

# Victim or Threat? Shipwrecks, Terrorist Attacks, and Asylum Decisions in France



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**Abstract:** *Tragic events such as terrorist attacks have been shown to influence voters' policy preferences, but less is known about whether such events also affect actual immigration policy. In this study, I bring new evidence to this question by examining whether migrant shipwrecks and terrorist attacks affected asylum decisions in France during the refugee crisis of 2015–16. I find that asylum officers were more likely to approve an individual's refugee application if a shipwreck has recently been in the news than they are otherwise. Yet they were less likely to grant refugee status to asylum seekers from Syria and Iraq after a terrorist attack. Together, these findings suggest that tragic events can affect immigration policy through their influence on asylum officers.*

**Verification Materials:** The materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BNUCX4>.

Between 2015 and 2016, over 2 million refugees fled wars in the Middle East and Africa and sought safety in Europe (Eurostat 2021). Many migrants have risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and more than 8,000 have been reported dead or missing on their journey to Europe (UNHCR 2020). Tragic shipwrecks of boats carrying migrants in the Mediterranean have made headlines around the world and highlighted the developing humanitarian crisis (Yardley 2015; Yardley and Pianigiani 2016). The European Union (EU) also experienced renewed terrorist activity during this period: a record 211 terrorist attacks causing 151 fatalities occurred in 2015 alone (Europol 2016), fueling fears that terrorists were entering Europe undetected in the wave of migrants (Nossiter, Breeden, and Bennhold 2015).

European leaders have been split in their response to this crisis. While former German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country's borders to hundreds of

thousands of refugees in 2015, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic cited national security concerns to justify their refusal to take part in the European Council's emergency response plan to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers from Italy and Greece (Stevig-Gridneff and Pronczuk 2020). These diverging responses illustrate the fundamental challenge at the heart of the international asylum system as defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees: how to provide shelter to those fleeing persecution without jeopardizing national security.

Political science research has explored how asylum officers balance these potentially conflicting considerations in their asylum application decisions for several decades (Gibney, Dalton, and Vockell 1992; Gibney and Stohl 1988). Humanitarian considerations and strategic interests have both been found to help explain variation in acceptance rates by country of origin in Europe and the United States (Miller, Keith, and Holmes 2014;

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Neumayer 2005; Rosenblum and Salehyan 2004; Rottman, Fariss, and Poe 2009; Salehyan and Rosenblum 2008). However, the difficulty of controlling for a case's merit has prevented researchers from concluding whether the relationship between a foreign country's humanitarian situation and how likely its citizens are to be granted asylum is the result of asylum officers' normative concerns or simply due to the fact that applicants from countries with worse humanitarian situations are more severely persecuted.

I use individual-level data to analyze how the occurrence of migrant shipwrecks and terrorist attacks affected asylum decisions in France during the 2015–16 refugee crisis. By temporarily increasing the salience of strategic considerations (for terrorist attacks) or humanitarian considerations (for migrant shipwrecks), these events allow me to test whether these factors influence asylum officers' decision-making. The recent refugee crisis is an ideal setting in which to examine this question. Between 2014 and 2015, the number of migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean nearly doubled, and the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks in the EU increased from 10 to 151, 148 of which were in France; a further 350 individuals were injured in France (Europol 2016).

To identify the causal effect of these unexpected events on asylum decisions, I leverage the fact that asylum seekers' interview dates, a central step in the decision process, are set weeks in advance. Thus the timing of the events is plausibly exogenous to the type of applicants interviewed on a particular day. To estimate these effects, I combine nonpublicly available data from the French asylum office on a representative sample of 34,678 asylum applications with data on migrant shipwrecks from the Missing Migrant project, terrorist attacks from the Global Terrorism Database, and synopses of daily prime-time news broadcasts from the National Audio-visual Institute (INA). These high-frequency data allow me to estimate the short-term effect of terrorist attacks and migrant shipwrecks by comparing the outcomes of applicants interviewed the day after an event to those interviewed on any other day, using a design similar to the one employed by Philippe and Ouss (2018).

This study provides new empirical evidence that both normative and strategic concerns influence decisions about whether to grant applicants asylum in three main ways. First, I find that asylum officers are more likely to approve applications immediately after a migrant shipwreck, but only when it was featured on prime-time television news. Applicants interviewed the day after such an event were 4.4 percentage points more likely to obtain refugee status than those interviewed on any other day; the average acceptance rate in the sample

is 21.4%. While this effect is sizable and robust to covariate adjustment, bandwidth reduction, and falsification tests, it is very short-lived: applicants interviewed two days after a shipwreck were no more likely to be granted refugee status than those interviewed on any other day. Second, I find that terrorist attacks negatively affect asylum decisions when they are featured on the news, but this effect is only robust and sizable for applicants from Syria and Iraq, strongholds of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – the terrorist group responsible for one-third of the attacks carried out in France during the study period. For those applicants, being interviewed the day after an attack featured on the news reduced their chances of receiving refugee status by 13.2 percentage points; the average acceptance rate for applicants from Syria and Iraq combined is 93.4%. Finally, I find that news reports of shipwrecks or terrorist attacks alone do not affect asylum decisions.

These findings enhance our understanding of whether and how (unrelated) tragic events can affect immigration policy. Numerous empirical studies have shown that terrorist attacks can affect political attitudes (see Helbling and Meierrieks [2020a] for a review), but few have assessed whether tragic events more broadly can also affect immigration policy (Bove, Böhmelt, and Nussio 2021; Choi 2021; Helbling and Meierrieks 2020b). The effect of terrorism on asylum decision-making has been of interest to scholars for a while (Avdan 2014; Holmes and Keith 2010; Rottman, Fariss, and Poe 2009), but researchers have only recently been able to credibly estimate this causal effect. Using a difference-in-differences design, Brodeur and Wright (2019) show that isolated terrorist attacks (9/11 and the 2004 Madrid train bombing) negatively affected asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries in the United States in the three to nine months following these attacks.

My study is the first to demonstrate that these findings replicate when analyzing the daily effect of multiple events in a context of sustained terrorist activity, which lends further credibility to their findings. But the study's main contribution is to provide the first empirical evidence that migrant shipwrecks, a different type of tragic event that has not yet been analyzed, can also affect asylum decisions. This finding has implications for our understanding of the mechanisms through which tragic events can affect asylum decisions since ingroup bias, a common explanation of how terrorism influences attitudes, cannot easily explain this finding. Indeed, additional analyses suggest that these effects are unlikely to be driven by racial bias or emotions. Instead, the data is most consistent with an alternative mechanism in which certain types of events affect the trade-off

asylum officers face between security and humanitarian concerns.

## Tragic Events and Immigration Policy

Several recent studies have examined how terrorist attacks shape voters' attitudes and policy preferences. For instance, Helbling and Meierrieks (2020a) reviews research which hypothesizes that such attacks increase prejudice against minorities and exacerbate negative attitudes towards immigrants by triggering fear among citizens. Early empirical studies on how 9/11 affected attitudes found the attacks negatively affected voters' views on immigrants in both the United States (Hopkins 2010) and Europe (Åslund and Rooth 2005; Noelle-Neumann 2002; Schüller 2016; Sheridan 2006). Research on more recent attacks in Europe (the 2004 Madrid bombing, the 2015 Bataclan attack, and the 2017 Manchester bombing) has drawn more mixed conclusions. Some studies have identified an effect (Boomgaarden and de Vreese 2007; Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede 2006; Epifanio, Giani, and Ivandic 2022; Ferrín, Mancosu, and Cappiali 2020), while others have not (Assche and Dierckx 2019; Boydston, Feezell, and Glazier 2018; Giani 2020; Hauwaert and Huber 2020; Jungkunz, Helbling, and Schwemmer 2019; Silva 2018). Yet these studies focus on one to two events at a time. In a multievent, multicountry study, Böhmelt, Bove, and Nussio (2020) find that terrorism abroad affects the salience of immigration-related issues at home, which suggests it may also influence voters' attitudes.

Few studies have examined how other types of tragic events affect attitudes toward immigrants. Two recent empirical studies investigating the effect of the death of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who drowned in September 2015 while trying to reach Europe with his family, suggest that tragic events other than terrorist attacks can affect voters' attitudes toward immigration. The publication of the iconic picture of the boy coincided with a marked increase in the popularity of the search terms "Syria," "refugees," and "Aylan" on Google and an uptick in donations to help refugees (Slovic et al. 2017). Sohlberg, Esaiasson, and Martinsson (2019) further show that randomly priming Swedish survey respondents with a picture of Alan Kurdi increased self-reported support for generous refugee policies up to a month after the event. The increase in donations lasted about six weeks (Slovic et al. 2017); four months after the publication of the photograph, preferences for refugee policy had

reverted to their May 2015 level (Sohlberg, Esaiasson, and Martinsson 2019).

Can tragic events also lead to changes in immigration policy? Helbling and Meierrieks (2020a) identify two main channels through which terrorist attacks could result in more restrictive immigration policies. First, politicians could adjust to account for changes in voters' general preferences, either by incumbent governments altering their platform or by electing politicians with different platforms. In a second channel, these events could affect immigration policy more indirectly "by reducing economic activity and life satisfaction" (Helbling and Meierrieks 2020a, 9). This second line of inquiry has generated contrasting evidence. While some cross-country studies have identified a positive association between exposure to transnational terrorism and migration controls (Helbling and Meierrieks 2020b) and more restrictive immigration policies (Bove, Böhmelt, and Nussio 2021), Choi (2021) find no such relationship. The current study helps fill this gap by investigating whether tragic events (migrant shipwrecks and terrorist attacks) can affect immigration policy through another, indirect, channel — asylum decision-making. According to Miller, Keith, and Holmes (2014), "understanding how immigration judges decide asylum cases is the best place to begin trying to grasp asylum policy." (2014, p. 1) By examining how tragic events affected asylum decisions in France during the refugee crisis, I hope to bring new evidence to examine this pressing question.

## Background

To apply for refugee status, asylum seekers first need to fill out an application form and produce a personal narrative, in French, describing why they need refugee protection. They have 21 days after their arrival to submit their application to the Office for Refugee Protection and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), referred to as the "French asylum office," which has the authority to grant or deny asylum claims. It was created in 1952 shortly after France ratified the Geneva Convention, which committed it to grant refugee protection to those persecuted for reasons of "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion (Article 1(A)2)." The Geneva Convention initially applied only to events that took place in Europe before January 1, 1951, but the Bellagio Protocol, which came into effect in France in 1971, removed these limitations. The French asylum office's mandate further expanded in 2003 to include granting subsidiary protection to those who do not meet the

Geneva definition but who face the “death penalty, torture or indiscriminate violence in the context of an internal or international armed conflict (Article L.712-1 of the Code de l’entrée et du séjour des étrangers et du droit d’asile (CESEDA)).”

Submitted applications are dispatched to the relevant geographic division, where division supervisors assign them to asylum officers. Although it is not clear on what basis cases are allocated to individual officers, they are assigned well in advance of the interview such that even if this assignment is not random, it does not compromise the main identification assumption, which is that the timing of these events is exogenous to the types of applicants interviewed on a particular day. The designated asylum officer reads the application before calling the applicant for a face-to-face interview, a mandatory requirement since 2006. To prepare for the interview, the asylum officer can also access country reports produced in house by the research division, as well as more confidential communications from the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, if relevant. During the interview, the asylum officer questions the applicant to determine whether her claims of persecution have merit. Using the information collected during the interview, the officer then makes a recommendation to grant or deny refugee status to his supervisor, who makes the final decision and can decide to overrule the officer’s recommendation. The entire process, from application to first decision, took an average of 262 days in 2015 and an average of 220 days in 2016 (OFPRA 2015, 2016).

In 2015, the French asylum office employed 214 asylum officers to examine claims (Number of asylum officers as of December 31, 2015 (OFPRA, 2015)). Officers are recruited either via a competitive national exam (permanent contract) or ad hoc recruitment drives (temporary contract). New hires are paired with a senior asylum officer who becomes their reference person during their first couple of weeks on the job. Since 2013, new officers have completed an induction program that explains the main steps of the application process. Little is known about the identity of these asylum officers; the asylum office only publishes statistics on the entire employee population. Contacts at the French asylum office involved in the recruitment process confirm that the large majority are women who are relatively young and tend to be highly educated (Master’s degree) but have little work experience.

Why would we expect asylum officers to be affected by tragic events? The asylum decision-making process involves two main stages. Asylum officers first need to determine whether, based on their claims, asylum seekers are eligible for refugee protection on the basis of either

the Geneva Convention or the subsidiary protection mandate. This part is relatively objective. For example, the former only applies to applicants persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular group or political opinion. In the first stage, asylum officers must thus decide whether claims meet one of these five criteria. The second stage of the decision process is more subjective, since asylum officers have to decide whether the claims are truthful or not. Despite sustained efforts by the French asylum office to standardize the process, the decisions largely rest on the gut feeling of the interviewing officer. Yet, this kind of discretion has been shown to lead to substantial variation between decision-makers (Fischman 2011; Hausman 2016; Ramji-Nogales, Schoenholtz, and Philipp 2007; Rehaag 2008, 2012); it can also make them susceptible to the influence of external events such as fatigue, emotions, and the weather (Danziger, Levav, and Avnaim-Pesso 2011; Eren and Mocan 2018; Heyes and Saberian 2019). In this study, I analyze the influence of irrelevant but related events on asylum decisions.

## Data

This study combines nonpublicly available administrative data from the French asylum office with daily data on (1) migrant shipwrecks that occurred in the Mediterranean from the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Missing Migrant project and (2) terrorist attacks in Europe from the Global Terrorism Database. I supplement this information with data on synopses of daily prime-time news broadcasts, which I scraped from the INA website.

## Asylum Decisions

The study sample includes 34,678 asylum applicants, who were randomly selected among applicants who filed their applications before December 2015 and who were scheduled to be interviewed at the French asylum office between January 2015 and December 2016. These administrative records contain information about applicants’ basic demographic characteristics (country of origin, age, gender, and marital status), interview date, whether the applicant was present during the interview, the anonymous identifier of the asylum officer in charge of the case, as well as the final asylum decision. While the records only include the final decision, anecdotal evidence suggests that supervisors generally follow the

**TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics of Asylum Applications**

	Mean	SD	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile
<b>Year of Application</b>					
Before 2013	0.018	0.132	0	0	0
2013	0.058	0.234	0	0	0
2014	0.225	0.417	0	0	0
2015	0.699	0.459	0	1	1
<b>Month of Interview</b>					
January - June 2015	0.290	0.454	0	0	1
July - December 2015	0.352	0.478	0	0	1
January - June 2016	0.290	0.454	0	0	1
July - December 2016	0.068	0.253	0	0	0
<b>Applicant Present during the Interview</b>					
Yes	0.849	0.358	1	1	1
No	0.120	0.325	0	0	0
Missing	0.031	0.172	0	0	0
<b>Decision</b>					
Denied refugee status	0.774	0.418	1	1	1
Granted refugee status	0.210	0.407	0	0	0
Not a decision	0.010	0.100	0	0	0
No information	0.006	0.074	0	0	0
<b>Number of Days between:</b>					
Application and decision	242.953	183.247	112	189	317
Application and interview	241.683	420.474	90	149	258
Interview and decision	49.146	82.414	8	20	49

*Notes:* Summary statistics on the number of days between the application, interview, and decision are missing for some observations for which the dates were not listed chronologically. All variables are binary (minimum = 0 and maximum = 1) with 34,678 observations, except the number of days between application and decision ( $N = 34,094$ , min = 1, max = 5,288) between application and interview ( $N = 34,671$ , min = 1, max = 9,598) and between interview and decision ( $N = 33,076$ , min = 0, max = 946).

asylum officers' recommendations. Only one of the nine asylum officers interviewed by the head archivist at the French asylum office mentioned cases in which the division head did not follow her recommendations.<sup>1</sup> Even if overruling were common practice, this would bias my estimates toward zero since deliberations between asylum officers and their supervisors usually do not take place on the day of the interview.

Table 1 presents summary statistics for the asylum applicants included in the sample. The vast majority of

them (69.9%) filed their applications in 2015; 22.5% filed in 2014, 5.8% in 2013, and 1.8% before 2013. Most interviews took place between January 2015 and June 2016; only 6.8% of the applicants in the sample were interviewed between July and December 2016. Since the dataset only contains applications filed until December 2015, the interviews are clustered at the beginning of the year. We also know that 85% of applicants were present during the interview. Importantly, the data specifies the scheduled interview date even for applicants who did not attend, which prevents me from having to restrict the sample on a posttreatment variable (interview

<sup>1</sup>AD du Val de Marne/OFPRA/BDIC.

attendance) (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). By the time the French asylum office shared the data (in September 2017), over 98% of all applicants in the sample for whom an interview had been scheduled had been notified of their decision. I exclude 545 applicants from the sample. These include 192 applicants who had not received their decision by then and 353 applicants who withdrew their applications (150), died (15), or for whom the recorded decision does not allow me to determine the first decision. In the online supporting information, I show that the results are not sensitive to coding all 545 of these applicants as either acceptances or rejections (Table A.1). A total of 21% of applicants in the sample received refugee status, and 509 different asylum officers made between 1 and 271 decisions (average of 68 decisions).<sup>2</sup>

## Migrant Shipwrecks

The IOM's Missing Migrant project has collected data on migrant deaths around the world since October 2013 (International Organization for Migration 2020). This database records every incident of "migrants who have died at the external borders of states, or in the process of migration towards an international destination, regardless of their legal status" (International Organization for Migration 2018, 4). The database includes all known events in which migrants have died or gone missing via "transportation accidents, shipwrecks, violent attacks or due to medical complications during their journeys" (International Organization for Migration 2018, 4). For each incident, the database provides information on the location, date, the number of migrants who died or went missing, and their probable cause of death.

I use this dataset to record information on *migrant shipwrecks in Europe*, events taking place in the Mediterranean or Europe for which the cause of death is (presumed) drowning. For each event, I extract the date and the number of dead and wounded.

IOM recorded 154 incidents in which at least one migrant died in Europe or the Mediterranean from drowning (see Table 2). In 2015 and 2016, 35 migrants on average were reported dead in shipwrecks, but the distribution of the number dead or missing is highly skewed to the right since half of these incidents recorded seven or

fewer drownings. The highest death toll was recorded on April 18, 2015, when a fishing boat carrying more than 700 migrants sank in the Mediterranean. In the main specification I report the results from shipwrecks coded as events in which more than 40 migrants died. The online supporting information reports the results for different thresholds as well (Table A.2).

Between 2015 and 2016, the IOM recorded an additional 124 incidents of *other migrant deaths in Europe* in which a migrant died in Europe but not by drowning. Although there is no reason to expect these events to be theoretically different, I focus on shipwrecks simply because they are easier to code in news reports using a keyword search, a crucial step (described below) for the analysis. *Other migrant deaths in Europe* combines 46 causes of death including suicide, violence, electrocution, burns, and asphyxiation. These varied circumstances made coding news reports much more difficult. Fortunately, the decision to restrict my attention to shipwrecks does not affect the analysis. As shown in Table 2, these events tend to be less deadly than shipwrecks, on average: only 6% caused more than 20 deaths (compared to 31% for shipwrecks) and only three of the 124 other incidents caused more than 40 deaths (the threshold I use to code shipwrecks in the analysis). In Table A.2 (Panel C) in the online supporting information, I show that the results are almost identical when I pool shipwrecks and other incidents.

## Terrorist Attacks

The Global Terrorism Database is an open-source database of domestic and international terrorist events that have occurred around the world since 1970 (START 2022). It contains a wide range of information, including the location of the attack, whether it was successful, the type of weapon used, as well as information about the target, perpetrator, and number of casualties. I use this database to code two types of events. First, I code *terrorist attacks in France* by restricting the dataset to the 63 terrorist attacks, successful or not, perpetrated in France in 2015 and 2016. These attacks took place on 43 different days (30 different weekdays). ISIS perpetrated one-third of these attacks; the identity of the terrorist organization involved is unknown for half of the attacks. The estimates reported here de facto exclude the largest terrorist attack that occurred during the study period. Since the November 13, 2015 attacks happened on a Friday, no asylum seekers were interviewed the following day and are thus not included in the sample. Importantly, no asylum seeker was accused or convicted of conducting

<sup>2</sup>Note that this number of officers is substantially higher than the number employed in 2015. In 2015 and 2016, the reported in section "Data." This is because here I am reporting the number of asylum officers in my sample who decided at least one case of those interviewed between January 2015 and December 2016, while the figure reported in section entitled "Data" is the number of asylum officers on the payroll at the end of 2015.

**TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics of Events and Their Coverage in the News (2015–16)**

	Events			Applicants
	Number of weekdays with at least one event	Proportion covered during prime time	Difference in the probability of related news story after event than on any other day	Number of applicants interviewed the day after the event
<b>Migrant Shipwrecks in Europe</b>				
At least one death	154	12	.036 (.029)	10,481
At least 21 deaths	47	26	.173 (.045)	3,103
At least 41 deaths	30	23	.143 (.056)	1,648
At least 61 deaths	19	32	.226 (.069)	817
<b>Other Migrant Deaths in Europe</b>				
At least one death	124			6,501
At least 21 deaths	8			382
At least 41 deaths	3			140
At least 61 deaths	1			62
<b>Terrorist Attacks in France</b>				
All attacks	30	37	.094 (.084)	2,060
Islamist attacks only	12	50	.227 (.131)	600
Other terrorist attacks in Europe	178	28	-.004 (.042)	13,077
News stories about shipwrecks	50			3,638
News stories about attacks	141			9,810

any of these attacks. Second, I code *other terrorist attacks in Europe* by restricting the dataset to the 178 attacks that were perpetrated in France's neighboring states (including the United Kingdom) on weekdays.

### News Reports

I downloaded the synopses of daily prime-time news broadcasts between January 2015 and December 2016 for France's two main free television channels, TF1 and France 2, from the INA website. Together, these two channels drew about 40% of television viewers in 2010 (Philippe and Ouss 2018). Daily prime-time news starts at 8 pm, lasts about 35 minutes, and covers an average of 26 stories. On the INA's website, each story is described with a title (about eight words) and a short content overview (about 27 words).<sup>3</sup> I coded a news broadcast

as featuring a news story about a migrant shipwreck if the title or content overview included the keywords "migrants" or "refugees" in conjunction with "shipwreck," "rescue," "drowning," "Mediterranean," or "survivors." I coded a story as featuring a terrorist attack if the terms "terrorist" or "attack" featured in its title or description. Importantly, I coded news reports as featuring these stories *independently of whether such an incident happened on that day*. As a result, the data on events and the data on news reports only partially coincide. It was possible to have days with an event but no news report or days with a news report but no event. There were a total of 50 weekdays on which a story about a migrant shipwreck was run on either channel, and 30 weekdays on which a migrant shipwreck with 40 deaths or more was recorded. There was a news story about a terrorist attack on 141 weekdays, even though such events were less frequent (Table 2).

each news story. For example, the raw data available for January 1, 2015 is displayed at [http://inatheque.ina.fr/doc/TV-RADIO/TV\\_5410273.001/20-heures-emission-du-1-janvier-2015?rang=1](http://inatheque.ina.fr/doc/TV-RADIO/TV_5410273.001/20-heures-emission-du-1-janvier-2015?rang=1).

<sup>3</sup>My data differs from that of Philippe and Ouss (2018), who only have keywords for each news report. I have a short description for

This last data source serves two purposes. First, it allows me to use the same research design to analyze the effect of both events and news reports on asylum decisions. Prior research has examined the effect of events (Brodeur and Wright 2019; Shayo and Zussman 2011) or news coverage on judicial decisions (Philippe and Ouss 2018; Spirig 2023). To the best of my knowledge, my study is the first to investigate both simultaneously. For this analysis, I use data on news reports as coded above, that is, irrespective of whether they coincide with an event. Second, data on news coverage allow me to proxy for an event's salience. Studies focusing on the effect of a single event have the advantage of being able to examine whether relevant actors knew about a specific event. But when averaging the effect of several events, as I do here, it is impossible to determine whether actors knew about the events (i.e., whether they complied with the treatment [Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernandez 2020]). To mitigate this challenge, I use data on the media coverage of these events to proxy for their salience, and in the analysis below I distinguish between events that were reported in the news and those that were not. I code events as being reported in the news if there was a prime-time news report on either channel about it on the day of the event. Table 2 shows that 30% of terrorist attacks were featured on the news, as were 23% of shipwrecks that caused more than 40 deaths.

## Empirical Strategy

To estimate the effect of events and news reports on asylum decisions, I regress an indicator variable  $y_{i,t}$  which equals 1 if applicant  $i$  interviewed on day  $t$  was granted asylum, and 0 otherwise, on a binary variable  $\text{Event}_{t-1}$ , which equals 1 if there was a migrant shipwreck, terrorist attack, or news report about either type of event the day before the interview.

$$y_{i,t} = \tau \text{Event}_{t-1} + X_i' \beta + \gamma_j \text{Asylum Officer}_j + \varepsilon_{ijt} \text{ if } \text{Event}_t = 0. \quad (1)$$

This specification also includes a vector  $X_i'$  of applicant (country of origin, age, gender, marital status), and interview characteristics (year, month, and day of the week of the interview), as well as asylum-officer fixed effects. I exclude asylum seekers who were interviewed on the day of the event considered in the analysis because they could be either treated or not depending on the (unobserved) timing of the event (e.g., morning, afternoon, or evening). Therefore,  $\hat{\tau}$  estimates the difference in the probability of being granted refugee status between (1)

those interviewed the day after an event (or news reports about it) and (2) those interviewed on any other day, controlling for observable characteristics. Unless otherwise noted, all standard errors are clustered at the level of the asylum officer.

$\hat{\tau}$  should be an unbiased estimate of the causal effect of events on asylum application decisions under two conditions. First, the treatment should be *ignorable*, that is, potential outcomes should be independent of the timing of the interview. This first assumption is particularly credible in this setting, both because the events I consider were unexpected and because the interview date is set weeks in advance to give applicants sufficient time to make arrangements to attend. As a result, applicants interviewed before and after the event should be comparable in their (unobserved) potential outcomes, such that the treatment is plausibly ignorable. Table A.3 (in the online supporting information) compares the observable characteristics of asylum seekers interviewed the day after an event (a migrant shipwreck or terrorist attack) to those interviewed on any other day and reveals no systematic imbalances in their observable characteristics.

In a second condition, the treatment should be *excludable* — that is, it should not affect the outcome through another variable. The study design minimizes the chances of detecting an effect running through another variable. Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernandez confirm that “the ideal way to increase the generalizability of [Unexpected Event Study Design] studies is to analyze more than one event of the same class in order to establish some regularities.” (2020, p. 204) Indeed, averaging the effects of multiple events helps rule out the possibility that the estimated effect is an artifact of something else happening at the same time. While simultaneously analyzing multiple events represents a methodological improvement, it also presents at least two unique challenges related to causal inference. First, it makes treatment compliance difficult to precisely control for (as mentioned in the section entitled “Data”). The second challenge associated with assessing more than one event at the same time is that they occur multiple times over a short period and at intervals of varying lengths, making it very difficult to track their effect over time. For this reason, and like Philippe and Ouss (2018), I restrict my attention to the short-term (daily) effect of repeated events.

## Results

Overall, I find that asylum seekers interviewed the day after an event, whether a terrorist attack or a migrant

**TABLE 3 Effect of Migrant Shipwrecks and Related News Reports on Asylum Decisions**

	Events			News Reports
	All	Reported	Not Reported	All
Shipwreck $t - 1$	0.008 (0.009)	0.044* (.021)	−0.005 (0.009)	−0.000 (0.007)
Observations	32,044	33,286	32,461	30,276
Number of treated units	1,557	411	1,226	3,096
Mean of dependent variable	0.214	0.214	0.214	0.214
$R^2$	0.369	0.368	0.369	0.370
Difference (3) − (2)			−0.050	
Standard error			0.023	

Notes: The dependent variable is equal to 1 if the asylum applicant was granted refugee status and 0 otherwise. Standard errors, clustered at the asylum officer level, are reported in parentheses. Asylum seekers interviewed on the day of the event or news report are excluded from this analysis. See text for details of control variables.

†  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

shipwreck, were *not* more or less likely to be granted refugee status than those interviewed on any other day. Controlling for observable characteristics and asylum-officer fixed effects, I find that the difference in the probability of being granted refugee status between these two groups is in the expected direction — positive for shipwrecks (Table 3, column 1) and negative for attacks (Table 4, column 1) — but small in size (1 percentage point or less) and not statistically distinguishable from zero.

To test whether this result is due to noncompliance (asylum officers were simply not aware of some of these events) or a null effect (asylum officers were aware of the events, but they were not affected), I separately analyze the effect of events featured in the news versus those not featured in the news. I find that applicants who were interviewed the day after a shipwreck occurred that was

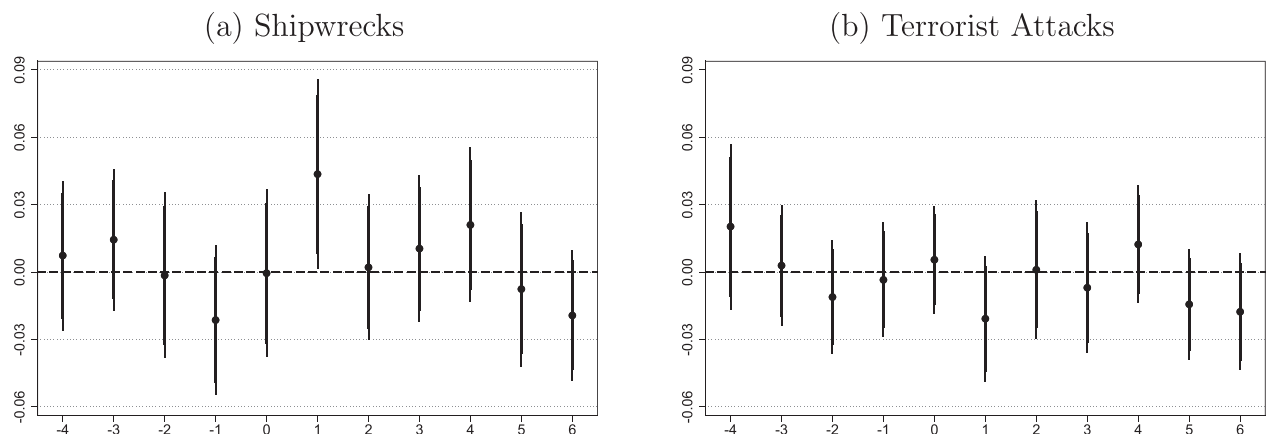
featured on prime-time news were 4.4 percentage points ( $SE = 2.1$ ) more likely to obtain refugee status than those interviewed on any other day, while the difference is less than 1 percentage point when considering events that did not feature on prime-time news (Table 3, columns 2 and 3, respectively). The difference between these two estimates (5 percentage points,  $SE = 2.3$ ) is significant at the 5% level.

These results suggest that migrant shipwrecks *did* affect asylum decisions, but only if asylum officers knew about them. I confirm this result using the shipwreck's death toll, a more indirect proxy for salience, which Table 2 demonstrates is correlated with the probability that a shipwreck will feature on prime-time news. Table A.2 (in the online supporting information) demonstrates that the effect of migrant shipwrecks increases from 0.2 percentage points for all shipwrecks (irrespective of their

**TABLE 4 Effect of Terrorist Attacks and Related News Reports on Asylum Decisions**

	Events			News reports
	All	Reported	Not reported	All
Attack $t - 1$	−0.013 (0.009)	−0.026† (0.014)	−0.005 (0.012)	−0.009 (0.006)
Observations	31,809	32,814	32,698	24,184
Number of treated units	1,777	884	1,034	4,731
Mean of dependent variable	0.213	0.213	0.213	0.212
$R^2$	0.368	0.368	0.368	0.369
Difference (3)−(2)			0.021	
Standard error			0.019	

Notes: †  $p < .1$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

**FIGURE 1 Duration of the Effect of Events Reported in the News on Asylum Decisions**

Notes: These figures display the coefficients, along with 90% and 95% confidence intervals from standard errors clustered at the asylum-officer level, of six lag and four lead indicator variables included in an ordinary least squares regression, controlling for all observable characteristics. The reference category is composed of all applicants who are interviewed outside the window (four days before or six days after an event).

death toll) to 3.8 percentage points for those that killed at least 90 people died; the difference between the two (0.036) is statistically significant at conventional levels ( $SE = 0.015$ ).

I check the robustness of this finding in four ways. First, I demonstrate that the effect of migrant shipwrecks reported in the news on asylum decisions is robust to reducing the bandwidth around the event (see Table A.4 in the online supporting information) and to controlling for event fixed effects which I construct by assigning each asylum application to the event that took place the closest to their interview date (whether before or after) (see Table A.5, column 5, top panel). Controlling for event fixed effects further increases the comparability of the control group by restricting the comparison of applicants interviewed the day after the event to those interviewed shortly before or after the event.

Second, I conducted two types of falsification checks. In Table A.6 (column 5) (in the online supporting information), I report the estimate of the effect of 40 events that I generated randomly, using the main specification. Reassuringly, this estimate is small (1.5 percentage points) and not statistically significant ( $SE = 1.0$ ). I also check that the events did not have an effect on applicants interviewed before the event occurred by plotting the marginal effect of migrant shipwrecks for applicants interviewed four days before to six days after the event (Figure 1). The effect of a migrant shipwreck for those interviewed beforehand is about 2 percentage points smaller, on average, than the main estimated effect and is not statistically different from zero, which further

confirms the robustness of my results. This analysis also reveals that the effect of migrant shipwrecks is very short-lived since those interviewed two days afterwards are not more likely to be granted refugee status than those interviewed before the event. This pattern is consistent with Philippe and Ouss's (2018) finding that news stories about crime only affect jurors' decisions for one day.

Third, in Table A.5 (in the online supporting information), I check that the effect of migrant shipwrecks is robust to removing all covariates, which confirms that the effect I estimate is not an artifact of the combination of control variables I included in the main specification (column 4) (Lenz and Sahn 2021). I also test whether the results are robust to clustering standard errors at the asylum officer and week of interview levels (Table A.5, column 6). In Table A.1, I show that the results are also robust to excluding extremely deferred cases (column 2) and to coding all applicants for whom a decision is missing as either rejected (column 3) or accepted (column 4).

For terrorist attacks, the pattern is similar: events featured in the news are associated with a 2.6-percentage-point reduction in the probability of being granted refugee status ( $SE = 1.4$ ), while those not reported in the news had no effect on decisions (Table 4, columns 2 and 3). However, the effect of attacks reported in the news is only significant at the 10% level, and the difference between the effect of reported and unreported attacks is smaller (2.1 percentage points) and not statistically significant at conventional levels. Moreover, additional robustness checks detailed above confirm that this effect cannot be distinguished from

zero. For instance, the effect of terrorist attacks is no longer significant when the bandwidth is reduced to 20 days before the event (Table A.4 in the online supporting information), or when controlling for the event identifier (Table A.5, column 5). It is therefore not surprising to find that attacks in other contiguous European countries did not affect asylum decisions (Table A.6, columns 3 and 4). However, this null effect could be due to a ceiling effect — a long-term effect over the period that nullifies the impact of any subsequent attacks. While my research design does not allow me to directly test this hypothesis, in the next section I test a hypothesis regarding the heterogeneity of the type of applicants who were affected by these events.

Finally, I find that news reports alone have no effect on decisions. Being interviewed the day after a news report about either a shipwreck or an attack, or on any other day, does not make a difference for asylum seekers (point estimates are less than 1 percentage point and not statistically significant at conventional levels) (Tables 3 and 4, column 4). Why do I find that shipwrecks affect asylum decisions when they are reported in the news, but that news reports about shipwrecks do not? As noted in the section entitled “Data,” news reports about events are coded *independently of whether an event took place that day* and may therefore include news stories about shipwrecks in general, or about shipwrecks that took place a while back. The magnitude of these estimates is consistent with the findings of a recent study of the effect of coverage of the asylum issue on asylum decisions in the Swiss asylum appeal process. Spirig (2023) finds that when the average daily number of circulation-weighted articles during the appeal period increases by 1, the probability of being granted asylum decreases by 0.4 percentage points, a relatively small effect.

## Mechanisms

Previous studies have identified three main channels through which tragic events such as terrorist attacks and migrant shipwrecks could affect asylum officers’ decision-making in the short term: racial bias, emotions, and cognitive bias. In this section, I discuss each potential mechanism in turn.

### Racial Bias

The first possible mechanism is that terrorist attacks could affect asylum decision-making by exacerbating asylum officers’ ingroup bias. The extent to which people identify with different facets of their social

identity, and therefore the affinity they feel with their ingroup, depends on their environment (Shayo 2009). Prior studies have demonstrated that judicial ingroup bias is related to the intensity of terrorist activity in the vicinity of the court in the months leading up to a hearing (McConnell and Rasul 2021; Shayo and Zussman 2011). Therefore, by increasing the salience of religion, Islamist terrorist attacks could make asylum officers less likely to grant refugee status to Muslim applicants. Consistent with this mechanism, Brodeur and Wright (2019) finds that applicants from Muslim-majority countries suffered a greater penalty in their asylum applications after 9/11 than other applicants did.

I empirically examine this mechanism by comparing the effect of all attacks, Islamist attacks only, and shipwrecks among applicants from Muslim-majority countries (columns 1, 3, and 5) to the effect among applicants from non-Muslim-majority countries (columns 2, 4, and 6) in Tables 5 and 6. If it is indeed the case that events affect asylum decisions by activating racial bias, I would expect to find that terrorist attacks have a stronger effect for applicants from Muslim-majority countries. I classify a country as Muslim majority if more than half of its population identified as Muslim in 2010 using the Association of Religion Data Archive’s World Religion dataset (Maoz and Henderson 2019), which estimates the percentage of the population that identifies with Christianity or Islam for most countries in the world from 1945 to today.

Surprisingly, the evidence in support of this mechanism is particularly weak. The estimated effect of attacks is indeed more negative among applicants from Muslim-majority countries (Table 5, column 1) than among those from non-Muslim-majority countries (column 2), but the difference between these two effects is small and not significant, whether considering all attacks or only reported attacks (Table 6). The conclusion is the same when considering only Islamist attacks (Tables 5 and 6, columns 3 and 4). Therefore, the short-term effect of tragic events does not seem to be operating mainly through racial bias. Note that the results presented here do not speak to the presence of racial bias overall. They only suggest that racial bias is not the primary mechanism through which events affect decisions, which is consistent with recent work showing that French asylum officers discriminate against Muslim asylum seekers (Emeriau 2023). Moreover, migrant shipwrecks do not have the potential to antagonize different ethnic or religious groups because they portray migrants as victims rather than threats. Therefore, in the next section I further explore the mechanism at play behind this effect.

**TABLE 5 Events: Heterogeneity by Religious Composition of the Country of Origin**

	Attacks		Islamist Attacks		Shipwrecks	
	Muslim-Majority countries	Excluding Muslim-Majority countries	Muslim-Majority countries	Excluding Muslim-Majority countries	Muslim-Majority countries	Excluding Muslim-Majority countries
Event $t - 1$	−0.021 <sup>†</sup> (0.012)	−0.013 (0.015)	−0.032 (0.025)	−0.003 (0.031)	0.010 (0.012)	0.005 (0.017)
Observations	18,612	13,197	19,259	13,696	18,742	13,302
Number of treated units	997	770	281	175	952	588
Mean of dependent variable	0.243	0.171	0.243	0.172	0.244	0.171
$R^2$	0.448	0.252	0.448	0.250	0.448	0.251
Difference		0.008		0.029		−0.005
SE		0.019		0.039		0.021

Notes: <sup>†</sup> $p < .1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

### Emotions

Prior work has also analyzed how events affect decision-making through the lens of emotions. The general consensus in the psychology literature is that emotions play a central role in most individual decisions (Lerner et al. 2015), and empirical evidence confirms that decisions

differ as a function of individuals' emotional state (Chen and Loecher 2022; Eren and Mocan 2018).

Shipwrecks and terrorist attacks may therefore influence asylum decisions via the negative emotional shock they trigger. Although we lack a theoretical framework for understanding *how* emotions affect decisions, one hypothesis is that asylum officers are more generous when

**TABLE 6 Events Reported in the News: Heterogeneity by Religious Composition of the Country of Origin**

	Attacks in the News		Islamist Attacks in the News		Shipwrecks in the News	
	Muslim-Majority countries	Excluding Muslim-Majority countries	Muslim-Majority countries	Excluding Muslim-Majority countries	Muslim-Majority countries	Excluding Muslim-Majority countries
Event $t - 1$	−0.040* (0.019)	−0.018 (0.019)	−0.022 (0.030)	−0.030 (0.032)	0.042 <sup>†</sup> (0.022)	0.045 (0.040)
Observations	19,216	13,598	19,435	13,826	19,456	13,830
Number of treated units	459	421	210	161	249	155
Mean of dependent variable	0.244	0.171	0.243	0.172	0.244	0.171
$R^2$	0.448	0.251	0.448	0.250	0.448	0.251
Difference		0.022		−0.008		0.003
SE		0.026		0.043		0.044

Notes: <sup>†</sup> $p < .1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

**TABLE 7 Effect of France's Defeat during the 2016 Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) Championship on Asylum Decisions**

	Full Sample		June 2016–July 2016	
	Difference in means	Main specification	Difference in means	Main specification
France's defeat in Eurocup	0.012 (0.074)	−0.052 (0.079)	−0.011 (0.077)	0.023 (0.087)
Observations	34,133	33,703	1,586	1,577
Number of treated units	32	32	32	32
Mean of dependent variable	0.214	0.214	0.236	0.236
$R^2$	0.000	0.368	0.000	0.564

Notes: †  $p < .1$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

they are sad (after a shipwreck) and less generous when they are angry (after a terrorist attack).

One implication of this mechanism is that we should observe that events besides attacks and shipwrecks that have the potential to trigger an emotional shock should also affect asylum decisions. Building on past studies, I analyze the effect of wins and losses of the French national team during the 2016 Union of European Football Associations' European Football Championship (UEFA Euro 2016), which took place during the study period (June 10 to July 10, 2016). During the championship, the French national team played a total of seven games and lost only in the final game against Portugal. Using the main specification, I estimate

the effect of France's defeat in the final (Table 7) and France's victories (Table 8) that took place from Monday through Thursday (no applicants interviewed on Saturday).

Again, the evidence for this mechanism is particularly weak. The simple difference in average acceptance rates for applicants interviewed the day after the events and those interviewed on any other day reveal no statistical difference (column 1). Using the main specification instead and reducing the study period to June–July 2016 does not substantively change the results (columns 2–4). This evidence suggests that the effect of shipwrecks and attacks on asylum decisions cannot be fully understood through the prism of an emotional shock.

**TABLE 8 Effect of France's Victories during the 2016 Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) Championship on Asylum Decisions**

	Full Sample		June 2016–July 2016	
	Difference in means	Main specification	Difference in means	Main specification
France's victory in Eurocup	−0.011 (0.032)	−0.002 (0.026)	−0.038 (0.035)	0.027 (0.032)
Observations	34,133	33,703	1,586	1,577
Number of treated units	174	174	174	174
Mean of dependent variable	0.214	0.214	0.236	0.236
$R^2$	0.000	0.368	0.001	0.564

Notes: †  $p < .1$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

## Cognitive Bias

In a third potential channel, events could affect asylum decisions by momentarily changing the weight asylum officers attach to security versus humanitarian concerns when deciding on asylum applications. The asylum officer has to weigh both humanitarian considerations, that is, whether the applicant will be persecuted if forced to return home, and security considerations, that is, whether the applicant will commit an act of terrorism if allowed to stay in the country. Her final decision depends on her assessment of the probability of these two events and on the weight she attaches to each of them. Events like attacks and shipwrecks could momentarily shift the weight asylum officers attach to each consideration in their evaluation by changing what they perceive to matter most. Empirical evidence from the French judicial system suggests that decision-makers are affected by what is on the top of their mind (Philippe and Ouss 2018). Similarly, terrorist attacks (shipwrecks) could make security (humanitarian) concerns more salient to asylum officers and cause them to be less (more) generous as a result.

One implication of this mechanism is that applicant characteristics that signal vulnerability (or threat) will weigh more heavily in their decisions after a shipwreck (or an attack). As a result, we should observe that attacks have a stronger effect among applicants whose characteristics signal a security threat and that shipwrecks have

a greater influence among applicants whose characteristics signal vulnerability. I use being from Syria or Iraq, which were ISIS strongholds in 2015, as a signal for threat because these are the two countries most closely associated with Islamist attacks. I use being a single woman to indicate vulnerability and expect shipwrecks to have a stronger effect among this subgroup than among married women. Since the choice of characteristics as signaling either threat or vulnerability is somewhat arbitrary, the results of this exploratory heterogeneity analysis should be interpreted with caution. I find in Table 9 that attacks have a stronger effect on Syrian and Iraqi applicants (9.1 percentage points,  $SE = 4.2$ ) than among those from other nationalities (1.1 percentage points,  $SE = 0.9$ ); the difference (8 percentage points) is statistically significant at the 10% level. The pattern is stronger and remains significant at the 10% level for attacks reported in the news. Importantly, as predicted, there is no similar pattern for shipwrecks whether looking at all shipwrecks or only those reported in the news (columns 5 to 8). In Table 10, I compare the effect of events among single versus married women. Asylum officers may consider single women to be more vulnerable than their married counterparts; thus according to the mechanism I am testing here, shipwrecks should have a stronger effect on single women than married women. This is indeed what I find. The difference between these effects is 6.6 percentage points ( $SE = 3.3$ ). For completeness, I also report

**TABLE 9 Heterogeneity Analysis by Individual Characteristics Signaling Threat**

	All Attacks		Attacks in the News		All Shipwrecks		Shipwrecks in the News	
	Among Syrians and Iraqis	Excluding Syrians and Iraqis	Among Syrians and Iraqis	Excluding Syrians and Iraqis	Among Syrians and Iraqis	Excluding Syrians and Iraqis	Among Syrians and Iraqis	Excluding Syrians and Iraqis
Event $t - 1$	-0.091* (0.042)	-0.011 (0.009)	-0.132† (0.068)	-0.022 (0.014)	0.001 (0.024)	0.010 (0.010)	0.067* (0.030)	0.044* (0.022)
Observations	1,385	30,424	1,436	31,378	1,420	(0.010)	1,463	31,823
Number of treated units	77	1,700	42	842	68	1,489	13	398
Mean of dependent variable	0.934	0.181	0.934	0.181	0.934	0.180	0.935	0.181
$R^2$	0.185	0.271	0.184	0.270	0.178	0.269	0.177	0.269
Difference		0.080		0.111		0.009		-0.022
Standard error		0.041		0.066		0.025		0.035

Notes: †  $p < .1$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

**TABLE 10 Heterogeneity Analysis by Individual Characteristics Signaling Vulnerability**

	All Attacks		Attacks in the News		All Shipwrecks		Shipwrecks in the News	
	Among single women	Among married women	Among single women	Among married women	Among single women	Among married women	Among single women	Among married women
Event $t - 1$	−0.016 (0.020)	−0.042 <sup>†</sup> (0.023)	0.001 (0.026)	−0.042 (0.032)	0.058* (0.028)	−0.009 (0.025)	0.118 <sup>†</sup> (0.062)	0.011 (0.046)
Observations	5,358	5,342	5,511	5,516	5,403	5,366	5,606	5,588
Number of treated units	308	264	140	141	236	262	61	75
Mean of dependent variable	0.179	0.249	0.179	0.249	0.177	0.248	0.178	0.248
$R^2$	0.380	0.460	0.381	0.458	0.381	0.454	0.382	0.455
Difference	−0.025		−0.043		−0.066		−0.107	
SE	0.029		0.038		0.033		0.072	

Notes: <sup>†</sup> $p < .1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . See notes of Table 3.

heterogeneity for additional subgroups (men versus women, Syrian or Iraqi men versus Syrian or Iraqi women) in Table A.7 (in the online supporting information).

### Alternative Mechanisms

At least two additional mechanisms may also be at work. First, the effects of either attacks or shipwrecks could instead be the result of a change in the attitudes of the applicants themselves, or of other individuals present during the interview, like lawyers or interpreters. While this scenario is impossible to rule out entirely, one piece of evidence suggests that applicants do not condition their behavior on these events: if asylum seekers believed that being interviewed after a shipwreck (attack) was beneficial (detrimental) to their case, we would expect them to be more (less) likely to show up to their interview if it was scheduled the day after a shipwreck (attack). Yet this does not seem to be the case. Table A.8 (in the online supporting information) illustrates that applicants scheduled for an interview the day after a shipwreck or attack were no more or less likely to attend.

A second potential mechanism is that tragic events could indirectly affect asylum decisions by increasing the amount of political pressure on the administration. While this mechanism could plausibly explain medium-

to long-term effects, it is less likely to be the main explanation for the very short-term effects identified here.

### Conclusion

The refugee crisis that began in 2015 coincided with renewed terrorist activity in Europe, which forced asylum officers to strike a delicate balance between protecting the lives of refugees fleeing persecution and preventing future terrorist attacks. During the first two years of the refugee crisis, two types of events, often reported by the media, unambiguously reminded citizens and asylum officers of this dual objective. News of migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean underlined the risk that asylum seekers take to reach Europe, while terrorist attacks underscored the potential cost of granting refugee status to even a single terrorist.

To determine whether these events affected asylum officers' decisions about whether to grant or deny refugee status to the applicants they were interviewing at the time, I estimate the short-term effect of migrant shipwrecks and terrorist attacks on asylum decisions, leveraging both the unexpected nature of these events and the fact that interviews at the French asylum office are scheduled weeks in advance. Combining administrative data on asylum applications filed at the French asylum office with data on migrant shipwrecks,

terrorist attacks, and news reports, I find that asylum officers were more generous with applicants interviewed the day after a shipwreck (compared to those interviewed on any other day), but only when the shipwreck was reported in the news. The effect of terrorist attacks was concentrated among applicants from Syria and Iraq, ISIS strongholds, which claimed responsibility for one-third of all terrorist attacks perpetrated in France in 2015 and 2016.

Examining possible mechanisms to explain these short-term effects, I find that the evidence in favor of racial bias or emotional shock, two common explanations of how tragic events affect voters and decision-makers, is surprisingly weak. Instead, the evidence is most consistent with a mechanism in which tragic events affect the extent to which asylum officers' value security versus humanitarian concerns when making their decisions. This study thus contributes to recent research on how unrelated events affect decision-making by judges and asylum officers in two ways. First, it provides evidence that other events, not just terrorist attacks, can affect decision-making. Second, my findings demonstrate that the focus on terrorist attacks in previous research may have resulted in an alternative mechanism being overlooked — one in which events affect the necessary trade-off between two conflicting but equally important goals. Overall, this study provides evidence that tragic events can affect immigration policy through their effect on asylum decision-making.

My research design suffers from at least two limitations. First, the study cannot speak to the longer-term effects of tragic events. Previous studies have shown that terrorist attacks can impact decisions for several months afterwards (Brodeur and Wright 2019; Shayo and Zussman 2011). But more research is needed to understand the long-term effects of other types of tragic events like migrant shipwrecks. Second, treatment compliance is a critical issue in such designs. Data on news coverage allowed me to mitigate this concern to some extent, but further research should attempt to better capture the extent to which decision-makers know about the events being studied.

The study has at least three broader implications. First, I anticipate that tragic events affect asylum decision-making in other refugee-receiving countries as well. The main scope condition is that events raised public awareness at home of the trade-off between humanitarian and security considerations at the heart of the Geneva Convention. Second, tragic events may affect decision-making in other areas as well. Further studies could explore how events influence decision-making in other fields, such as the bail system in the United States.

Third, a better understanding of how unrelated events affect decision-making should help policymakers anticipate and mitigate possible inconsistencies in asylum decisions. Most research so far has focused on inconsistencies with respect to applicants' characteristics (Emeriau 2023; Keith and Holmes 2009; Schneider and Holzer 2002). This study sheds light on another type of inconsistency related to the timing of decisions and the level of public awareness of the trade-offs involved at the time of the decision.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

### Table A1: Additional Analyses