



New  
Direction

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# **MIGRATION IN THE MENA AND SAHEL**

**Lack of Dialogue Despite  
Shared Challenges with the EU**



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# Introduction

## MIGRATION SEEN “FROM THE OTHER SHORE”

Migration across the Mediterranean is one of the main defining issues of our time, profoundly shaping the socio-economic and political dynamics of both the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Europe. And even beyond, as it affects and is affected by the Sahel region. Historically, the Mediterranean has been a bridge connecting continents, facilitating trade, cultural exchange, and human mobility. In recent decades, however, migration has become a pressing and complex challenge, with far-reaching consequences for origin, transit, and destination countries alike. This report focuses on the adverse effects of migration on MENA countries and the Sahel, examining the challenges these nations face as both sources and transit hubs for migrants heading to Europe.

A range of interconnected factors drives the Mediterranean migration crisis. Economic disparities, political instability, social inequalities, and environmental pressures push millions to leave their home countries for better opportunities, safety, and stability. These movements are compounded by the pull of Europe, where the prospect of improved living conditions and security attracts those willing to risk perilous journeys. For MENA countries, the effects of migration are severe. These nations are not only losing skilled professionals and educated individuals essential for their socio-economic development. Still, they are also grappling with the demands of being transit hubs for those travelling through their territories toward Europe.

This dual burden is acutely felt in countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Turkey or Lebanon. The central Mediterranean route in Tunisia has made the country a key departure point for migrants. This role amplifies socio-economic challenges, with the loss of human capital hindering critical sectors such as healthcare and education. Similarly, Algeria faces the “Elharga” phenomenon, symbolising its youth’s disillusionment with their homeland’s governance and economic prospects. In Morocco, migration policies have shifted the nation’s role from primarily a source country to a transit hub, creating new social and political tensions. Libya, still reeling from prolonged conflict, has become a hotspot for human trafficking and exploitation. With its vast population and persistent economic challenges, Egypt experiences significant emigration and pressure from being a transit route for sub-Saharan migrants. Turkey, which hosts millions of refugees primarily from Syria, faces unique political, economic, and social pressures as a bridge between the MENA region and Europe. Lebanon and Palestine, meanwhile, host large refugee

populations, placing immense strain on public services and infrastructure.

The implications of migration for the European Union are equally significant. The EU is a primary destination for migrants from the Mediterranean, and its proximity to the MENA region makes it particularly vulnerable to the socio-political and economic challenges stemming from migration. Irregular migration routes are frequently linked to organised crime and human trafficking, raising security concerns. Furthermore, the arrival of migrants in Europe presents challenges related to integration, including language barriers, cultural differences, and socio-economic disparities, which often strain public resources and fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. Balancing humanitarian responsibilities with domestic concerns is a persistent challenge for EU member states, further complicated by the need for cohesive migration policies that address the root causes of migration in origin countries.

This report highlights four critical areas where migration adversely affects MENA and Sahelian countries. First, **brain drain**—the emigration of skilled professionals and educated individuals—has profound implications for these nations. The departure of talent stifles innovation, weakens public services, and disrupts economic development. For instance, in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Palestine, the loss of professionals in medicine, engineering, and education exacerbates existing challenges in building robust socio-economic systems. In Egypt, youth unemployment and the scarcity of high-paying jobs drive emigration, especially among the educated, while leaving a domestic skilled labour gap.

Second, the role of MENA countries as **transit hubs** creates unique challenges. Nations like Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, and Egypt bear the logistical, financial, and humanitarian costs of managing migration flows. Border security is a persistent issue, as is combating human trafficking and providing basic services to transient populations. For Libya, in particular, the lack of centralised governance complicates efforts to address these issues, leaving the country vulnerable to exploitation by organised crime networks. Egypt, serving as a pathway for sub-Saharan migrants and as a key departure point for Mediterranean crossings, faces the dual challenge of managing inflows and outflows of migrants amid its own economic difficulties.

Turkey represents a distinct case as both a transit and host country. With over 3.7 million Syrian refugees and significant

numbers of Afghans and Iraqis, Turkey has become one of the world's largest refugee-hosting nations. This responsibility strains its infrastructure, healthcare system, and labour market, while the presence of such a large refugee population creates political tensions domestically and in its relations with the EU. Turkey's role as a gatekeeper for migration into Europe, particularly under the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal, underscores the critical need for sustained international cooperation to address these challenges.

Third, the **costs of hosting refugees** further strain MENA countries. Lebanon, hosting one of the world's largest per capita refugee populations, faces overcrowding in urban areas and mounting pressure on housing, healthcare, and education systems. Palestine's long-standing refugee crisis similarly creates immense socio-political and economic challenges, exacerbating instability and hindering development. In Turkey, refugees often live in overcrowded conditions with limited access to formal employment despite government and NGO efforts to provide support.

Lastly, migration has also become a key factor in **national security and international diplomacy**. Origin and transit countries, particularly those in politically strategic locations, often leverage migration as a bargaining tool in their dealings with the EU. This phenomenon, known as weaponised migration, involves using the movement of migrants to exert political pressure, secure funding, or negotiate favourable agreements.

Weaponised migration poses significant risks to both the migrants themselves, and the stability of the regions involved. It politicises human mobility, turning vulnerable populations into tools for political leverage. The securitisation of migration, while addressing some immediate concerns, often results in stricter border controls and harsher treatment of migrants, further exacerbating humanitarian crises. National security concerns also arise from the association of migration routes with organised crime and terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

The EU's role in addressing the Mediterranean migration crisis is critical. As the primary destination for migrants, the EU must balance its internal challenges with its external responsibilities. Collaborative efforts with MENA countries are essential to tackle the root causes of migration, from economic development and political reform to addressing climate change and fostering stability in conflict-affected regions. Equitable burden-sharing, support for transit and host countries, and investment in sustainable development initiatives are vital components of any long-term solution.

This report is thus particularly significant for the EU and the international community. It provides an analysis of the impacts of migration on countries of origin and transit, emphasising the interconnectedness of these challenges

and the need for coordinated responses. For countries of origin and transit, it highlights migration's socio-economic and political repercussions and offers insights into potential policy interventions. It underscores the need for international support to manage migration flows effectively for transit countries. For the EU, it calls for collaborative and equitable migration policies that address the shared challenges of the Mediterranean migration crisis.

Chapter 2 consists of a theoretical framework for the study of migration, which is paramount considering the high contention around it and the sensitiveness it brings up everywhere. Chapter 3 provides a radiography of the current state of informal migration to Europe as it pertains to the MENA region as an origin and transit region, including also a brief review of the Sahel.

After this theoretical and data-based framework of informal migration, Chapter 4 examines some of migration's most prevalent adverse effects on origin and transit countries. Chapter 5 investigates the policy implications of informal migration. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a forward-looking set of policy proposals. These two final chapters put the accent on an EU policymaking perspective.

The findings of this report are based on an extensive review of existing literature, statistical data, and case studies. Drawing on insights from regional and international studies, it offers a holistic understanding of the migration crisis, integrating perspectives from countries across the Mediterranean. The report also incorporates cases and examples from countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon to provide a nuanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by these nations.

Migration dynamics in the Mediterranean do not operate in isolation; they are deeply intertwined with global political and economic systems. For example, the European Union's migration policies directly impact the flow and management of migrants in MENA and Sahelian countries. Agreements such as the EU-Turkey deal and border management initiatives like those in Morocco highlight the interconnected nature of migration governance.

The Mediterranean migration crisis is not merely a regional issue; it has global implications, as was recently shown in the United States, where migration has been a decisive political fault line in the 2016, 2020 and 2024 elections. Addressing it requires a shared commitment to fostering stability, development, and equitable solutions. This report aims to inform policymakers, researchers, and international organisations about the profound impacts of migration on MENA and Sahel countries, urging them to adopt collaborative and sustainable strategies. By highlighting the complexities of migration and its far-reaching consequences, this report seeks

to contribute to a deeper understanding of the crisis and to inspire action that benefits both the MENA and Sahel regions and the EU.

Understanding the impact of migration on countries of origin is critical for developing balanced and effective

migration policies. The findings of this report aim to bridge some gaps and provide actionable insights for governments, international organisations, and civil society stakeholders engaged in addressing migration challenges, as well as specifically assist the EU in policymaking pertaining to migration.

<sup>1</sup> See Glied, V. (2024). 'Migration and Terrorism in North Africa.' In: Besenyő, J., Issaev, L., Korotayev, A. (eds) *Terrorism and Political Contention. Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*. Springer.

## MIGRATION A Theoretical Framework

Migration—especially irregular migration—remains a deeply polarising issue. And so is its very definition, insofar as migration itself and migration-related terminology is highly contentious. As a result, prior to delving into further research, let us briefly review the working definition of this report regarding irregular migration. Namely, the “movement of persons to a new place of residence or transit that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries.” This is the definition coined by the European Migration Network’s (EMN) Asylum and Migration Glossary, which also specifies that, from the perspective of destination countries, it is entry, stay or work in a country without the necessary authorisation or documents required under immigration regulations. From the standpoint of the sending country, the irregularity is, for example, seen in cases in which a person crosses an international boundary without a valid passport or travel document or does not fulfil the administrative requirements for leaving the country. There is, however, a tendency to restrict the use of the term to cases of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings.

The EU itself points out that “defining irregular migration has been the subject of considerable debate” insofar as terms such as illegal, undocumented, non-documented, and unauthorised migration can have different connotations in national policy debates.

Because of the nature of the organisation that publishes this report, New Direction, it is pertinent that this document looks at the issue of migration from an EU-based terminology. To that end, this brief glossary of terms might be both interesting and valuable.

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **Migration:** movement of a person either across an international border (international migration), or within a state (internal migration) for more than one year irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate. This term encompasses both immigration and emigration.
- **Emigration:** The action by which a person leaves their country of origin with the intention to remain in another country for a period exceeding one year. It emphasises the perspective of the country of departure.
- **Immigration:** The process of entering and settling in a country of which one is not a national. The act of arriving in a State with the intention to remain for a period exceeding one year.
- **Informal Migration:** Migration occurring outside formally established legal frameworks, often involving undocumented travel, residency, or employment without breaking explicit legal provisions. It is distinct from irregular migration.
- **Irregular Migration:** Movement of people outside the regulatory framework of the sending, transit, or receiving country. This includes cases of unauthorised entry, residence without legal status, or overstaying visas.
- **Illegal Migration:** Refers to the movement of people in contravention of a country’s immigration laws, including unauthorised entry or stay. The term is discouraged in EU discourse in favor of “irregular migration” to avoid stigmatisation.
- **Refugee:** In the EU context, either a third-country national who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or a stateless person, who, being outside of the country of former habitual residence for the same reasons as mentioned above, is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it, and to whom Art. 12 (Exclusion) of Directive 2011/95/EU (Recast Qualification Directive) does not apply.

While the United Nations Organisation uses the term ‘irregular’ or ‘undocumented’ migration, the European Commission favoured for a long time the term ‘illegal immigration’, but more recently refers to ‘irregular migration’ as well. The main reason for the preference of ‘irregular’ over ‘illegal’ immigration in recent times, according to the EU, is that “the association with criminality the term ‘illegal migration’ should be avoided, as most irregular migrants are not criminals. In most countries, being in a country without the required papers is not a criminal offence but an administrative infringement.”<sup>2</sup>

The Council of Europe also differentiates between illegal migration and irregular migration. Referring to Resolution 1509 (2006) of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, ‘illegal’ is preferred when referring to a status or process, whereas ‘irregular’ is preferred when referring to a person: those “who enter a country without the necessary documents and permits.”<sup>3</sup>

The ‘irregular migration’ concept has also been extensively analysed in scholarly literature, reflecting its complex legal, social, and political dimensions. Irregular migration generally refers to the movement of people that takes place outside the regulatory frameworks of sending, transit, or receiving countries. However, definitions vary based on legal systems, regional contexts, and institutional frameworks, leading to ongoing debates among scholars and policymakers.

Scholars emphasise the importance of distinguishing between irregular and illegal migration. Triandafyllidou (2016)<sup>4</sup> defines irregular migration as a condition where migrants lack valid authorisation or documentation to stay or work in a country. This can result from visa overstays, unauthorised border crossings, or employment without permits. The term ‘illegal migration’ is increasingly avoided in academic discourse due to its criminalising implications, as it conflates the legal status of actions with moral judgments about individuals (Kraler & Reichel, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Irregular migration is often constructed through legal and political lenses. Düvell (2011)<sup>6</sup> argues that irregular migration

arises from state policies that categorise migrants based on compliance with immigration regulations. He identifies pathways into irregularity, including systemic barriers to legal migration channels and changes in visa or residency status. These definitions are fluid, as migrants can shift between regular and irregular statuses depending on circumstances such as changes in employment or residency laws (Koser, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Definitions of irregular migration also vary regionally. In the European Union, irregular migration predominantly refers to non-EU citizens residing or working in member states without proper authorisation. This includes unauthorised border crossings, overstays, and unauthorised labour market participation (Guild, 2004).<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in the MENA region, irregular migration often encompasses transit migration through countries like Libya and Morocco *en route* to Europe.<sup>9</sup>

This institutional conception of irregular migration coincides with most scholarship in that there is often a preference for either humanitarian obligations or security concerns. However, these are rarely found in a balanced fashion, just as political and national realities are found in very diverse settings.

EU policymakers grapple with public sentiment, integration difficulties, and the socio-economic strain posed by irregular migration routes.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, the MENA and Sahel regions faces its own burdens as both a source and transit zone for migrants. These challenges are compounded by socio-economic inequalities, political instability, and environmental stress, making migration a shared yet contested issue.<sup>11</sup> Irregular migration is a dual challenge, functioning both as a source of emigration and as a transit hub for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. The socio-economic pressures driving migration include high unemployment, political instability, and environmental degradation. In countries such as Libya and Tunisia, weak governance structures exacerbate the exploitation of migrants, particularly in the context of human trafficking and smuggling networks (Jaulin, 2010).<sup>12</sup> Nations such as Morocco and Algeria manage significant migrant flows while grappling with resource constraints, political instability, and international pressure to control their borders.

Refugees must also be distinguished from overall international migrants, including irregular ones. Whereas irregular migration is voluntary, driven by the pursuit of better opportunities, people seeking refugee status are due to threats to their lives—the legal framework affecting irregular migrants and refugees. The former are not protected under international law but are affected by national immigration laws of the receiving country or body of them (e.g. the EU). However, the latter are protected under international law, specifically the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

Lastly, one more term that must be examined is that of Forced Displaced Persons (FDP). FDP include both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees —of an international nature— and are not explicitly protected under international law unless they qualify as refugees or asylum seekers.

The EU’s support for border management often places MENA and Sahel countries in a difficult position, balancing domestic challenges with the expectations of external stakeholders (Cassarino & Del Sarto, 2018)<sup>13</sup>. However, the countries of these regions have also utilised irregular migration as a bargaining tool in their relations with the EU. This phenomenon, referred

to as ‘migration diplomacy’, leverages the transit role of these nations to negotiate financial aid, trade benefits, and political concessions (Seeberg & Völkel, 2022).<sup>14</sup>

International migration is the issue that underscores the interdependence between the EU and MENA regions the most, as well as the MENA and the Sahel. While the EU focuses on curbing irregular flows, MENA countries bear the brunt of managing these flows. This dynamic reveals stark power imbalances, with the EU setting migration policy terms while MENA nations manage the operational and humanitarian burdens.

The human rights dimension of irregular migration is also a critical area of concern. The securitisation of migration often undermines the development goals that could address the root causes of irregular migration in origin and transit countries.

With a clear terminological framework, let us now examine in more detail the reality of migration in the MENA and Sahel regions, its numbers, trends and routes, its root causes, and push and pull factors.

2 European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, EMN Asylum and Migration Glossary. Available here: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/irregular-migration\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/irregular-migration_en)

3 Council of Europe, Manual for Human Rights Education, Human Rights Themes, Migration. Available here: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/migration>

4 Triandafyllidou, A. (2016). *Irregular Migration in Europe*. Taylor & Francis.

5 Kraler, A., & Reichel, D. (2011). *Measuring irregular migration and population flows*. International Migration, Wiley Online Library.

6 Düvell, F. (2011). *Paths into irregularity: The legal and political construction of irregular migration*. European Journal of Migration and Law.

7 Koser, K. (2005). *Irregular migration, state security and human security*. Citeseer.

8 Guild, E. (2004). *Who is an irregular migrant?*. Brill.

9 Triandafyllidou, A. (2016). *Irregular Migration in Europe*. Taylor & Francis.

10 European Migration Network. European Report on Migration and Asylum 2023 (July 2024). Available here: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-07/EMN\\_Inform\\_ARM2023.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-07/EMN_Inform_ARM2023.pdf)

11 OECD (2024). International Migration Outlook 2023. Available here: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/10/international-migration-outlook-2023\\_0faed233.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/10/international-migration-outlook-2023_0faed233.html)

12 Jaulin, T. (2010). *The impact of EU migration policy in the southern and eastern Mediterranean*. IDEA.

13 Cassarino, J. P., & Del Sarto, R. A. (2018). *The governance of migration and border controls in the European-North African context*. Cadmus EUJ.

14 Seeberg, P., & Völkel, J. C. (2022). *Migration diplomacy and institutionalized flexibility in the Arab-Mediterranean context*. Mediterranean Politics.

## THE REALITY OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN THE MENA AND THE SAHEL

### 3.1. The Numbers of Migration in the MENA and Sahel regions

Migration is currently at an all-time surge, driven by a complex interplay of economic, political, and environmental factors. While this phenomenon spans multiple regions globally, certain areas stand out as hotspots due to their strategic locations and socio-political dynamics. Among these, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Sahel region are perhaps the most critical on earth.

According to the UN, there are an estimated 281 million international migrants in the world, which comprise some 3.5 per cent of the global population.<sup>15</sup> However, it is essential to note that most people do not migrate across borders but within countries.<sup>16</sup>

The MENA and Sahel regions serve as both points of origin and transit for millions of migrants seeking better opportunities or fleeing conflict, persecution, and climate change impacts. Their geographical proximity to Europe and their position as crossroads between Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world, and Europe make these regions pivotal in the global migration narrative. Addressing irregular migration in these areas requires a coordinated international approach that tackles not only border security but also the root causes driving migration, such as instability, poverty, and lack of opportunities.

Compiling precise data on the number of individuals who have left each Sahel and MENA country is very challenging. Comprehensive data on legal and irregular migrants from these countries is limited due to reporting challenges—e.g. varying reporting standards from a methodological standpoint—and the clandestine nature of irregular migration, which makes it very hard to track. There is also the challenge of overlapping

categories, as some individuals may shift between categories (e.g. IDPs becoming refugees). Finally, there are some critical gaps in specific country statistics, which also prevent international reporting from UNHCR and IOM, for instance, to provide accurate data.

From an EU standpoint, North Africa (or the broader MENA region) has more proximity. Still, the core of the migration crisis lies in the Sahel, which has long undergone a very dire situation. The Sahel region has gone through a profound transformation over the past few years. One which calls for an adjustment in political and humanitarian engagement to address the worsening crisis characterised by escalating forced displacement and increased protection needs. There has been a decade of conflict and displacement in that region, which entered into a multidimensional crisis after the eruption of the Malian conflict in 2012. Violent groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have spread from Central Mali to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, while Boko Haram has made incursions into Southern Niger from Nigeria, resulting in a conflict that has grown in extension and intensity.

As of August 2024, almost 5 million people were forcibly displaced across Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger, Mauritania, and the coastal countries of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo—an increase of 25% since 2020. In the first half of 2024 alone, approximately 130,000 Malians sought refuge in Mauritania. Over 150,000 people fleeing Burkina Faso sought asylum in coastal countries since 2021. In Burkina Faso, with limited opportunities for return, the number of IDPs may increase to 3.65 million by the end of 2025.

<sup>15</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2024). Interactive World Migration Report 2024.

<sup>16</sup> A phenomenon that is caused by a wide array of factors ranging from violence and terrorism to urbanisation.

**Table 1.**  
**Main Departure or Origin Countries in the Sahel Region (2023) (estimates)**

| Country      | Refugees and Asylum Seekers (2023) | Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) | Legal Migrants (Est.) | Irregular Migrants (Est.) |
|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Burkina Faso | ~38,000                            | ~1.9 million                        | ~200,000              | ~50,000                   |
| Chad         | ~100,000                           | ~220,000                            | ~150,000              | ~40,000                   |
| Mali         | ~60,000                            | ~350,000                            | ~500,000              | ~50,000                   |
| Mauritania   | ~105,000                           | Minimal                             | ~300,000              | ~20,000                   |
| Niger        | ~431,000                           | ~507,000                            | ~500,000              | ~100,000                  |
| Senegal      | Minimal                            | Minimal                             | ~500,000              | ~30,000                   |
| Sudan        | ~1.2 million                       | ~7.1 million                        | ~3 million            | ~150,000                  |
| South Sudan  | ~2.2 million                       | ~2 million                          | ~500,000              | ~50,000                   |

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Some crucial observations of Table 1 are that there is a high displacement country, such as Sudan, with 1.2 million refugees and 7.1 million IDPs, driven by conflict in regions like Darfur and Khartoum, or South Sudan, with 2.2 million refugees and 2 million IDPs due to long-standing internal conflicts and regional instability. Niger is also a good example, with 431,000 refugees and 507,000 IDPs affected by ongoing insurgencies and regional instability. As for the internal displacement hotspots, Burkina Faso has 1.9 million IDPs caused by escalating violence

in the central Sahel region, and Mali comprises 350,000 IDPs due to conflict in northern and central areas. Niger accounts for 507,000 IDPs caused by insurgencies and regional instability.

Despite the Sahel region being the most complex area when dealing with migration, the MENA region also represents a pressing issue for the region itself and the countries where the displaced population aspire to arrive.

**Table 2.**  
**Main Departure or Origin Countries in the MENA Region (2023) (estimates)**

| Country   | Refugees and Asylum Seekers (2023) | Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) | Legal Migrants (Est.) | Irregular Migrants (Est.) |
|-----------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Algeria   | ~110,000                           | Minimal                             | ~1.5 million          | ~30,000                   |
| Djibouti  | Minimal                            | Minimal                             | ~100,000              | ~5,000                    |
| Egypt     | ~290,000                           | Minimal                             | ~5 million            | ~100,000                  |
| Iraq      | ~300,000                           | ~1.2 million                        | ~1 million            | ~50,000                   |
| Jordan    | ~700,000                           | Minimal                             | ~1.5 million          | ~20,000                   |
| Lebanon   | ~800,000                           | Minimal                             | ~1 million            | ~15,000                   |
| Libya     | ~50,000                            | ~278,000                            | ~600,000              | ~80,000                   |
| Morocco   | ~20,000                            | Minimal                             | ~3 million            | ~150,000                  |
| Palestine | ~5.9 million                       | ~300,000                            | ~2 million            | ~10,000                   |
| Syria     | ~6.8 million                       | ~6.7 million                        | ~3 million            | ~300,000                  |
| Tunisia   | Minimal                            | Minimal                             | ~1 million            | ~50,000                   |
| Turkey    | ~3.4 million                       | Minimal                             | ~6.5 million          | ~200,000                  |
| Yemen     | ~140,000                           | ~4.5 million                        | ~500,000              | ~100,000                  |

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM)

**NOTE**

Turkey is not part of the MENA region but has nonetheless been included in this table because of the role it plays, from outside the EU, as a key actor addressing the issue of migration. Turkey's Role. It hosts over 3.4 million refugees, predominantly from Syria, making it the largest host country for refugees globally. Moreover, Turkey has a significant diaspora of legal migrants, with 6.5 million legal migrants abroad, mainly in Europe and the Middle East. Furthermore, Turkey is both a destination and transit country for irregular migrants heading to Europe.

Several observations can be drawn from Table 2. One is that Syria continues to be a major refugee host (6.8 million refugees and 6.7 million IDPs), as it accounts for the most significant refugee and IDP numbers in the MENA region. This situation can now be accelerated after the fall of the Assad regime. Similarly, there is a long-standing refugee situation with over 5.9 million registered refugees. Iraq and Yemen also show alarming figures due to the high forced displacement of the population due to protracted conflicts.

Up to now, this chapter has focused on the countries of origin, may those be the Sahel or MENA countries. However, an essential aspect of migration –especially irregular migration– is the situation in transit countries.

Over the last decade, several countries in the MENA region

have served as major transit points for migrants, primarily those aiming to reach Europe. These transit countries include Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt. Migrants passing through these nations originate from various regions, notably Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, but also further away regions such as South Asia.

In 2023, an estimated 212,100 attempts were reported by migrants and refugees to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea from Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia to Europe. This was a 33 per cent increase compared to known departures in 2022.

Of those who attempted to depart in 2023, 71 per cent (151,500) were disembarked in Europe, while 29 per cent (60,600) were rescued or intercepted and disembarked in North Africa (21 per cent in Tunisia, 8 per cent in Libya)<sup>17</sup>.

**Table 3.**  
**Main Transit Countries in the MENA Region**

| Transit Country | Incoming Migrants (2023) | Outgoing Migrants (2023)                          | Key Origins of Incoming Migrants                        | Key Destinations for Outgoing Migrants                    |
|-----------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|
| Libya           | ~660,000                 | ~100,000  | Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Sudan, Eritrea)      | Europe (Central Mediterranean route)                      |
| Tunisia         | ~70,000                  | ~70,000 (attempts intercepted or departures)      | Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea), Syria | Europe (Central Mediterranean route, Italy)               |
| Morocco         | ~50,000                  | ~25,000   | Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Senegal, Mali), Moroccans     | Europe (Spain, Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes) |
| Algeria         | ~35,000                  | ~20,000   | Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Niger, Mali), Algerians       | Europe (Western Mediterranean route, Spain)               |
| Egypt           | ~300,000                 | ~50,000   | Horn of Africa (e.g., Eritrea, Somalia), Syria          | Europe (Eastern Mediterranean route, Greece, Italy)       |
| Lebanon         | ~1.5 million refugees    | Minimal direct migration (refugees mostly remain) | Syria, Palestine  | Limited, often resettlement to Europe and North America   |
| Jordan          | ~1.3 million refugees    | Minimal direct migration (refugees mostly remain) | Syria, Iraq   | Limited, often resettlement to Europe and North America   |
| Turkey          | ~3.4 million refugees    | ~200,000  | Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq                                | Europe (Eastern Mediterranean route, Greece, Balkans)     |

Source: UNHCR and IOM Joint Annual Overview 2023

Libya and Egypt are the largest receivers of migrants in the MENA region, with many coming from sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa. Serves as a significant transit hub due to its proximity to Europe and porous borders. In 2023, approximately 100,000 migrants attempted to depart toward Europe. Cumulatively, over 1,000,000 migrants have departed from Libya between 2010 and 2023.

Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan are the largest hosts of refugees in the MENA region, with the majority originating from

Syria due to the ongoing civil war. Tunisia and Morocco serve as key transit points for migrants from both Africa and the Middle East. Tunisia has seen a significant increase in migrant departures, with approximately 70,000 individuals intercepted attempting to cross the Mediterranean in 2023, more than double the 2022 figure. As for Morocco, it acts as a key transit country for migrants aiming to reach Spain via the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes. In 2023, over 25,000 migrants departed toward Europe from Morocco.

<sup>17</sup> IOM UN Migration (2024). Migrant and refugee movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea - Joint Annual Overview 2023. Available here: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/migrant-and-refugee-movements-through-central-mediterranean-sea-joint-annual-overview-2023>

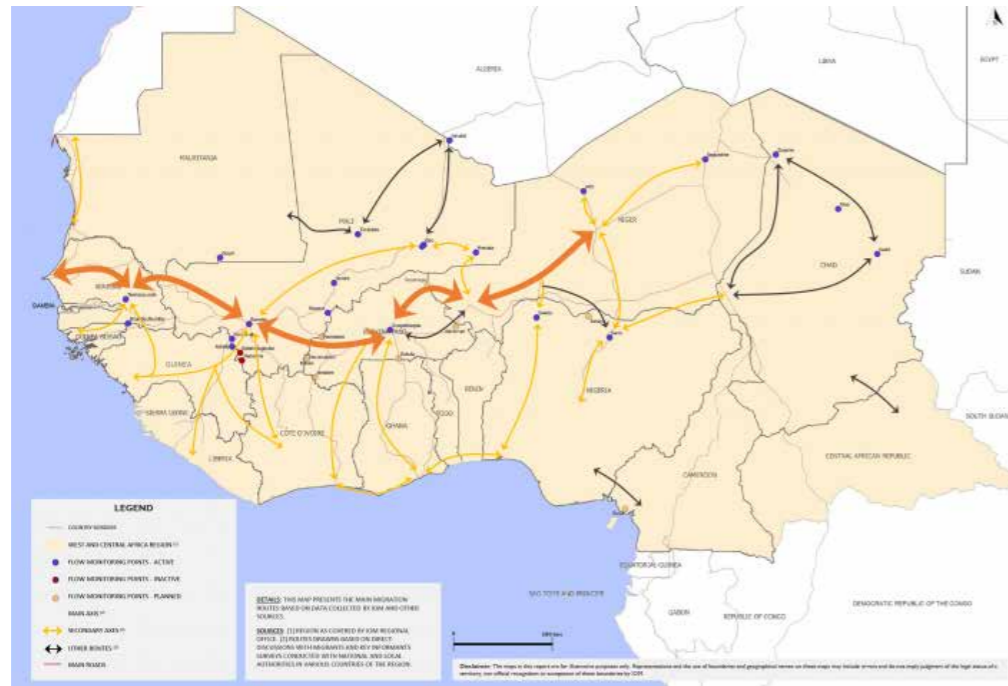
### 3.2. Sahel and MENA Migration Routes

#### The Sahel Route

As mentioned above, the Sahel serves both as the origin or departing point for migrants and as a transit region for migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa and beyond. Migration

movements in the region are a long-standing phenomenon and an integral part of West African societies. Many countries of the region host substantial migrant populations. Migration movements are first and foremost intraregional, with almost 90-95 per cent of all migrants moving between countries in the region<sup>18</sup>.

Figure 1. Internal Sahel Migration Routes



Source: EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration

As Figure 1 shows, the Sahel migration route features numerous pathways through countries like Niger<sup>19</sup>, Chad, and Mali.

#### The Mediterranean Migration Routes

Migrants and refugees trying to reach Europe often embark on life-threatening journeys as smugglers use increasingly dangerous tactics to cross the Mediterranean. The year 2023 saw yet another increase in irregular migration pressure that reflected the ever-greater geopolitical turbulence in Europe's neighbourhood and beyond. In 2023, more than 442,000 illegal border crossings were detected at the EU's external borders: 380,000 on entry, including both attempts and successful crossings. This marks the highest level since 2016, the year the EU experienced the so-called "refugee crisis".<sup>20</sup> The detections on entry increased by 17 per cent in relation to the 2022 figure, making 2023 the third consecutive year with a significant

rise in the number of irregular entries. The increase in illegal border crossings in 2023 was driven mainly by migrant arrivals at the sea borders.

There are three main Mediterranean migration routes: Central, Eastern and Western, each posing different yet pressing challenges in North African and EU countries, and each with its own specificities across countries and across time. They also present different origins, specific drivers and challenges.

#### The Central Mediterranean Route

The Central Mediterranean Route is one of the most perilous migration pathways, stretching from North Africa to southern Europe, particularly Italy and Malta. Libya and Tunisia are the key departure countries. Migrants often gather in coastal cities such as Tripoli, Zuwara, and Sfax. Many migrants come from

Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Sudan, and Eritrea. However, some also hail from Bangladesh and Syria, reflecting the interconnected nature of global migration. It is also worth mentioning that the route is infamous for shipwrecks and deaths at sea, exacerbated by limited search-and-rescue capacity and strict European Union (EU) border policies.

The year 2023 witnessed increased arrivals in the Central Mediterranean (well over 50,000 more than in 2022) and totalled almost 158,000 irregular border crossings (50% more than in 2022). Tunisians, Guineans, and Ivorians were the top three nationalities reported in 2023, a year which saw the most arrivals in this region since 2016. Tunisia ranked first as a country of departure, followed by Libya<sup>21</sup>.

#### The Eastern Mediterranean Route

This route connects Turkey to Greece and the Balkan countries, serving as a gateway for migrants seeking entry into the EU. Migrants cross the Aegean Sea to reach Greek islands like Lesbos and Chios or travel overland via the Turkish-Bulgarian or Turkish-Greek borders. They predominantly come from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and many are fleeing ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises.

According to Frontex<sup>22</sup>, around 60,000 detections were reported in 2023, the second consecutive year with a clear rebound in crossings after the pandemic low. Syrians, Afghans, and Palestinians, who left Palestine before October 7th, 2023, were the most often reported nationalities. Arrivals of vessels from Lebanon, Libya and Syria were registered in more significant numbers.

The Eastern Mediterranean and Central Mediterranean routes will likely see more migratory activity and a higher proportion of the overall migratory flows to the external borders due to regional conflicts and instability. Also, regarding the Eastern Mediterranean Route, it is important to note that overcrowded refugee camps in Greece and harsh border enforcement have made conditions precarious for migrants. Political disputes between Turkey and the EU over migration management further complicate the situation.

#### The Western Mediterranean Route

This route leads from the North-West of Africa to the south of Spain via the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alborán Sea. In 2018,

the Western Mediterranean route became the most frequently used route into Europe. After the peak of arrivals in 2018, arrivals steadily decreased from 2019 to 2022. However, this route saw an increase of around 12 per cent in 2023 in relation to 2022, with Moroccans and Algerians by far the largest migrant groups detected. The use of powerful speedboats to transport migrants was a frequent occurrence in 2023.

Some key departure points are cities such as Tangier, Nador, and Oran, aiming to reach Spanish mainland cities or enclaves like Ceuta and Melilla. As for the precedence of the migrants, while many originate from Sub-Saharan Africa, Moroccan and Algerian nationals also use this route.

Beyond the three Mediterranean migration routes cited above, two other routes affect the MENA region and the Sahel. The Western Balkan route affects the former, whereas the Sahel profoundly impacts the Western African Route.

#### The Western African Route

The Western African Route connects West Africa (and further north) with the Spanish Canary Islands. The Western African route refers to irregular arrivals in the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. Migrants depart mainly from Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal and The Gambia and embark on dangerous journeys along the West African coast to reach the Canary Islands. The distance covered ranges from less than 100 kilometres from the nearest point on the African coast to more than 1,600 kilometres from Gambia.<sup>23</sup>

In 2023, instability in West Africa was concomitant with a tripling of detected arrivals from that region. Smugglers use larger cayucos—a type of West African fishing boat—to be able to transport more migrants—something that became prevalent after the 2006 cayucos (small boats) crisis<sup>24</sup>. The 161 per cent increase in relation to 2022 was driven mainly by more direct arrivals from Senegal, followed by Morocco and Mali, and the situation in 2024 is even more alarming.

As noted by Frontex,<sup>25</sup> some countries in this region have experienced growing instability, such as military takeovers or socio-economic insecurity. A further increase on this route is likely. And irregular migrants' arrival data speak for itself: Out of 54,541 irregulars who arrived by sea in Spain throughout this year, 75.5 per cent did so in 640 cayucos to the Canary Islands, registering a total of 41,425 irregular migrants by December 1st, 2024.

18 EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration. Available here: <https://www.migrationjointinitiative.org/countries/sahel-and-lake-chad>

19 Agadez in Niger is a significant hub for migrants travelling northwards to Libya or Algeria.

20 It was branded as such even though less than 50 per cent of all migrants coming to Europe were refugees from an international law standpoint.

21 Frontex (2024). *Migratory Routes*, 2023. Available here: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/migratory-routes/>

22 Ibid.

23 European Council. Council of the European Union. EU migration and asylum policy. Migration flows on the Western Routes. Available here: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/western-routes/#africa>

24 In 2006 over 31,000 irregular migrants arrived in the Canaries. This was known as the *Cayucos crisis*, named after the popular fishing boats from Senegal and Mauritania. In the following years the number of irregular arrivals dropped to less than 1,500 arrivals per year. After a significant increase in 2020 and 2021, the number of irregular arrivals decreased again in 2022. For more information see Dudek, C.M. & Pestano, C. (2019). 'Canaries in a coal mine: The cayuco migrant crisis and the europeanisation of migration policy', *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*. No. 49. March 2019, pp. 85-106.

25 Ibid.

**The Western Balkan Route**

The Western Balkan route includes Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia at the land borders with countries from the Western Balkan region. Migrants often enter Greece via the Eastern Mediterranean Route from Turkey, landing on Greek islands or crossing overland at the Evros River. From Greece, they proceed through North Macedonia and Serbia or take alternative paths via Albania and Montenegro.

The Western Balkan route reported a decrease of around 31 per cent to 99,000 detections in 2023. Some of the pressure from the Serbian borders shifted to the EU's borders with Bosnia and

Herzegovina, which saw a roughly 80 per cent increase in illegal border-crossings in the first eleven months of 2023 compared with the same period of 2022. The reported migrants were mainly Syrians, Turks, and Afghans.

Developments at the land borders to the Western Balkans could hold surprises for European border management as visa policies change and loopholes are exploited. Steps in the direction of visa policy alignment have shown promising results. Moreover, since 2021, three countries in the Western Balkans —North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania— have hosted fully-fledged Frontex operations, thereby supporting their authorities in preventing future irregular migration to the EU.

Table 4. Detection of illegal border-crossings to the EU

| Route                 | 2021   | 2022    | 2023    | % Change over 2023 |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|---------|--------------------|
| Central Mediterranean | 67,724 | 105,561 | 157,479 | 49                 |
| Eastern Mediterranean | 22,793 | 38,690  | 60,073  | 55                 |
| Western Mediterranean | 18,466 | 15,134  | 16,915  | 12                 |
| Western African Route | 22,351 | 15,463  | 40,403  | 161                |
| Western Balkan Route  | 61,735 | 144,197 | 99,068  | -31                |

Source: Frontex

As can be seen in the data, after the Covid-19 crisis, which put migration routes on hold, these have been very much reactivated. Of the five migration routes affecting Europe from

MENA and Sahel —as there are additional ones such as the Eastern Border route—over the past two years, all have been rapidly rising in numbers, except for the Balkan Route.



Source: Frontex. From West to East: Western Africa, Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean Route (together with the Western Balkan Route).

These are the main irregular migrant routes to Europe coming from the Sahel and North Africa, as well as the primary data points. However, looking at these numbers without examining

the drivers of migration provides an incomplete picture. Therefore, let us look into the push and pull factors of irregular migration in the MENA and the Sahel.

**3.3. Push and Pull Factors of Irregular Migration in the MENA and the Sahel**

There are many drivers of irregular migration, but most can be put in one of two categories. Namely, **push factors** and **pull factors** are elements that drive people to leave and those that make a place desirable for migrants to arrive at.

Migration flows from the MENA and Sahel regions are heavily influenced by an intricate interplay of push and pull factors. These drivers are rooted in the region's socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges and the perceived opportunities abroad. Understanding these factors requires a closer examination of the underlying conditions that force people to leave their home countries and draw them to destination countries, primarily in Europe.

**Push Factors**

One of the primary push factors across the world is the prevalence of **conflict and violence**. The MENA and Sahel regions are not different. Actually, they have been home to some of the world's most prolonged and devastating conflicts. In the MENA region, Syria remains the most significant contributor to forced migration, with over 9 million individuals fleeing the country as of 2023. The ongoing civil war has displaced millions internally and externally, creating one of the most significant refugee crises in modern history. This crisis now faces much uncertainty with the regime change that unfolded with the recent escape of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow. Similarly, Yemen, plagued by a protracted civil war, has seen 4.5 million people displaced. The effects of these conflicts are not contained within their borders but extend to neighbouring countries and beyond,

straining regional stability. Libya's continued instability further exacerbates migration flows, serving as both a source and a transit hub for approximately 700,000 migrants in 2023.

As for the Sahel region, almost 5 million people were forcibly displaced across Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger, Mauritania, and the coastal countries of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo as of August 2024 – an increase of 25% since 2020. In the first half of 2024 alone, approximately 130,000 Malians sought refuge in Mauritania. Over 150,000 people fleeing Burkina Faso sought asylum in coastal countries since 2021. In Burkina Faso, with limited opportunities for return, the number of IDPs may increase to 3.65 million by the end of 2025.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the migrants fleeing violence —mostly war or terrorism— are asylum seekers or endowed with protection under international law as they are granted refugee status. However, that is not the case with another type of migrants, who migrate seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families. That is particularly the case of economic migrants.

**Economic instability** is another significant push factor. Youth unemployment across the MENA region remains alarmingly high, exceeding 25 per cent in several countries, compared to a European Union average of 14-15 per cent in the 2022-2024 period. The lack of employment opportunities forces many young people to seek livelihoods abroad. Sudan represents a stark example of economic instability; with inflation surpassing 190 per cent in 2023, the country has experienced a mass exodus of individuals seeking better economic prospects elsewhere.

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR Global Focus. Sahel+ situation. Available here: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/sahel-situation#:~:text=Almost%205%20million%20people%20were,Malians%20sought%20refuge%20in%20Mauritania.>

Table 6. **Macroeconomic Indicators in MENA, Sahel, EU Mediterranean, and EU Average (2022\*)**

| Country      | Population (Million) | GDP (USD Billion) | GDP per Capita (USD) | Youth Unemployment (%) | Inflation Rate (%) | Region |
|--------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------|
| EU Average   | 446.7                | 17,000            | 38,000               | 14.2                   | 2.5                | EU     |
| France       | 67.9                 | 2,850             | 42,000               | 16.1                   | 5.4                | EU     |
| Greece       | 10.35                | 240               | 23,200               | 26.7                   | 5.3                | EU     |
| Italy        | 59.0                 | 2,100             | 35,500               | 22.7                   | 7.0                | EU     |
| Spain        | 47.4                 | 1,490             | 31,300               | 28.7                   | 3.9                | EU     |
| Algeria      | 44.18                | 193               | 4,500                | 28.0                   | 8.5                | MENA   |
| Egypt        | 109.26               | 404               | 4,000                | 24.0                   | 22.5               | MENA   |
| Iraq         | 44.85                | 230               | 5,600                | 20.0                   | 6.3                | MENA   |
| Jordan       | 10.55                | 45                | 4,600                | 26.0                   | 4.2                | MENA   |
| Lebanon      | 5.49                 | 21                | 3,100                | 37.0                   | 170.0              | MENA   |
| Libya        | 6.99                 | 50                | 7,300                | 19.0                   | 9.2                | MENA   |
| Morocco      | 37.84                | 142               | 3,400                | 29.0                   | 5.7                | MENA   |
| Palestine    | 5.23                 | 15                | 2,800                | 38.0                   | 6.5                | MENA   |
| Saudi Arabia | 35.01                | 1,061             | 29,000               | 9.0                    | 2.7                | MENA   |
| Sudan        | 49.71                | 21                | 500                  | 36.0                   | 190.0              | MENA   |
| Syria        | 21.32                | 40                | 1,900                | 35.0                   | 90.0               | MENA   |
| Tunisia      | 12.11                | 47                | 3,200                | 32.0                   | 7.8                | MENA   |
| Turkey       | 85.34                | 819               | 9,600                | 22.0                   | 43.8               | MENA   |
| UAE          | 9.89                 | 499               | 52,000               | 7.0                    | 2.0                | MENA   |
| Yemen        | 33.18                | 22                | 1,100                | 44.0                   | 60.0               | MENA   |
| Burkina Faso | 22.1                 | 18                | 810                  | 32.0                   | 12.0               | Sahel  |
| Chad         | 17.18                | 13                | 750                  | 33.0                   | 8.0                | Sahel  |
| Mali         | 21.91                | 17                | 770                  | 30.0                   | 9.5                | Sahel  |
| Mauritania   | 4.84                 | 10                | 2,100                | 31.0                   | 4.2                | Sahel  |
| Niger        | 25.25                | 14                | 550                  | 35.0                   | 3.7                | Sahel  |

Sources: World Bank, IMF, and Eurostat, 2022

\*This table has used data from 2023 because some countries (especially non-EU countries) still do not have updated data statistics from 2023.

**Environmental stress** also contributes to migration pressures. Climate-related factors significantly drive irregular migration from the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and Sahel regions. Key indicators include water scarcity, land degradation, desertification impact, and temperature increases.

The MENA region is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. With 85 per cent of the land classified as arid or semi-arid, water scarcity is a pervasive issue. Desertification has displaced an estimated 12 million people over the last decade, with countries like Morocco and Algeria among the most brutal

hit. As agricultural livelihoods become untenable, individuals are forced to migrate to urban centres or internationally in search of better living conditions.

Climate change has increasingly become a driver of migration in the MENA and Sahel regions. In 2023, erratic weather patterns, prolonged droughts, desertification, and rising sea levels forced many to move within and beyond their countries. Extreme weather events, such as droughts and heavy rains, are also becoming more frequent and worsen especially the Sahel region. The following table summarises climate-related migration in MENA and Sahel countries:

Table 7. **Climate-Related Migration in MENA and Sahel Countries (2023)**

| Country      | Estimated Climate Migrants (2023) | Primary Climate Driver         | Notes   |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Algeria      | 120,000                           | Desertification                | Sahara expansion displacing rural populations.                          |
| Morocco      | 85,000                            | Water Scarcity                 | Agricultural communities were severely impacted.                        |
| Tunisia      | 45,000                            | Drought                        | Increased urban migration due to loss of rural livelihoods.             |
| Egypt        | 150,000                           | Rising Sea Levels              | Nile Delta communities are at risk due to salinisation and flooding.    |
| Libya        | 20,000                            | Desertification                | Internal displacement worsened by climate and political instability.    |
| Yemen        | 50,000                            | Water Scarcity                 | Ongoing conflicts compounded by severe water shortages.                 |
| Sudan        | 1,200,000                         | Flooding and Desertification   | Widespread displacement is caused by seasonal flooding and droughts.    |
| Jordan       | 10,000                            | Water Scarcity                 | Limited migration due to the relatively small rural population.         |
| Lebanon      | 15,000                            | Deforestation and Soil Erosion | The economic crisis exacerbates rural-to-urban migration.               |
| Iraq         | 250,000                           | Water Scarcity                 | Tigris-Euphrates water disputes and extreme heat affecting agriculture. |
| Saudi Arabia | Minimal                           | Desertification                | Wealth and urbanisation mitigate large-scale migration.                 |
| UAE          | Minimal                           | Heatwaves                      | Technological adaptation prevents displacement.                         |
| Syria        | 500,000                           | Drought                        | Ongoing conflict intertwined with agricultural loss.                    |
| Palestine    | 25,000                            | Water Scarcity                 | Movement constrained by political restrictions.                         |
| Mali         | 450,000                           | Desertification and Flooding   | Nomadic communities were severely impacted.                             |
| Niger        | 900,000                           | Drought and Flooding           | The Sahel belt is heavily affected by climatic extremes.                |
| Chad         | 800,000                           | Lake Chad Shrinkage            | Water scarcity leads to livelihood loss and migration.                  |
| Mauritania   | 300,000                           | Desertification                | Rural populations were losing grazing land.                             |
| Burkina Faso | 600,000                           | Desertification                | Increased movement towards southern regions.                            |

Sources: International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR and World Bank<sup>27</sup>.

Among many climate-related drivers of migration, water scarcity is a significant factor in both regions, MENA and Sahel, especially in agricultural economies. Seasonal floods in countries like Sudan and Niger also displace millions temporarily and sometimes permanently. Finally, desertification pushes rural populations across borders or toward urban centres.

Despite their limited capacity to absorb the influx, urban centres are perceived as hubs of opportunity. Cities like Bamako (Mali), Niamey (Niger), and N'Djamena (Chad) are experiencing rapid population growth, leading to overcrowded living conditions. These rapidly growing cities are struggling to provide adequate housing, education, healthcare, and transportation to the growing population, resulting in overwhelmed public health systems, with higher incidences of diseases like cholera and malaria due to poor sanitation. Moreover, increased competition for jobs in already fragile urban economies leads to higher unemployment and underemployment rates.

At the same time, informal economies are expanding, often marked by low wages and precarious working conditions. Finally, the massive influx of rural migrants is leading to tensions with long-term urban residents, who may perceive newcomers as competitors for limited resources and may result in deepening inequalities between the growing urban poor and the wealthier classes.

All of these push factors often intersect, creating a complex web of challenges that compel individuals to migrate. For instance, a family in Sudan may face economic hardship compounded by environmental degradation, pushing them to undertake perilous journeys in search of stability and security.

### Pull Factors

The pull factors driving irregular migration from the Sahel to MENA countries and from both regions to the EU highlight a complex interplay of economic, social, and geopolitical forces. Addressing these dynamics requires a comprehensive approach

<sup>27</sup> For further clarification as to these data sources, see: International Organization for Migration (IOM): Reports on environmental migration trends. UNHCR: Climate displacement data for vulnerable populations. World Bank: Climate impact studies for MENA and Sahel countries.

that includes economic development, conflict resolution, and improved migration management in origin, transit, and destination countries.

On the other hand, pull factors play a significant role in shaping migration patterns. There are many pull factors that affect or impact migration: the numbers, the rate and the routes. However, three factors stand out: better economic prospects, family reunification and education opportunities.

Europe continues to attract migrants from the MENA and Sahel regions due to its perceived **economic opportunities** and higher standards of living. Just as economic instability or precariousness is a driver for migration as a push factor, economic opportunities—from jobs to legal security—are also pull factors for migration. Despite stringent border controls and restrictive immigration policies, the allure of stable employment and social benefits remains strong. For instance, in 2023, over 160,000 migrants arrived in Europe through the Central Mediterranean route alone, highlighting the enduring attractiveness of European destinations.

**Family reunification** policies also act as a pull factor. For the past 20 years, family reunification has been one of the main reasons for immigration into the EU<sup>28</sup>. Many MENA and Sahel

migrants seek to join relatives who have already established themselves in host countries. For example, family reunification accounted for 35 per cent of residence permits issued in France and Germany in 2023. These policies provide a legal pathway for migration, albeit one often fraught with administrative hurdles.

Another significant draw for migration—both legal and irregular—is **education opportunities**. An estimated 1.9 million students from the MENA region were enrolled in tertiary education globally in 2023, with Europe hosting the majority—70 per cent of these students. Countries offering scholarships or favourable conditions for international students are particularly attractive to young migrants seeking to improve their prospects through education. As seen in the next chapter, economic and educational opportunities are also some of the leading causes of the brain drain of these origin and transit regions.

This chapter has provided an overview of the current state of irregular migration from and through the MENA and Sahel regions, emphasising trends, routes, and the intricate interplay of push and pull factors. It is now time to delve deeper into the impacts of these migration patterns in origin and transit countries.

## 4

# ADVERSE EFFECTS OF MIGRATION ON ORIGIN AND TRANSIT COUNTRIES

Irregular migration from the MENA and Sahel regions to Europe has profoundly shaped the socio-economic and political landscapes of these areas. Serving as both sources of migrants and transit hubs, countries in these regions bear a disproportionate burden of the migration phenomenon. While much focus has been placed on the challenges facing European nations, the origin and transit countries experience economic losses, increased humanitarian responsibilities, and social strains that are equally consequential and often overlooked.

As a result, this chapter shifts the focus from description to analysis, examining the multifaceted adverse effects migration

imposes on origin and transit countries. This examination will uncover the economic, social, and political tolls, setting the stage for a comprehensive discussion on policy implications and potential solutions.

Although migration from Sahel and MENA brings some positive aspects to origin and transit countries—together with those who migrate themselves—there is an overall net loss for these regions. In other words, the impact of migration from and through MENA and Sahel is of a negative nature. As a result, we must examine the adverse effects of irregular migration on MENA and Sahel countries by evaluating three main aspects: economic, political and social implications.

## 4.1. Economic Implications of Migration in MENA and Sahel

There are two main economic implications of irregular migration in these regions. Namely, brain drain, and the difficulties faced by transit countries in managing large migrant populations and the costs of hosting refugees.

### The Economic Toll of the Brain Drain

One of the most significant impacts of irregular migration on MENA and Sahel countries is the loss of human capital. According to a 2023 study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the OECD, over 30 per cent of migrants from the Sahel region possess secondary or higher education, and many are trained professionals, including doctors, engineers, and teachers. For example, Libya and Syria have lost more than 50 per cent of their healthcare professionals due to emigration over the last decade (World Bank, 2022).

The brain drain primarily affects highly educated professionals such as doctors, engineers and scholars, resulting in reduced productivity—as they drive innovation and economic growth—and hindering the region's competitiveness. For instance, Tunisia, a country with a strong tradition of training doctors,

loses a significant proportion of its medical graduates to European countries, leading to healthcare shortages<sup>29</sup>. Similarly, countries like Sudan and Niger face severe shortages of medical professionals. While Sudan trains a substantial number of doctors annually, an estimated 70% emigrate to the Gulf states or Europe. Algeria's *Elharga*—which means burning everything that connects the migrant to their homeland, including official documents in order to completely sever ties and flee for another country—is also not specific to impoverished segments of society, but to affluent youth. Doctors, lawyers, engineers and judges leaving are also leaving Algeria irregularly.

The brain drain phenomenon creates a wide array of secondary consequences, which are also of paramount importance. Some examples are lower GDP growth and wasted government spending—essentially, governments subsidise the economies of destination countries by educating professionals who later emigrate. For example, the MENA region loses over \$2 billion annually in migration-related education costs alone.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the brain drain also weakens the already fragile public services—especially healthcare, education and infrastructure sectors—as qualified professionals leave.

<sup>28</sup> See European Commission. *Legal migration, resettlement and integration policy*. Available here: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-resettlement-and-integration/family-reunification\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-resettlement-and-integration/family-reunification_en)

<sup>29</sup> According to the Tunisian Statistics Office and the Observatoire National de la Migration, the level of current migrants from Tunisia is higher than that of the population of the country. Nearly one out of three current migrants (34.6 per cent) have a higher education level and 38.7 per cent have a secondary education level. Furthermore, the educational structure of current migrants evolves favourably over time. Thus, the share of current migrants with higher education levels tends to increase, from 17.3 per cent for departures before 2000 to 47.4 per cent for departures after 2010. Available here: <http://www.migration.nat.tn/images/pdf/2022/Tunisia-Hims-en-opt.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> United Nations. *Situation Report on International Migration 2021*. Available here: <https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl686/files/documents/srim-2021-en-english-june-30.pdf>

Brain drains also increase regional disparities, as brain drain often concentrates talent in urban areas of receiving countries, leaving rural areas in source countries underserved. The loss of human capital also increases dependence on foreign aid, as it undermines local or national self-reliance and hinders innovation. The departure of the most talented individuals stunts technological development and entrepreneurship. This also affects research and development and the capacity to attract investment—foreign and domestic—and causes an innovation exodus as entrepreneurs leave in search of more supportive start-up hubs.

The adverse effects of brain drain are compensated, to some extent, by the phenomenon of remittances. Remittances play a crucial role in the economic stability and development of countries in the MENA and Sahel regions. These financial flows from migrants working abroad to their home countries are often seen as lifelines for families and communities, serving as a critical source of income, especially in regions marked by economic vulnerability and limited access to formal financial systems.

In the MENA region, remittances constitute a significant share of GDP for many countries. Nations like Egypt and Morocco

stand out as major recipients. For instance, Egypt consistently ranks among the world’s top beneficiaries, with remittances contributing over \$31 billion annually. These flows help households manage basic needs, such as food, housing, and education, while also alleviating pressures on national foreign currency reserves. For Morocco, remittances similarly exceed \$10 billion annually, providing a stable economic buffer that supports rural and underserved populations. These inflows have proven resilient even during global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted other forms of economic activity.

In the Sahel region, the scale of remittances is smaller compared to MENA, but it remains essential. Countries like Senegal, Mali, and Niger depend on these funds to bridge gaps left by weak domestic economies and limited industrial bases. Remittances in Senegal account for a significant proportion of GDP, contributing to community-level development by financing local businesses and infrastructure projects. However, the reliance on remittances in the Sahel highlights structural challenges, as these countries often lack diversified economies capable of generating sustainable growth.

such as tightened migration controls and selective immigration favouring skilled workers, influence these patterns, creating complex implications for sending countries. While skilled migrants might remit less due to family reunification abroad, unskilled migrants who maintain stronger ties to their home communities tend to send a higher proportion of their earnings.

The remittance phenomenon in these regions underscores a delicate balance. While remittances are a vital economic asset, the structural dependence on these flows highlights vulnerabilities in domestic economic policies and limited opportunities for local wealth generation. For both MENA and Sahel, leveraging remittances for development requires strategic interventions, such as enhancing financial inclusion, creating investment channels for diaspora contributions, and addressing the root causes of economic migration. Without these measures, remittances, though beneficial, may continue to mask more profound economic challenges without addressing their underlying causes. The reliance on remittances cannot compensate for these structural losses.

As indicated in the table, the MENA region has gained a net gain in terms of sheer financial standards. However, the Sahel shows a closer margin, where remittances barely surpass the economic losses from brain drain, indicating a more precarious situation. Finally, as has been shown in much scholarship on this topic, contrary to expectations, skilled migrants remit less<sup>32</sup> despite earning more than unskilled labour, as they often have more extended stays abroad, leading to weaker ties with home countries. There is a higher likelihood of reuniting with close family abroad, reducing the need for financial support in home countries. As a result, if the economies of countries of origin rely on remittances, these will mostly come from unskilled labour, which is the type of migration that receiving countries will be more hesitant to welcome.

### The cost of transit countries in managing migrant populations across and the costs of hosting migrants and refugees

The MENA and Sahel regions are pivotal transit points for migrants attempting to reach Europe. Still, they also are destination countries, if not permanently, for extended periods—particularly in MENA countries such as Morocco or Turkey. This role exposes these countries to a unique set of challenges, as they must manage the flow of migrants with domestic resources and international support.

Libya is a prime example of a transit country struggling under the weight of migration. According to the IOM, over 650,000

migrants were present in Libya in 2023, many of whom were coming to Europe. The situation in Niger, another key transit hub, highlights the pressures on fragile economies. Agadez, a transit city, accommodates thousands of migrants annually, putting immense strain on local infrastructure.

The financial cost of managing transit populations is enormous. Niger spends approximately 10% of its GDP on border security and migrant management (IOM, 2022), diverting resources from essential services like healthcare and education. While helpful, the European Union’s external border funds often fail to address these gaps.

Transit countries also face heightened security challenges. In the Sahel, migration routes often overlap with areas controlled by criminal networks and terrorist groups. Human trafficking and smuggling generate billions of dollars annually, fueling instability. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), trafficking networks in the Sahel generated \$1.5 billion in 2021 alone. This exacerbates existing governance issues, as corruption within local authorities undermines counter-trafficking efforts.

MENA and Sahel countries are transit hubs, but they also host significant refugee populations. The region has borne the brunt of displacement crises triggered by conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and beyond. As of 2023, the MENA region hosted 14 million forcibly displaced and stateless populations<sup>33</sup>, while the Sahel region hosted nearly 6 million displaced persons, including half a million refugees and asylum seekers<sup>34</sup> (UNHCR, 2023).

Lebanon, with a population of just 5.8 million, hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees, accounting for over 20 per cent of its population (UNHCR, 2022). This has placed an overwhelming strain on the country’s economy, which is already grappling with hyperinflation and political instability. Refugees compete with locals for scarce resources such as jobs, housing, and healthcare, fueling tensions. A dire situation is exacerbated now in the Israeli military operations across southern Lebanon but affecting the entire country. Similarly, Chad and Sudan host hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries, including South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The prolonged nature of refugee crises exacerbates these challenges. Palestinian refugees, for example, have lived in camps in Jordan and Lebanon for over seven decades, creating what the United Nations terms a “protracted refugee situation”<sup>35</sup>. This prolongation drains resources. It fosters resentment among host communities, complicating integration efforts.

Table 8. Comparison between Remittances Inflows and Brain Drain Cost for the Sahel and MENA (2023)

| Country      | Remittance Inflows (2023) | Brain Drain Cost (2023) | Net Impact       |
|--------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Egypt        | \$31.5 billion            | \$1 billion             | +\$30.5 billion  |
| Morocco      | \$10.5 billion            | \$150 million           | +\$10.35 billion |
| Tunisia      | \$2.8 billion             | \$500 million           | +\$2.3 billion   |
| Sudan        | \$3.7 billion             | \$300 million           | +\$3.4 billion   |
| Libya        | \$1.1 billion             | Not quantified          | Uncertain        |
| Algeria      | \$2.1 billion             | \$500 million           | +\$1.6 billion   |
| Senegal      | \$2.7 billion             | \$120 million           | +\$2.58 billion  |
| Mali         | \$0.6 billion             | \$200 million           | -\$1.4 billion   |
| Niger        | \$0.5 billion             | \$200 million           | -\$1.5 billion   |
| Chad         | \$0.4 billion             | \$150 million           | -\$1.1 billion   |
| Mauritania   | \$0.2 billion             | Not quantified          | Uncertain        |
| Burkina Faso | \$0.3 billion             | \$150 million           | +\$0.15 billion  |

Source: World Bank, 2023<sup>31</sup>

The social and economic impact of remittances is multifaceted. On the positive side, they reduce poverty, support education, and improve health outcomes. Families receiving remittances are more likely to invest in human capital, which can break intergenerational cycles of poverty. At the macroeconomic level, remittances contribute to financial stability by bolstering foreign exchange reserves and mitigating balance of payment deficits. However, this dependence on external flows raises concerns. Remittances are often spent on consumption rather than productive investment, limiting their transformative potential for long-term economic growth. Moreover, the

phenomenon exacerbates the brain drain, as the departure of skilled workers impacts critical sectors like healthcare and education, undermining local development.

In both regions, remittance flows intersect with migration dynamics, often shaped by historical, geographical, and policy factors. For MENA, proximity to Europe and long-standing migratory ties to Gulf countries create significant corridors for both skilled and unskilled labour migration. In contrast, Sahel’s patterns are defined by regional movements within Africa and growing migration to Europe. Policies in destination countries,

31 World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook. Available here: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migration/overview>

32 Faini, R. (2007). ‘Remittances and the Brain Drain: Do More Skilled Migrants Remit More?’, *The World Bank Economic Review*, Volume 21, Issue 2, 2007, Pages 177–191,

33 UNHCR (2023). Regional Overview Middle East and North Africa. Available here: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-2023/regional-overviews/middle-east-and-north-africa>

34 UNHCR (2023). Regional Overview Sahel. Available here: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sahel-situation-global-report-2023>

35 UNHCR. Protracted Refugee Situations. Available here: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4444afcb0.pdf>

Table 9.

**Migration-related financial pressure for transit and host countries in the Sahel and MENA regions (2023-2024)**

| Country      | Total Cost (2023–2024) | EU Financial Aid (2023–2024) | Total International Aid (2023–2024) |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Turkey       | \$5 billion            | \$1 billion                  | \$2.5 billion                       |
| Egypt        | \$1.2 billion          | \$350 million                | \$500 million                       |
| Libya        | \$800 million          | \$250 million                | \$300 million                       |
| Tunisia      | \$500 million          | \$150 million                | \$200 million                       |
| Morocco      | \$600 million          | \$200 million                | \$300 million                       |
| Algeria      | \$700 million          | \$100 million                | \$150 million                       |
| Sudan        | \$400 million          | \$75 million                 | \$125 million                       |
| Niger        | \$300 million          | \$125 million                | \$200 million                       |
| Chad         | \$250 million          | \$100 million                | \$150 million                       |
| Mali         | \$200 million          | \$75 million                 | \$100 million                       |
| Mauritania   | \$150 million          | \$50 million                 | \$75 million                        |
| Burkina Faso | \$200 million          | \$60 million                 | \$100 million                       |
| Syria        | \$1 billion            | \$200 million                | \$400 million                       |
| Lebanon      | \$3 billion            | \$600 million                | \$1 billion                         |
| Palestine    | \$800 million          | \$350 million                | \$500 million                       |

Source: World Bank, UNHCR and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

This table highlights the critical role of the European Union (EU) in financing migration and displacement-related costs in the Sahel, MENA regions, and Turkey. EU financial aid constitutes a substantial portion of the total international aid directed to these countries. For instance, in Lebanon and Palestine, EU contributions account for 60 per cent and 70 per cent of their respective total international aid, while in Syria, the EU provides 50 per cent of the total—which is also explained by UN and US larger strategic interests in this country as compared to other countries in the MENA region. This significant financial commitment reflects the EU's strategic interest in stabilising its neighbouring regions to manage migration flows and prevent large-scale displacement from escalating into direct migration pressure on European borders.

The ongoing wars in Israel and Palestine and the military operations in Lebanon will likely exacerbate these dynamics. Intensified conflict in Gaza and the potential destabilisation of southern Lebanon could trigger new waves of displaced persons, further straining the financial and infrastructural capacities of neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. These countries already host large refugee populations and rely heavily on international aid, including

from the EU, to cope with existing pressures. The conflict risks overwhelming these systems, driving up costs for both transit and host countries, as well as their international donors.

In Syria, the fall of the Assad regime introduces significant uncertainty. While it could pave the way for reconstruction and eventual refugee repatriation, the collapse of centralised authority could also lead to fragmentation and further displacement. Without a stable governance framework, international donors, including the EU, will face challenges in coordinating aid effectively and mitigating further outflows of displaced populations. This instability will likely require sustained and potentially increased financial commitments from the EU, even as the bloc grapples with its own economic pressures and domestic political challenges regarding migration.

Finally, the convergence of these crises underscores the precarious balance transit and host countries maintain, relying on external financial support to manage the escalating human and economic costs of migration and displacement. The EU's central role in this system is evident, but the long-term sustainability of such financial commitments, especially amidst growing geopolitical uncertainty, remains a critical question.

are equally profound, often reshaping local and national dynamics.

One of the most visible social impacts is the **exacerbation of existing inequalities** within and between communities.

Migrant and refugee populations frequently face limited access to public services such as healthcare, education, and housing, further marginalising vulnerable groups. Host communities, particularly in economically fragile countries like Chad, Sudan, and Lebanon, often experience resource competition, straining relations between local populations and displaced groups. This tension is especially pronounced in regions where infrastructure and public services are already underdeveloped, creating fertile ground for resentment and social conflict.

In transit countries like Libya, Tunisia, and Niger, migration often fuels illicit economies, such as human trafficking and smuggling, undermining the rule of law and destabilising governance. The reliance on these illicit networks perpetuates exploitation and strengthens non-state actors who **challenge state authority**. This dynamic can worsen political instability as governments struggle to maintain control over territories increasingly influenced by criminal networks.

Migration also has significant political consequences, as it often becomes a **polarising issue in national politics**. In host countries such as Turkey, where millions of refugees have settled, the presence of large displaced populations is a contentious topic, shaping electoral debates and influencing public opinion. Populations may view migrants as a drain on public resources or a threat to job opportunities, which politicians may exploit for political gain<sup>36</sup>. In countries like Libya, tensions between local populations and sub-Saharan African migrants have erupted into violence. Similarly, in Lebanon, anti-refugee rhetoric has become a prominent feature of political discourse, further marginalising displaced populations.

Migration-related pressures can also destabilise governments. For instance, the inability to manage migration effectively<sup>37</sup> has undermined public trust in institutions in countries like Mali and Libya. In Jordan, the financial and social strain of hosting Syrian refugees has sparked protests, demanding greater international support.

The ongoing conflicts in Israel and Lebanon are poised to exacerbate these social and political tensions further. Increased displacement from Gaza and southern Lebanon will place an even greater strain on neighbouring countries like Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, where social cohesion is already under pressure. The potential for overburdened systems to collapse under the weight of additional refugees is a looming threat, which could spark unrest and weaken governments already grappling with economic instability.

In Syria, the uncertain future following the potential fall of the Assad regime adds yet another layer of complexity. While some displaced Syrians may return if stability is restored, the risk of continued fragmentation or localised violence could generate new waves of migration. This uncertainty challenges regional governments and international donors as planning for long-term solutions becomes increasingly difficult. Political factions vying for control in Syria could exploit migration dynamics, further complicating governance and regional diplomacy.

Migration also brings with it an **international political aspect**, as migrants are increasingly being weaponised as a geopolitical tool. The phenomenon of weaponised migration<sup>38</sup> involves the deliberate manipulation of migration flows by states or non-state actors to achieve political, economic, or strategic objectives. This tactic has become prominent worldwide<sup>39</sup>, but predominantly in regions such as MENA and Sahel, where migration dynamics are closely tied to political manoeuvring and power struggles.

Morocco has strategically used migration pressure as leverage in its geopolitical disputes, particularly concerning Spain and the European Union. This approach was prominently observed in May 2021, when Moroccan authorities appeared to loosen border controls at Ceuta, a Spanish city in North Africa, allowing approximately 10,000 migrants, including unaccompanied minors, to cross into Spanish territory over just two days. This unprecedented influx followed Spain's decision to host Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, for medical treatment—a move Morocco perceived as a tacit recognition of Sahrawi independence efforts.

The incident highlighted Morocco's ability to manipulate migration flows as a tool to pressure Spain and, by extension, the EU. It underscored the dependence of European nations on Morocco to manage migration from sub-Saharan Africa, as Morocco acts as a key transit country. In response, the EU reaffirmed financial support to Morocco, with over €500 million allocated between 2021 and 2027 to bolster border management and migration control. However, this financial dependency also strengthens Morocco's position in negotiating broader issues, such as its claim over Western Sahara.

Algeria, a regional rival of Morocco, has supported Sahrawi refugees and the Polisario Front in their struggle for self-determination. This dynamic has also extended into migration politics. Algeria hosts over 170,000 Sahrawi refugees in camps near Tindouf, providing them with resources and political backing. This support not only strengthens Algeria's stance against Morocco but also

<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in Europe, migration from MENA and Sahel countries has fueled debates and shaped elections, with border security and national identity as political and societal fault lines. This topic has also impacted foreign policy and relations with transit and origin countries.

<sup>37</sup> The MENA and Sahel are not different in this regard to the West. Failure to deal with the Ukrainian refugee crisis by the PiS government in Poland also contributed to its fall in the 2024 elections. Similarly, the rapid ascent of Germany's AfD is mainly explained for the migration pressure.

<sup>38</sup> Greenhill, K.M. (2022). 'When Migrants Become Weapons'. *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the most important showcase is that of Russia. For more information regarding Russia's weaponisation of migration, see Scutaru, G. & Pavel, A. (2024). 'Weaponisation of Migration. A Powerful Instrument in Russia's Hybrid Toolbox'. *Hoover Institution* (Sept. 17, 2024). Available here: <https://www.hoover.org/research/weaponization-migration-powerful-instrument-russias-hybrid-toolbox>

exacerbates migration tensions in the region. The Sahrawi refugee population has become a point of contention in the broader geopolitical rivalry, as Morocco accuses Algeria of destabilising the region and fostering migration flows into its territory.

Algeria, in turn, has faced accusations of deliberately expelling migrants from sub-Saharan Africa toward Morocco's borders. While official figures remain elusive, local reports estimate that thousands of migrants have been transported to border areas, intensifying pressures on Morocco. This tit-for-tat dynamic illustrates how migration has become a key instrument in the regional power struggle.

Turkey's use of migration as leverage against the EU is among the most prominent examples of weaponised migration. Hosting the world's largest refugee population – more than 3.7 million Syrians – Turkey has repeatedly threatened to open its borders, allowing migrants to flow into Europe, as a means of securing political and financial concessions. This strategy was particularly evident in February 2020, when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Turkey would no longer prevent migrants from crossing into Greece. This declaration led to an immediate surge, with thousands of migrants attempting to breach the Greek border within days.

Turkey's actions forced the EU into a position of dependency, culminating in the 2016 EU-Turkey deal<sup>40</sup>, under which the EU pledged €6 billion to Turkey in exchange for stricter border controls and the readmission of migrants who crossed into Europe irregularly. While the deal has reduced migrant flows into Europe, it has also emboldened Turkey's ability to extract further financial and political benefits. In 2023, Turkey sought an additional €1 billion from the EU to continue its migration management cooperation, highlighting this geopolitical tool's cyclical nature.

Weaponised migration reflects the intersection of humanitarian crises and *realpolitik*, where vulnerable populations are caught in the crossfire of geopolitical rivalries. In regions like MENA and the Sahel, migration is no longer just a social or economic challenge but a powerful political instrument. The EU's heavy financial involvement demonstrates the bloc's vested interest in mitigating migration flows at their source. However, these strategies also reinforce dependency and embolden transit and host countries to leverage migration for their own gains, creating a cycle of instability that is difficult to break. Addressing the root causes of migration and fostering genuine regional cooperation is critical to reducing the weaponisation of this pressing global issue.



40 Kirisci, K. (2021). As EU-Turkey Migration Agreement Reaches the Five-Year Mark, Add a Job Creation Element, Brookings Institute. Available here: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/as-eu-turkey-migration-agreement-reaches-the-five-year-mark-add-a-job-creation-element/> For more information, see 2016 EU-Turkey Statement & Action Plan. Available here: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION - An EU Focus

### 5.1. Policy Reform in MENA and Sahel to Address Mass Migration

Irregular migration between the Sahel and MENA regions and Europe is not only a humanitarian and socio-economic issue but also a critical policy challenge for the European Union (EU). The political landscape of migration is deeply intertwined with questions of security, economic integration, regional stability, and the EU's standing in international relations.

Over the past few years, both the Sahel and MENA have undertaken profound measures to address the growing migratory pressure. In the Sahel, for instance, initiatives like the Agadez transit project<sup>41</sup> in Niger provide support to migrants and local communities while improving border management. The African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) also encourages regional collaboration on migration governance, with a focus on job creation and human rights. However, just as good agreements and legislation have been enacted, countries like Chad have enacted stringent anti-migration laws that penalise migrants rather than addressing underlying issues such as poverty and insecurity, and others such as Niger and Mali face challenges in sustaining adequate border controls due to corruption and resource constraints. Similarly, in November 2023, the new Nigerien military government, in power after the coup d'état, abrogated the law of 2015 that criminalised migrants transport from Agadez to Libya, defined as "human trafficking" and "migrant smuggling."

International agreements have also played a crucial role, although most have negative unintended consequences. Some examples are the G5 Sahel Joint Force Agreement<sup>42</sup>, which

focuses on combating terrorism and trafficking but often neglects the humanitarian aspects of migration management, and even older instances of cooperation, such as the Cotonou Agreement (2000-2020). Aimed at fostering development, its conditionality clauses linking aid to migration control have been criticised for exacerbating local instability.

In the MENA region, legislative action, reforms and treaties have been more effective at addressing mass migration movements. Some of these pertained to border control and security, and others to integration and the labour market. One example is Morocco's Regularization Campaign in 2014, which provided residency permits to thousands of irregular migrants, improving their access to services and labour markets. However, there have been a number of deeply flawed policies here, too. One example is Libya's interception of migrants *en route* to Europe, who are often held in overcrowded detention centres under inhumane conditions and sometimes left later on in very climate-harsh regions. Another example is Tunisia's border crackdowns, where border patrols have pushed migrants into more dangerous routes, leading to higher casualties, as well as creating a closed loophole of migrants entering Tunisia and then being expelled to Algeria.

As for treaties and international agreements in the MENA region, there are many, including some long-standing ones such as the EU-Morocco Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2000 and includes provisions for migration control in exchange for trade benefits, or the Khartoum Process (2014)<sup>43</sup>; a regional dialogue focused on combating human trafficking.

### 5.2. EU Policymaking to Address Mass Migration

In 2024, migration will be the EU's biggest challenge, and we can expect it to remain its top priority for the remainder of the century. The 2015 migration crisis highlighted the scale

and complexity of these challenges. Over 1 million migrants arrived in the EU, many via dangerous sea crossings and overland routes. Despite it being branded a "refugee crisis" for

41 This project is part of the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa. More information available at: [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/EUTF\\_SLC-SO2\\_2023%201st%20sem..pdf](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/EUTF_SLC-SO2_2023%201st%20sem..pdf)

42 INTERPOL. Integration for Impact. INTERPOL and the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force. Available at: <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Terrorism/Counter-terrorism-projects/G5-Sahel>

43 See more information about the Khartoum Process here: <https://www.khartoumprocess.net>

political purposes and to encourage a welcoming approach, approximately 52 per cent of those arriving were refugees fleeing war and persecution, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The remaining 48 per cent were economic migrants, driven by poverty and lack of opportunities in their home countries.

This unprecedented surge overwhelmed border countries like Greece, Italy, and Hungary, exposing deep divisions within the EU. While countries like Germany and Sweden opened their borders and welcomed significant numbers of migrants, others, particularly in Eastern Europe, resisted relocation quotas. The crisis not only strained public services in receiving countries but also fueled anti-immigrant sentiment and the rise of populist movements across the continent.

The 2015 crisis reshaped the EU's migration policies, prompting a stronger focus on border control and external partnerships. Agreements like the EU-Turkey deal sought to stem the flow of migrants by outsourcing responsibilities to transit countries. While these measures reduced the immediate pressure, they also revealed the fragility of the EU's migration governance and its reliance on external actors.

Today, migration remains as pressing an issue as it was in 2015, albeit with different dynamics. The number of irregular border crossings detected at the EU's external borders reached 442,000 in 2023—the highest since the peak of the 2015 crisis. Persistent instability in the MENA region, coupled with violence and climate-induced displacement in the Sahel, continues to drive migration flows. First-time applications for international protection in the EU have also increased in 2023, surpassing one million for the first time since 2016.

Recent figures indicate that while fewer arrivals are formally registered compared to 2015, the proportion of dangerous sea crossings has increased. The Central Mediterranean route remains one of the deadliest, and the West Africa route is fully reopened, as shown in Chapter 3.

The EU's response to address both mass migration and irregular migration is multifaceted, encompassing efforts to manage migration flows, enhance border security, and address root causes in origin and transit countries. These measures or policy implications can be put into two major categories: Border security and migration management and migration diplomacy and geopolitical leverage.

### Border security and migration management

The EU has prioritised securing its external borders to curb irregular migration. This includes the deployment of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency,

which collaborates with member states and non-EU countries to monitor migration routes and intercept unauthorised crossings. Recent agreements with MENA countries, such as the EU-Turkey deal mentioned in the previous chapter and bilateral pacts with Morocco and Tunisia, reflect a strategy of externalising border management. These agreements often involve financial and technical assistance in exchange for stricter border controls in transit countries.

While these measures have reduced immediate migration pressures, they also raise concerns about human rights. Reports of pushbacks and inadequate living conditions in detention facilities have drawn criticism from international organisations. Moreover, reliance on non-EU partners—such as Libya and Turkey—to manage migration flows exposes the EU to geopolitical leverage, as these states often use migration as a bargaining tool in broader political negotiations.

### Migration diplomacy and geopolitical leverage

Turkey's strategic location and its hosting of over 3.7 million Syrian refugees make it a pivotal player in EU migration policy. The 2016 EU-Turkey deal provided financial support and political concessions to Ankara in exchange for enhanced border controls. However, this dependency has allowed Turkey to leverage migration flows to secure further aid and political advantages, as seen during border crises in 2020 and 2023.

North African partnerships with countries like Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya play dual roles as both transit hubs and gatekeepers for migrants. In return for EU funding and trade benefits, these nations have increased border surveillance and disrupted smuggling networks. However, these arrangements often exacerbate socio-economic tensions within transit countries and raise ethical questions about the EU's responsibility for human rights violations occurring in partner states.

Migration diplomacy highlights divisions among EU member states, particularly those on the frontline of migration routes in Southern Europe. The 2020 Pact on Migration and Asylum exacerbated that tension as the Dublin Regulation<sup>44</sup> placed disproportionate responsibility on border states like Greece and Italy, leading to overwhelmed asylum systems. As a result, countries like Italy, Spain, and Greece often advocate for greater burden-sharing, while northern and eastern member states resist mandatory relocation quotas, especially after the adverse long-term effects of the 2015 migrant crisis. These disputes have delayed comprehensive reform of the EU's asylum and migration framework, undermining collective action.

EU policymaking aiming at addressing that unresolved issue reached a peak with the New Pact on Migration and Asylum<sup>45</sup>.

On April 10th, 2024, a slender majority in the European Parliament (300 votes in favour, 270 against) approved the regulations that make up the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to impose order on a dysfunctional and divisive

system. The history of the pact goes back to the autumn of 2020, when the Commission, following lengthy consultations, put forward a new set of regulations aimed at improving the EU's asylum system<sup>46</sup>.

## 5.3. Toward a New Era of EU Migration Policy

Despite joint efforts to arrive at a shared solution to address the challenge posed by mass and irregular migration, there is still much division among member states, especially between those who suffer a greater burden and those who do not. This has led some countries to design and execute their own action plan to address migration. And one has stood out since 2023. Namely, that of Giorgia Meloni's Italy: The *Piano Mattei* (Mattei Plan) to *Revitalize Italy's Africa Policy*.<sup>47</sup>

In 2023, Italy experienced a massive influx of irregular migrants, with nearly 90,000 arrivals, over double the figure from the previous year. This led to a 71 per cent increase in asylum applications. The increased migration pressure towards Italy took the Western Balkan and the Central Mediterranean routes. There were many reasons for such a sudden surge. Some examples were the shift in migration routes away from Spain due to improved Spain-Morocco relations and increasing instability in Libya and Sudan.

Meloni's response was that of realpolitik. She initiated the Rome Process at a Conference in July 2023, during which nations from the enlarged Mediterranean convened in the Italian capital for the first Development and Migration Conference. They agreed to curb irregular flows and intervene upstream through cooperation and investments, espousing Meloni's approach, who remarked on Italy's role as a “bridge between Europe, Africa and the Middle East.” She also highlighted that Rome “has what it takes to play a leading role” not only because of the attention level it demonstrates through investments—Italy-Africa interchange has been growing at an average rate of 7 per cent, reaching €70 billion—but because it employs a “non-predatory cooperation” model.

Meloni's migration actions significantly influenced the EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum, aiming to balance the responsibility of frontline nations (Italy, Greece, Spain) and solidarity from other EU members. However, the most paramount element of the Mattei Plan for Africa is the multilayer approach for the MENA and Sahel countries, which includes politics and diplomacy, as well as corporations and civil society. It is non-extractive but creative in terms of opportunities in origin and transit countries, and it presents a very clear path forward as the best alternative to misplaced sentimentality or perverse interests.

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### ITALY AS A CASE STUDY TO ADDRESS IRREGULAR MIGRATION

**Italy's Mattei Plan is strategy primarily based on a plan to curb the massive influx of undocumented individuals from other countries, particularly those arriving from the African continent. Meloni's plan hinges on signing a variety of agreements and treaties with nations that are key sources of irregular migrants.**

**To be more precise, Meloni has traveled on multiple occasions (see Appendix 1) to countries such as Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia—three of the countries contributing the largest numbers of migrants to Italian shores—with Tunisia being a particularly frequent destination, visited by the Italian leader no fewer than four times in one year alone. She has been accompanied to many of these visits by a top EU official—Von der Leyen in some instances—and by some Italian industrialist—e.g. Italian energy giant Enel. She has also met with prime ministers across the EU to gain support for her plan, and welcome MENA mandataries to Rome to discuss migration but, above all, investments. For the Mattei Plan is not just about migration. It is a roadmap encompassing sectors such as education, energy, and agriculture. Meloni emphasised that Africa is “not a poor continent,” pointing out that it holds 30 per cent of the planet's mineral resources and 60 per cent of its agriculture land. She has thus proposed a €5.5 billion package for Africa, comprising loans, grants, and guarantees for specific projects in several countries.**

**The results of the Mattei Plan, although incipient, start to speak for themselves:**

- **Meloni allocated €331 million in aid to Kais Saied, the President of Tunisia, a measure that seems to have yielded results. Immigration from Tunisia has decreased by 77% so far this year compared to the same period in 2023.**
- **She also pledged \$750 million in aid to Tunisia and lobbied the IMF for a potential rescue package.**

44 European Commission (2020). Pact on Migration and Asylum. Country Responsible for Asylum Application (Dublin Regulation). Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/country-responsible-asylum-application-dublin-regulation\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/country-responsible-asylum-application-dublin-regulation_en)

45 European Commission (2024). Pact on Migration and Asylum. Available at: <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migra->

tion-and-asylum\_en

46 González Enríquez, C. (2024). The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: context, challenges and limitations, *Real Instituto Elcano*, ARI 67/2024.

47 Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, Italy (2024). *Il Piano Mattei: Rilanciare L'Africa Policy Dell'Italia*. Available at: [https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ISPI\\_FPC-Piano-Mattei.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ISPI_FPC-Piano-Mattei.pdf)

- **Meloni has maintained strong agreements with Algeria, ensuring energy supply amid critiques from neighbouring EU member states because of Algeria's partnership with Russia.**
- **She also brought a €7.4 billion package to Egypt to boost its economy and support the country in hosting refugees.**
- **Meloni secured €100 million in direct aid to North African countries from the United Arab Emirates (UAE).**

Italy's strategy to manage migration flows relies on seemingly straightforward measures. These include passing decrees that reject most asylum applications. The data from the Italian government underscores the effectiveness of these policies: asylum rejections have doubled to 91 per cent, and the revocation of international protection for individuals already residing legally in Italy has reached 10 per cent. Furthermore, Italy has introduced measures to hinder NGOs from setting up aid facilities for migrants.

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There is, however, another country that could also lead the EU to respond to the migration challenge in the MENA region and the Sahel, which is Spain. Spain is uniquely positioned to lead the EU in addressing the migration challenge due to its geographical, historical, and political attributes. It holds a strategic geographic location, for as a southern European country, Spain is a primary entry point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean and the Atlantic —via the Canary Islands. This firsthand experience with migration routes gives Spain unique insights into the dynamics of irregular migration and border management.

Furthermore, Spain has a proven record of successfully managing migration peak times as the one it suffers today, such as the 2006 Cayucos crisis. At the time, Spain adopted policies inspired by EU principles of solidarity combined with security

and defence aspects. It developed programmes which provided aid to countries of origin in Africa with the aim of reducing irregular migration.

Spain also sought support from the EU and other member states by collaborating closely with Frontex. This cooperation was essential in managing the crisis and serves as a case study of how the EU can influence national policies through mechanisms of soft governance, emphasizing the importance of European solidarity and collective action.

Just like Italy's African Plan, 2006-2009 Spain also retained a predominant role in formulating and implementing migration policies. This aligns with liberal intergovernmentalism perspectives, which emphasise the primacy of nation-states in policy domains like migration, even in contexts of European integration. The combination of EU principles and policy with nation-specific action demonstrates how national responses to specific challenges can influence broader European practices for the better, providing insights for the development of migration policies across the continent.

Spain has also proven that it has developed effective bilateral agreements with countries in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Morocco and Senegal, to manage migration flows. These agreements often include economic development, training, and joint patrols, which have successfully reduced irregular migration. Finally, Spain has implemented innovative initiatives like temporary work visas<sup>48</sup> for seasonal agricultural labourers from Africa, promoting legal migration pathways. These efforts can serve as models for broader EU policies.

Spain has every element required to adopt a leadership position in the EU pertaining to the migration challenge. But to do so, it must learn from its own recent history and also from Meloni's Africa Plan, which, combining strong border policies with international agreements and development initiatives, has managed to significantly curtail irregular migration flows, presenting a stark contrast to other European nations grappling with the same challenges.

## 6

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The migration dynamics across the Mediterranean and the Sahel present some of our time's most complex socio-political and economic challenges, intricately linking the regions of origin, transit, and destination. As discussed, migration is not merely a regional phenomenon but a global issue, driven by factors ranging

from political instability and economic hardship to environmental stressors and demographic pressures. The EU, as a primary destination for migrants, must navigate a delicate balance between addressing security concerns, fulfilling humanitarian obligations, and managing internal political dynamics.

## Addressing Root Causes in Origin Countries

The root causes of migration, such as poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation, must be addressed to create sustainable solutions. Initiatives like the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa aim to tackle these issues by promoting economic development, job creation, and governance reforms in origin and transit countries. However, the effectiveness of these programs has been uneven, hampered by weak governance, corruption, and limited long-term engagement.

needs migrants, especially considering its well-funded welfare systems paired with an unprecedented demographic winter. Therefore, the question is how many, how fast (quantitative aspects) and of what qualifications —may those be language or culture-wise, or technical and educational qualifications. That is the question that the EU as a whole and every single EU member state should be urgently discussing.

Stabilisation efforts in conflict-prone regions like the Sahel are particularly urgent. Addressing internal displacement and fostering security in countries like Burkina Faso and Mali can reduce migratory pressures. Additionally, family reunification programs, as highlighted by the OECD<sup>49</sup>, have proven essential in promoting migrant integration and reducing irregular flows. Policymakers should streamline these processes to improve outcomes for migrants and their families, but to do so in strict observation of EU and national law, as reunification policies are often utilised in a too extensive manner, as has been the case in Belgium, for example, leading to untenable situations.

Similarly, there should be a profound reflection as to the most successful migrant integration policies. This is critical for long-term stability in host countries and not to spark radical populist movements across the EU. Furthermore, challenges such as strained public services, language barriers, and cultural differences often exacerbate anti-immigrant sentiment. The EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) outlines strategies for addressing these issues but requires consistent implementation across member states. Investments in education, housing, and healthcare, alongside community engagement initiatives, can foster mutual understanding and social cohesion. However, the best integration policy must always be setting the right barrier for migrants to enter a country. Again, how many migrants come, how fast they come, and where migrants come from will be determinants of the effectiveness of any integration policy.

The tension between security and asylum obligations continues challenging the EU's migration policy. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum offers a framework for balancing these priorities, but its implementation faces significant political resistance. Expanding legal pathways for migration, including seasonal work programs and education exchanges, can reduce reliance on irregular routes while addressing labour market needs in Europe. However, as Dudek and Pestano (2019) emphasised, these pathways must be scaled up and simplified to compete with the risks of irregular migration effectively.

A comprehensive migration policy must also enhance solidarity mechanisms among EU member states, e.g., by alleviating pressure on frontline countries like Spain, Italy, and Greece. Finally, a holistic and multifaceted approach to migration must strengthen partnerships with MENA and Sahel countries and foster similar agreements among them. These partnerships must not be predatory from the EU side and cannot be subject to blackmail from African counterparts. These must be sustainable collaborations with origin and transit countries, building capacity and creating jobs and prosperity while ensuring compliance with human rights standards. This will

However, this must not distract us from an unresolved issue. The real challenge remains to be the fact that we, Europeans must open the still politically incorrect discussion of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of migration. The EU

<sup>48</sup> Spain's GECCO Program (Gestion Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen, or Collective Management of Hiring in Origin) allows seasonal workers from countries like Morocco to work temporarily in Spain's agricultural sector. This initiative has provided thousands of legal migration opportunities annually, particularly for women.

<sup>49</sup> OECD (2019), "Family ties: How family reunification can impact migrant integration", in *International Migration Outlook 2019*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

genuinely address the root causes of migration and will also unleash the full potential of these two regions, which have been heavily castigated over the past few decades.

Migration in the MENA and Sahel regions underscores the interdependence between Europe and its neighbouring regions. The challenges associated with irregular migration require coordinated responses that balance immediate security concerns with long-term development goals. By adopting sustainable and inclusive policies, the EU can mitigate migration pressures and contribute to regional stability and

prosperity. In effectively managing migration crises, Italy and Spain can serve as a model for broader European strategies, at least regarding its Southern border.

In conclusion, the Mediterranean migration crisis is not impossible but requires sustained commitment, international cooperation, and innovative policy solutions. By addressing root causes, expanding legal pathways, and fostering integration, the EU can transform migration from a challenge into an opportunity, strengthening ties between Europe and its southern neighbours.

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- Appendix. List of migration and investment-related meetings led by Giorgia Meloni to address the migratory challenge (2023)
- Key Diplomatic Meetings in 2023:

## APPENDIX

### List of migration and investment-related meetings led by Giorgia Meloni to address the migratory challenge (2023)

- Jan 23: With Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in Algiers.
- April 8: With UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in London.
- May 2: With Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer at Palazzo Chigi.
- May 8: With Libyan general Khalifa Haftar.
- June 6: With Tunisian President Kais Saied in Tunis.
- June 7: With Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dabaiba at Palazzo Chigi.
- June 8: With German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at Palazzo Chigi.
- June 20: With French President Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée Palace.
- July 23: 1st Conference on Development and Migration held in Rome, hosted by Meloni. Attendees included:
  - 5 Heads of State: Cyprus, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, UAE.
  - 8 Prime Ministers: Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Nigeria.
  - 8 Ministers: Bahrain, Greece, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey.
- Sept 8: Meloni and UK PM Sunak meet during the G20 in India.
- Sept 26: Meeting with French President Macron at Palazzo Chigi.
- Oct 5: Meloni and Sunak lead a meeting in Granada during the European Political Community (EPC) summit to discuss migration and organised crime.
- Oct 7: Signature of the Albania Agreement to establish two refugee centres in Albania.
- Oct 21: Meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi during the Cairo Summit for Regional Peace.
- Nov 22: Meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin.



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