



Maginot Line Around Europe? Assessing the Impact of EU Agreements with MENA Countries on Migration Flows to Europe

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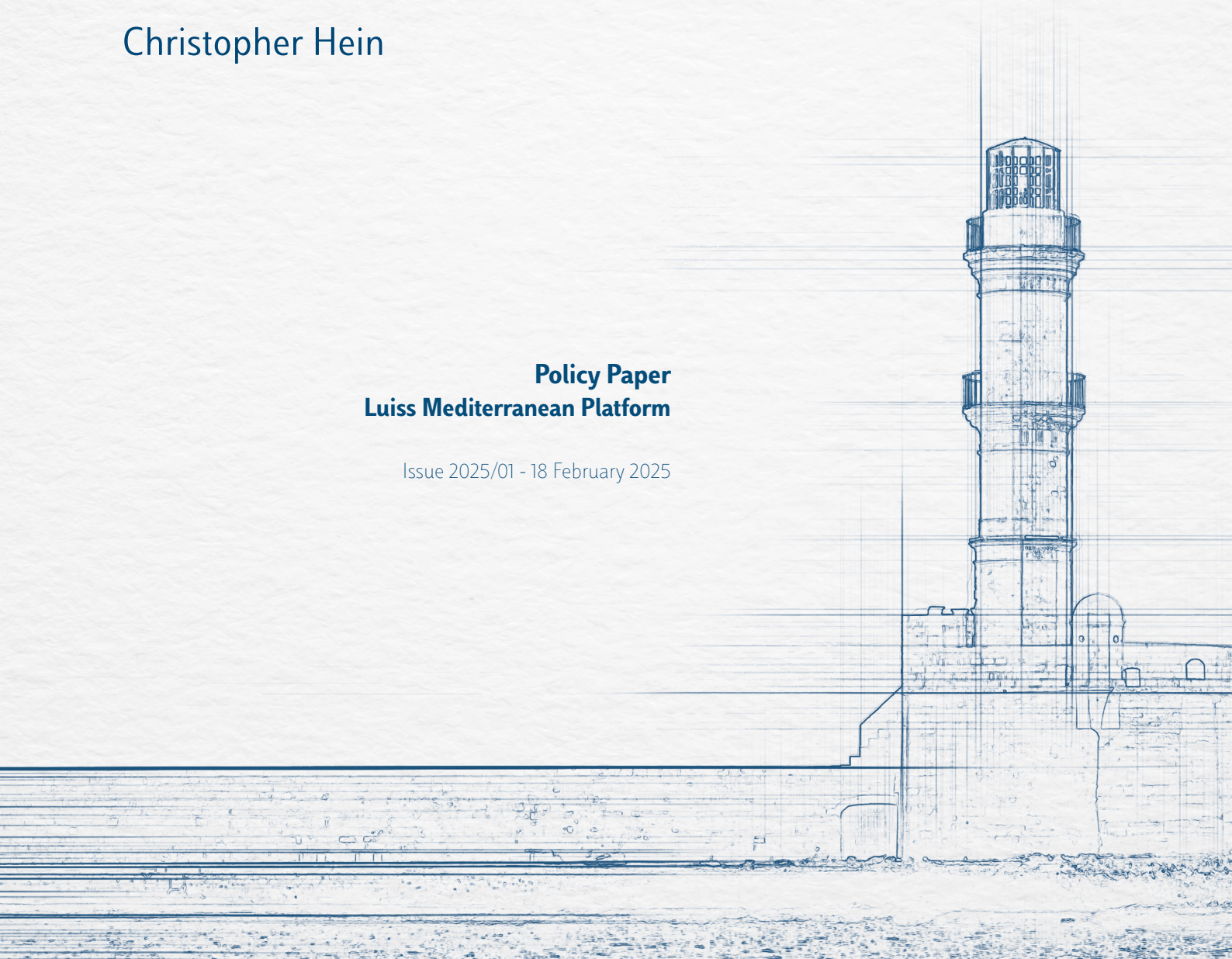


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Abstract

Faced with increasing numbers of irregular arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers on the shores of its Member States, the EU has concluded partnership agreements with almost all third countries around the Mediterranean in order to manage the flows. The policy paper analyses the impact of the cooperation on the number of arrivals by sea in the EU frontline Member States over the period 2015 to 2024 and concludes that the implementation of the agreements has led to a steady shift in migration routes rather than a sustained reduction in overall numbers. EU should invest more in addressing the root causes of migration from transit countries to Europe, by supporting policies and measures to improve the living conditions and social rights of refugees and migrants in partner countries.

1. Introduction

Cooperation between the European Union (EU) and non-EU countries on a wide range of migration management issues has been developing for more than a quarter of a century.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. on 11 September 2001, the EU broadened the scope of its cooperation with third countries in the area of migration and its external relations in general to include joint migration management and border control. The conclusions of the Seville European Council in June 2002² launched the ‘carrot and stick’ policy in the Union’s external action, which has remained a feature of cooperation agreements to date. On the one hand, the Union would emphasise “closer economic cooperation, trade expansion, development aid and conflict prevention” and would be prepared to provide third countries with technical and financial assistance in the fight against illegal migration. On the other hand, the Council announced that “insufficient cooperation by a country would prevent the establishment of closer cooperation with the Union” and could lead to adopting “measures and positions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy”.

The reduction of irregular migratory flows has been a declared objective in all subsequent EU strategic concepts³. Surprisingly, in 2024 the European Commission still speaks of a “new approach” that “embeds migration in international partnerships to prevent irregular departures and loss of life, fight against smuggling, reinforce cooperation on readmission and promote legal pathways”⁴.

If it is true that, for so many years, the main objective of cooperation with countries of origin and transit has been to reduce irregular migratory flows and irregular arrivals at the EU’s external borders, the question arises as to the extent to which this objective has been achieved. We can formulate two opposing hypotheses: the declared deterrent effect of the cooperation induces potential migrants not to leave their home countries or to remain in an extra-EU transit country or to return from there to their home countries. Conversely, cooperation may induce migrants and asylum seekers to change their travel routes without significantly reducing the overall number of irregular arrivals on EU territory.

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2 European Council, Presidency Conclusions, Doc. 1434/2002, chapter III “Asylum and Immigration”.

3 See, among others, the “Stockholm Programme” for the years 2010-2014 (European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - An area of freedom, security and justice serving the citizen, COM (2009)262).

4 European Commission, “Embedding migration in international partnerships”, 11 April 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_24_1946.

2. Drivers of Irregular Migration to Europe

The wealth of research on the drivers of migration contrasts with the scarcity of studies on the factors that determine the choice of routes for irregular movements and the modification of initially planned routes during the journey⁵.

Information is a key element in determining travel routes⁶. Information about tighter border controls, the risk of being apprehended on a land route, or the interception of boats and return to the point of departure in the case of irregular sea crossings may lead the migrant to adapt the travel plan, even at the cost of taking more dangerous routes⁷.

Cooperation agreements concluded by the EU and/or individual Member States with countries of origin and transit may influence the route planning of individual migrants and whole groups, insofar as these agreements aim at encouraging partner countries:

- to redress irregular sea or land departures of migrants towards Europe;
- to better equip border and coast guards;
- to intercept migrant boats in their territorial waters and in the area of search and rescue under their responsibility and returning the migrants to their territory;
- to increase the fight against smuggling and trafficking in human beings;
- to readmit their own nationals without valid residence permits in the EU Member States as well as of third country nationals who have transited through the territories of the partner countries;
- to exchange of information and data with EU or Member State authorities and agencies.

An assessment of the impact of measures taken by third countries on the routes of irregular migrants has to take into account a number of variables. Among these are the diversity of nationalities, the availability and reliability of statistical data, external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, recent environmental degradation in certain areas, new conflict situations such as that in Sudan since 2023 or in Gaza and Lebanon in 2024, as well as the time dimension, including the period between the conclusion of cooperation agreements and their actual implementation. Last not least, fundamental changes in a country of origin like the recent one in Syria, allowing for a prospect of return, are to be considered and policies adopted.

Under this premise, we will analyse the individual agreements in terms of their impact on irregular migratory movements towards Europe, as well as on travel patterns.

3. The EU-Türkiye Statement of 2016: A Model?

The Statement signed in March 2016 between the European Commission and the Turkish government⁸ in response to the “European refugee crisis” of 2015 has been considered a “success story” and therefore a model for cooperation agreements with other third countries. Türkiye was the main transit country for some 1.7 million asylum seekers who arrived in EU Member States in 2015 and early 2016. After the signing of the Declaration, the number immediately decreased dramatically and remained relatively low compared to 2015 until 2023, when they increased to almost 50.00 (41.500 by sea, 7160 by land). However, some researchers have questioned whether the sharp decrease in numbers or irregular arrivals in Greece is due to the deterrent measures taken in the implementation of the Declaration⁹. F. Spijkerboer argued that the numbers had only returned to pre-2015 levels and would have done so regardless of the agreement¹⁰.

5 See the overview on research regarding the subject: Mathias Czaika and Constantin Reinprecht, “Drivers of Migration: A synthesis of knowledge”, *Working Paper 163*, International Migration Institute, April 2020; International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Drivers of international migration”, *Essentials of Migration Management 2.0* “The Global Context of International Migration”, 2024.

6 Martin Hirsch and Jakub Bijak, “The Effects of Information on the Formation of Migrant Routes and the Dynamics of Migration”, *MIT Press Direct*, Vol.29, pp 3-20, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2023.

7 Frey Lindsay, “Migrants Are Taking Ever More Dangerous Routes To Get To Europe”, *Forbes*, 8 January 2022.

8 European Council, EU-Türkiye-Statement, Press Release, 18 March 2016.

9 Aysem Biriz Karaçay, “On its Eighty Anniversary: the EU-Turkey Deal- From Externalization to Digitalization”, *International Journal of Human Mobility*, 4(1), pp.44-65, 2024. Meltem Ineli-Ciger, Orçun Ulusoy et al., “Taking Stock of the EU-Turkey Statement in 2024”, *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 18 June 2024.

10 Thomas Spijkerboer, “Fact Check: Did the EU-Turkey Deal Bring Down the Number of Migrants and Deaths?”, *Faculty of Law Blogs*, University of Oxford, 28 August 2016.

Syrian nationals continue to represent the first nationality of asylum seekers in the EU. This has still been true in November 2024, when however, the numbers dropped to 12,000, 26% less than in October¹¹. Since September 2024, more than half a million Syrian refugees have returned till January 2025, notably from Türkiye. The return movement has increased following the collapsing of the Assad regime early December 2024. It may be expected that these trends will continue, with regard to the decrease of new asylum seekers as well as to returns. UNHCR has called for international support to returning refugees and their reintegration¹².

Syrian refugees used to arrive mostly irregularly, with few exceptions allowing legal travel such as family reunification, resettlement and humanitarian admission. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has observed an increase of 80% in 2023 compared to 2022 of the number of people, mostly Syrians, departing from Türkiye, and then using the “Balkan route”¹³. The number of irregular departures by sea from Lebanon or directly from the Syrian coast has been steadily increasing, prior to autumn 2024, as well as the number of Syrians taking the central Mediterranean route, departing from the eastern shores of Libya, taking advantage of the facilitation of air travel between Türkiye and Cyrenaica. From January to November of 2024, 12.000 Syrians arrived in Italy by sea, representing, for the first time since 2015, the second largest nationality group among migrants disembarking in Italy¹⁴.

The implementation of the Statement in the period 2016-2024 had contributed to a redirection of routes towards the EU, especially for the main nationality, Syrians, but also for Afghans and Iraqis, nationalities that were in the spotlight during the refugee crisis in 2015. However, even if the number of irregular arrivals has increased in the recent period, especially in 2023, it has never reached levels comparable to those of 2015/early 2016. The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees and other refugee groups have remained in Türkiye, which continues to host 4 million refugees, including more than 3 million Syrians, and remains, for the time being, the world’s top asylum country.

The fact that most refugees in Türkiye have not attempted to leave the country, prior to the new Syrian situation, is not primarily due to the deterrent effect of border controls, coastal surveillance and the turning back of boats. Since 2020, Türkiye no longer accepts the return of asylum seekers from Greece and has temporarily reduced sea and land border controls without causing a major outflow. More important seems to be the improvement of living conditions and the level of social rights of refugees in Türkiye, not least as a result of EU financial contributions, which amount to more than 9 billion euros since the end of 2015. Certainly, not all of this money is being spent in a sustainable way for the direct benefit of refugees and host communities, as the European Court of Auditors (ECA) critically noted in 2024¹⁵. However, the ECA report recognises that the facility has provided significant support for the well-being of the refugee population. More than 95% of refugees in Türkiye live outside camps, most of them have been settled for several years and apparently find it more advantageous to remain in Türkiye than to pay smugglers and risk their lives on the uncertain irregular journey to Western Europe.

It is difficult to see the EU-Türkiye declaration as a model to be replicated regarding other transit countries for refugees and migrants. First, the legal basis of the agreement is the assumption that Türkiye is a “safe third country” or a “safe first country of asylum”. Türkiye does not apply the Geneva Convention on Refugees to non-European refugees, but has a temporary protection regime in place which, according to UNHCR, offers protection guarantees similar to those of the Convention. Despite the economic difficulties, which were exacerbated by the earthquake in February 2023, the socio-economic conditions for effective protection and temporary settlement of refugees are generally in place. These conditions are not easily met in other third countries with which the EU has entered cooperation on migration.

11 European Union Agency for Asylum, “Latest Asylum Trends”, <https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-asylum#:~:text=1,by%2026%25%20to%20just%2012,000>

12 UNCHR Cyprus, “UNHCR’s Grandi calls for global action to support Syrians returning home”, 27 January 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2025/01/27/unhcrs-grandis-calls-for-global-action-to-support-syrians-returning-home/>

13 Frontex, Annual Brief 2023; in 2024, however, numbers on the Balkan route dropped by 78% from 2023; Frontex, “Frontex Press release”, 14 January 2025, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/irregular-border-crossings-into-eu-drop-sharply-in-2024-oqpweX>

14 Italian Ministry of Interior, “Cruscotto Immigrazione”, 28 November 2024.

15 European Court of Auditors, “The Facility for Refugees in Turkey -Beneficial for refugees and host communities but impact and sustainability not yet ensured”, Special Report, June 2024.

4. The Central Mediterranean Route and EU Cooperation with Libya and Tunisia

The cooperation with Libya on migration policies, initiated in 2002, continued after the revolution in Libya in 2011 and was further strengthened in the face of the increase in sea arrivals from Libya to Italian shores, which reached 350,000 people between 2013 and 2015, mainly Syrians and Eritreans¹⁶. The number increased further in 2016 to 181,000 sea arrivals in Italy, the highest number ever recorded in one year, leading to a shift of attention in the EU from the Eastern to the Central Mediterranean corridor. The migrant population was made up of Nigerians, Guineans, Ivorians and other nationalities from sub-Saharan African countries.

In response to the alarming number of boat arrivals in 2016, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Libya in February 2017 “on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, trafficking and smuggling, and the reinforcement of border security”¹⁷, immediately followed by the political and financial endorsement of the European Council in Malta. The text respects the Libyan doctrine that there are no refugees or asylum seekers on its territory, only illegal immigrants. Unlike the EU-Türkiye declaration, the announced Italian and EU funds promised in the MoU and in subsequent bilateral and multilateral technical agreements have no component for the reception and integration of asylum seekers. The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights does not allow migrants to be returned to Libya because of the risk that people would be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment and ultimately departed to their home countries¹⁸. Therefore, the policy adopted by Italy and the EU aims at the empowerment of the Libyan coast guard for intercepting and returning migrant boats to Libya, by supplying patrol boats, equipment and training of guards.

A few months after the signing of the MoU, the number of migrants and refugees crossing the central Mediterranean to Italy and Malta decreased significantly to 119,000 in 2017, 23,000 in 2018 and 11,500 in 2019. From then on, however, the numbers rose steadily, reaching 105,000 in 2022 and 157,600 in 2023, a level close to that of 2015-2016. But the route has increasingly shifted from Libya to Tunisia. In 2017, 90% of the boats arriving in Italy had departed from Libya, but the share fell to less than 50% in 2018 and further to 38% in 2023, before reaching a 50/50 balance between Libya and Tunisia in the first half of 2024. From 2018 onwards, the Tunisian coasts will become the preferred departure point for Europe within the Central Mediterranean corridor.

These figures should be interpreted in the light of developments following the signing of the MoU. Since 2017, the Libyan coastguard, equipped and trained by Italy and the EU, has progressively intercepted migrant boats in Libyan territorial waters or in the newly created Libyan SAR zone, the sector of international waters for which Libya is responsible for search and rescue operations. In 2022/23, more than 57,000 migrants were forcibly returned from the sea to Libyan ports and from there to detention centres, often with the operational support of Frontex, despite UNHCR’s call not to return anyone rescued at sea to Libya. It can be assumed that migrants, through their information channels, have become increasingly aware of the risks of transiting Libya and embarking from Libyan shores and, since 2018, have begun to prefer the Tunisian route.

The objective of the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding and the subsequent financial agreements between the EU and Libya to reduce the number of irregular boat arrivals was achieved for a limited period of three years, but did not show sustainable results. Living and detention conditions for migrants and refugees, which have been described as inhumane and unacceptable in numerous UN reports and statements, have not improved. The number of deaths and missing migrants in the Central Mediterranean has increased in proportion to the number of irregular departures, even in the period 2018-19, when the overall number of departures decreased. Migration routes have partly been diverted to Tunisia, where smugglers and traffickers have dramatically increased their activities. The presence of tens of thousands of irregular migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, in transit in Tunisian urban areas may have contributed to the general instability of the country and fuelled racist and xenophobic tendencies among the population.

16 On Italy’s cooperation with Libya see: Christopher Hein, “Migratory Movements to and from Libya: Italian and European policy responses”, in: Natalino Ronzitti and Elena Sciso, “I Conflitti in Siria and Libya”, pp.265-291, 2018.

17 “Memorandum d’intesa sulla cooperazione nel campo dello sviluppo, del contrasto all’immigrazione illegale, al traffico di esseri umani, al contrabbando e sul rafforzamento della sicurezza delle frontiere tra lo Stato della Libia e la Repubblica Italiana”, 2 February 2017, <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Libia.pdf>.

18 ECHR, *Hirsi Jamaa and others v. Italy*, Appl. No. 27765/09, of 23/2/2012, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-109231%22%7D>.

Given the poor results of cooperation with Libya, and in view of the increasing number of sea departures from the neighbouring country, the EU and some member states, notably Italy, are stepping up their cooperation with Tunisia on migration issues, again with the aim of reducing irregular departures by sea.

On 16 July 2023 the EU and Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and global partnership covering cooperation in five key areas: macroeconomic stability, trade cooperation, green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, migration and mobility. The latter has received the most media attention and is seen as the main issue that led to the adoption of the MoU, as the ‘stick’, accompanied by the other sectors as the ‘carrot’. Of the total EU financial contribution of around €1 billion announced in the MoU, €105 million is earmarked for support to the Tunisian coastguard and has been disbursed immediately¹⁹.

It is too early to assess the impact of the MoU on irregular departures from Tunisian shores over a longer period. In the second half of 2023, the number of arrivals by sea from Tunisia in Italy was twice as high as in the first half of the year, but in the eleven months of 2024 it fell to a less than the half of the previous year’s level. The Tunisian border authorities intercepted more than 73,000 migrants in 2023, more than twice as many as in 2022. In the first four months of 2024, the Tunisian National Guard prevented 21,500 departures, including migrants rescued and returned to Tunisia. In addition, more than 20,000 people were prevented from entering Tunisia irregularly from Libya or Algeria, four times more than in the same period in 2023²⁰. A number of MEPs have questioned the EU payments for Tunisia under human rights aspects and because of a lack of tangible results²¹. It is reported that in January 2025, the European Commission has decided to overhaul the conditions for migration-linked funding of Tunisia, following new reports on human rights abuses against refugees and migrants in the country²².

Unlike the situation in Türkiye, there are few opportunities to settle in Tunisia and obtain some form of residence and work permit. Analogous scenarios in other countries, including Libya, suggest that many of the migrants returned to Tunisia will try again to migrate irregularly to Europe, using the same or different routes, including that from Morocco to Spain. Potential migrants who are not yet in Tunisia may avoid the Tunisia/Central Mediterranean route in the light of the information they have about the risk of being ill-treated and/or returned to the point of departure and opt instead for the West African route.

5. The West Africa Route and EU Cooperation with Morocco and Mauritania

The Spanish Canary Islands were in the spotlight as a port of irregular arrival for migrants in 2005-2006, when 35,000 African migrants disembarked in a short period of time (“Cayucos crisis”). After that, the number of arrivals was relatively modest until 2021. In 2023, more than 40,000 migrants arrived on the islands, having set off from the coasts of Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia, facing an extremely dangerous journey across the Atlantic, with distances to the Canary Islands ranging from 100 km (Western Sahara) to 1,600 km (Gambia). Contrary to the figures for the central Mediterranean for 2024, the number of arrivals by boat in the Canary Islands has seen a further increase of 14% compared to 2023. In 2024, an average of 33 migrants died or went missing every day²³. Spain received 163,000 asylum applications in 2023, the highest number ever.

19 The Tunisian Government has sent back 60 million Euro back to Brussels in October 2023. President Said stated that “Tunisia does not accept anything resembling charity or favour”, in Sarah Yerkes, “Eu-Tunisia Relations: It’s All About Migration”, Commentary, ISPI, 23 July 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/eu-tunisia-relations-its-all-about-migration-181484>

20 Agence France Presse, 12 May 2024.

21 Mared Gwyn Jones, “EU lawmakers clash over Tunisia migration deal, denounce lack of results”, *Euronews*, 12 September 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/12/eu-lawmakers-clash-over-tunisia-migration-deal-denounce-lack-of-results>.

22 Mark Townsend, “Europe overhauls funding to Tunisia after Guardian exposes migrant abuse”, *The Guardian*, 24 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/24/eu-human-rights-tunisia-migrant-security-forces-migration>.

23 IOM, Missing migrants project, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

Considering that the nationalities of those who have used the Central Mediterranean route to enter the EU in recent years are largely identical to those registered as arriving in the Canary Islands between July 2023 and June 2024, it can be assumed that the EU's cooperation with Libya and Tunisia has contributed to the significant increase in numbers on the West African route. The risk of being intercepted by coastguards and returned to the point of departure is much lower on this route than in the Central Mediterranean. The implementation of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding from the second half of 2023, in particular the support to the Tunisian coastguard, together with the deterioration of conditions for migrants and refugees in Tunisia, appears to have motivated the change in the migration route to the EU. Cooperation with Libya and Tunisia may have temporarily reduced sea arrivals in Italy, but it has not changed the overall number of irregular sea crossings to the EU. Rather, the focus has shifted to the West African route and the increase in arrivals in Spain.

Morocco, including West Sahara, is one of the main countries of departure to Spain in general and the Canary Islands in particular. For Frontex, Morocco is a priority on the agenda for international border cooperation, a “crucial partner in Africa”²⁴. From the first EU-Morocco financial agreement on borders in 2004 to the non-binding mobility partnership of 2014 and the new cooperation programme of December 2023, the Union has paid more than €2.3 billion to Morocco under various financial programmes for migration control. 77% of the funds from the EU Emergency Fund for Africa, Morocco chapter, have been earmarked for integrated border management and the fight against smuggling and trafficking, and only 14% for protection and community stabilisation. Morocco has agreed to step up surveillance of its sea and land borders. According to the Moroccan authorities, 87,000 migrants were prevented from leaving the country irregularly in 2023²⁵. Many observers maintain that Morocco, in turn, expects, as a “carrot”, EU support for the international recognition of Western Sahara as an integral part of Moroccan territory²⁶.

Morocco and Western Sahara are not the only, and ultimately not even the main, departure points for migrants to the Canary Islands. Due to increased control, surveillance and interception activities by Moroccan forces, better equipped thanks to financial and logistical support from the EU and Spain, more southern and distant coasts, namely those of Mauritania and Senegal, appear to be used by an increasing number of migrants trying to reach the EU via the Spanish Atlantic islands.

Negotiations between the EU and Mauritania aimed at stemming irregular migration flows started in July 2022 and led to the signature of a Joint Declaration on Partnership on 8 March 2024. The agreement foresees the disbursement of €210 million by the EU, covering investment, infrastructure, job creation, mobility of professionals and students, and reception of asylum seekers, in addition to migration control. Frontex is to provide equipment and training for border guards.

Some observers are sceptical about the agreement, given the objective of preventing irregular departures and the risk of internal destabilisation in Mauritania, a country facing ethnic tensions and neighbouring armed conflicts in Mali²⁷. The political opposition and civil society voices in Mauritania warn against the country becoming a place of resettlement for migrants, in addition to the 200,000 or so Malian refugees it already hosts. The UNHCR estimates that by the end of 2024 the number of refugees might have risen to 244,000, only some of whom can be accommodated in the overcrowded organised camps.

It is certainly too early to assess the impact of the Joint Declaration and its implementation in terms of resources and services to control migration. The shift of migration routes in West Africa from Morocco to Mauritania and further south is a long-term process in which several unpredictable factors may interact. The fragile and unstable political situation throughout the Sahel may lead to unexpected new scenarios, as in the case of Niger, where any agreement with the EU risks being overturned by unforeseen events and new political orientations.

24 Frontex Document, 12 December 2023.

25 Jennifer Holleis, “Morocco’s growing role in EU migration control”, Deutsche Welle, 18 January 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/moroccos-growing-role-in-eu-migration-control/a-68022730>

26 Abderrafie Zaanoun, “Irregular Migration and Border Security in Morocco”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 June 2024; Fanny Tittel-Mosser, “Reversed conditionality in EU External Migration Policy: The Case of Morocco”, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 14 (4), pp. 349-363, 2018.

27 Hassane Koné, “Mauritania -the latest target in EU migration control”, *Institute for Security Studies*, 23 April 2024, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/mauritania-the-latest-target-in-eu-migration-control> Hassan Ould Moctar, “The EU-Mauritania is destined to fail”, *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2024.

6. Migration Agreements with Egypt and Lebanon

Recently, the EU has concluded comprehensive agreements with Egypt and Lebanon. In a Joint Declaration with Egypt of 17 March 2024, the EU has earmarked €200 million out of a €7.4 billion package of economic assistance and aid for migration issues, including talent partnerships, addressing the root causes of migration, fighting smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and border management. The EU is concerned about the growing number of Sudanese refugees in Egypt, from where many of them may try to reach Europe in the near future.

On 2 May, the EU announced a €1 billion aid package for Lebanon, not least with a view to reducing the number of Syrian refugees arriving by sea in Cyprus, a member state which has declared that it will stop examining asylum applications due to the unmanageable number of applications. However, due to the new political landscape in Syria, the number of new refugee arrivals in Cyprus has dropped to only 200 in December 2024, and Syrians in Lebanon now rather cross the easy land border with their home country instead of going to Cyprus. Some observers have been critical of the EU's cooperation with Lebanon, arguing that the deal does not address the structural problems in the country that cause the outflow of refugees to Europe²⁸. Today, the scenario in the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean has changed dramatically. The challenge is no longer to manage new refugee outflows from Syria but rather the return and rehabilitation, and to prevent that mass returns would destabilize the country. EU funds earmarked to redressing irregular departures could eventually be diverted for this purpose.

7. Concluding Remarks

Cooperation with countries of origin and transit of refugees and migrants to manage irregular migration to Europe has been an integral part of the Union's migration policy and external action for more than 25 years. The primary aim has been to encourage third countries to prevent irregular departures to Europe from their territories and shores, to strengthen their capacity to control their land and sea borders and to cooperate in the fight against smuggling and trafficking in human beings.

EU action did usually follow up on bilateral agreements between individual frontline Member States and a third country, as in the cases of Greece with Türkiye, Italy with Libya and Tunisia, Spain with Morocco and Mauritania.

The turning point in the EU's cooperation with third countries was the European refugee crisis of 2015-2016, which left a kind of trauma in several governments as well as in the EU institutions. Considering the arrival and reception of 4.5 million Ukrainian displaced persons in the EU following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the number of refugees and asylum seekers in 2015-2016, less than half of the Ukrainian caseload, may appear in a different light. Given that Türkiye was the main country of transit and departure for refugees, the first agreements, in November 2015 and March 2016, were concluded with a state that was, and still is, the world's largest host of refugees.

The immediate dramatic reduction in the number of refugees arriving in Greece and Western Europe has demonstrated the success of the strategy of containing refugees in Türkiye, even if there are doubts about its sustainability in the longer term. Indeed, Syrians have been still the first nationality of asylum seekers in the EU, but the numbers are not comparable to those of 2015.

The success of the cooperation with Türkiye is not so much due to repressive measures such as increased border controls on the Turkish coast, the crackdown on smugglers, the push back from the Greek coast and the forced return of asylum seekers, but rather to the investment of around €9 billion in improving the living conditions of refugees in Türkiye and raising the level of their social rights. Refugees in Türkiye have not resorted to seeking alternative routes to Europe on a large scale.

28 Kelly Petillo, "Strategic aid: How the EU Lebanon migration deal can work", Policy Alert, European Council on Foreign Relations, 3 May 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/strategic-aid-how-the-eu-lebanon-migration-deal-can-work/>

The EU-Türkiye declaration was seen as a blueprint for further cooperation with other transit countries, first with Libya, which in 2016-2017 became the main departure point to Europe, namely Italy. However, applying the Turkish experience to Libya has encountered obstacles. Libya has never shown any intention to receive and integrate refugees and migrants on its territory. The financial contributions of the EU and Italy were not earmarked for the welfare of migrants and refugees, but for strengthening border control at Libya's southern and maritime borders and for increasing the capacity of the Libyan coastguard to intercept and turn back migrant boats.

The deterrent effect of EU and Italian cooperation with Libya led temporarily to a significant reduction in sea arrivals in Italy from the second half of 2017 and over the following three years. In the longer term, from 2020 onwards, information about the risks of entering and leaving Libya has led an increasing number of migrants and refugees to change their route, foremost to Tunisia. The nationalities of the migrants departing from Tunisia, mostly from West African countries, but increasingly also from Syria prior the fall of the Assad regime, are largely identical to those of the Libyan cases. In this case, the shift in the migratory route is evident. Since 2021, Tunisia has become the main departure point for the EU. By 2023, the total number of arrivals by sea in Italy has reached a level similar to that in 2016, before decreasing in 2024.

In response to this new scenario, the EU has intensified its cooperation with Tunisia, following the model of the 2017 Italy-Libya agreement, within the logic of "cash for migration control". At the same time, the West African route to the Canary Islands has become more prominent, leading to unprecedented numbers of migrants arriving in the Canary Islands from August 2023, with a further increase in 2024. Again, the nationalities are similar to those of the Libyan and Tunisian cases, which suggests a further shift in migrant routes towards the West. During the first half of 2024, EU cooperation with Morocco and Mauritania has intensified, with new agreements, the allocation of substantial funds for enhanced border control and the deployment of Frontex officials. The impact of these measures remains to be seen. In the doubtful event that Mauritania, with the support of Spain and the EU, is able to effectively control its 754 kilometres of Atlantic coastline, the result could be a further shift of routes to more southern departure points in West Africa or a return to the central Mediterranean route, as suggested by the increase in departures from Libya in early 2024.

Between 2015 and 2024, migration agreements were concluded with almost all the countries of the eastern and southern Mediterranean as well as with West African countries. Nevertheless, Frontex has registered an increasing number of detected irregular crossings at the EU's external borders in the period 2021 to 2024. Frontex expects a further increase in irregular migration, particularly along the eastern and central Mediterranean maritime corridors. In 2024, the number of asylum seekers in the EU, over 80% of them arriving irregularly, will again surpass one million.

The ring or virtual "wall" around the EU's external borders, created by the involvement of third countries in the effort to stem irregular migration flows, has not succeeded over the years in significantly reducing the overall numbers, but has rather contributed to the constant shifting of routes. Although smuggling organisations deliberately spread false information, migrants are usually well informed through their informal networks about the changing conditions on the various routes and adapt their individual migration plans accordingly. There is no statistical evidence that deterrent measures would cause migrants to return to their home countries or to abandon their migratory plans altogether.

Much has been said and written about "tackling the root causes of migration", usually referring to interventions in countries of origin. Tackling root causes in areas affected by armed conflict or dictatorial regimes, such as Afghanistan, Syria, Mali and Sudan, or in areas affected by climate change and disasters is an impossible task. Rather, the EU and its Member States should consider tackling the root causes of extra-European secondary movements from transit or intermediate countries towards the EU by supporting the creation of conditions for integration and self-reliance, at least temporarily, while respecting fundamental rights. This should go hand in hand with the opening or enhancement of channels for the legal and orderly arrival of significant numbers of refugees and economic migrants. Both measures could effectively prevent irregular and dangerous journeys to the territories of the Union and redress the business of smugglers.



Mediterranean Platform

Founded in 2022, and directed by Prof. Luigi Narbone, the Mediterranean Platform is a research, dialogue, and educational programme at the School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli. It offers a space for collective reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the Mediterranean region and promotes informed policymaking and advocacy at the national and transnational levels.

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