

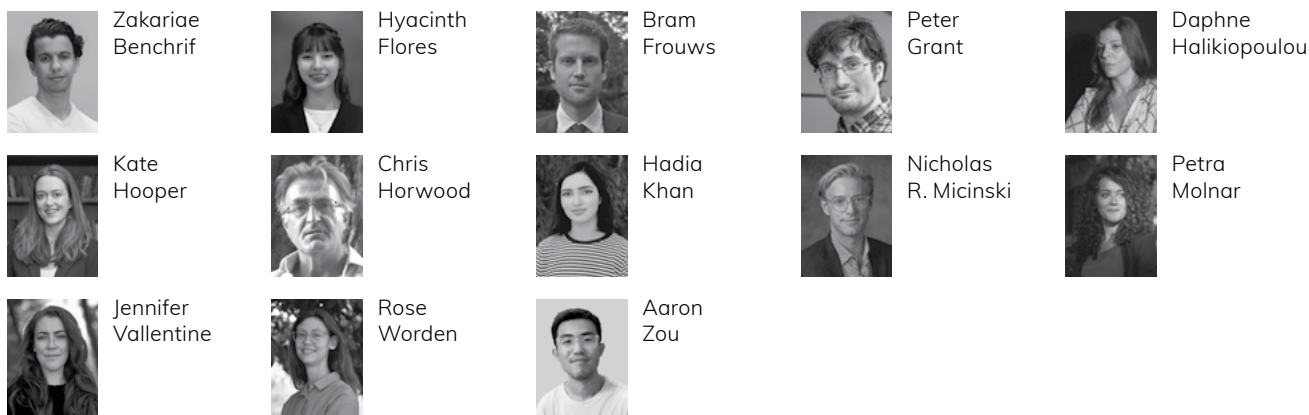
Migration in the context of
geopolitical turmoil



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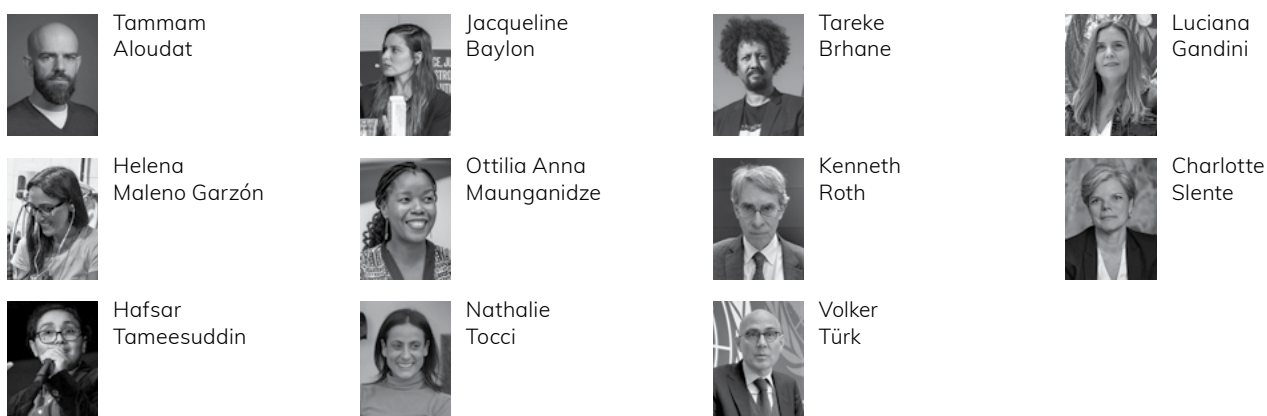


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Photo credit: Loredana Sangiuliano / Shutterstock

London, summer, 2025. As support for migration policies associated with the far right became more normalised, the resistance to it became more targeted. In London, UK, people were alarmed at the rapid rise of the Reform Party. (See *The far-right and migration politics in the aftermath of the 2024 'year of elections'*, [p. 178](#)).



Foreword

In an era marked by unprecedented geopolitical turbulence, the patterns of human mobility are undergoing deep and rapid transformations. As Secretary General of the Danish Refugee Council, I am privileged to introduce this year's Mixed Migration Review 2025. In particular, this report lands at a time when understanding the contours and drivers of migration, and the personal stories of those who undertake these often dangerous, journeys has never been more essential. As the poet Warsan Shire reminds us, "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark." Her words capture the raw truth behind so many movements today: flight is rarely a choice, but often the only way to survive.

The past year has witnessed extraordinary shifts across multiple fronts. The so-called year of elections in 2024 brought profound political change across continents; authoritarian tendencies have gained ground, while democratic institutions face mounting pressure. These upheavals compound simmering regional conflicts, such as those in the Sahel, the Middle East and parts of Asia, while climate shocks, global economic inequality and technological disruption continue to escalate. For millions of people, these overlapping crises render home increasingly uninhabitable. When home becomes unsafe, the instinct to move is not a choice but a necessity – an escape from the shark's mouth.

It is against this backdrop that the Mixed Migration Review 2025 offers its timely insights and intervention. Through thematic essays, feature interviews with leading migration thinkers, voices from the Global South, 4Mi survey data and deeply personal migrant narratives, this review paints a nuanced – and ultimately human – picture of realities of migration amid geopolitical turmoil.

Our collective efforts to respond to migration patterns – and the many complex drivers behind them – must rest on a foundation of reliable, rigorous, relevant analysis and data. Without it, policy makers risk falling prey to simplistic responses, populist narratives or, worse, inaction. The turbulence of today demands evidence-based foresight: to recognise when rhetoric incites exclusion rather than safety; to understand the dual role of technology, as both lifeline and tool of surveillance; to assess how dwindling development aid and fragmented multilateral systems are likely to drive migration further.

The 4Mi data featured in this review exemplify what innovative, agile and rigorous primary data collection can offer: a responsive and standardised snapshot of the impacts of key policy changes on the experiences of migrants from across the globe. Coupled with direct interviews with migrants and essays from emerging Global South writers, whose perspectives remain too often marginalised, this edition ensures that policy discourse is informed and enriched.

Moreover, in these times of geopolitical turmoil, documenting the "normalisation of the extreme" – from increasingly militarised border regimes to collective desensitisation – is essential. By laying bare these troubling dynamics, the review reminds us that what is extraordinary today may become an accepted norm tomorrow – unless challenged.

To policymakers, advocates, researchers, donors and all who strive for a more just and humane response to mixed migration, this review is offered as a tool. I hope the data and analysis by our Mixed Migration Centre will serve not only as a mirror reflecting the current state of migration governance, but also as a guide towards evidence-informed and rights-respecting policy and advocacy.

Thank you to the editors, contributors, analysts and migrants who lend their insight and stories to this Review.

I wish you all good reading.



Charlotte Slente,
DRC Secretary General

Introduction

The year 2025 began with a sense of shock, disorientation and anxiety about the future. The geopolitical landscape had shifted sharply over the previous year following the election of US president Donald Trump for a second term. Ongoing wars and humanitarian crises continued and deepened, and new conflicts erupted. The humanitarian and development sector experienced a sudden and massive loss of funding due to foreign aid cuts by the US. The risk of an escalating global trade war continues to loom due to the trade tariffs by the US and the multilateral system worldwide is under threat. Politics are hardening across the globe and, in many countries, migration continues to be the easy scapegoat for a wide range of economic and societal challenges and concerns, such as employment, housing and the cost of living. Coincidence or not, but one year after the so-called year of elections – the theme of last year's Mixed Migration Review (MMR) – the world finds itself in geopolitical turmoil. How this will impact mixed migration and the lives of people on the move is at the heart of this year's review.

Since its second edition, released in 2019, the MMR has included a section called *Normalising the extreme* (see [p. 258](#)), which we introduced by referring to the concept of the Overton Window. This is an analytical concept that describes the acceptable range of political discourse and actions in a society, which crops out ideas deemed so controversial and extreme that they will not be taken seriously, let alone become common practice. But the Overton Window continues to shift, allowing formerly fringe ideas and radical actions to fall within its frame, as they become more and more acceptable. Offshore asylum processing, summary expulsions, pushbacks, deportations, suspension of asylum, prolonged detention and even migrant deaths, for example, no longer make headlines, indicating they have turned into mainstream occurrences.

In Washington, a return to an uncompromising hardline migration agenda is now accelerating this process, which is looking likely to threaten the global migration and asylum system. The boundaries are now being redefined so rapidly that the normalisation might no longer be a gradual, slippery slope, but a sudden paradigm shift. Other countries might be following suit and feeling more emboldened to implement more extreme anti-migration measures: as long as their measures are less extreme than those of the Trump administration, it might fall within the new window of 'acceptability'. In fact, as one of our interviewees this year warned, we may be witnessing not just a widespread normalisation of human rights violations but a situation

where it is becoming 'trendy', with governments openly attacking migrants' rights as part of their political and deterrence strategies (see [p. 126](#)).

This is why, in this year's edition of the MMR, we dedicate a whole essay to this topic (see [p. 192](#)), looking back at six years of documenting the normalisation of the extreme but, more importantly, looking forward and exploring whether we are on an irreversible path towards ever harsher measures, or whether it is still possible to shift course.

One factor that could change the current trajectory is the economy. Paradoxically, despite rising anti-migration sentiment, there is a strong need and demand for migrant labour. Politicians in many destination countries struggle to balance their economic and labour policies with a perceived need for harsh anti-migration measures (see [p. 209](#)). In the US, this has already led to some clashes between the Trump administration and his Make America Great Again supporters.

Nevertheless, the global migration and asylum system appears to be at a turning point. Long-simmering debates - particularly since the arrival of a large number of refugees and migrants in Europe in 2015 and 2016 - have intensified, with growing calls to reform the 1951 Refugee Convention. Among the most contentious issues are the onward movement of refugees through 'safe' countries toward preferred destinations and the use of asylum systems by so-called economic migrants. At the time of writing, the US had organised a side event at the UN General Assembly to initiate a consultation process aimed at reform (see [p. 207](#)).

This happens against the backdrop of the massive cuts in foreign aid (see [p. 233](#)), not only by the US but by almost all traditional donors, most of whom are North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members now committed to significantly boosting their military spending in response to the threats posed by Russia and pressure from the US. At the same time, the erosion of multilateralism (see [p. 252](#)) is fragmenting the very frameworks that underpin global migration governance. In combination, this will affect mixed migration dynamics and migration governance in many different ways, in some places increasing displacement while in others constraining movement.

One year after the 'year of elections', we also take a look at the political landscape, asking how far campaign promises on migration have translated into practice (see [p. 178](#)) and explore the growing role of

artificial intelligence in shaping – and surveilling – mobility (see [p. 220](#)).

Throughout the report, interviews with policy makers, UN leaders, academics and activists aim to further enrich and provoke the migration debate, while a series of *Thematic snapshots* provide rapid updates on a range of timely topics – from returns to Syria to Spain's divergent approach to migration and the deportations from Iran to Afghanistan.

The forces driving people to move are persistent and, in places, intensifying. Conflict continues and escalates in the Middle East, with no durable peace in sight. Violence in parts of the Sahel and Sudan, instability in Myanmar, climate shocks in South Asia and deepening economic crises from Venezuela to Lebanon are all driving both mobility and (forced) immobility. As in previous years, the *Keeping track* sections provide a full overview, offering a regional year-in-review, including snapshots of shifting routes, risks and responses.

In this year of geopolitical turmoil, *Voices on the move* captures the deeply personal but unmistakably global stories of five migrants, including how the current geopolitical climate is shaping their daily lives and futures, while also sharing their important insights into the ways they think migration systems can be improved.

As always, five prize-winning essays from young Global South writers offer emerging perspectives often absent from Global North-dominated migration discourse (see [p. 165](#)).

This year's 4Mi data section provides unique and clear insights into how over 6,000 refugees and migrants around the world are experiencing the direct and indirect impacts of the wide range of measures taken by the new US government, ranging from restricted migration routes and cuts to foreign aid to the closure of resettlement opportunities and increased xenophobia.

As we approach the end of 2025, the outlook for global migration governance is undeniably bleak. Across many regions, policies are hardening and the pull towards ever harsher and more extreme measures feels relentless. The temptation to treat migrants and refugees as threats rather than human beings with rights is becoming deeply embedded in political discourse and practice. Left unchecked, this trajectory risks making the erosion of rights appear inevitable.

Yet none of this is set in stone. It remains possible to shift course – to pull the window of what is acceptable back towards proportionality, legality, protection and rationality. Evidence of this possibility exists all around us. As this year's *Resisting the extreme* section illustrates, resistance is not only imaginable but real (see [p. 270](#)).

Courts, for example, have intervened to block unlawful measures and reaffirm the primacy of international law – from France's historic recognition of refugee status for Palestinians fleeing Gaza to repeated rulings in Italy and the European Court of Justice striking down the government's plan to hold asylum seekers in offshore facilities in Albania. Some countries, too, are exceptions to the prevailing trend: Spain's ambitious regularisation programme (see [p. 122](#)) shows that governments can choose inclusion over exclusion. Activists are also on the frontlines: in the US, protests against raids and detention – often uniting faith groups, labour unions and lawmakers – have challenged abuses and mobilised solidarity. At the community level, places like Lampedusa – recognised for their 'gestures of hospitality' – demonstrate how humanity can thrive even in the most pressured border zones.

It is important not to lose hope. These examples – from courts to governments, from activists to communities – remind us that a different way forward is possible. The MMR does not offer easy answers, but it does aim to clarify the stark choices before us. Political leadership, evidence-based policymaking and the courage to defend rights even when unpopular will all be essential. By bringing together data, analysis, reflection and the direct experiences of people on the move, the MMR 2025 provides a moment to take stock, to understand where we are and where we are heading. It is an opportunity to clarify the stakes and the choices before us. These are stark, but they are still choices.



Bram Frouws,
Director, Mixed
Migration Centre

Introduction to the Mixed Migration Centre

What is the MMC?

MMC is a knowledge centre engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. It has a global team headquartered in Geneva and based in several countries worldwide.

What is MMC's mission?

The MMC is a leading source of independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, positively impact global and regional migration policies, inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

What is MMC's vision?

Migration policies, responses and public debate are based on credible evidence and nuanced understanding of mixed migration, placing human rights and protection of all people on the move at the centre.

What are MMC's objectives?

- To contribute to a better, more nuanced and balanced understanding of mixed migration (knowledge)
- To contribute to evidence-based and better-informed migration policies and debates (policy)
- To contribute to effective evidence-based protection responses for people on the move (programming)

What is MMC's relationship with the Danish Refugee Council?

The MMC is part of, and is governed by, DRC. While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists and the broader humanitarian sector. The position of the MMC does not necessarily reflect that of DRC and vice versa.

Where does MMC work?

The MMC focuses on six regions: Eastern and Southern Africa (including Egypt and Yemen), North and West Africa, Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The 40 staff members of MMC are based in Europe and, mainly, in regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where we work in close cooperation with regional partners, stakeholders and donors. Through MMC's global data collection programme 4Mi, approximately 165 enumerators collect data in over 20 countries across different mixed migration routes globally, conducting approximately 15,000 in-depth interviews with migrants on the move annually.

For more information on MMC visit our website mixedmigration.org, follow us [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration) or write to us at info@mixedmigration.org.

Who supports MMC?

The Mixed Migration Review 2025 builds upon work by the various MMC regional hubs and 4Mi data collection projects, supported by a wide range of donors, including (between mid-2024 and December 2025): the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Horizon Europe, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Robert Bosch Stiftung, Save the Children, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), the United Kingdom Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN Women.

Photo credit: David Peinado Romero / Shutterstock

As President Trump implemented a range of tough anti-immigration policies, encounters at the US-Mexico border fell sharply in 2025 compared with 2024. US Customs and Border Protection's 2025 monthly updates show historically low encounter totals. (See Thematic snapshot *US migration policies: regional impact on mixed migration in Latin America*, [p.88](#) and Interview with Luciana Gandini, [p.92](#)).



Photo credit: Josia True / Shutterstock

Sometimes, the 'normalisation of the extreme' is vigorously resisted. Angelenos have been protesting against ICE immigration raids and President Donald Trump's immigration policies in downtown Los Angeles, California, since June 2025. Protests have spread to other cities across the country. (See *When the extreme is normalised: shifting boundaries in 'acceptable' migration policy*, [p. 192](#) and *Thematic snapshot ICE wars: the rising tension between state and federal immigration policies*, [p. 98](#)).



Section 1

Regions on the move

This first section of this review analyses mixed migration trends and developments across the globe in 2025. It is organised into five regional sections: Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, Europe and Asia. Each region features a summary entitled *Keeping Track*, providing an overview of noteworthy migration developments and policies from the region from 2025.

Interview features with migration experts offer unique insights, complemented by *Thematic snapshots* that explore specific topics. These include the regional and national impacts of US policies on mixed migration dynamics, contradictory approaches within Europe – from Spain's relatively open approach to migration to the rightward-shifting politics in Germany, pushbacks from Iran to Afghanistan, uncertain returns to Syria and protracted crises in countries such as Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Each regional section includes an in-depth interview with a migrant, offering a firsthand perspective on how the current context of geopolitical turmoil is impacting their daily life and future.

Africa



Overview

Peter Grant

While Africa has a longstanding history of migration, driven by economic opportunities and social connections, the increasing spread of conflict across the region has also given it added urgency as a coping mechanism. From Mali to Sudan, millions of people have been forced to flee violence in their own countries and seek safety elsewhere. Millions of others remain internally displaced, unable to return home or move on. Across the region, the intersecting factors of conflict, climate change, weak governance and poverty are driving migration and displacement.

The increasing securitisation of migration within Africa, however, from heightened border controls and surveillance to mass arrests and deportations, is reinforcing the threats many migrants already face within their countries of origin. Instead of offering them protection, many host and transit countries are subjecting them to further abuse, sometimes with lethal consequences.

Irregular migration to Europe

The total number of migrants travelling from Africa to Europe irregularly by land and sea, having increased year-on-year between 2021 and 2023, fell sharply in 2024. This overall reduction was attributable to movement more than halving along the Central Mediterranean route to Italy that year, even as more migrants reached Spain (primarily through the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands). The picture changed in 2025, however, with movement to both Italy and Greece (Crete) picking up while, at the same time, journeys

along the Atlantic route declined. Though the European border management agency Frontex reported a continued reduction in irregular migration into Europe overall in the first seven months of 2025, migration from Africa specifically appears to have increased compared to 2024, though levels remain lower than in 2023. This is because, while arrivals in Italy and Spain combined are comparably less, this reduction has been more than balanced out by the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean route – specifically from **Libya** to the Greek islands of Crete and Gavdos – as a major entry point.

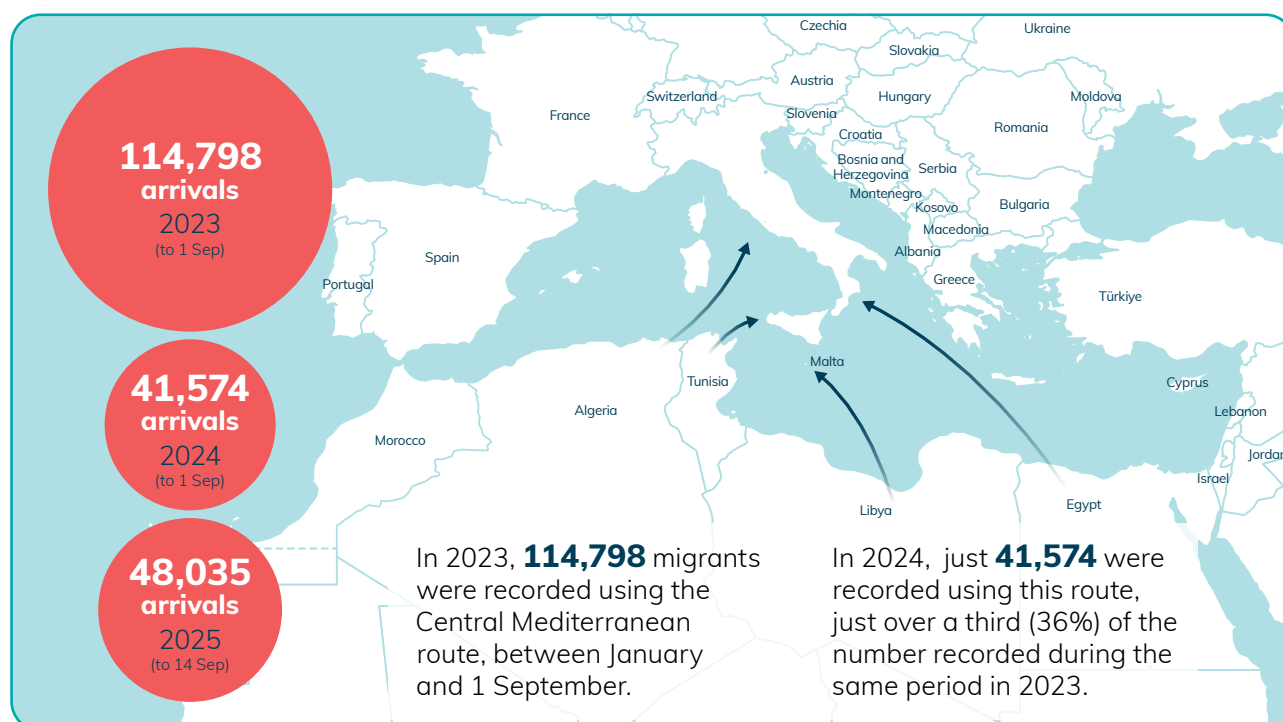
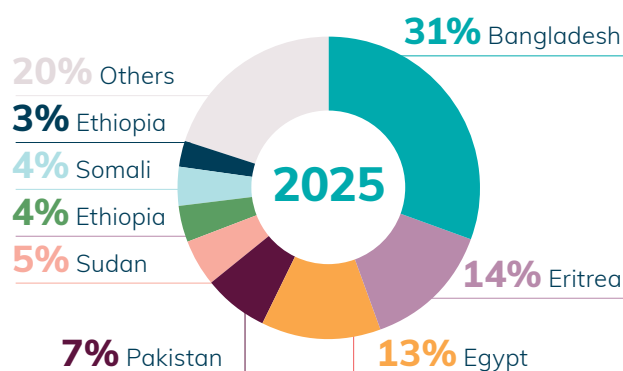
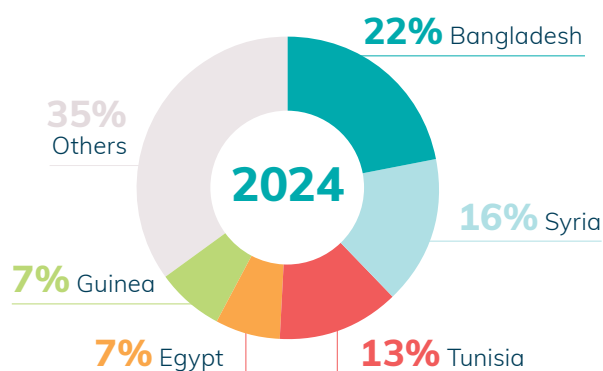
The **Central Mediterranean route** to Italy, predominantly from Libya and **Tunisia**, remains the most popular migratory pathway from Africa to Europe. Nevertheless, numbers fell substantially in 2024 to 66,617 arrivals, a drop of 58 percent compared to 2023 (157,651). Numbers have picked up again in 2025, with 36,406 registered sea arrivals,¹ almost 9 percent compared to the same period in 2024.² The most represented countries of origin among sea arrivals in Italy were Bangladesh (32.4%), Eritrea (14.5%), Egypt (11.8%), Pakistan (8.7%) and Ethiopia (4.8%).³ While Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals are increasingly using Libya as a transit point to Europe, the proportion of Tunisians reaching Italy has fallen markedly, likely the result of tighter border security. Moreover, for the first time in many years, East African countries are among the most common countries of origin, comprising nearly one-fifth of the total. This phenomenon is also evident along other routes, with reports of a sudden increase in the number of East African nationals flying to West Africa to attempt the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands and Balearics.⁴

1 UNHCR (2025) [Italy weekly snapshot - 18 August 2025](#).

2 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Italy](#).

3 UNHCR (2025) [Italy sea arrivals dashboard: December 2024](#); Also Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: North Africa – Quarter 1 2025](#).

4 Martín, M. (2025) [From Somalia to Spain's Balearic Islands: A journey along one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world](#). El País.

Graphic 1. Central Mediterranean route: 2025 sees slight uptick in arrivals**Most represented countries (Jan – Sep 2024 and 2025)***Source: [UNHCR situations - Europe sea arrivals](#)

*Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

North African embarkation points have shifted from year to year between Libya and Tunisia, generally in response to changing security conditions in each country. Libya, having been briefly overtaken by Tunisia in 2023, has, since 2024, re-emerged as the most common country of departure for Italy. This is likely due in part to Tunisia's increased maritime surveillance and anti-migrant crackdown.⁵ In the first seven months of 2025, at least 666 people died or disappeared during the crossing to Italy, compared to 1,032 people in the same period in 2024.⁶ Though lower, this still translates to an average of more than three fatalities every day along the route. One factor in the high death toll is the rollback of search

and rescue operations, with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) blaming the reduction in migrants rescued by its boat Geobarents on the implementation of restrictive legislation at the beginning of 2023 that severely constrains the ability of humanitarian vessels to operate.⁷

The **Atlantic route**, connecting much of the West African coast to the Canary Islands, has seen a resurgence from late 2019, quickly superseding the Western Mediterranean route as the primary entry point to Spain. The number of migrants travelling along this route climbed steadily in 2023 and again in 2024, peaking at 46,843, before falling dramatically during 2025.

5 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Mediterranean – Central Mediterranean route](#).

6 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Mediterranean – Central Mediterranean route](#).

7 MSF (2025) [Deadly manoeuvres: Obstruction and violence in the Central Mediterranean](#).

Between January and the end of July, a total of 11,614 migrants reached the Canary Islands – just over half (52%) the number in the same period in 2024 (22,035).⁸ The reduction in movement during 2025 is largely the result of a concerted crackdown by authorities in **Mauritania**, including not only maritime interceptions but also raids and deportations. The operation, involving the interception of tens of thousands of foreign nationals in the country, took place in the shadow of a new partnership agreement between Mauritania and the EU.⁹

The most represented countries of origin along this route are conflict-affected **Mali**, where deteriorating conditions continue to drive migration even in the face of the new restrictions, followed by **Senegal** and **Guinea**.¹⁰ The journey has evolved over time to encompass new embarkation points, with Senegal superseded in 2024 by Mauritania as the most popular country of departure,¹¹ though this may change again in the wake of the recent crackdowns there. However, there have even been reports of boats beginning their journey from as far south as Guinea-Conakry.¹² These greater distances create additional dangers on what is already an extraordinarily perilous journey: this was highlighted at the end of August, when a boat originating from **The Gambia** capsized off Mauritania, resulting in at least 69 deaths.¹³ While International Organization for Migration (IOM) data shows that at least 207 people died or disappeared along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands in the first seven months of 2025,¹⁴ this is likely an underestimate.¹⁵ According to figures from the NGO Ca-minando Fronteras, for instance, as many as 1,482 fatalities occurred in the first five months of 2025 alone.¹⁶ The risks of the route were highlighted in April by the discovery of a boat with the bodies of 13 migrants, many with Malian documentation, in St Kitts and Nevis. The next month, another boat washed up in St Vincent and the Grenadines with 11 bodies, also apparently originating from Mali. It is

likely that both vessels were heading towards the Canary Islands but were instead swept by currents across some 6,000 kilometres of ocean to the Caribbean.¹⁷

The **Western Mediterranean route** covers a number of land and maritime connections from **Morocco** and **Algeria** to Spain, including the towns of Ceuta and Melilla on the North African coast, as well as the southern coast of mainland Spain and the Balearics. After peaking in 2018, the route has stayed comparatively stable in the ensuing years, with almost identical numbers of crossings in 2023 (17,208) and 2024 (17,475).¹⁸ However, in the first seven months of 2025, it has seen the highest relative growth of any route, with 9,025 maritime and land arrivals – an increase of 16 percent from the same period in 2024 (7,755).¹⁹ In terms of deaths and disappearances, according to IOM, 152 people died or disappeared along the Western Mediterranean route in the first half of 2025, compared to 330 during the same period in 2024.²⁰ However, fatalities along this route are significantly under-reported.²¹ According to estimates by Ca-minando Fronteras, for instance, 383 fatalities occurred in the first five months alone.²²

While overall numbers remain low, much of the growth along the Western Mediterranean route as a whole is due to the sharp rise in movement towards the Balearic Islands,²³ with more than 4,300 arrivals between January and mid-August 2025 – around 77 percent more than the same period in 2024.²⁴ The recent uptick in movement to the Balearics, predominantly from Algeria, has swiftly overwhelmed local capacity to respond,²⁵ raising fears that it could develop into a prolonged and deadly crisis.²⁶ Despite recent media coverage, this emergency was months in the making,²⁷ with almost 6,000 migrants reaching the Balearics during 2024 – close to a sixfold increase compared to the previous year.²⁸ Crossings from Morocco into the Spanish enclave

8 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

9 MMC (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: West Africa – Quarter 2 2025](#).

10 Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: Irregular crossings drop by 20% in first half of 2025](#).

11 InfoMigrants (2025) [Mauritania is main country of departure for migrants to Spain](#).

12 InfoMigrants (2025) [Guinée : 26 migrants meurent dans un naufrage au large du Sénégal](#).

13 Fleming, L. (2025) [Boat heading to Canary Islands capsizes, killing at least 69 passengers](#). BBC.

14 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Europe – Western Mediterranean](#); Also IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Africa – Western Africa / Atlantic route to the Canary Islands](#).

15 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Uncounted and unknown: Tracking deaths and disappearances on the Atlantic and other irregular migration routes](#). MMC.

16 Ca-minando Fronteras (2025) [Monitoreo del derecho a la vida – Primeros 5 meses 2025](#).

17 Reuters (2025) [Eleven bodies found in beached boat in Eastern Caribbean](#).

18 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

19 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

20 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Europe – Western Mediterranean](#); Also IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Africa – Western Africa / Atlantic route to the Canary Islands](#).

21 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Uncounted and unknown: Tracking deaths and disappearances on the Atlantic and other irregular migration routes](#). MMC.

22 Ca-minando Fronteras (2025) [Monitoreo del derecho a la vida – Primeros 5 meses 2025](#).

23 Grant, P., Fortin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Are Crete and the Balearics revealing cracks in the EU migration deterrence?](#) MMC.

24 Carter, H. (2025) [77% surge in number of migrants arriving in the Balearics by small boats](#). Majorca Daily Bulletin.

25 Robinson, R. (2025) [Crisis in Balearic Islands as migrants keep flocking in small boats](#). Daily Express.

26 Panara, M. (2025) [Alarming rise in shipwrecks on Algerian migratory route to Spain](#). InfoMigrants.

27 MMC (2024) [Quarterly mixed migration update: North Africa – Quarter 3 2024](#).

28 InfoMigrants (2025) [Spain: More migrant arrivals, regions overwhelmed](#).

of **Ceuta** have also risen significantly during 2025, with more than 2,400 by the end of August:²⁹ from late July, in particular, increasing numbers of migrants in large groups have attempted to enter by swimming across the border.³⁰

Until recently, the crossing from the North African coast to Greece has not been a major route for irregular migration from Africa to Europe. However, this changed significantly during 2025, with the previously marginal route between Libya and the Greek islands of Crete and Gavdos gaining considerable traction during the year. As of 24 August, 11,466 migrants – predominantly Egyptians, Sudanese and Bangladeshis³¹ – had arrived there. Even before, however, the route was already gaining traction, with around six times the number of arrivals in 2024 than the preceding year.³²

The increase in movement between Libya and Crete has led to tensions,³³ highlighting the precarity of the EU's partnerships and cooperation with authorities in Libya in the current geopolitical context.³⁴ One underlying source of friction is the contentious 2019 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Libya and Türkiye relating to maritime oil and gas exploration that overlooks Greek and Cypriot claims over some of the areas in the agreement.³⁵ This has prompted some to speculate whether Libya is seeking to “weaponise” migration against Greece and the EU – though, in practice, the internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli is not in control of the eastern part of the country from where the majority of boats are embarking towards Crete.³⁶ This, instead, falls under the aegis of the opposing, Russia-supported Government of National Stability (GNS),³⁷ whose relationship with the EU is far from harmonious: in July, a senior EU delegation who arrived in eastern Libya were deported shortly after their arrival, reportedly because they refused to be photographed with GNS ministers.³⁸ Greece responded to the increasing number of arrivals from Libya by first threatening in June to send warships to intercept migrant vessels,³⁹ before rolling out, in early July, a three-month suspension of asylum applications from those who had embarked from North Africa (see also *Keeping Track in Europe*, p. 102).⁴⁰

Mixed migration in North Africa

While the dangers of the maritime crossings to Europe are well documented, the land routes connecting migrants to the North African coast involve their own risks. Thousands of migrants have died or disappeared in the Sahara Desert over the past decade, including 259 in the first five months of 2025 alone, according to IOM data.⁴¹ Furthermore, the situation in host countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Egypt has also deteriorated, as authorities have actively targeted migrants, particularly nationals of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, for arrest and deportation. These conditions leave many migrants with a stark choice: either return to their country of origin, despite the challenges they may face there, or risk the perilous Mediterranean crossing to Europe.

Because, in many cases, these actions are being carried out against the backdrop of the EU's ‘partnership frameworks’ around migration management with a number of North African countries, the EU has been accused of implicitly encouraging these abuses – even if these actions are not specifically mandated in the agreements themselves. With regard to the increasingly violent enforcement of Morocco's borders, for instance, a recent report argued that “the externalisation of European border control has created incentives to support these practices.”⁴²

Abuse and deportations in Libya

Though many migrants use Libya as a country of transit en route to Europe, it nevertheless hosts a sizeable and diverse migrant population, estimated at 867,055 as of March-April 2025 – around 20 percent higher than the total a year earlier. Of these, the largest groups are from Sudan (33%), Niger (22%), Egypt (19%) and Chad (10%). While migrants from many of these countries frequently engage in circular migration, working seasonally in key

29 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

30 Raynal, M. (2025) [L'enclave espagnole de Ceuta confrontée à un nouvel afflux de migrants en provenance du Maroc](#). RFI.

31 Mellersh, N. (2025) [Migrant arrivals in Greece drop, but asylum suspension draws sharp criticism](#). InfoMigrants.

32 RSA (2025) [Crete – Gavdos: Sixfold increase in refugee arrivals in 2024 – Lack of organised first reception and accommodation infrastructure](#).

33 AP (2025) [Greece, EU to press Libya on migrant crossings as Mediterranean numbers surge](#).

34 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Are Crete and the Balearics Revealing Cracks in the EU Migration Deterrence?](#) MMC.

35 The Arab Weekly (2025) [Libya rejects European interference in maritime agreement with Turkey](#).

36 Michalopoulos, S. and Mandilara, S. (2025) [Greece faces migrant surge as Libya, Turkey intensify Mediterranean energy ties](#). Euractiv.

37 Knipp, K. (2025) [Russia's role in trafficking, smuggling from Libya to EU](#). DW.

38 Politico (2025) [The great Benghazi blunder: How a Libyan warlord humiliated Brussels](#).

39 Droukga, B. (2025) [Greece plans to deploy navy ships off Libya to 'send a message' to migrant smugglers](#). Euronews.

40 Papadimas, L. (2025) [Greece suspends asylum applications for migrants from North Africa](#). Reuters.

41 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2025) [Migration within Africa: Sahara Desert crossing](#).

42 ASGI (2025) [Untraceable: Border practices and enforced disappearance in Morocco](#).

sectors such as construction, the Sudanese population has not only increased but also become more settled since the outbreak of conflict in **Sudan**, with far fewer choosing to return voluntarily.⁴³

This growth has occurred despite the continued abuse and mistreatment of migrants across the country,⁴⁴ both in the areas governed by the Tripoli-based GNU and the eastern parts of the country under the control of the GNS. The vulnerability of migrants in Libya was underlined in February 2025 when, following a raid on a human trafficking camp in south-eastern Libya, the bodies of as many as 100 migrants were discovered in two mass graves.⁴⁵ In March, false rumours that the GNU had agreed to resettle migrants in Libya from other countries prompted a surge in hate speech, public protests and arrests, and culminated with the announcement by the GNU's interior minister of plans to deport 100,000 migrants from the country every four months.⁴⁶ Both the GNU and the GNS have carried out mass deportations in their respective areas of control, with the former expelling hundreds of Nigeriens across the border into a remote and dangerous desert area,⁴⁷ while the latter has forced large numbers of Sudanese nationals back into Sudan, despite the ongoing conflict there.⁴⁸

As part of its long-standing arrangement with the EU, the Libyan coastguard continues to apprehend and return large numbers of migrant vessels headed towards Europe, with as many as 15,000 interceptions between January and late August 2025.⁴⁹ This is despite the fact that the majority of those returned to Libya are transferred to detention facilities where they are at risk of being subjected to torture, sexual abuse and extortion. In a context of widespread institutional corruption, Europe's provision of financial assistance also appears to preserve a dynamic of partial enforcement, whereby Libyan officials will work with smugglers to allow some boats to continue their journey while intercepting others to satisfy the EU. This, therefore, perversely incentivises an approach where some, but by no means all, migrants are intercepted.⁵⁰ The EU's partnership with Libya has remained controversial, given its track record on human rights, and attracted further controversy on 24 August when the Libyan coastguard (using an EU-financed vessel) fired on the humanitarian boat Ocean Viking,

causing significant damage in the process. Though the attack was criticised by the EU as “worrying” and by Frontex as “deeply concerning”,⁵¹ it is not clear whether any concrete action will be taken in response (see also *Keeping Track in Europe*, p. 102).

Renewed crackdown on migrant settlements in Tunisia

Since 2023, Tunisia has become markedly more hostile towards its predominantly Sub-Saharan migrant population, driven in part by the public vilification of these groups by senior government officials. Besides tightening its borders, it has launched repeated drives to arrest and deport migrants, including those apprehended at sea. In March 2025, in one of the largest incidents of its kind, Tunisian authorities intercepted more than 600 migrants over the course of 24 hours and reportedly expelled hundreds of them into Algeria and Libya.⁵² While Tunisia has also promoted “voluntary repatriations”, with around 3,400 reported in the first five months of 2025 alone,⁵³ critics have argued that migrants have little freedom of choice in the hostile environment created by the government. Conditions, they argue, have intentionally been made so difficult that Tunisia is becoming increasingly unviable for migrants to travel through or live in.⁵⁴

A case in point is the large-scale destruction of dozens of migrant camps carried out near Sfax, beginning in April. The destruction of these informal settlements, built on private land and accommodating more than 20,000 people, was justified by authorities as necessary for “health and security”,⁵⁵ given growing tensions in the area between migrants and locals.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, for thousands of migrants this latest phase of displacement has only added to their desperation and uncertainty. While the government claimed that the evictions were carried out peacefully and in line with human rights standards, activists argued that the use of bulldozers and incineration of personal belongings tell a different story.⁵⁷

Mixed messages in Algeria around reforms and deportations

In Algeria, there have been positive signs of progress reforms around immigration, with public discussions around the potential regularisation of the country's

43 IOM (2025) [IOM Libya: Migrant report – Round 57](#).

44 MSF (2025) [Migrants face extreme violence and exclusion from healthcare in Libya](#).

45 UN (2025) [Two mass graves of migrants uncovered in Libya](#).

46 ICJ (2025) [Libya: Immediately halt collective expulsions, arrests, violence and hate speech against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers](#).

47 Volkmann, E. (2025) [Libya expels 600 Nigeriens in “dangerous and traumatising” desert journey](#). The Guardian.

48 Wallis, E. (2025) [Libya: Eastern authorities deport 700 Sudanese migrants](#). InfoMigrants.

49 Sanderson, S. (2025) [Libya: Nearly 15,000 migrants intercepted and returned since start of the year](#). InfoMigrants.

50 MMC (2025) [Beyond restrictions: How migration and smuggling adapt to changing policies across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the English Channel](#).

51 Giordano, E. (2025) [Migration ties with Libya criticized after patrol boat shoots at NGO rescue team](#). Politico.

52 Carretero, L. (2025) [Tunisia: Hundreds of migrants intercepted at sea are nowhere to be found](#). InfoMigrants.

53 InfoMigrants (2025) [Tunisia: Around 3,400 repatriations since beginning of 2025](#).

54 Bathke, B. (2025) [Tunisia: Authorities clear around 7,000 migrants from camps around Sfax](#). InfoMigrants.

55 AP (2025) [Tunisia dismantles encampments housing migrants stranded en route to Europe](#).

56 InfoMigrants (2025) [Tunisia: Authorities set fire to migrant camp](#).

57 Speakman Cordall, S. (2025) [“I don't know where I will go”: Refugees run out of options in Tunisia](#). Al Jazeera.

undocumented migrant population in April. If implemented, this would be an unprecedented step that could significantly strengthen protections for this vulnerable group.⁵⁸ At present, against a backdrop of increasing racism and hate speech, Sub-Saharan migrants are at particular risk of being targeted.⁵⁹ Large numbers continue to be deported into Niger, with around 16,000 migrants expelled across the border between April and the beginning of June alone.⁶⁰ Dumped in the desert in an area known as Point Zero, these deportations are frequently accompanied by violence and mistreatment, with a number of migrant deaths reported during the recent crackdown.⁶¹

An increasingly inhospitable environment for refugees in Egypt

The geographic position of **Egypt** at a converging point bordering North Africa (Libya), East Africa (Sudan) and the Middle East (Gaza) contributes to its complex mixed migration landscape as a country of origin, transit and destination.⁶² Besides the fact that thousands of Egyptians continue to migrate to Europe, Egypt's large refugee population – including an estimated 1.5 million Sudanese nationals since the outbreak of civil conflict in 2023⁶³ – likely contributed to the EU's brokering of a EUR 7.2 billion deal in 2024, including EUR 200 million specifically earmarked for migration management. Despite repeated calls for human rights safeguards and clarity on how the provisions will be implemented in practice, it remains unclear what monitoring mechanisms, if any, will be in place to prevent abuses.⁶⁴

Egypt has long practiced a non-encampment policy towards its refugee population, allowing them to settle in urban areas rather than confining them to camps. However, in a context of anti-refugee sentiment targeted particularly at the large number of recent arrivals from Sudan, established rights to education and health services have become increasingly difficult to access. Since 2023, the government has implemented a series of restriction policies that have not only made life in Egypt more difficult for the Sudanese already there, but also made it almost impossible for many Sudanese to enter, forcing them to engage smugglers to cross the border.⁶⁵ Of particular concern is the adoption of a new Asylum Law in December 2024, despite its potential as the first

dedicated asylum legislation in North Africa for creating a more coherent protection framework for refugees. With its opaque security provisions and broad powers, there are fears it could, in practice, be used to roll back existing rights and provide a pretext for authorities to detain and deport anyone deemed to have entered the country illegally.⁶⁶ However, as of August 2025, the bylaws outlining how the law will be implemented have yet to be published, nor have any meaningful consultations with civil society or UN agencies been conducted to inform how the legislation should be operationalised.⁶⁷

One positive development, however, was the Egyptian government's announcement, in April, that it would be extending the refugee residence permits from six to 12 months, providing registered refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan and other countries with a measure of greater stability.⁶⁸ While improving security conditions in some areas of Sudan during the year have encouraged some refugees to return⁶⁹ (though some observers have questioned how "voluntary" many of these returns have been in practice)⁷⁰ other Sudanese in Egypt remain at risk of deportation.

East and Horn of Africa

Across the East and Horn of Africa region, millions of people are displaced within their countries or living as refugees in neighbouring states, often in acutely challenging conditions and with little or no access to assistance. Many of these crises are the product of intersecting challenges around conflict, climate and humanitarian collapse, in some cases drawn out over many years. In **Somalia**, for instance, protracted insecurity, food shortages, flooding and an extended, multi-year period of chronic drought, have contributed to a situation where more than 3.5 million people are internally displaced and 6 million in need of assistance.⁷¹ The re-emergence of crises, such as growing insecurity within **Ethiopia's** Tigray region, also threatens to intensify pressures across the region. After fighting broke out in 2020 between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), resulting in the deaths of an estimated 600,000 people,⁷² a ceasefire in 2022 formally ended the fighting. However, recent reports

58 Nasri, H. (2025) [L'Algérie entre discours d'hospitalité et expulsions massives de migrants subsahariens](#). Le Monde.

59 Statewatch (2025) [Algeria: Migrants face raids, mass expulsions, and hate speech](#).

60 Le Monde (2025) [Niger: More than 16,000 irregular African migrants turned back from Algeria in two months, according to authorities](#).

61 Alarme Phone Sahara (2025) [Urgent alert: Stop the inhumane mass deportations from Algeria to Niger!](#)

62 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Between pledges and practices: Egypt's complex mixed migration policy landscape](#).

63 UNHCR (2025) [Sudan emergency](#).

64 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Between pledges and practices: Egypt's complex mixed migration policy landscape](#).

65 Gohar, I. (2025) [Egypt's policies and rhetoric target Sudanese refugees](#). Arab Center Washington DC.

66 Cone, D. and Sullivan, D. (2025) [No model of refuge: Sudanese refugees in Egypt](#). Refugees International.

67 EIPR (2025) [The collapse of Egypt's protection for refugees: Systemic and widespread violations of the non-refoulement principle and the right to asylum](#).

68 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR commends Egyptian government for extending refugee residence permits to one year](#).

69 Gaber, N. F. A. (2025) [Free trains, full hearts: Sudanese refugees return home from Egypt](#). InfoMigrants.

70 Global Detention Project (2025) [Sudanese refugees in Egypt: "Voluntary" returns amidst intensified detention and deportation campaign](#).

71 OCHA (2025) [Somalia](#).

72 Soy, A. (2025) [Aid workers "executed" in Ethiopia's Tigray war, charity says](#). BBC.

of renewed tensions have raised fears that the conflict could reignite, potentially drawing Ethiopia into hostilities with neighbouring Eritrea and creating further instability elsewhere.⁷³

Discrimination and persecution also contribute to displacement within the region. While the role that ethnic and religious identity can play in driving migration is relatively well known, particularly in conflict-affected contexts, it is also the case that sexual and gender minorities are moving to different countries in response to the increasingly inhospitable environment towards LGBTQI+ groups. This is especially evident in **Uganda**, where a raft of exclusionary legislation – the harshest in the world, including the death penalty for some same-sex acts – has left gay, bisexual and transgender individuals vulnerable to violence and arrest.⁷⁴ Many end up having to move to the relative security of **Kenya**, though they continue to face significant challenges as a result of intersectional discrimination relating to their status as both migrants and LGBTQI+ individuals. This impacts on their ability to integrate or access housing, employment and health care. In addition, Kenya's protracted asylum processes have even pushed some LGBTQI+ migrants to leave for other countries, including South Sudan, despite ongoing insecurity and the existence of heavy criminal penalties for homosexual acts.⁷⁵

War in Sudan

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2023, the situation in Sudan has developed into the world's largest internal displacement crisis.⁷⁶ At the end of January 2025, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) was at a peak of almost 11.2 million, a figure that includes the roughly 2.7 million IDPs already in the country prior to the war – many of whom have themselves been displaced again by the fighting.⁷⁷ In the ensuing months, however, the total number of IDPs reduced by 13 percent to around 9.9 million by the end of July, reflecting the return of over 1.1 million IDPs to their homes in Khartoum, Al Jazira

and Sennar states after the Sudanese army regained control of these areas.⁷⁸ Much of this displacement has taken place in South, North and Central Darfur states, with IDPs also concentrated in these areas, though the largest source of displacement was from Khartoum, with more than 3 million IDPs originating from this state.⁷⁹ In addition, as of late July, around 320,000 refugees had returned from abroad, primarily Egypt and South Sudan, either with a view to remaining there or to assess security conditions.⁸⁰ In most contexts, the situation for returnees remains extremely fragile, with limited services, supplies or humanitarian assistance available: in many cases, return is driven by the lack of a better alternative, given the difficult conditions in IDP-hosting areas. Some returnees may end up being displaced again in future, unless the situation urgently improves.

Though the current conflict is shaped by historical fault lines of violence and displacement, its scale and intensity are unprecedented. While previous outbreaks have occurred primarily in rural areas, the war began in the country's capital and led to the rapid collapse of key governance functions.⁸¹ Besides the destruction of numerous urban centres and displacement camps, the conflict has also disrupted the country's vital agricultural sector by forcing farmers to flee their farmland. In North Darfur, famine was officially declared in August 2024.⁸² In West Darfur, where fighting has been especially intense, total crop failure has occurred as a result. In this context, in the worst-affected areas, the majority of both displaced and host households are unable to secure sufficient food for their families. Access to clean water and health care is also severely limited, with the added threat of widespread sexual violence for women and girls in particular.⁸³ Against a backdrop of chronic underfunding and shrinking humanitarian assistance, the toll has been acute, with more believed to have died from hunger and disease than the fighting itself, including many children as a result of malnutrition.⁸⁴

73 Lawal, S. (2025) [Why Ethiopia's Tigray could be on the brink of another conflict](#). Al Jazeera.

74 Okiror, S. (2025) [Uganda's parliament passes mostly unchanged anti-LGBTQ bill](#). The Guardian.

75 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) ["I just want to be free...": Emerging evidence on the lives, experiences, and movement intentions of displaced sexual and gender minorities in Kenya](#).

76 IDMC (2025) [Sudan – The world's largest internal displacement crisis deepens](#).

77 IOM (2025) [DTM Sudan mobility update \(15\)](#).

78 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Eastern and Southern Africa / Egypt and Yemen – Quarter 2 2025](#).

79 IOM (2025) [DTM Sudan mobility update \(15\)](#).

80 IOM (2025) [Urgent support needed as over 1.3 million war-displaced Sudanese begin to return home](#).

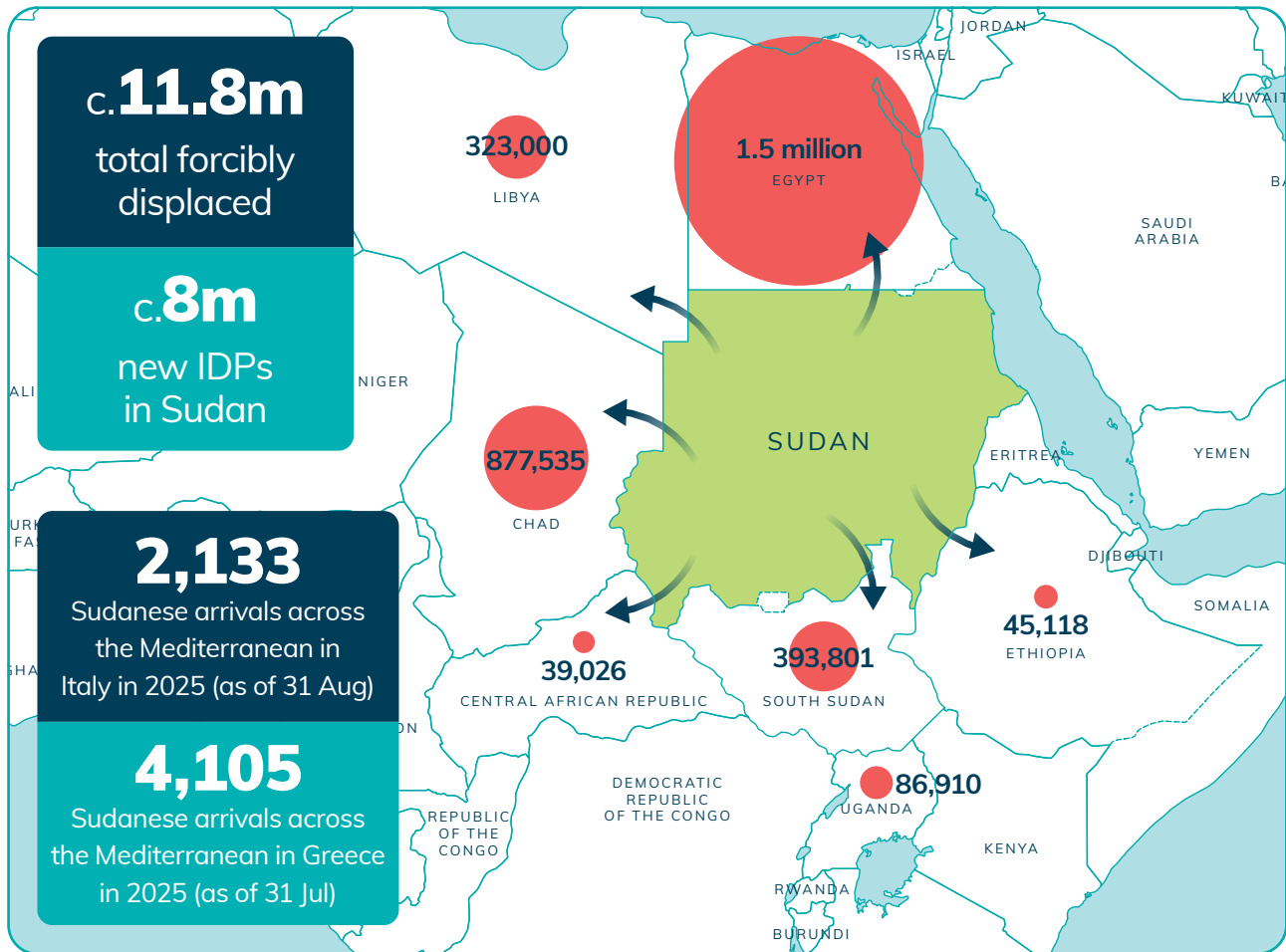
81 Gamal Eldin, A. (2025) [Forgotten and neglected, war-torn Sudan has become the world's leading displacement crisis](#). Migration Policy Institute.

82 Mishra, V. and Makki, A. (2024) [Sudan: Over a dozen more areas at risk of famine as fighting impedes aid](#). UN News.

83 IDMC (2025) [Sudan – The world's largest internal displacement crisis deepens](#).

84 Gamal Eldin, A. (2025) [Forgotten and neglected, war-torn Sudan has become the world's leading displacement crisis](#). Migration Policy Institute.

Graphic 2. Sudan: conflict exodus 2023-2025 (up to September 2025)



Sources: [UNHCR situations dashboard Sudan](#); [UNHCR situations Europe sea arrivals](#)

In addition to the IDP population, as of August 2025, almost 4.1 million civilians are currently living outside Sudan as a result of the conflict, including around 830,000 refugee returnees who have been forced to move back to their countries of origin. The largest numbers of displaced civilians are in Egypt (1.5 million), South Sudan (1.2 million, including 803,000 South Sudanese returnees as well as 389,000 displaced Sudanese), Chad (877,000) and Libya (323,000), with smaller numbers in Uganda, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic.⁸⁵ Conditions in these countries, many of which are contending with their own challenges around insecurity and displacement, vary considerably. The situation for displaced Sudanese in **South Sudan**, for instance, is complicated by the simultaneous return of large numbers of South Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers as well as weak governance, conflict, poverty and growing social tensions with local communities.⁸⁶

In Egypt, on the other hand, Sudanese have in the past benefited to some extent from the long-standing ties between the two countries. Many arrivals have been allowed to settle, albeit in highly precarious conditions, in urban areas such as Cairo, Alexandria and Aswan.⁸⁷ However, as discussed earlier, there are signs that the environment is becoming increasingly inhospitable. The difficult situation in Egypt has reportedly driven some Sudanese to move on to Libya to join the significant numbers who had already crossed into the country direct from Sudan.⁸⁸ Here, in a context of rising anti-migrant sentiment, Sudanese face the risk of abuse⁸⁹ and deportation.⁹⁰ Many end up attempting the Central Mediterranean crossing into Europe, as can be seen from the uptick in the number of Sudanese reaching Italy and even the Greek island of Crete during the year.⁹¹

85 UNHCR (2025) [Sudan situation](#).

86 Gamal Eldin, A. (2025) [Forgotten and neglected, war-torn Sudan has become the world's leading displacement crisis](#). Migration Policy Institute.

87 Gamal Eldin, A. (2025) [Forgotten and neglected, war-torn Sudan has become the world's leading displacement crisis](#). Migration Policy Institute.

88. Ismail, A., Eltahir, N. and Maltezou, R. (2025) [Egypt's crackdown drives Sudanese refugees on new route to Libya and beyond](#). Reuters.

89 SWI (2025) [UN warns Sudanese refugees are stuck in Libya with nowhere to go.](#)

90 Wallis, E. (2025) [Libya: Eastern authorities deport 700 Sudanese migrants](#). InfoMigrants.

91 Ismail, A., Eltahir, N. and Maltezou, R. (2025) [Egypt's crackdown drives Sudanese refugees on new route to Libya and beyond](#). Reuters.

Migration and returns between the Horn of Africa and Yemen

The economic and political challenges within the region, in particular Ethiopia and Somalia, continue to drive tens of thousands of migrants every year to cross the Gulf of Aden from the coast of Djibouti or Somalia to Yemen. In the first quarter of 2025 alone, over 37,000 migrants were tracked making the journey,⁹² though the actual number is likely to be higher.⁹³ The route remains the most used on the continent despite the considerable dangers involved, with 448 deaths or disappearances recorded by IOM between January and the end of August 2025.⁹⁴ This included, among other incidents, the March capsizing of two boats in poor weather that led to at least 180 deaths.⁹⁵ In August, another tragedy occurred, when a boat carrying 154 Ethiopian migrants capsized off the coast of Yemen, leading to at least 68 deaths and 74 people missing.⁹⁶ The risks are often compounded by the unscrupulousness of the smugglers controlling the route in their attempts to avoid detection. In June, for instance, after a boat with 150 migrants on board was intercepted by smugglers, the passengers were forced to swim back to the shore, resulting in at least eight confirmed deaths and many others missing.⁹⁷

The dangers for migrants persist once they reach Yemen, with many abducted and held for ransom by criminal groups on arrival. In Yemen's deteriorating humanitarian context, the product of widespread poverty and more than a decade of civil conflict, migrants are especially vulnerable. This was illustrated in April, when a detention centre near Sana'a was bombed during a US military strike, killing at least 68 migrants and wounding many others.⁹⁸ Thousands of migrants end up stranded in Yemen, unable to move on or to make the perilous journey again in reverse back to the Horn of Africa, with some ultimately choosing to undertake voluntary returns to their countries of origin.⁹⁹

Those who manage to cross Yemen to the Saudi border, on the other hand, face further threats, as evidenced by numerous reports documenting torture, sexual abuse, mass killings and executions by Saudi security forces.¹⁰⁰ Despite international condemnation, these

gross human rights violations continue to be reported.¹⁰¹ MMC continues to receive testimony from Ethiopian migrants who have attempted to cross into Saudi Arabia from Yemen, confirming these targeted killings by Saudi security forces continue until today. Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are also regularly exploited by their employers and at constant risk of being apprehended by authorities, with almost 24,000 deported to Ethiopia or Yemen in the first quarter of 2025 alone.¹⁰² Tens of thousands more were expelled in the ensuing months (see *Keeping Track in the Middle East*, p. 46).¹⁰³

West and Central Africa

Extraordinarily, around one in four people who live in extreme poverty globally are based in West and Central Africa. In addition, close to three-quarters of the entire regional population are in fragile, conflict- and violence-affected countries.¹⁰⁴ The region as a whole has been beset by insecurity, humanitarian crisis and environmental strain, creating significant tensions that have frequently developed into communal conflict and violent extremism. Many countries are grappling not only with their own internal struggles, but also with the pressures coming from hosting large refugee populations from neighbouring countries, alongside being vulnerable to the possibility of further cross-border displacement as conflicts elsewhere intensify. An uptick in fighting in the eastern **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC), for instance, pushed around 119,000 people to flee into **Burundi** by the middle of the year,¹⁰⁵ with many – caught between conflict in DRC and impossible living conditions in Burundi – forced to move back and forth across the border multiple times (see Thematic snapshot *DR Congo's endless war: how protracted conflicts impact mixed migration dynamics in 2025*, p. 37).¹⁰⁶ At the same time, the rollback of development assistance by many donor countries has left vulnerable populations in even greater precarity. Of the 10 most neglected crises in the world ranked by the Norwegian Refugee Council for 2024, including eight in Africa as a whole, four were in West and Central Africa: Cameroon (the highest-ranking country), Burkina Faso, Mali and DRC.¹⁰⁷

92 IOM (2025) [Flow monitoring registry](#).

93 IOM (2025) [Flow monitoring registry dashboard: Non-Yemeni migrant arrivals in March 2025](#).

94 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Western Asia – Eastern route to/from EHOA](#).

95 IOM (2025) [Over 180 migrants feared dead after shipwrecks off Yemen's coast](#).

96 InfoMigrants (2025) [African migrant boat capsizes off Yemen, killing dozens](#).

97 IOM (2025) [IOM mobilizes urgent aid after tragic incident off Djibouti coast](#).

98 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Yemen: US strike reportedly kills, injures dozens of migrants](#).

99 IOM (2025) [Yemen crisis response plan 2025](#).

100 Horwood, C. and Frouws, B. (2024) [Saudi border killings continue](#). Mixed Migration Centre; Also Human Rights Watch (2024) [Saudi Arabia falls short of respecting migrants' rights](#).

101 Harter, F. (2025) [Saudi border forces accused of killing "hundreds of Ethiopian migrants"](#). The Guardian.

102 IOM (2025) [January – March Eastern Route report](#).

103 Ata, H. (2025) [Saudi Arabia arrests 15,000 illegal residents, deports over 11,000 in one week](#). Gulf News; Also Times of India (2025) [Illegal residents deported: Saudi Arabia arrests 22,222 illegal residents in major crackdown](#).

104 World Bank (2025) [The World Bank in Western and Central Africa](#).

105 UNHCR (2025) [Eastern DRC situation: 11 July 2025](#).

106 UN (2025) [DR Congo crisis forces refugees to swim for their lives to Burundi](#).

107 NRC (2025) [The world's most neglected displacement crises 2024 – It is time for action](#).

Mauritania's anti-migrant crackdown highlights the human cost of migration restrictions in the Sahel

Historically, the Sahel has been an area of open migration, with nationals of different countries (such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) crossing borders for trade or seasonal employment elsewhere (in particular, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal). This phenomenon has become even more pronounced with the emergence of extremist armed groups in the Central Sahel, making free movement even more important for communities forced to seek safety in neighbouring countries.¹⁰⁸ However, there have always been tensions between the principles of the 1979 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment, with its emphasis on the “the abolition of the obstacles to free movement of persons, services and capital”, and the increased securitisation of national borders within the region. Though this is, in part, the result of political tensions between countries in the region – in particular, the breakaway of post-coup Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS in 2025, following the latter's demands that these countries re-establish democratic rule¹⁰⁹ – the EU has created a further layer of complications by exporting its migration management model to the region.

The challenges were vividly highlighted in Mauritania in the first months of 2025, when as many as 30,000 migrants (though estimates vary) were detained and many subsequently deported by authorities as part of a nationwide operation to crack down on migration.¹¹⁰ The crackdown was accompanied by reports of foreigners (including those with legal documentation to be in the country) being abused in detention and stripped of their possessions before being expelled across the border into Senegal or Mali.¹¹¹ These actions led to considerable diplomatic tensions with Mauritania's neighbours and was condemned by the opposition within the country, with one MP calling for the agreement with the EU to be annulled.¹¹² A report by Human Rights Watch, published in August 2025, also highlighted that the recent abuses of

migrants are not isolated phenomena but part of a long-standing pattern of mistreatment by Mauritanian authorities, stretching back years, at times aided with financial and technical assistance by the EU and Spain.¹¹³ The Mauritanian government responded by denying all the accusations.¹¹⁴

While the abuses cannot be separated from Mauritania's deep-seated patterns of racism towards black Africans in general,¹¹⁵ including its own citizens,¹¹⁶ many believe that the EU's increasing engagement in the region – most recently, in 2024, a EUR 210 million partnership agreed to support “migration management”¹¹⁷ – has played a decisive role in Mauritania's hardline approach. This was reflected in the passage, in January 2025, just as the crackdown began, of a new law mandating all foreign nationals to have a residency permit: previously, nationals from neighbouring countries were able to move freely. These measures have all come after extensive discussions with the EU and Spain to reduce irregular migration from the West African coast to the Canary Islands. As with its partnerships with various North African countries, this involves the ‘externalisation’ of border controls to Mauritania in exchange for financial assistance – an approach that critics in Mauritania have labelled “neocolonial”.¹¹⁸ Though the Mauritanian government subsequently engaged in further dialogue with Mali and Senegal around migration, including the brokering of new agreements with Dakar on residency permits and irregular migration, its actions were strongly condemned by both countries at the time.¹¹⁹

In terms of arrivals on the islands and from the perspective of Europe, the outcome has been a success: movement along the Atlantic route has almost halved in the first seven months of 2025,¹²⁰ mainly as a result of the large numbers of migrants (especially from Mali) intercepted at sea or detained on land and subsequently expelled from the country. However, these numbers only tell part of the story, and the drivers of migration from the conflict in Mali, in particular, are only intensifying. This raises the question of how sustainable this approach will be in the long term, particularly

108 Ename Minko, A. (2025) [On Shifting Sands in Africa's Sahel Region: Tensions between Security and Free Movement](#). Migration Policy Institute.

109 Ewokor, C. (2025) [Three military-run states leave West African bloc - what will change?](#) BBC.

110 InfoMigrants (2025) [Mauritania intercepts 30,000 migrants, cracks down on over 80 smuggling rings this year](#)

111 Lawal, S. (2025) [“Xenophobic”: Neighbours outraged over Mauritania's mass migrant pushback](#). Al Jazeera.

112 Lawal, S. (2025) [“Xenophobic”: Neighbours outraged over Mauritania's mass migrant pushback](#). Al Jazeera; Also Focus on Africa (2025) [Mauritania, Member of Parliament calls for cancellation of migration agreement with the EU](#).

113 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Mauritania: Years of migration control abuses](#).

114 République Islamique de Mauritanie (2025) [Réponses aux allégations et questions soulevées dans le rapport préliminaire de HRW](#).

115 Hedgecoe, G. and Macaulay, R. (2025) [EU deal fuelling Mauritania's abuse of migrants – rights group](#). BBC.

116 Minority Rights Group International (2025) [World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Mauritania](#).

117 The European Commission (2024) [The European Commission launches new migration partnership with Mauritania](#).

118 Dan Yaye, M. and Ould Moctar, H. (2025) [Detained, deported, abandoned: A note on the situation of migrants in Mauritania](#). migration-control.info.

119 MMC (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: West Africa – Quarter 2 2025](#).

120 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

as the human and political costs of enforcement mount. At a time when the need for a cooperative, humane approach to migration and displacement is more urgent than ever, the increasing securitised approach to movement within the region threatens to make already vulnerable populations even more at risk. Despite the severity of the allegations in its report, Human Rights Watch also acknowledged that Mauritania had implemented some positive reforms in recent years around human rights monitoring and legal reform, including the adoption, in May 2025, of standard operating procedures to guide the interception, detention and management of migrants.¹²¹

The Central Sahel

The Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) continues to be wracked by the intersecting crises of conflict, climate change, poverty and political upheaval. As of April 2025, there were an estimated 5.9 million IDPs and 2.1 million refugees and asylum seekers – a rise, respectively, of 6 percent and 20 percent compared to the total in January 2024.¹²² This continues a year-on-year deterioration which has seen the number of IDPs triple in Burkina Faso, Mali and western Niger between 2020 and 2024, while the number of refugees has doubled over the same period. Within this region, mixed migration occurs in both directions, as civilians are displaced across borders between different countries in response to crises and insecurity.

Though the primary driver of displacement in the region is the proliferation of insurgent and jihadist groups, drought and desertification have also created growing competition over resources between herders and pastoralists, frequently tipping into deadly conflict and creating widespread hunger. Flooding, meanwhile, drove the displacement of almost 1 million people in the region.¹²³ Alongside forced displacement, restrictions on movement such as curfews, checkpoints, unexploded ordnance and banditry all contribute to the vulnerability of many communities, who end up being trapped in conflict-affected areas.¹²⁴ Despite the severity of the crisis, much-needed humanitarian assistance on the ground remains sparse, with just 16 percent of the USD

4.9 billion needed to reach the most vulnerable groups in 2025 received as of early August.¹²⁵

In **Burkina Faso**, almost 2.1 million – close to 10 percent of the population¹²⁶ – are currently displaced internally.¹²⁷ While, by the end of 2024, around 1 million IDPs had reportedly returned to their areas of origin, pointing to an apparent improvement in the security situation in some regions,¹²⁸ the number of IDPs overall in the country continued to climb during 2025, with others forced across the border into Mali and Niger¹²⁹ – though, at the same time, nationals of both countries entered Burkina Faso to seek refuge there.¹³⁰ The fighting has only intensified in recent years, with thousands of civilians killed.¹³¹ Many of these atrocities overlap with deep-seated ethnic and identity-based animosities, meaning particular communities may end up being targeted.¹³²

The crisis in Mali has also deteriorated further, amid deepening conflict between the military government and armed groups, particularly in the north and centre of the country. While the large majority (over 90%) of displacements is the result of the conflict, environmental disasters also play a role, causing catastrophic economic and infrastructural damage.¹³³ In addition to more than 402,000 IDPs, as of 31 December 2024, there are also now more than 140,000 refugees – compared to fewer than 67,000 in January 2024 – primarily from Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania.¹³⁴ While the majority of Malians displaced by the conflict are taking refuge in or near Mbera refugee camp in the Hodh El Chargi region of Mauritania, thousands are also attempting to move on to Europe via the Western Atlantic route, with Malians now accounting for the most arrivals of any country in the Canary Islands.¹³⁵

Niger's location means it not only has a pivotal role in the Central Sahel crisis – as of the end of July 2025, it had almost 460,000 IDPs and more than 429,000 refugees and asylum seekers, the majority displaced from neighbouring conflict-affected areas, including Mali and Nigeria¹³⁶ – but also as a country of transit for tens of thousands of migrants heading northwards towards Libya. This is despite the ongoing challenges in Niger itself, spanning insecurity, environmental instability and widespread poverty, which have contributed to food

121 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Mauritania: Years of migration control abuses](#).

122 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

123 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

124 Project 21 (2025) [Burkina Faso, Mali, Western Niger: Forced displacement and movement restrictions in the Central Sahel \(May 2025\)](#).

125 OCHA (2025) [Sahel dashboard – Humanitarian overview \(as of 5 August 2025\)](#).

126 ACAPS (n.d.) [Burkina Faso](#).

127 UNHCR (2025) [Burkina Faso](#).

128 UNHCR (2025) [Operational update – Burkina Faso – January-March 2025](#).

129 OCHA (2025) [Burkina Faso, Mali and Western Niger – Humanitarian snapshot \(as of 10 June 2025\)](#).

130 UNHCR (2025) [Operational update – Burkina Faso – January-March 2025](#).

131 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2025) [A growing divergence of security narratives in Burkina Faso](#).

132 Rukanga, B. (2025) [Burkina Faso military accused of killing over 100 civilians in "massacre"](#). BBC.

133 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

134 UNHCR (2025) [Mali](#).

135 Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: Irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025](#).

136 UNHCR (2025) [Niger](#).

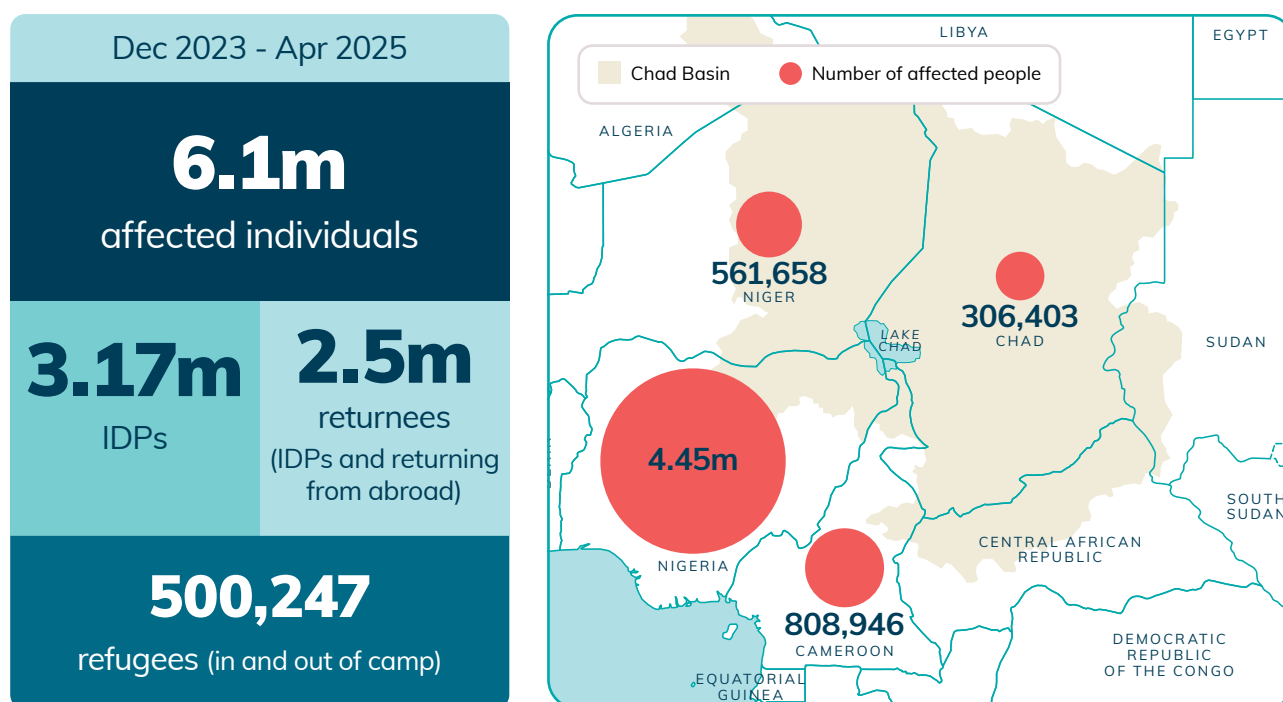
shortages, school closures and disease outbreaks.¹³⁷ There is also significant internal circular movement among migrants who travel from the more impoverished areas of the country to look for opportunities in artisanal gold mines in the region.¹³⁸

The Lake Chad Basin conflict

The effects of climate change and environmental degradation are especially acute in the Lake Chad Basin, an area spanning Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. In a context of growing scarcity, the region has become increasingly unstable in recent years, due

to intercommunal conflict and the presence of various armed groups, including Boko Haram.¹³⁹ In the first half of 2025 alone, 263 security incidents occurred that took the lives of at least 329 people. The internally displaced population, while falling by 6 percent in the same period, still numbers 2.9 million, with another 330,000 refugees – a group that has, conversely, risen by 23 percent in the first six months of 2025.¹⁴⁰ While military campaigns have had some success in disrupting militants, their operations have frequently come at a high cost to local communities and, on their own, are insufficient to address the underlying drivers of conflict.¹⁴¹

Graphic 3. The impact of armed insurgency and conflict in the Lake Chad Basin (as of June 2025)



Source: [IOM situation in Lake Chad basin](#)

In **Nigeria**, around 3.5 million people are forcibly displaced, including a majority of IDPs but also refugees, asylum seekers and refugee returnees.¹⁴² Alongside conflict, flooding is a major cause of displacement: in the war-affected Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states in the north-east, for instance, almost 1.2 million people were displaced during 2024 by flooding.¹⁴³ **Chad** faces similar pressures of violent insurgency, climate change and deepening poverty, exacerbated by the conflict in

neighbouring Sudan. By late August, almost 877,000 refugees had arrived in the country since April 2023,¹⁴⁴ increasing the total displaced population in Chad to almost 2.1 million.¹⁴⁵ By the end of 2025, the number of new arrivals is projected to come close to 1 million, placing further strain on the already desperate situation of displaced Sudanese in the eastern region, as well as local communities.¹⁴⁶ Sudan's cholera epidemic also appears to be spreading to Chad, with an increasing

137 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

138 IOM (2025) [Niger — Population flow monitoring report 90 \(July 2025\)](#).

139 Niang, A. (2025) [Tackling security and climate challenges in the Lake Chad Basin requires collaboration](#). LSE.

140 OCHA (2025) [Lake Chad Basin – Humanitarian snapshot \(ss of 5 August 2025\)](#).

141 Watson, A. and Adebayo, T. (2025) [Ask the experts: Lessons for regional stability in the Lake Chad Basin](#). GPPI.

142 UNHCR (2025) [Nigeria](#).

143 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

144 UNHCR (2025) [Sudan situation](#).

145 UNHCR (2025) [Chad – Forcibly displaced persons \(July 2025\)](#).

146 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

number of cases reported in refugee camps there.¹⁴⁷ As in Nigeria, repeated flooding is also a major concern, affecting nearly 2 million people in 2024 and continuing to drive displacement and loss of livelihoods in 2025.¹⁴⁸

Cameroon is also contending with protracted insecurity and conflict in the Far North, where Boko Haram militants are also active. The combination of internal displacement and the influx of large numbers of refugees fleeing conflict from neighbouring countries in the region has served to deepen destitution levels in the region, with almost three-quarters of the population having limited access to social services and living in a state of chronic poverty.¹⁴⁹ In addition to the more than 410,000 refugees the country hosts, primarily from the Central African Republic and Nigeria, there are nearly 1 million IDPs, split almost evenly between the Far North (476,000) and the Anglophone North-West/South-West regions (493,000).¹⁵⁰ The latter is the product of the protracted conflict between the Cameroonian military and the Ambazonian separatists that first emerged in response to the government's violent crackdown in 2016 on protests against the perceived dominance of the French-speaking population. Since then, at least 6,500 people have been killed so far in the violence, though the actual number may be substantially higher.¹⁵¹

Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean region

The Southern Africa Route, running from the East and Horn of Africa to South Africa, has become more popular in the past two decades. Various estimates suggest that between 10,000 and 20,000 migrants, predominantly from Ethiopia, risk their lives every year to travel irregularly through Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The journey, lasting anything from a month to a year, has only become more dangerous with the steady entrenchment of smuggling organisations in the region.¹⁵² The vulnerability of those attempting the route is exacerbated by the fact that authorities are increasingly focusing their efforts on enforcement, with at least 6,000

migrants from the Horn of Africa currently in detention in various transit countries, some for extended periods.¹⁵³ Raids and apprehensions in different countries along the route continued during 2025, including the rescue of dozens of young Ethiopian trafficking victims by South African security forces in May.¹⁵⁴ This was reportedly one of a number of similar incidents in recent months that highlighted the vulnerability of migrants even once they reach South Africa.¹⁵⁵

Migration to Mayotte

Irregular migration to Mayotte,¹⁵⁶ an overseas department of France located in the Indian Ocean, has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Though much of this movement originates from the neighbouring island of **Comoros**, in practice, arrivals are not only Comorian nationals but also made up of Burundians, Congolese, Malagasy and Somalis. While migrants originating from the Great Lakes typically travel overland through Tanzania and on via Comoros to Mayotte, many Somalis depart by boat from Somalia to Comoros or even directly to Mayotte.¹⁵⁷ The route between Comoros and Mayotte is very hazardous, with at least 69 deaths and disappearances recorded during 2024.¹⁵⁸ This included, at the beginning of November 2024, the deliberate capsizing of a boat by traffickers off the coast of Comoros, resulting in at least 25 fatalities.¹⁵⁹ A similar story emerged later that month when two boats, carrying 75 passengers between them, were abandoned by their smugglers and left to drift in the ocean, with 28 of those on board dying of thirst and starvation before they were rescued.¹⁶⁰

The situation has led to increasing tensions between Mayotte and Comoros, as well as large-scale raids and public protests against migrants among local Mahorans. In December 2024, following the deportation of DRC nationals in October,¹⁶¹ the French interior minister Bruno Retailleau went so far as to accuse Comoros of actively enabling irregular movement to the island, “pushing populations towards Mayotte to create a kind of illegal occupation” – a situation that meant “we have to change the rules”.¹⁶² This mood was reflected in the subsequent passage of a bill by France's parliament in April 2025

147 UN News (2025) [Au Tchad, l'épidémie de choléra se propage dans les camps de réfugiés soudanais](#).

148 OCHA (2025) [2025 Sahel humanitarian needs and requirements overview \(May 2025\)](#).

149 FAO (2025) [Cameroon: Reducing humanitarian needs in the Far North by scaling up anticipatory actions](#).

150 UNHCR (2025) [Cameroon](#).

151 Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect (2025) [Cameroon](#).

152 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Southbound: Mixed migration routes, experiences and risks along the journey to South Africa](#).

153 IOM (2024) [Pilot study on the southern migration route and access to protection services](#).

154 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Eastern and Southern Africa / Egypt and Yemen – Quarter 2 2025](#).

155 Mashale, K. (2025) [Inside cops' rescue of 44 Ethiopians](#). Sowetan Live.

156 Mayotte is part of the Comoros archipelago but remained under French control when the other islands gained independence in 1975. In 2011, it became a French overseas department. [The Comorian constitution still claims Mayotte as part of its territory, and the Comoros government disputes France's sovereignty](#).

157 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [“If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk”: Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route](#).

158 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2025) [Migration within Africa: Sea crossings to Mayotte](#).

159 IOM (2024) [IOM statement: At least 25 dead in latest tragic shipwreck off Comoros Islands](#).

160 Maruf, H. (2024) [Somali migrants recount ordeal of 16 days helpless, drifting at sea](#). Voice of America.

161 France24 (2024) [France orders more deportation flights to Africa from Indian Ocean island of Mayotte](#).

162 RFI (2024) [France and Comoros clash over migrants lost in Mayotte cyclone disaster](#).

that restricted birthright citizenship for children born in Mayotte, effectively suspending the otherwise nationwide “right to soil” enshrined in the constitution. Though justified by its proponents as removing a key lure for irregular migrants to attempt to reach Mayotte, its critics argue that it is serving to normalise far-right policies.¹⁶³

Mayotte suffered a devastating cyclone in December 2024 that left hundreds of people dead or missing,¹⁶⁴ with its informal settlements worst affected. Despite advance warnings, many migrants reportedly stayed clear of shelters out of fear that they might be deported.¹⁶⁵ While the disaster appears to have mobilised further measures to tackle irregular migration, insufficient attention has been paid to the needs and vulnerabilities of the undocumented population: despite being among the most affected, the informal settlements where many are concentrated were reportedly sidelined during early relief efforts.¹⁶⁶ There is also little in the way of public acknowledgment of the factors driving movement from Comoros and, more broadly, the East and Horn of Africa, meaning migrants will likely continue to attempt the journey, despite the risks involved.¹⁶⁷

In April 2025, as part of a package of support to Mayotte to assist its recovery in the wake of the cyclone, French president Emmanuel Macron announced a new programme known as Iron Wall to prevent crossings from Comoros.¹⁶⁸ This, potentially, has troubling implications for migrants, given the frequently violent interceptions that have been carried out on boats in recent years. An investigation published by Lighthouse Reports in September 2025 documents at least 24 deaths between 2007 and 2025 as a result of the French security forces intentionally encircling, striking or capsizing migrant vessels. This included the ramming, in July 2025 of a small boat carrying 27 passengers, including children, with one witness reporting that he saw an elderly man and teenage girl drown in the wake of the collision.¹⁶⁹

South Africa's failure to protect migrants is in the spotlight in court

For years, against a backdrop of rising xenophobia, South Africa's large migrant population has been subjected to racism, discrimination and physical attacks. This has been driven not only by fear and resentment in urban communities towards foreign nationals, partly caused by the limited economic opportunities available locally, but also by senior politicians who have further inflamed these attitudes with populist policies of their own. This intertwining of vigilante violence and official support is epitomised by the formation in 2021 of Operation Dudula (meaning “to force out” in Zulu), a group that specialised in raiding migrant-owned businesses and campaigning for foreign children to be excluded from schools.¹⁷⁰

Despite some initial condemnation from the government,¹⁷¹ much of Operation Dudula's anti-migrant rhetoric has come to permeate the views of South Africa's mainstream parties,¹⁷² with the organisation itself registering as a political party in 2023. Tellingly, a lawsuit filed in 2023 by the civil society group Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX) against Operation Dudula was subsequently expanded to include the Department of Home Affairs and the South Africa Police Services for their failure to protect migrant communities and even, in some incidents, their alleged complicity with its actions. After a two year wait, proceedings began in June 2025 in the High Court of Johannesburg.¹⁷³ The International Commission of Jurists intervened in the case with a submission calling on the court to recognise South Africa's international obligations towards non-citizens and its constitutional duty to protect them from violence, discrimination and other rights violations when formulating its verdict.¹⁷⁴

163 France24 (2025) [French parliament restricts birthright citizenship in Mayotte, left slams “laboratory of far right”](#).

164 Rose, M. and Moustoifa, A. (2024) [Several hundreds, maybe thousands, may have died in Mayotte cyclone](#). Reuters.

165 Imray, G., Adamson, T. and Aliloiffa, R. (2024) [France rushes aid to Mayotte after Cyclone Chido leaves hundreds feared dead](#). AP.

166 Bochenek, M.G. (2025) [Cyclone damage in Mayotte highlights lack of social protections](#). Human Rights Watch.

167 Santos, A.P. (2024) [Somali woman who nearly died on migrant boat says she would do it all again](#). InfoMigrants.

168 Duclos, A. (2025) [French President Macron brought new promises to cyclone-battered Mayotte. Residents want more](#). The Independent.

169 Lighthouse Reports (2025) [“They hit us and watched us drown”](#).

170 Charlie, A. and Ford, T. (2023) [Inside South Africa's Operation Dudula: “Why we hate foreigners”](#). BBC.

171 France24 (2022) [S.Africa's Ramaphosa lashes xenophobic hospital protests](#).

172 OHCHR (2022) [South Africa: UN experts condemn xenophobic violence and racial discrimination against foreign nationals](#).

173 Mutsila, L. (2025) [Operation Dudula in the dock — rights organisations confront anti-migrant group in court battle](#). Daily Maverick.

174 International Commission of Jurists (2025) [South Africa: ICJ urges high court to apply international law protecting migrants and refugees from discrimination and xenophobia in case involving vigilante attacks](#).

While the proceedings were still ongoing at the time of writing, in August, three members of Operation Dudula were arrested following weeks of illegal activity in Soweto, with the group preventing migrants from accessing health care. In response, KAAX issued a statement commending the police for “finally” taking action against them, a move it said was “welcome, if overdue”.¹⁷⁵ The following month, KAAX called on the government to remove Operation Dudula from the National Dialogue, a supposedly civil society-led process that KAAX had previously refused to participate in due to what it viewed as its lack of inclusivity: the organisation wrote that anti-migrant vigilante groups had “no place in a genuine, inclusive and credible national dialogue aimed at healing and rebuilding our democracy”.¹⁷⁶

175 KAAX (2025) [Operation Dudula arrests: Justice partially served, but the fight for equal protection continues.](#)

176 KAAX (2025) [Open letter: Call to remove Operation Dudula from National Dialogue.](#)

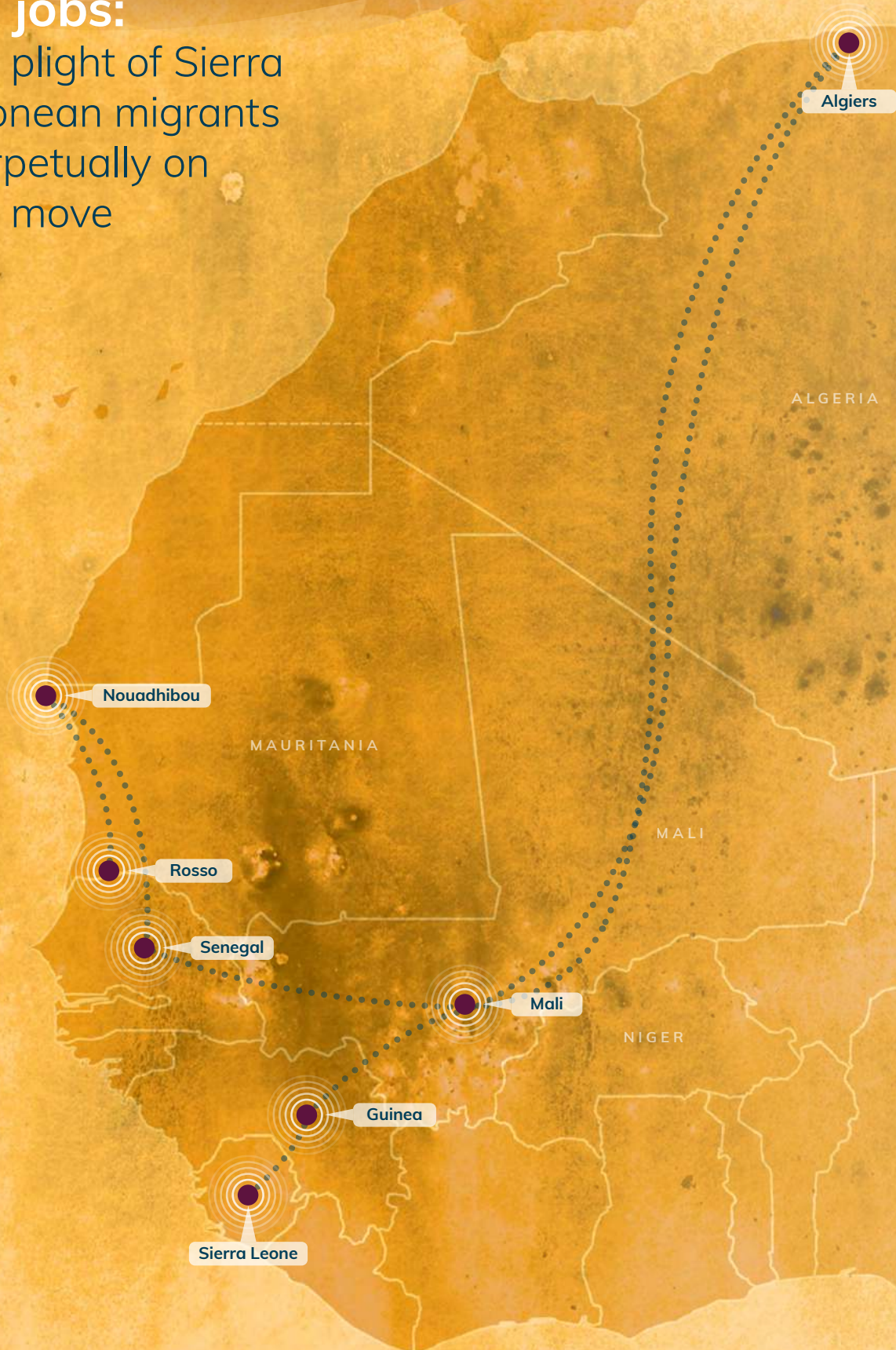
Photo credit: Chadolfski / Shutterstock

The modern contradiction: In Cape Town, South Africa, Black African migrant labourers bear the brunt of relentless and increasing Afrophobic discrimination and yet the economy benefits from millions of low paid, often informal, unprotected migrant workers. (See *On a collision course? Labour shortages and anti-immigration stances*, [p. 209](#)).





No money, no documents, no jobs: the plight of Sierra Leonean migrants perpetually on the move



MMC spoke to one teenager who has migrated through five nations experiencing hunger and insecurity - but also an unlikely kindness - along the way. He was expelled from Mauritania during the recent collective expulsions that started in early 2025, when Mauritanian authorities launched a crackdown on irregular migration, resulting in a fierce expulsion campaign. Between January and April, approximately 30,000 irregular migrants were apprehended in widespread raids and interceptions. These developments follow the 2024 migration partnership signed between Mauritania and the European Union, aimed at curbing irregular migration to Europe.¹

“Migration is hard. I’m doing this to give my parents a better life.”

Two years ago, when I was 16, I dropped out of school back home in Sierra Leone. My mother was very sick. I started working in a local coffee shop, but the money wasn’t enough. I always thought I’d migrate someday, but at that moment I had to do it because I wanted to support my parents and help them live a better life. My original destinations were going to be either Italy or Spain, where I could hopefully start school again and play football. But you need a lot of money for the crossing, and then I got stopped a few times by the police when trying to cross.

When leaving Sierra Leone, I bought myself a bus ticket and went to Guinea. I stayed there for two months, working on fishing and sea vessels. Then I went to Mali, again by bus, and then to Algeria. In this case, I didn’t use the bus, because there is a lot of organised crime on the road. My friend put me in touch with a group of smugglers. I paid about CFA 150,000² to cross from Mali to Algeria in a Toyota car. I stayed in Algeria for six months. In Algiers, I worked in construction but got arrested by the police and sent back to Mali. In Mali, I found another job in construction and, when I got enough money, I moved to Senegal.

“There were a lot of people struggling and suffering, with no money or food for themselves or their children.”

I spent 18 months in Senegal then moved to Mauritania last year. In Mauritania, where I worked again in construction, my goal was to cross to Spain, but I got arrested in Nouadhibou. The Mauritanian police took me to Rosso. Here, they just left us at the border. I was with a lot of my friends, all suffering, with no food, no place to sleep, nothing. There were also a lot of other people struggling, especially women and children, with no money to feed themselves or their kids. There was a garage there where we used to sleep, but they demolished it so they could force us to go back to our country. But, the thing is, they didn’t actually send us back – they just left us stranded there. When I met the police for the second time, as I was trying to cross the river to Senegal, I explained my situation to the police officers and they gave me a note that I could present at checkpoints so they let me pass. It worked, and I thought it was a nice gesture from the policeman to let me through.

“The only thing I have access to here is football, and that gives me the hope and ambition to move forward.”

I left everything in Mauritania – my clothes, my documents, everything. I have nothing on me here in Senegal. When I was there, I heard about the process of applying online for residency and to obtain documents and paperwork, but I did not end up applying. I didn’t have any residency in Mali or Algeria, either. Right now, I don’t have a job, enough money to eat, or a place to sleep. I sleep inside a ship docked at the port. When I was in Mauritania, I used to sleep in the factory where I worked. Here, I’m not alone, because a lot of my friends from Sierra Leone are with me. We all sleep in the same place. I keep looking for a job, we all do, but can’t find anything. Some of my friends beg for money for food to eat. Language is another barrier, because I don’t speak French or Wolof. Not having any ID on me is also making it very hard to find work. The only thing I have access to here is football, and that gives me the hope and ambition to move forward.

“Throughout my day, I do not feel safe.”

I only feel safe now, during this interview, but throughout my day, I do not feel safe. I have nothing, I am not working. It is very hard. I do not have a problem with the police. I did not witness or commit any crimes, my only problem is not being able to find a job. I have only been here for a month, but the first time I got to Senegal, I managed to find a job with the fishermen. This time, I cannot find any work. Since I left, I’ve had no support, no help from anyone. I do not even have contact with my own family. Nobody has ever sent me money, I do this on my own.

“People will continue to move, each one with their own motivations to do so.”

The only thing that can change my situation right now is having access to money so I can continue my journey. Money would also give me access to a place to sleep, medical facilities and job opportunities, and all that would make my journey easier. Some of my friends want to come here and do the same thing that I’m doing, but I wish they didn’t. I don’t want the same thing to happen to them. Girls, in particular, are very vulnerable and can get exploited, trafficked for sex or pushed into prostitution.

I want people to know that, if you have enough money for the journey, it’s best to invest it in a business, or in moving regularly, if you can. And if you don’t have money or documents, then you’re going to get stuck in a place where you don’t know anyone, and the situation can be really bad. The thing is, people will continue to move because the situation back home is not good. Some want to reach Spain or Italy to find a job, many die on the road. Migration is really hard.

1 Infomigrants (2025) [Mauritania intercepts 30,000 migrants, cracks down on over 80 smuggling rings this year](#) and Euronews (2024) [Von Der Leyen vows to strike €210-million migration deal with Mauritania](#).

2 Approximately, USD 265.

Interview

Migration: the urgent shift from local conversations to concerted global efforts

At a time when key mobility factors continue to evolve, intensify and converge, it is imperative to adopt a global approach on migration that calls to action multiple stakeholders and takes into account increasingly pressing issues, such as climate change, forced immobility and Afrophobia, **Ottilia Anna Maunganidze** believes.

Ottilia Anna Maunganidze is the head of special projects in the Office of the Executive Director at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). A strategist and international law and human rights expert, Ottilia promotes human security in Africa by advancing peace, accountability, the rule of law and justice. Her areas of interest include emerging security threats, international criminal justice, international human rights law and migration trends and policy.

You've worked a long time at ISS, and you've seen a change in the salience and importance of migration as a security and political issue. How would you characterise that, not just in South Africa but continent-wide?

When I started at the ISS in early 2009 the conversations on migration happened very much on a national level, with individual countries dealing with domestic challenges in terms of regulating irregular migration. In my mind, it was an issue that countries sought to address administratively. Let's take South Africa, for example. In 2008, we witnessed one of the largest, until then, bouts of anti-foreigner sentiment and violence which resulted in close to 70 people being killed in May of that year. The economic crunch and increased movement of people from neighbouring countries, particularly Zimbabwe following their election, provoked these

acts of violence. So the sentiments, even then, were very insular. The response, then, was to look to what administrative tools the South African government had to respond to a challenge that wasn't of their creation. What they chose to do in 2009 was to implement a special exemption permit that allowed people who had entered South Africa irregularly or who had overstayed to effectively be regularised. Fast forward to 2014, just five years later, we started seeing the increase in migrants – particularly those forcibly displaced by violence and conflict in the Middle East – towards Europe. Then the discussions on migration were no longer just happening on a national level, they started to take on a regional lens. This was not limited only to movement out of Western Asia, but also, increasingly, movement out of the African continent. So much so that, at least on the European side, we saw the Valletta Summit, for example, and efforts to address migration as a collective responsibility among

countries. A decade since then, we see a resurgence of a national-level response, but within a more regional and global lens.

The current migration discourse centres on the views and the perspectives out of Western Europe and North America. Yet migration is very much a topic that requires to be addressed on a global scale.

“ [Unlike Europe, African countries like Uganda] have not used the language of crisis when it comes to people moving. Instead they have used the language around ‘administrative challenge’ when dealing with a large inflow of people for which they were not prepared. ”

How much do you think the ‘crisis’ or problem of migration and asylum is a Global North anxiety ‘infecting’ Africa because of Europe’s agenda, and to what extent is it, in fact, a security problem?

I’d almost want to de-link these two issues. In Europe, reference is made to a migration crisis. This was the result of a continent struggling to absorb a million people at the time. Meanwhile, a country like Uganda, together with Ethiopia and Kenya combined, were hosting close to three million forcibly displaced people with far less resources. These are smaller countries geographically but also economically, with no choice but to find a way to address what they saw as an immediate refugee crisis. They continue to host people forcibly displaced out of South Sudan, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and those fleeing repression in Eritrea. However, they have not used the language of crisis when it comes to people moving. Instead, they have used the language around ‘administrative challenge’ when dealing with a large inflow of people for which they were not prepared.

The language we have seen coming out of Europe and North America, though, makes it seem as if they are receiving the largest numbers of people entering their countries. In particular, when you go into the data, you see that the number of regular and irregular African migrants into Western Europe is far lower than that of those coming from Eastern Europe or Asia into Western Europe. The approaches that have been used in responding to this – including the externalisation policies stretching into North Africa and into the Sahel – can often be seen as excessive in focus and attention, so much so that they actually overshadow real and much needed efforts to ensure stability.

I’ll use the example of Niger. In July 2023, these externalisation policies and the increase in

securitisation enabled a military junta to garner support from its local population. Importantly, Niger is the youngest African country with a median age of just under 15 years old and with challenges around employment and development, but also around stability and security. Two of the laws that the junta aimed to repeal first were instruments related to trafficking and smuggling of persons. This was not necessarily because they thought that smuggling and trafficking of persons should be legalised, but because in a number of communities, including in areas like Agadez, for example, it had become a means to gain income – a lucrative economic activity.

When you look at the numbers of people that migrate out of Niger compared to their neighbouring countries, they are far less. Niger was and remains a transit zone. But there was concern that the way in which the externalisation policy was being implemented, particularly out of the EU, was affecting the livelihoods of people who were engaged in transporting people, selling life jackets, offering guidance, etc. But this is not in itself a solution, because what you don’t want is an over-securitised policy to result in further criminal activity or the destabilisation of a country within its region and within the broader African context.

Are you seeing migrants wrongly identified and targeted?

Yes, very often. What we have seen is an increase in nationalistic language, not limited only to migration, but migration being used as an easy win politically. We can talk about identity and all those other issues, but I argue it’s because migration is the one thing that is almost easier to address. If you have people who can be deported, and if you can say we would be in a better place, we would have less crime, ‘We would have less violence if they were sent home,’ this resonates with the population as they would then be able to attribute their societal ills to a particular demographic. However, research has shown that often the criminal elements within societies are not singularly migrant communities; but the more restrictive your policies are in terms of accessing the job market or accessing social security, the more likely people are to use irregular pathways to enter.

Ironically, the consequence is also that people who would otherwise follow legal pathways and work in legal sectors almost have no choice but to either work without work permits because the process is so difficult and expensive, or work in the parallel market, so to speak. It’s almost: how do you address what society challenges are, without making it about the migrants themselves? And what are those challenges? It’s crime, it’s violence, it’s issues around integration, but it’s also employment. These are key challenges that we see, not only in Europe and in North America but, as I mentioned earlier, in African and Asian countries, too. But it’s easier

to attribute those social ills to the people who you can easily (or more easily) get rid of in your society, whether through deportation or through detention.

“ It’s easier to attribute those social ills to the people who you can easily (or more easily) get rid of in your society, whether through deportation or through detention. ”

So how should these tensions be addressed?

My view, and this is using the South African example, is that it has to be done on multiple levels. I know saying all of society can seem quite trite, but it should be addressed across government departments, because often migration is dealt with by the ministry responsible for the interior or home affairs and, in some cases, with the police as well as defence. But the kinds of conversations that need to be had must involve the ministries responsible for socio-economic issues as well, such as those ministries responsible for education, or health, those dealing with questions of inclusion and integration, because if you have just a security cluster talking about migration, your outcomes will be security cluster-focused. The South African government has tried to have a constructive conversation through a migration and urbanisation platform that is steered through the statistics department, together with home affairs and social development and the ministries for international relations.

What about the dynamics and contradictions around demand for labour migration?

In the context of South Africa, the most integrated communities are also those where violence flares up, because these are also the spaces in which the socio-economic disparity is most stark. It’s not unusual for some migrant groups to do very well in business, resulting in them hiring other migrants and people from the local community. Take Italy, for example, where far-right groups got great support in communities where the people who are picking tomatoes are predominantly West African migrants. So you have a recognition in that community that you need this labour to be able to actually continue and sustain your business but, at the same time, they’re confronted with challenges when it comes to how to integrate migrants effectively beyond their utility in the economic sector. It is that conversation, I feel, that lends itself to a nationalistic contestation, because nationalism then uses the language of identity as the basis on which you start to exclude people.

In Europe, countries with aging populations like Germany have identified a need for labour, and they are looking at different sectors to identify where they

need this labour. Just recently, though, they indicated that there is still no uptake [by migrants of available roles] and they’re puzzled as to why this is. So they’re adjusting their language requirements and entry into sectors because they are targeting professionals who already have the tertiary skills they need. I’ll use myself as an example: if you are a professional that already possesses tertiary skills, you also have freedom of mobility and freedom of choice. Where I choose to live is my choice, whereas a number of people who are lower income end up living in areas which they may not have otherwise chosen, so to speak. That is where the gap is. If you need skilled labour, there has to be an investment in skilling that labour, rather than expecting people with skills to be the ones who apply for the visas to come and service your industries.

I do think one of the under-explored aspects is, of course, Europe’s need for labour. And how do you ensure that the people you need are accommodated? What kind of spaces are you creating for them? We are seeing private companies think about this more, instead of importing a labour force, so to speak, they are outsourcing in the countries where people are. But we’re not seeing this in a more concerted national-level approach. Individual companies are adjusting how they employ and where they employ from over anything else, but this shouldn’t happen on such an ad-hoc, individual basis.

Can you explain the issue of the so-called Afrophobia in South Africa?

In April 2015, the late Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu, made really Afrophobic and racist remarks, specifically around people who had migrated into South Africa from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The consequence was another bout of xenophobic violence, particularly in the township areas. At the time, I wrote for foreign policy around the best way to understand why we have the kind of violence targeting African foreign nationals and sometimes foreign South Asian nationals. It is rooted in a history where Black wealth was questioned and seen with suspicion and White wealth was presumed. This is a history of apartheid, unfortunately.

These tensions are a result of people querying why these people are living within our communities: ‘How are they – as black, foreign nationals – able to establish businesses and send their children to school when I am not able to do so?’ These questions are not raised in respect of foreign nationals from Europe because it is presumed that they already wield some degree of privilege. In the past, I’ve used the example of ownership of businesses within the South African formal and informal economy. Most of your local franchise-type grocery stores are, in fact, owned either by foreign nationals or by dual foreign and South African nationals of Portuguese, Greek and

German descent. These shops are rarely attacked. The shops that are attacked in communities are the small neighbourhood 'tuckshops' known as 'spaza shops' owned by Somali and Ethiopian nationals. This is happening because of that history of apartheid and dispossession, because the ways in which we regard society have unfortunately been tainted by a history in which one race was privileged.

This is illustrated, at the moment, by the discourse around the white Afrikaners who have been granted refugee status in the US at a time when the US has frozen all other refugee pathways. Because, for South African nationals, the question is: 'How can the most privileged be the ones who are getting refugee status?' Because white wealth is presumed. So you almost have to prove that you're disadvantaged as a white person in South Africa, but you don't have to prove that you're disadvantaged as a black national. But then, that is where the challenge and the contestation come in within communities saying, 'How are you able to access services, health, education and other forms of service delivery when I, as a South African national, am struggling to get treatment, struggling to get my children into school and unable to open a business? It must be because of something other than your own hard work.'

“The decision by the US to roll back a number of its refugee resettlement arrangements, but make an exemption for Afrikaners out of South Africa is an attempt at reframing how we look at refugee protections – where the decision to protect is informed by one's own interest, rather than by the need for protection of refugee communities. That in itself erodes the very foundation of conventions intended to ensure the protection of people considered most vulnerable because they're fleeing persecution, forms of conflict and so forth.”

Arguably, the Refugee Convention is being quite weakened by government action and activities around the world. I wondered if you can imagine a time when it's so weakened that it would need to be reframed and, if it was reframed, what are the risks and the opportunities of that?

That's a difficult question because, for example, the decision by the US to roll back a number of its refugee resettlement arrangements but make an exemption for Afrikaners out of South Africa is an attempt at reframing how we look at refugee protections – where the decision to protect is informed by one's own interest, rather than

by the need for protection of refugee communities. That in itself erodes the very foundation of conventions intended to ensure the protection of people considered most vulnerable because they're fleeing persecution, forms of conflict and so forth.

Will we see, in this geopolitical moment, amendments to the refugee system? I don't think so because I don't think there is sufficient consensus among countries to even consider revising particular texts – not only on refugee protection, mind, but also on regular movement. We've seen this with countries making very little reference whatsoever to both the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees. I think that, if there was any effort to amend right now, it would in fact undermine the protections that we've had for close to 80 years. It would reduce and restrict the criteria for people to even be considered asylum seekers, let alone be granted refugee status. To phrase this notion in a more positive way, I'd prefer to say the current framework is a good framework that ensures protections for multiple categories of people, rather than a phrasing that suggests narrowing it down in any way. We can't and shouldn't allow any dilution.

What steps do you think need to be taken to ensure people displaced by climate receive adequate protection under international law? And, given the potential numbers that might be involved, is this viable?

A lot of the research that we've done at the ISS, but also coming from other organisations, shows that people who are displaced as a result of climate impacts often list climate among a basket of reasons that triggered them to move. So you find, for example, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin are regions which have been affected by climate change. These include the reduction in the size of the Lake Chad Basin and the increase in drought-like conditions with cycles of heavy rains resulting in flooding.

And yet most of the community has stayed put. What has often led to some people starting to move has been a combination of climate change, its direct impact on their livelihoods and the existence of conflict. So my response here would be that, yes, we have to be very clear that there are people for whom there is no choice but to move because the living conditions have become near-impossible for them. Do we need to define a new and special category that fits into this? I would argue that this may only apply to certain Pacific Island nations in which the very existence of their countries is directly impacted. But it may not extend to, for example, people that are displaced in countries like Mozambique and Malawi as a result of constant cycles of cyclonic activities because, when asked for their reasons for moving, climate is oftentimes third, if not fourth, among their mobility drivers, while the primary reason is livelihoods. For now, then, I would argue that there

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needs to be almost a separate legal mechanism that recognises this particular vulnerability.

“We are also facing an immobility crisis, where people remain because they can’t afford to move. When you look at how much people are paying to relocate legally or to be transported irregularly and smuggled across borders, the majority of them, particularly in Africa, can’t afford that.”

The final point I did want to make, which is one that is often under-discussed, is that we are also facing an immobility crisis, where people remain because they can’t afford to move. When you look at how much people are paying to relocate legally or to be transported irregularly and smuggled across borders, the majority of them, particularly in Africa, can’t afford that. In areas affected by climate, the language used has often been a language of resilience. But when you speak to rural communities, as we recently did whilst conducting some interviews in Malawi about whether or not they choose to stay, their answers actually tell you that it’s not that they are resilient, it’s that they cannot afford to move. So, if you don’t have the necessary tools to address development challenges, socio-economic inequality, as well as the triggers of conflict, you might find that people don’t move, not because they don’t want to, but because they simply cannot do so. They also recognise that, if they could, they would be moving into communities which are increasingly hostile to migrants, so they don’t want to relocate when they know that this could be putting their family at greater risk.

“If you don’t have the necessary tools to address development challenges, socio-economic inequality, as well as the triggers of conflict, you might find that people don’t move not because they don’t want to, but because they simply cannot do so.”

You have said that, in terms of migration, the world needs a paradigm shift if it’s to meet present and especially future challenges. Can you please elaborate?

Yes. What we have to face and what’s to come is on two fronts. The one is what you speak about, which is climate. I live in Southern Africa. Here, temperature increases are the highest, with summer periods getting increasingly longer and winters getting increasingly colder across the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. The second challenge is that, by 2050, Sub-Saharan Africa

will have almost doubled its current population. We’re looking at 2.4 billion people, right? Where are we going to go?

Cities in Sub-Saharan Africa – particularly coastal cities, ironically – are becoming increasingly overpopulated. People are moving to the places where they think they will be able to get more economic opportunities, even as sea levels rise. So, what kind of impact will this have for Lagos, for example, which is already a highly densely populated city to begin with, or Dar es Salaam on the eastern coast? How are we thinking and planning for this future? Unfortunately, we are currently in a space where there’s an increase in climate change denialism, even as I’ve been speaking to people in Europe who, for the first time in their lives, experienced temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius. You only need to speak to people anecdotally to recognise that this is not a conversation for the future. This is a conversation that we need to be having now. And if we wait for 10, 15, 20 years, I don’t think we will be able to manage the number of people impacted, those who can’t move and those who are displaced.

I would also like to make one final point. At the recent Berlin Climate Mobility Forum, a number of the ministers from the island nations of Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Fiji and the Maldives raised alarm on the urgency to act. For them, this is not just a planning issue. For them, this is an existential issue around whether or not their countries will even exist given the sea level rise, and which countries will be able to absorb their populations. We need to have mechanisms in place which deal with the level of displacement which could come as a result of rising sea levels and cyclonic activities.

Overall, in terms of migration outlook, do you have a sense of pessimism or are you optimistic?

I think we’ve got so many challenges, some of which have a direct impact on how we deal with questions of migration. We’re not in a great moment, I can’t spin this. It’s not looking good and I’m certainly not optimistic.

DR Congo's endless war: how protracted conflicts impact mixed migration dynamics in 2025

The prolonged conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has had, and continues to have, profound impacts on mixed migration in the region, leading to instability and violence, and exacerbating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

In 2024 and 2025 the conflict intensified and is now considered the main cause of the DRC's current displacement crisis, with almost 8 million IDPs. By the end of 2024 about 7.8 million people were living in internal displacement and over 1.1 million Congolese were refugees or asylum seekers in neighbouring countries.¹ At least 940,000 people were newly displaced inside DRC in the first months of 2024. In early 2025, escalations around North and South Kivu triggered further mass movements of approximately 4 million people in those two provinces alone.²

The DRC conflict: historical context and latest developments

The current conflict in the region emerged from the First and Second Congo Wars (1996-2003) – the latter of which was considered by some to be one of the deadliest conflicts since the Second World War – and the creation of a range of armed groups (FDLR, ADF and Mai-Mai) who kept the conflict going for decades, particularly in the eastern part of the country.³ These protracted periods of war generated large-scale displacement and cross-border migration, which have worsened in the past 12 months.⁴

At the beginning of 2025, groups led by the M23 rebels – a militant faction that first emerged in the early 2000s

and has recently experienced a resurgence – escalated fighting against the Congolese forces, taking the city of Goma in the eastern part of the country. During the fall of Goma, hundreds of people were killed and thousands more were displaced.⁵ Crucially, M23 received – and continues to receive – significant support from Rwanda, despite the country's constant denials.⁶ In fact, Rwanda's role in these wars has been central from the beginning.⁷ After the genocide in 1994, Rwanda invaded the DRC – known at the time as Zaire – with the aim of pursuing Hutu genocidaires who had fled across the border, triggering the First Congo War.⁸ Rwanda was also deeply involved in the Second Congo War, both militarily and economically, with the country's elites accused of profiting from Congolese minerals. Today, Rwanda remains closely tied to the conflict in eastern Congo through its backing of M23 rebels, in a quest to access strategic minerals such as gold and coltan – something that is widely seen as a key driver of the country's continuous involvement.⁹

Amidst all of this, Rwanda cooperates with European countries and is willing to take their rejected asylum seekers and refugees. These intentions were made clear when the country agreed to the so-called UK-Rwanda deal as well as earlier, similar plans with Denmark. Currently, Rwanda is also in talks with the US to receive deported migrants. While, on one side, Rwanda plays a significant role in driving mass displacement in the region, it also positions itself as being a cooperative partner on migration externalisation while remaining a big recipient of foreign aid. The country's position can be seen as simultaneously cynical and practical, but the question remains: is Rwanda playing aid donors at their own game or is it strategically optimising realpolitik for its own benefit?

- 1 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR and partners urgently seek funding as Congolese refugee numbers soar](#); Also Uebersax, D. (2024) [M23 conflict caused nearly 3 out of every 4 displacements in the DRC this year](#). IDMC.
- 2 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR and partners urgently seek funding as Congolese refugee numbers soar](#).
- 3 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (n.d.) [Democratic Republic Of The Congo](#).
- 4 Global Conflict Tracker (2025) [Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#).
- 5 Global Conflict Tracker (2025) [Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#).
- 6 Blanshe, M. (2025) [UN experts cast blame on Rwanda and Uganda. What are they doing in DRC?](#) Al Jazeera.
- 7 History Rise (2024) [Rwanda's Involvement in the Congo Wars: Historical Motives, Actors, and Lasting Impact](#).
- 8 Lawal, S. (2025) ['People need a break' DRC conflict reignites dark memories of Congo wars](#). Aljazeera..
- 9 Pronczuk, M. (2025) [UN experts say Rwanda supported rebels in Congo and smuggled minerals at 'unprecedented levels'](#). AP News.

Impact on mixed migration dynamics

The conflict in the DRC is impacting the migration dynamics of different groups. The IDP figures are continually increasing – currently, they number close to a staggering 8 million people – with new reports of large numbers of displaced people every month.¹⁰

Cross-border migration of displaced Congolese into Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania, and further into South Africa and Zambia is also rising, with host countries facing overcrowded refugee camps that lack basic facilities. The numbers of refugees and asylum seekers have increased, with the DRC maintaining its position as one of the top 10 countries of origin for refugees globally.¹¹ As of 2025, over 1.1 million Congolese sought refuge across Africa, especially in neighbouring Burundi (90,543), Uganda (575,961) and Tanzania (85,268).¹² Burundi, in particular, saw unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers from the DRC between February and March 2025, with more than 63,000 people crossing its border.¹³ In February 2025, an offensive in Uvira led to further displacement, with up to 15,000 civilians fleeing to Burundi and straining the country's transit systems for asylum seekers.¹⁴

The recent resurgence of M23 has also generated new displacement, particularly after the capture of the cities of Goma and Bukavu. Since the beginning of 2025, approximately 7,000 people have been killed due to M23's advances, with a further 45,000 left without shelter after the destruction of 90 camps. By early February 2025, more than 700,000 people were displaced within Goma alone.

The conflict has also created a fertile ground for exploitative practices such as smuggling, forced labour and human trafficking, which have reportedly become rife.¹⁵ Internally displaced women, children and artisanal miners are among some of the most at-risk groups, coerced by armed groups and criminal networks into labour in illegal mines, domestic work or sexual exploitation, both within the DRC and across neighbouring countries such

as Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. UNICEF reported nearly 600 cases of rape in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Goma, highlighting the heightened threats of sexual and gender-based violence faced by women and children in these displacement settings.¹⁶

Conflict-driven mixed migration: potential future outlook

Both past and present conflicts in the DRC significantly affect mixed migration dynamics, causing internal displacement and cross-border migration, with the total numbers of IDPs and refugees skyrocketing. Unless local and global actors intervene, the crisis is likely to endure and could continue to worsen. The seemingly unending nature of DRC's crises makes the country easy to ignore, with the danger it could fall out of the international news headlines. Indeed, in 2025, the two conflicts most noticeably missing from news coverage and the geopolitical agenda are the conflicts in Sudan and DRC. Largely, this is because both global attention and funding have been redirected towards higher-profile situations, such as the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East.¹⁷

Substantial evidence showed that Rwanda had sent between 7,000 and 12,000 troops into eastern Congo to support M23 and UN experts also documented direct Rwandan military engagement in Congolese territory, including troop deployment and command control over the rebels' operations.¹⁸

Despite its involvement in the conflict in DRC, Rwanda has faced relatively limited international pressure, in part due to the Tutsi genocide.¹⁹ Some analysts have drawn a comparison to Israel, noting that both countries leverage historical traumas to neutralise opposition and carry out violent offensives abroad, often without consequence.²⁰ In the case of Rwanda, this lack of foreign intervention allows it to maintain solid international aid and diplomatic ties – particularly, with the UK and the US – even while

10 Reliefweb (2025) [UNICEF DR Congo Humanitarian Situation Report No. 3 \(Upsurge in Conflict\), 15 April 2025](#).

11 Concern USA (2024) [The largest refugee crises to know in 2025](#).

12 UNHCR (2025) [Refugees and asylum seekers from DRC](#).

13 Le Poidevin, O. (2025) [Congo refugees pour into Burundi, conditions dire, says UN](#). Reuters.

14 Binnur Donmez, B. (2025) [Up to 15,000 people arrive in Burundi within days amid escalating violence in Congo: UN refugee agency](#). AA.

15 USDOS – US Department of State (2024) [2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Democratic Republic of the Congo](#).

16 de Kerros, T. and Kane, C. (2025) [Fighting in the DRC sparks a surge of sexual violence](#). Le Monde.

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effectively acting as one of the main drivers of conflict and displacement in the DRC.²¹

However, in late June 2025, international media were reporting that officials from Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo signed a peace agreement in the White House, aiming to end a complex and long-running conflict.

The peace deal, brokered by the US, includes American access to critical minerals in the DRC, leading some to speculate whether the deal will hold and whether it will actually reduce fighting.²²

Adding to the already dramatic context of the conflict, climate-related stressors and the potential security vacuum left by the gradual and ongoing withdrawal of MONUSCO – the UN's peacekeeping operation in the DRC – pose further challenges to the civilian population, possibly becoming additional migration drivers.²³ Furthermore, if East African host countries – whose services and infrastructure are already feeling the strain of the large number of incoming Congolese refugees – choose to close their borders or implement more restrictive policies, southward migration might increase towards an increasingly intolerant South Africa, where Congolese will not be welcome and are likely to face discrimination through xenophobia and economic exclusion.²⁴

South Africa already hosts a sizeable Congolese community: by late 2024, approximately 163,000 Congolese migrants, refugees and asylum seekers were living in the country, a number which rose to around 171,000 by mid-2025.²⁵ Of these, the majority are young, well-educated men who routinely face unemployment or informal, poorly paid work. Highlighting the precariousness of the Congolese community in South Africa, too, is the fact that only about 45,000 Congolese migrants are formally recognised as refugees, leaving tens of thousands more in limbo.²⁶

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Stuck in limbo – a bleak future for Sudanese refugees in Kenya

“Everything was gone. At that moment, we chose to leave.”

I'm a 28-year-old man from Darfur and I've lived in the Kakuma 1 Refugee Camp in Kenya since 2005. I left Sudan as a young boy because of the Janjaweed invasion. One morning, the Janjaweed attacked our unarmed village and committed horrific acts: looting everything, burning down homes, destroying property and carrying out violence, including rape and killings. That day, I had gone to play football with other boys nearby. While we were away, one of the boys came running to warn us that the Janjaweed were raiding our village. We quickly hid until it was safe to return. When we went back to the village, what we saw was unimaginable. Almost everyone was dead. Houses were burnt to the ground. Everything was gone. At that moment, we chose to leave.

I followed a group of boys who were also fleeing. I felt scared and kept to myself for most of the journey. When we arrived in Nyala, some boys stayed behind and the rest of us continued on. We sneaked onto a cargo train, as we had no money for transportation. We hid among the goods and travelled all the way to Khartoum. In Khartoum, we split up again, and I decided to go to the camps with the older boys. When we arrived in Kauda, after travelling and sleeping rough for days, we were welcomed and given support by a UN organisation. They told us we could relocate to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. We had no choice, so we agreed.

“I was able to access education in Kakuma... and now hold a diploma in social work”

Currently, I am a registered refugee. When I first came to Kakuma, I was grouped with three other boys as we were all under 18. After turning 18, I went through several interviews with UNHCR and the Government of Kenya. After seven years, in 2017, I was issued an Alien ID. Then I was able to access education in Kakuma. I continued my studies here and now hold a Diploma in Social Work. Receiving my Alien ID allowed me greater freedom of movement and made me eligible for resettlement opportunities. Now I work with an international organization as an auxiliary nurse.

In Kakuma, movement outside the camp is highly restricted. I have a friend who was smuggled out for about KES 55,000 (approximately, USD 425). Refugees need a special pass to leave the camp, otherwise they risk arrest by authorities. I left the camp for the first time in December 2024, after nearly 20 years, when I was invited through an organisation to attend a conference on Sudan in Nairobi.

In the camp, many children go missing and are never found, and women disappear and are often discovered later in Sudan, as part of forced marriages. There are also major security concerns in the camp. The host community also faces extreme hardship, which leads to frequent looting and attacks. Many of the boys I arrived with felt that life in the camp was too hard, so they chose other paths or went back to Sudan. Only one of the boys, my cousin, still lives in the camp.

“I found a job abroad...but when Trump returned to power the company withdrew their offer.”

In 2017, Sudan was added to the list of countries affected by Trump's travel ban, which meant that all resettlement cases involving Sudanese nationals were placed on hold. It was devastating. They say my case is “pending”, but I believe it's been “sold out”: people with money may have stolen or taken over my case, using their influence to relocate. Stuck in this uncertain situation, remaining in Kakuma was my only option. In 2023, I found a job abroad but, unfortunately, when Trump returned to power the company withdrew their offer. I'm open to resettlement in any first-world country, preferably the United States. If I can secure a work permit, I would even consider relocating within Kenya.

“Living under this pressure is stressful...I'm stuck in limbo.”

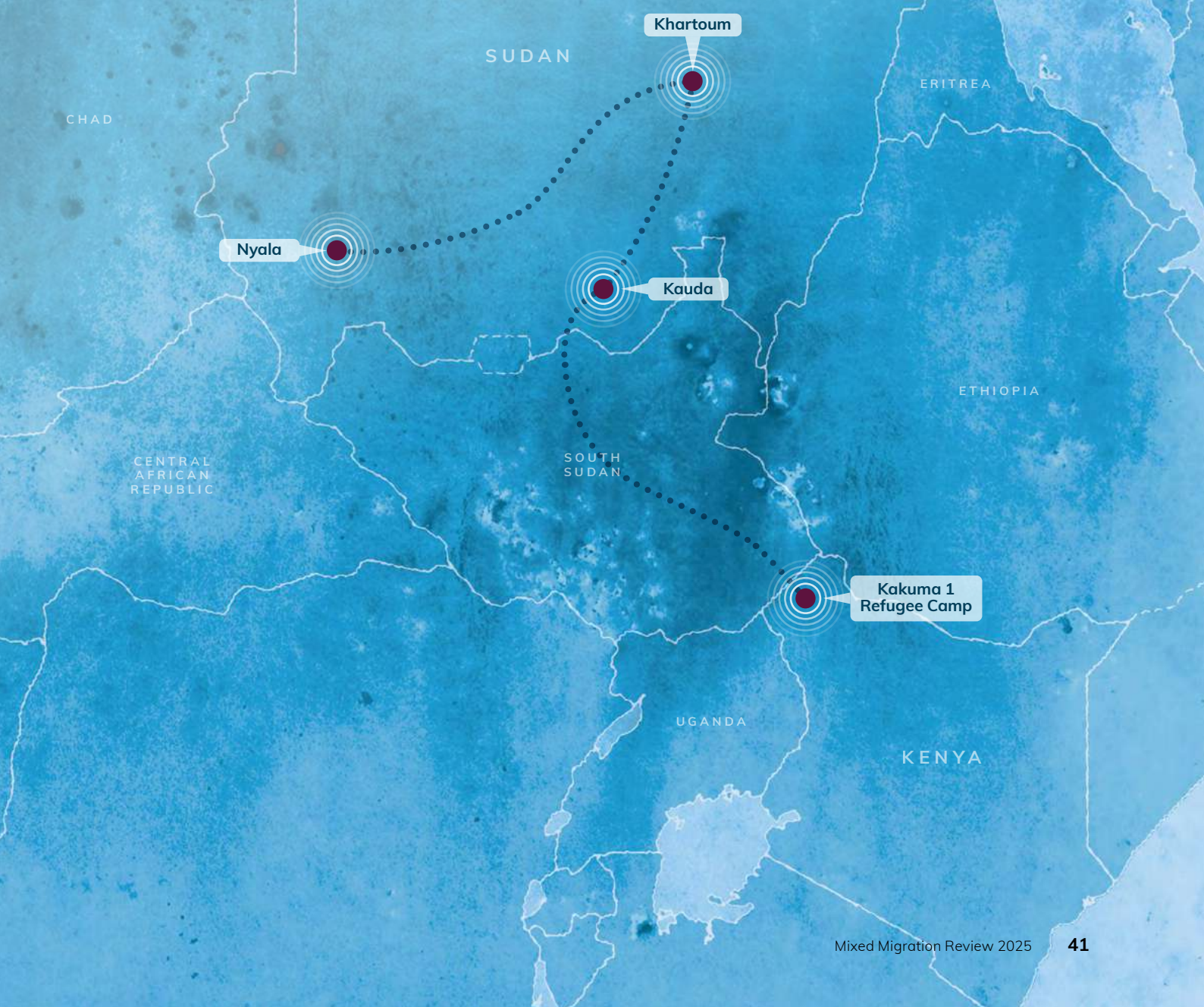
I miss my family deeply. My cousin is the only family member I still have contact with, and I don't even know if we have any other relatives left in Sudan. Living in this camp has been extremely challenging. Food is a daily struggle and the health sector is in a terrible state. Only basic treatment is available. My housing situation is also poor. My home is made of mud and iron sheets. UNHCR no longer provides housing materials, so we have to build and maintain our homes ourselves. Recently, my house cracked due to heavy rains. During the rainy season, rivers overflow into the community, forcing people to leave their homes and seek shelter elsewhere. We receive water assistance and food from organisations, and protection from the Kenyan police, though their support is unreliable.

Living under this pressure is stressful. It's almost impossible to save anything. I would like to continue my education but don't have the money for that. I feel like time is passing but I'm stuck in limbo. I've had to start rationing meals and now only eat two times a day.

“Resettlement has become harder than ever... the migration and resettlement process must become fairer.”

The future outlook is bleak. Resettlement has become harder than ever. The United States and Germany have suspended new refugee cases and there's increasing talk of integration instead of resettlement. In Kalobeyei, for example, integration is already being practised, and people there are no longer recognised as refugees. Refugees oppose reintegration because it forces us to accept Kenyan citizenship, which closes the door to international resettlement. Many of us came here seeking safety and the hope of resettling to a more stable country abroad. Even Kenyan citizens themselves are struggling with limited employment opportunities and means of survival! And with most Kenyans being highly educated and experienced, getting into the job market would be very difficult for refugees.

The migration and resettlement process must become fairer. Organizations like UNHCR need to improve the services they offer to refugees and ensure that opportunities are distributed equitably and transparently, prioritising those who have waited the longest.





Interview

Protecting people, not borders – advocacy, activism and the recognition of those who died at sea

Tens of thousands of migrants have died at sea in the last decade, with many others still missing. Identifying bodies, providing families with long-awaited answers and holding governments and authorities to account is the mission of *Comitato 3 Ottobre*, as **Tareke Brhane**, its president, explains.

Tareke Brhane, originally from Eritrea and now an Italian citizen, is the president of the Comitato 3 Ottobre and has dedicated his life to advocating for the rights of migrants and commemorating those who died at sea. His efforts led to the creation of the Day of Remembrance and Reception, officially recognised in Italy, and a campaign for a European DNA database to identify migrant victims.

Which country do you come from originally?

I come from Eritrea. When I was 16, my dream was to be a pilot. At school I was very good at science and math, but then I lost everything. My mother, she really risked a lot to get me to a safe place outside Eritrea. I lost her during the trip because the journey was so expensive and not a lot of people have the opportunity to do this trip. She chose to get me out because it was time for me to go to military service. She had already lost my brother through conscription into the army and never heard from him again and she had lost my father – he died when I was a child. And so she ran the risk of never seeing me again by deciding to get me out. And we paid a very high price, mentally, physically, financially, everything. She decided to let me go alone. At the time I didn't understand why. I was so angry with her because I was only 16. I said, 'Why let me go? Mother, I'm going to die.

Why leave me alone?' She only smiled strongly and said, 'No, don't worry.' I was really angry with her because we had never been apart. And then, after long years, I understood why she did it: because there wasn't enough money, so she decided to sacrifice herself. The little she had, she gave to me. But when you're a child, you don't understand these things. Then, when I got to Italy in the end, I searched for her and found out that she had died. She never saw a better life, she was never even able to say goodbye. I'm so sad that I didn't even get to say thank you. She gave me a new life.

When did you cross the Mediterranean? Please tell us about the trip and set the scene.

I attempted the crossing twice. The first time, I was 18 or 19 years old. I spent more than five days at sea and I was pushed back by the Maltese coastguard. There

were about 270 people in the boat. There were also around 20 children, ranging from babies to eight-year-olds. The majority of the people were men like me and they pushed us back using both Libyan and Maltese coastguards – not giving any possibility to talk or ask for asylum. Then, the police apprehended us when we got to Libya. They were rough with us. They beat everybody up and drove us to a prison in Tripoli. In that prison, there were more than 2,000 people in the same area. There was no space for any of us to even sleep. After that they took us to Misrata and then we were taken further south to the worst prison I've ever seen in my life.

So I spent more than four years moving from one prison to another. And then, at last, in 2005 I finally managed to get a place on a second boat. Even on this second attempt, we got lost at sea and nobody wanted to rescue us. By law, if you rescue someone, the Italian government is going to punish them with fines from EUR 5,000 to 10,000, or accuse them of trafficking, so everyone was afraid of rescuing migrants at sea. We saw ships pass and there were many on the Mediterranean at that time, but they refused to call rescue and help us. So, all of us agreed to cause a deliberate accident to make the other boats rescue us. We started a fire on our boat. There were about 280 or 290 people on board and we eventually got rescued.

Twenty years ago, the treatment in Libya was already very tough for migrants, right?

Yes, it was tough for us, but it got much harder in recent years. Perhaps in the last year or so the treatment hasn't been so bad, but before it was very hard. I saw it with my own eyes. Imagine that, of any girls who pass through Libya, many are raped and many become pregnant. Some Libyan men would use the girls like toys. Any girls and women, from the age of eight or even as young as six. They would do what they wanted with them in groups of three or five or more men. I was there for some years, I saw everything. That's why most women coming from Libya either came with babies or children or were pregnant. They didn't know who the fathers were and they couldn't even ask for help because sometimes they wouldn't be accepted by their own community. Sometimes they would treat them like criminals, asking them, 'Why don't you know who the father is?' But how could they know? We knew it wasn't another migrant – it was a Libyan.

One day, there will be regime change in Eritrea. But how do you think it will happen?

I really don't know. It's complicated because a lot of people have left Eritrea and there are a lot of problems with land rights and ownership because some houses and land have been taken over by other people. So, when there is a change of government, there will be so many disputes and fights with people looking to get back their father's land or their grandfather's

land. Others have purchased houses and land from the government, but the government itself had stolen it originally so you can imagine the disputes that will erupt. There might even be a civil war, like in Libya after Gaddafi was killed. Gaddafi died in 2011 and there's still conflict today – people are still killing each other and the country is run by five different governments.

“Imagine that, for the last 20 years, one of the biggest groups of refugees in Europe or anywhere else in the world is from Eritrea. And yet I never hear any government talk about the government of Eritrea. They never even discuss the situation and, instead, they give you asylum automatically. Even the political opposition to the government there is invisible and silent.”

What, if anything, can the international community do to help the situation in Eritrea?

They can do a lot, but nobody talks about Eritrea and forcing a regime change. Imagine that, for the last 20 years, one of the biggest groups of refugees in Europe or anywhere else in the world is from Eritrea. And yet I never hear any government talk about the government of Eritrea. They never even discuss the situation and, instead, they give you asylum automatically. Even the political opposition to the government there is invisible and silent. I don't know why, but there's just silence. Journalists maybe do some research and write articles, but only from outside the country. In terms of real activism, though, there is nothing, mainly because a lot of them are afraid. They are afraid because if they are Eritrean, they have family still there. If they speak out, they and their family might get into big trouble. I remember a guy who went every day to the court gates here in Italy. He was continually shouting and crying, crying, crying. The police came and took him away and they called me to ask me to translate. The man's story was that he was in the same boat with his wife and she died during the trip, and he needed the certificate to prove she died in order to send it back to Eritrea. The trouble was, his wife's family had all been arrested and thrown in prison and wouldn't be released as a punishment because the wife left Eritrea and was not paying the 3 percent tax that the government people demand from us migrants. But the wife had died and so he needed the certificate to get the family to be released and that's why he was crying so much. But the Italian court cannot give a certificate without evidence. Imagine. Those people are probably still in prison today. Eritreans outside of the country are very frightened and don't feel safe. They can get to you directly or sometimes indirectly through the Eritrean

community abroad... they have many ways. Even me – I don't feel safe.

“ So many died in the Mediterranean Sea. I started taking notes and counting deaths 10 years ago, and I've now reached 40,000 people. Imagine that. Who are they? Who are we going to ask for justice for them? I'm just fighting to identify a single boy. Not to give him life back, just to give him a name. ”

You have a slogan that there's been over 10 years of indifference since the 2013 Lampedusa wreck that killed almost 400 migrants. You speak of the 'invisible deaths'.

And yet, at the political level and the media level, there's so much attention given to migration issues some people might say the profile is too high already, especially in Italy. While everyone is aware to some degree, it still feels like an invisible fact. It's like what's happening now in Sudan. We spend a lot of time talking about China, talking about Gaza, but it's as if those who die at sea didn't exist. When they find one body in the Mediterranean, all the radio and TV talk about it a bit but when it's big numbers like 20, 30 or 40 migrant bodies, or even the 520 people who were victims in the Lampedusa capsized, then there's virtually no talk. So many died in the Mediterranean Sea. I started taking notes and counting deaths 10 years ago, and I've now reached 40,000 people. Imagine that. Who are they? Who are we going to ask for justice for them? I'm just fighting to identify a single boy. Not to give him life back, just to give him a name. The way we treat migrants who cross the sea is the same, whether they are alive or dead.

“ The authorities say it's not necessary to bring the bodies [out of the shipwreck]. Meanwhile, the mothers are waiting year in and year out without having peace. ”

I've been reading about your DNA project. It's very compassionate and very impressive, but the progress is very, very slow.

I'm making a new legal proposal to the European Parliament. I'm even going to the Council of Europe. I do my best, but the progress of identifying bodies is very, very slow. At the same time, we have a lot of families and especially mothers who are continually looking for their sons, for their children, their wives, their brothers. People are still waiting, waiting, waiting. Imagine that, when you hear of any accidents in the Mediterranean,

a huge percentage of the bodies are not taken back to where they came from, even when the authorities know where the wreck is and that there are still people trapped inside. They mostly remain in the sea. They become food for fish. The authorities say it's not necessary to bring out the bodies. Meanwhile, the mothers are waiting year in and year out without having peace. Even when a body washes up, they're not identified. They just bring the box. They take one or two photos and close it, and without any more details than whether it was a female or a male, they give it a number and put it down in the ground. They just bury the body without having all the information that the DNA can give you.

Do you feel there are double standards operating in the treatment of migrants and refugees?

I really have difficulty understanding the way policy is made. Look at the treatment of those coming from Ukraine. All the European countries helped them with support, money and everything. Even the way mass media treats them is very positive, but then with others it is very different. We have to be honest that this is double standards. For Ukraine, they have opened the doors. They can choose to go to Italy, the UK or Germany, anywhere they want, and of course they are always called refugees. At the same time, people who come from Syria, Afghanistan or Sudan are connected with negative aspects and not often called refugees: they are seen as illegal migrants. People think: 'They are black! They are going to take our jobs! They are going to kill us!' And, of course, the politicians keep these ideas alive because, in some cases, they cannot even be elected unless they say these things.

“ We have to be honest that this is double standards. For Ukraine, they have opened the doors. They can even choose to go to Italy, the UK or Germany, anywhere they want, and, of course, they are always called refugees. At the same time, people who come from Syria, Afghanistan or Sudan are connected with negative aspects and not often called refugees: they are seen as illegal migrants. ”

You mean they're using immigration issues cynically?

Yes, of course, they use it to get votes – it's so easy. It's not so easy for them to talk about the economy, to talk about health care, to talk about jobs or to talk about the environment. Talking about immigration, though, is easy, because you're making people afraid. They just go with propaganda and misinformation. The people landing in Lampedusa from Libya are a small number, but people coming from Ukraine are a far bigger amount.

Do you believe in open borders? Do you think there should be open borders?

One of my slogans is we need to protect people, not borders. When we consider migrants and refugees, we are talking about people who don't have a choice. They move because they have to. For the majority of people who come, including me, there's no alternative. Imagine those people coming from Syria or from Sudan: they are dying in their home countries. What are we doing for those people if we say we don't want them to come to Europe? The numbers that need help are increasing every year. We can't just leave them. Who is going to support all these people?

“ I think that, at a very minimum, we should support people who are in difficulty using resources just as we are helping those coming from Ukraine. People are dying without limit. We cannot just abandon them. ”

You could say, why should it be the responsibility of another country to look after people from a country that cannot organise itself better? But remember, most people don't have the ability to fight or oppose their home governments. I think that, at a very minimum, we should support people who are in difficulty using resources just as we are helping those coming from Ukraine. People are dying without limit. We cannot just abandon them.

What do you think will happen with climate change and continuing conflict around the world? Presumably, more migrants and refugees will need help.

Yes. Of course, the numbers will increase, and more people will be displaced. But most governments are ignoring the situation. They do accept the inevitable truth about these kinds of movements but they ignore it completely. In terms of climate change, we see it every day. These countries are dry and getting dryer. The numbers coming now are manageable, but the numbers coming in the future may be unmanageable, so it's important for governments to accept the issues and find a way to respond. Even now, a lot of people don't have anything because of climate change, and they have no

“ I know I cannot change today. I cannot change yesterday, but I'm going to shift tomorrow. Maybe I need 20,000 people or maybe I just need five people to make some changes. It's the only thing that I do and that motivates me. ”

means to live. Of course, they will have to move and yet the world is not focused on this, is not helping them.

What are you planning for the future, personally?

While I'm alive, I just want to do my best. I don't want to see people suffering. I want to use my life going from place to place, advocating and talking with people, especially young people and students. I talk a lot. I've met and talked to more than 20,000 students from all kinds of countries. I know I cannot change today. I cannot change yesterday, but I'm going to shift tomorrow. Maybe I need 20,000 people or maybe I just need five people to make some changes. It's the only thing that I do and that motivates me. Sometimes you feel you're alone because it's not so easy at this time to advocate on these issues, to talk about migration and discuss with people. Propaganda tells people to see migrants as criminals but, in fact, it's all about people suffering.

“ Propaganda tells people to see migrants as criminals but, in fact, it's all about people suffering. ”

The Middle East

Overview

Peter Grant

Since the launch of Israel's military offensive in Gaza in October 2023, almost the entirety of the latter's population of 2 million has been repeatedly displaced by the fighting. Alongside the rising death toll and what the World Health Organisation has described as manmade mass starvation,¹ the widespread destruction of housing, infrastructure and farmland will further complicate the possibility of return to areas that have effectively been rendered uninhabitable. Observers have suggested that this is a deliberate strategy on the part of the Israeli government to ethnically cleanse Gaza for the foreseeable future.² Besides the prospect of continued displacement, there are also concerns that the impacts could extend across the entire region, particularly as Israel's military operations have expanded to include Iran, Syria, southern Lebanon and Yemen. Already the conflict has led to complex and overlapping movements of people, including the displacement of tens of thousands of Lebanese into Syria following the outbreak of fighting in late 2024 and significant internal displacement in Iran in response to Israel's attacks in June 2025.

In Syria, the unexpected fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 has renewed hopes of a resolution to the situation in the country. Though more than 2.6 million refugees and IDPs have been able to return home so far, conditions in the country remain precarious, with a number of incidents of sectarian violence highlighting the challenges ahead. With improved security and stronger governance in place, others may also be able to return – but for many Syrians, particularly members of religious and ethnic minorities, it may still be unsafe to do so. Yemen, meanwhile, remains in crisis, with no end in sight to its decade-long civil conflict.

Crisis in Gaza and the West Bank

On 7 October 2023, Hamas – **Palestine's** nationalist political and military organisation – launched a surprise attack on **Israel** that resulted in the killing of up to 1,200 people and the abduction of 251 others, including children.³ In the aftermath of the attack, which was described as a war crime by the UN, the Israeli government launched a military offensive in **Gaza**, with the stated aim of eliminating Hamas and recovering the hostages. Since then, however, the conflict has evolved into a large-scale displacement crisis that has disproportionately affected Palestinian civilians. By the beginning of September 2025, according to the Palestinian health ministry, 64,321 people had been killed and another 161,583 injured.⁴ However, research suggests that the true death toll in Gaza is much higher than official estimates suggest,⁵ particularly when indirect deaths from hunger or disease are factored in,⁶ with civilians accounting for around four in five fatalities.⁷

A cycle of forced displacement in Gaza

A recurrent feature of the conflict in Gaza has been the mass displacement, in many cases multiple times, of almost the entire civilian population. Israeli military forces have frequently announced evacuation orders shortly before launching offensives in populated areas, leaving residents with 24 hours to move to designated "safe zones" that, in some instances, were subsequently subjected to attacks.⁸ These repeated displacements, while justified by Israel on humanitarian grounds, have been condemned by Human Rights Watch as amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁹ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has similarly described the use of "last-minute displacements" as a "violent tool" of "psychological and physical warfare".¹⁰

1 Christou, W. (2025) [Gaza suffering man-made mass starvation, says WHO chief](#). The Guardian.

2 Wallach, Y. (2025) [Seize Gaza, or make it uninhabitable. That's Netanyahu's plan – and either way he wins](#). The Guardian.

3 Abc News (2025) [Israel confirms Hamas handed over hostages' bodies as Palestinian prisoners released](#).

4 Middle East Eye (2025) [Death toll in Gaza rises to 64,231](#).

5 Khatib, R., McKee, M. and Yusuf, S. (2024) [Counting the dead in Gaza: Difficult but essential](#). The Lancet, 404 (10449), 237-238.

6 Middle East Monitor (2025) [Gaza death toll reaches 84,000 far higher than official counts, new study finds](#).

7 Cockerill, M. G. (2024) [Civilian casualties in Gaza: Israel's claims don't add up](#). AOA; Also Graham-Harrison, E. and Abraham, Y. (2025) [Revealed: Israeli military's own data indicates civilian death rate of 83% in Gaza war](#). The Guardian.

8 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) [Mixed Migration Review 2024](#), pp. 44-46.

9 Human Rights Watch (2024) ["Hopeless, starving, and besieged": Israel's forced displacement of Palestinians in Gaza](#).

10 MSF (2025) [Displacement orders are "psychological and physical warfare" in Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Gaza](#).

Following the collapse of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas on 18 March 2025, hundreds of thousands of civilians (more than 856,000 by 4 September, over the course of less than six months)¹¹ were again displaced, the majority to unsanitary and overcrowded conditions in camps, ruined buildings or open spaces.¹² Alongside this repeated displacement, however, the civilian population is also contending with increasing forced immobility: 86 percent of the Gaza Strip was in Israeli-militarised zones or under displacement orders.¹³ With around 90 percent of housing now damaged or destroyed, the majority of the population are homeless and nowhere in Gaza is safe.¹⁴

Israel's prolonged siege of Gaza has also prevented the entry of food, medicine, fuel and other life-saving essentials in what the World Health Organisation has described as “the deliberate withholding of humanitarian aid”.¹⁵ The blockade – condemned by Amnesty International as a “crime against humanity and violation of international law”¹⁶ and a “systematic and intentional” starvation campaign¹⁷ – has resulted in widespread hunger and malnutrition.¹⁸ The same month, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification determined that famine was taking place in and around Gaza City.¹⁹

In the meantime, UN special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories Francesca Albanese has characterised this repeated pattern of forced displacement as a campaign of ethnic cleansing, with the intention of permanently appropriating Palestinian land.²⁰ The proposal, in July, to establish a so-called humanitarian city on the ruins of Rafah was widely condemned for effectively containing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.²¹ In August, going even further, Israeli authorities announced their plan to take control of Gaza City in its entirety – a move that is expected to displace around 1 million people.²² Earlier in the year, the US administration proposed that, in effect, the Gazan population leave Gaza in order to “clean out”

the strip.²³ This was followed by a suggestion that the US could “take over” and “own” the territory, with its existing residents removed and resettled elsewhere²⁴ (Somalia, Somaliland and Sudan were reportedly among the destinations under consideration).²⁵ Critics argue that these moves would amount to ethnic cleansing.²⁶ The same charge was levelled against plans for the development of a “Gaza Riviera”, circulated in the White House and subsequently leaked, that were criticised as an effort to window-dress mass displacement and ethnic cleansing.²⁷ On 16 September 2025, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory concluded that Israel has committed genocide through killings, starvation and destruction of essential systems, with intent shown by leaders’ statements and actions.²⁸

Land grabs and illegal settlements in the West Bank

In the Israel-occupied West Bank, increasing violence and displacement have been taking place. In the wake of the October 2023 attacks, there was a sharp uptick in the use of deadly force by the Israeli army, with personnel accused of carrying out unlawful killings and denying medical assistance to injured civilians.²⁹ Between October 2023 and June 2025, more than 900 Palestinians were reportedly killed by Israeli forces.³⁰ There has also been a sharp increase in violence by settler groups against Palestinian communities in the West Bank, aided in many cases by Israeli security forces, who either participated in the assaults themselves or failed to intervene.³¹ While attacks by Hamas militants in the West Bank declined in the first months of 2025, extremist violence by settlers rose during the same period, enabled in large part by the widespread granting of impunity for their actions.³²

The modus operandi of these groups is to terrorise Palestinian and Bedouin residents – either through direct violence or by poisoning their water sources, destroying their crops and vandalising their property – into leaving their established settlements before occupying these

11 OCHA (2025) [Humanitarian Situation Update #319: Gaza Strip](#).

12 OCHA (2025) [Humanitarian Situation Update #319: Gaza Strip](#).

13 OCHA (2025) [Humanitarian situation update #300: Gaza Strip](#).

14 International Rescue Committee (2025) [Crisis in Gaza: What to know and how to help](#).

15 WHO (2025) [People in Gaza starving, sick and dying as aid blockade continues](#).

16 Amnesty International (2025) [Israel's blockade of aid into Gaza is a crime against humanity and violation of international law](#).

17 Amnesty International (2025) [Israel's starvation campaign is systematic and intentional – new testimonies from Palestinians in Gaza](#).

18 Chughtai, A. (2025) [Israel starving Gaza: 266 dead from starvation, including 122 children](#). Al Jazeera.

19 Burke, J. and Tantesh, M. A. (2025) [UN-backed experts declare famine in and around Gaza City](#). The Guardian.

20 OHCHR (2025) [“Tragedy foretold and stain on our collective humanity”: Special Rapporteur warns of mass ethnic cleansing in the West Bank](#).

21 Graham-Harrison, E. (2025) [“Humanitarian city” would be concentration camp for Palestinians, says former Israeli PM](#). The Guardian.

22 Tantesh, M. and Tondo, L. (2025) [Israeli plan to displace 1 million Palestinians spreads fear in Gaza](#). The Guardian.

23 Graham-Harrison, E. (2025) [Trump's Gaza proposal rejected by allies and condemned as ethnic cleansing plan](#). The Guardian.

24 Keath, L. (2025) [Trump doubles down on plan to empty Gaza](#). AP.

25 Bassist, R. (2025) [US, Israel looking to resettle Gaza's Palestinians in Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan: Report](#). Al-Monitor.

26 O'Neill, R. (2025) [Trump's plan for 'ethnic cleansing' in Gaza is illegal, says UN investigator](#). Politico.

27 Beaumont, P. and Speri, A. (2025) [Leaked “Gaza Riviera” plan dismissed as ‘insane’ attempt to cover ethnic cleansing](#). The Guardian.

28 United Nations Human Rights Council (2025) [Legal analysis of the conduct of Israel in Gaza pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#).

29 The Guardian (2025) [Israeli forces kill three Palestinians after settlers attack West Bank town](#).

30 The Guardian (2025) [Israeli forces kill three Palestinians after settlers attack West Bank town](#).

31 Human Rights Watch (2024) [West Bank: Israel responsible for rising settler violence](#).

32 Neumann, N. (2025) [Settler violence is turning the West Bank into a tinderbox](#). The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

areas themselves.³³ According to the organisation Kerem Navot, dozens of Palestinian communities have been expelled using these tactics between 2022 and 2024.³⁴ The de facto annexation of more Palestinian land in the West Bank was given a further boost at the end of May 2025, when the Israeli government approved the development of 22 settlements in the territory, including 12 unauthorised settlements that had already been constructed illegally.³⁵ In August, the Israeli government approved the expansion of an existing Israeli settlement into an area known as E1, a move that could render any future two-state solution unviable by physically dividing the West Bank and effectively splitting the territory into two.³⁶ The development has been celebrated by senior Israeli officials, with the finance minister predicting it would “bury the idea of a Palestinian state”.³⁷

Israel has also driven the displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinians through its military operations in the West Bank, destroying homes and vital infrastructure in refugee camps there. Israeli security forces have also prevented former residents of Jenin, Nur Shams and Tulkarem refugee camps from returning to their homes or retrieving their belongings.³⁸ By the end of June, the UN human rights office had issued a statement condemning the escalation in demolitions and forcible transfer of Palestinians in the West Bank, supposedly on the pretext that their areas of residence were needed for military training. In total, between 7 October 2023 and 31 May 2025, it is estimated that 6,463 Palestinians in the West Bank were displaced as a result of the destruction of their homes by Israeli forces. This is in addition to the approximately 40,000 Palestinians who were expelled from refugee camps and more than 2,200 forced from their communities by settler violence or entry restrictions.³⁹

Displacement in the wider region

The implications of the conflict in Gaza are already playing out elsewhere in the region, particularly as Israel's military operations have drawn in other neighbouring countries. Hostilities between Israel and the militant group Hezbollah, based in southern **Lebanon**, escalated from September 2024, when Israel launched repeated

airstrikes in Lebanese territory, including the capital Beirut, leading to widespread displacement in the south of the country.⁴⁰ The subsequent land invasion, launched at the beginning of October, had an even wider impact. By early November, an estimated 1.3 million people had been displaced during the fighting, either internally or into neighbouring countries,⁴¹ including Palestinian refugees who had already suffered displacement multiple times over the past few decades. Other vulnerable groups included migrant workers, with many reportedly abandoned in situ by their employers without food, shelter or documentation.⁴² In addition, 562,000 others – a mix of Syrian (63%) and Lebanese (37%) nationals – crossed the border into Syria.⁴³

By 24 November, the internally displaced population had peaked at around 900,000,⁴⁴ before reducing following the agreement of a ceasefire on 27 November and the return home of hundreds of thousands of IDPs. However, the destruction of housing, the damaged infrastructure and the presence of unexploded ordnance in many areas prevented significant numbers from returning to their homes even once hostilities were formally ended. By the beginning of 2025, a little under 124,000 people were still internally displaced.⁴⁵ Over the two-month period of the conflict, Israel – mirroring tactics it has deployed repeatedly in Gaza – issued 136 separate displacement orders, covering a quarter of Lebanese territory in total. The impacts of these directives were catastrophic, sometimes uprooting entire civilian communities at a time, and were condemned by international organisations as potentially amounting to the crime of forcible transfer.⁴⁶

This was evidenced by the short-lived but devastating outbreak of conflict between Israel and **Iran**, between 13 and 24 June 2025. The fighting began with a pre-emptive missile strike by Israel, with the stated aim of dismantling Iran's nuclear programme, followed by a series of attacks from both sides that nevertheless impacted far more significantly on Iran than Israel: while 28 Israeli casualties were reported,⁴⁷ as many as 935 died in Iran.⁴⁸ The conflict also led to significant internal displacement, as Iranians attempted to leave Tehran and other major cities to escape the bombing, though many were unable

33 Neumann, N. (2025) [Settler violence is turning the West Bank into a tinderbox](#). The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

34 Kerem Navot (2025) [The expulsion on the map](#).

35 Tondo, L. (2025) [Israel confirms plans to create 22 new settlements in occupied West Bank](#). The Guardian.

36 Rahn, W. (2025) [Israel approves controversial West Bank settlement plan](#). DW.

37 Amichay, R. and Cornwell, A. (2025) [Israel's Smotrich launches settlement plan to 'bury' idea of Palestinian state](#). Reuters.

38 Amnesty International (2025) [Israel's destructive West Bank military operation fuels mass forced displacement of Palestinians](#).

39 OHCHR (2025) [UN rights office sounds the alarm over forced displacement in the West Bank](#).

40 Al Jazeera (2025) [The Take: One million in Lebanon are now displaced. Where can they go?](#)

41 OCHA (2024) [Lebanon: Flash Update #41 – Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, as of 4 November 2024](#).

42 Ben Romdhane, W. (2024) [Lebanon's escalating conflict: what are the displacement and migration consequences?](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

43 UNHCR (2024) [UNHCR Syria emergency response brief – 28 November 2024](#).

44 OCHA (2024) [Lebanon: Flash Update #47 – Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, as of 25 November 2024](#).

45 OCHA (2025) [Lebanon: Flash Update #53 – Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, as of 02 January 2025](#).

46 Oxfam and ActionAid (2025) [Israel's forced displacement orders in Lebanon may constitute grave breaches of International Humanitarian Law, say aid agencies](#).

47 Chughtai, A. (2025) [Visualising 12 days of the Israel-Iran conflict](#). Al Jazeera.

48 ABC (2025) [Iran raises death toll from war to 935, won't guarantee safety of nuclear inspectors](#).

to do so as a result of traffic jams and fuel shortages.⁴⁹ While some analysts feared that the war could trigger a major refugee crisis,⁵⁰ in practice, only relatively small numbers of Iranians crossed into neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, Armenia and Iraq.⁵¹ However, in the event of another conflict between the two countries in the near future,⁵² the potential for further displacement remains. In Iran, the war also had the knock-on effect of dramatically escalating the mass expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Afghans on the pretext of national security (for further information see *Keeping track in Asia*, p. 136 and, in detail, Thematic snapshot *Iran's Afghan expulsion surges: bitter and dangerous returns for scapegoated Afghans*, p. 134).

More than 100,000 Palestinians have also been displaced into **Egypt**, the only other country besides Israel that borders with Gaza. The movement of people and goods has been heavily restricted, especially since the closure of the Rafah crossing in 2024 – which briefly reopened in early 2025 before being closed again after Israeli forces took back control of it in March. Besides foreign nationals and medical evacuees, some Palestinians were able to leave in the first months of the conflict, by paying substantial fees of up to USD 5,000 to the Egyptian travel agency Hala.⁵³ Their presence is a sensitive issue for an Egyptian government trying to balance a desire to show solidarity with Gaza's population with a wish to avoid potentially permanent displacement into Egypt and long-term obligations to those already there. While being accommodated in relative safety in housing estates in Cairo, they remain in a legal limbo, unable to access employment, education or health care.⁵⁴ In addition to the everyday material challenges they face, many Palestinians in Egypt are also contending with the effects of the trauma they have experienced first-hand, as well as anxiety about the fate of their loved ones in Gaza.⁵⁵

A new chapter for Syria

The extraordinary fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024, following a rapid offensive by rebel groups across the country, was hailed by the UN Secretary-General as “an historic opportunity for Syrians to build a stable and peaceful future.”⁵⁶ During the conflict, Assad's egregious human rights abuses and ruthless attacks against civilian populations in **Syria** contributed to the displacement of almost half the country's pre-war population.⁵⁷ His ousting has already enabled the return of millions of Syrians who were not able to go back to their homes while he was in control. At the same time, it has also prompted governments in some host countries to push for the return of Syrian refugees, despite continued concerns about whether conditions for doing so are yet conducive or sustainable.

Refugees and IDPs return home

Towards the end of 2024, just before Assad's fall, around 7.2 million Syrians were internally displaced⁵⁸ and another 6 million were living as refugees outside the country, the majority within the region.⁵⁹ Most were unable to return due to insecurity, the destruction of their homes or the fear of persecution by the Assad regime. However, as of 28 August 2025, more than 2.6 million Syrians have been able to return home since the end of the regime: this includes almost 844,000 refugees from neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Türkiye⁶⁰ – preceded by hundreds of thousands of others who were forced back into Syria as a result of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah – as well as more than 1.76 million IDPs who were living predominantly in the northern areas of the country outside Assad's control.⁶¹

49 Frouws, B., Ben Romdhane, W., Vallentine, J. and Forin, R. (2025) [Mixed migration consequences of the war between Israel and Iran](#). MMC.

50 The Economist (2025) [Will the Iran war trigger a refugee crisis?](#)

51 Frouws, B., Ben Romdhane, W., Vallentine, J. and Forin, R. (2025) [Mixed migration consequences of the war between Israel and Iran](#). MMC.

52 Parsi, T. (2025) [The next Israel-Iran war is coming](#). Foreign Policy.

53 van der Merwe, B. and Inez Simon, M. (2025) [The price of freedom: The company making millions from Gaza's misery](#). Sky News.

54 Begum, T. (2024) [“Life has come to a standstill”: the Palestinian refugees struggling to survive in Egypt](#). The Guardian.

55 Hodali, D. (2024) [“Gaza is my heart”: Palestinians struggle with life in Egypt](#). DW.

56 Lennon, C. (2024) [Forging peace in Syria: Great opportunities, grave risks](#). UN News.

57 Sanadiki, O. (2025) [850,000 Syrian refugees have returned home since Assad's fall, UN says](#). PBS NEWS.

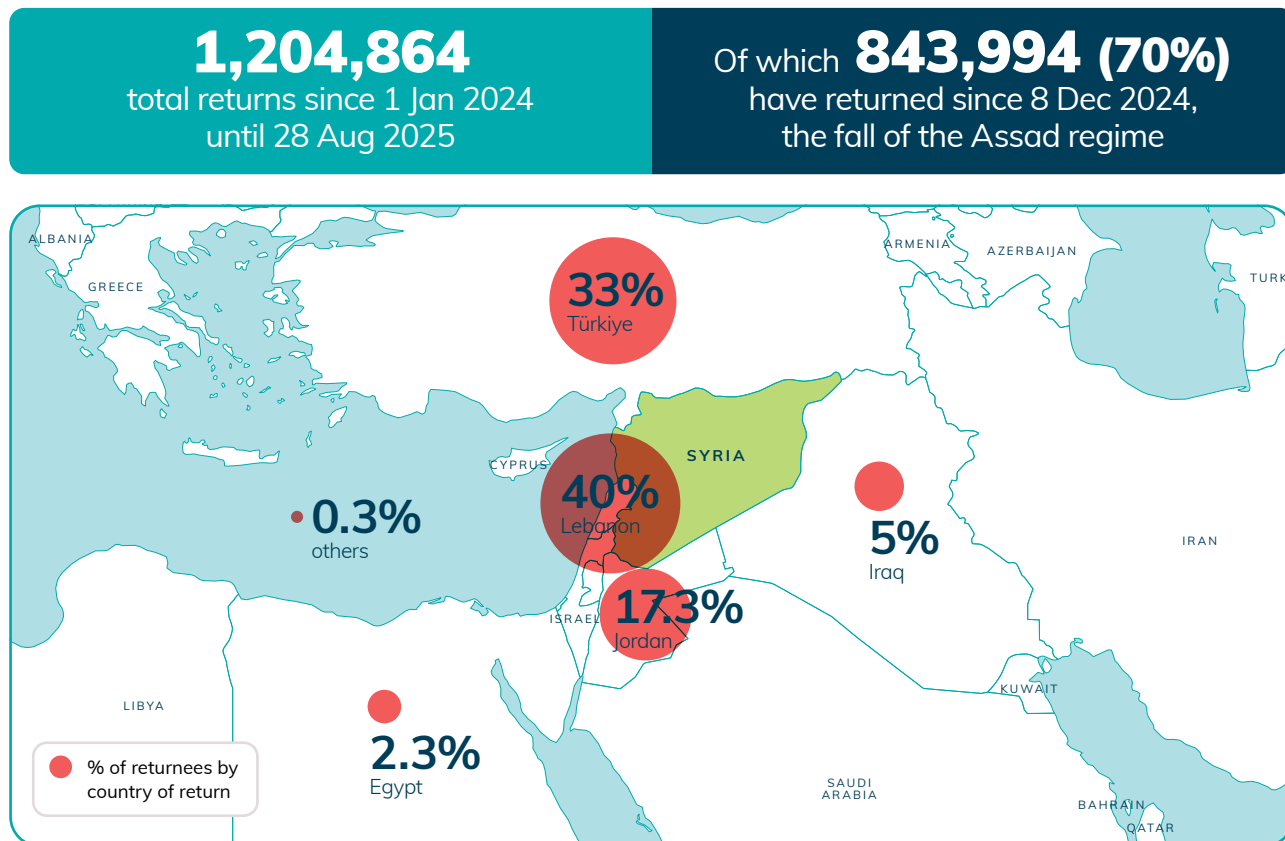
58 UNHCR (2025) [Syrian Arab Republic: October–November 2024](#).

59 UNHCR (2024) [Syria refugee crisis](#).

60 UNHCR (2025) [Syria governorates of return overview \(as of 28 Aug 2025\)](#).

61 UNHCR (2025) [Syria governorates IDPs and IDP returnees overview \(as of 28 August 2025\)](#).

Graphic 1. Number of Syrian returnees 2024 – 2025



Source: [UNHCR Syria returns](#)

Despite this renewed optimism, however, significant challenges remain for returnees. The widespread devastation of housing and essential infrastructure, including health facilities and schools, poses significant barriers for the sustainable return and integration of displaced families into their former areas of residence. In this context, many threats persist – from unexploded ordnance to the spread of communicable diseases such as cholera in crowded displacement camps.⁶² Moving forward, one of the key challenges Syria faces is securing adequate livelihood opportunities, in a context where agriculture and local markets are still in a state of recovery. Many returnees also lack civil documentation, potentially obstructing their ability to access services or claim land rights.⁶³ Given how many homes have been damaged, illegally occupied or sold without the property owner's consent since 2011, ensuring an inclusive and transparent process of restitution and compensation is key to reintegration and reconciliation efforts.⁶⁴

Security, however, remains a fundamental requirement for return and has been undermined by a number of serious incidents during 2025 that threaten to drive further displacement. In March, a rebellion by remnants of Assad's former security personnel in the coastal city of Latakia, subsequently put down by the de facto government's forces, resulted in the targeted killings of civilians by both sides,⁶⁵ including the massacre of around 1,500 Alawite men, women and children by government-aligned fighters.⁶⁶ In the wake of the attacks, tens of thousands of predominantly Alawite civilians crossed the border into Lebanon, despite poor living conditions and limited access to basic services.⁶⁷ The UN special envoy for Syria subsequently called attention to the "extremely fragile" situation in the country, calling for increased humanitarian assistance, the relaxation of sanctions, a commitment to inclusive governance and accountability for the perpetrators of violence against civilians.⁶⁸ On 13 July, in the province of Suwayda, violence broke out again between Druze and Bedouin communities, resulting in

62 USCRI (2025) [Six months post-Assad: A safe return remains out of reach](#).

63 IOM (2025) [New report: Challenging economy and unemployment main obstacles for Syria returnees](#).

64 Arab Land Initiative (2025) [Paving the way to durable solutions and the safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Syrians](#).

65 Christou, W. (2025) [Entire families reportedly killed in fighting in north-west Syria, UN says](#). The Guardian.

66 Michael, M. (2025) [Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites. The chain of command led to Damascus](#). Reuters.

67 Davis, H. (2025) [Syrian Alawites flee to Lebanon, with little aid to meet them](#). The New Humanitarian.

68 UN (2025) [Situation in Syria 'extremely fragile', UN envoy tells Security Council, stressing rule of law, new social contract, fair elections are yet to materialize](#).

the killing of hundreds of civilians⁶⁹ and almost 192,000 individual displacements by 28 July.⁷⁰

While much of this violence has occurred along communal lines, analysts have argued that the clashes should not be seen solely in terms of sectarian violence, but also understood in a wider context of longstanding land disputes, competing demands on resources and the economic impacts of environmental collapse.⁷¹

The ethical and logistical challenges of promoting returns to Syria

For years, host countries within the region and in Europe have been advocating for the return of at least some Syrian refugees and asylum seekers on the grounds that it was safe to do so. In both Lebanon and Türkiye, the two countries with the largest Syrian populations, their presence had become increasingly politicised over the years, particularly as their respective economies slowed. With politicians calling for their return, there were frequent reports of arbitrary detentions and deportations, despite the evident risks facing returnees.⁷³ Some Syrians forcibly returned from Lebanon and Türkiye are believed to have subsequently died or disappeared in the country's notorious detention facilities.⁷⁴

In Europe, too, there were moves towards the promotion of returns to Syria. As early as 2019, for instance, Denmark declared that Damascus and its environs were safe for Syrians from these areas to return to, later extending this designation to Latakia and Tartous, despite the well-documented abuses being carried out by Assad's security forces and the particular risks that returnees would face.⁷⁵ In June 2024, seven EU countries issued a statement calling for the situation in Syria to be reassessed, with a view to facilitating voluntary returns.⁷⁶ Italy had even gone so far as to renew diplomatic relations with the Assad regime in the months before its sudden and unexpected fall, which included discussions on the potential creation of a safe zone in Syria for refugees in Europe to return to.⁷⁷

Addressing these underlying challenges, as well as the symptoms of identity-based divisions, is therefore key. The situation in Syria, however, has not been aided by the fact that extremist militias remain active in the country. Among other incidents, a group associated with Islamic State (IS) carried out a suicide bombing in a church in Damascus in June that led to dozens of deaths and many more injuries.⁷²

In this context, the evident desire among some countries since the departure of Assad to hasten the return of Syrians is not without concerns. A large number of EU countries swiftly responded by “pausing” asylum applications for Syrian nationals,⁷⁸ with the Austrian government even announcing its preparation of “an orderly return and deportation programme to Syria” the day after the fall of Assad's regime.⁷⁹ Lebanon and Türkiye also took steps to facilitate returns through the creation of Go and See pilot programmes to enable Syrian nationals to visit Syria temporarily to assess conditions there for themselves.⁸⁰ However, given the limited trust refugees have for migration officials in both countries, not to mention towards security forces in Syria itself, these arrangements are not without complications.

Concerns have also been raised that, alongside continued discrimination and social hostility towards Syrians in host countries, these arrangements could serve to engineer returns against their will.⁸¹ Cyprus, for instance, has been accused of pressuring Syrians into supposedly voluntary returns through various means of coercion, including denial of asylum, detention and threats of criminal prosecution.⁸² Furthermore, in a context of rising anti-migrant sentiment, the rollback of humanitarian assistance and hostile governmental policies, remaining in the supposed safety of their host country is becoming more difficult. Many of those considering return are not doing so out of a strong conviction that conditions in Syria have improved, but rather in response to their increasingly precarious situation as refugees.

69 Al Jazeera (2025) [Syria evacuates Bedouins from clashes-hit Suwayda as shaky ceasefire holds](#).

70 OCHA (2025) [Syrian Arab Republic: Flash update no. 5 – Escalation of hostilities in As-Sweida governorate \(as of 31 July 2025\)](#).

71 Dukhan, H. and Chatty, D. (2025) [The Druze-Bedouin clashes in Syria were not a sectarian conflict](#). Al Jazeera.

72 Sinjab, L. (2025) [“We’re not safe here anymore” – Syria’s Christians fear for future after devastating church attack](#). BBC.

73 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Mixed migration review 2023](#), pp. 111-112.

74 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Syrians fleeing Lebanon risk repression upon return](#).

75 Bernild, M. (2023) [Syrian refugees in Denmark at risk of forced return](#). Human Rights Watch.

76 Hadjicostis, M. (2024) [7 EU members say conditions in Syria should be reassessed to allow voluntary refugee returns](#). AP.

77 Barboti, G. (2024) [How Italian PM Giorgia Meloni’s al-Assad bet in Syria failed](#). EuroNews.

78 Al Jazeera (2024) [Why is Europe pausing Syrian asylum claims after al-Assad’s fall?](#)

79 Politico (2024) [Austria prepares to deport Syrian migrants after Assad regime falls](#).

80 UNHCR (n.d.) [Movement procedures](#)

81 Dab, J. L. (2025) [Lebanon’s 2025 Syrian repatriation agenda: Consent under constraint?](#) LCPS.

82 ECRE (2025) [Cyprus: Government accused of coercing Syrians into “voluntary” returns](#).

The challenge is assisting the significant number of refugees potentially wishing to head back to Syria to do so safely and with the support they need, while at the same time ensuring that all returning are doing so voluntarily – without being coerced, directly or indirectly, into leaving their host countries. In January 2025, UNHCR announced plans to prepare for the return of up to 2 million IDPs and 1.5 million refugees, with USD 575 million in humanitarian assistance needed to ensure the necessary services, shelter and livelihood opportunities are in place for sustainable, durable returns. However, only a fraction of this has been raised so far, prompting concerns that many potential returnees may, in practice, be unable to do so or find themselves forced by conditions in Syria to leave again.⁸³ While some countries, such as the UK, France and the Netherlands, have resumed processing Syrian asylum claims,⁸⁴ in July Austria became the first European state to deport a Syrian national,⁸⁵ with Germany subsequently announcing that it intended to follow suit.⁸⁶ For more see Thematic snapshot *Returns to Syria: drivers, challenges and impacts on mixed migration*, p. 64.

Exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf

Across the Gulf, much of the workforce is comprised of migrant labourers from outside the region, predominantly South and Southeast Asia, but also the Horn of Africa. While forming the backbone of key sectors including construction, domestic work and hospitality, their situation in host countries is precarious. Their continued marginalisation and lack of rights is rooted in the *kafala* system, longstanding ‘sponsorship’ arrangements that continue to inform the relationship between migrants and their employers. Consequently, in most countries, work and legal residency rights are tied to a specific employer, a situation that exposes migrants to a high risk of abuse and exploitation, such as unpaid wages, excessively long hours, dangerous work conditions and sexual harassment.

Despite some reforms in recent years, the broader regulatory framework in most Gulf countries perpetuates inequitable relationships between foreign workers and their employers. **Kuwait**, for instance, announced a new

exit permit for foreign workers, which came into effect in July 2025 and requires them to secure permission through their employer to leave the country even for short periods (previously, migrants were only required to inform authorities if they intended to be out of the country for more than six months). The move has been condemned as “an alarming step backwards” that will leave migrants at even greater risk of coercion at the hands of their employers by reinforcing and formalising existing restrictions on mobility, such as confiscation of passports and the threat of false abscondment charges.⁸⁷ Their treatment is reflected in the response of Kuwaiti authorities to a spate of reported suicides in recent months: rather than providing at-risk individuals with support and mental health care, migrants who have attempted to harm themselves have been detained, deported and blacklisted.⁸⁸ In **Saudi Arabia**, meanwhile, recent allegations that Kenyan migrants have had their organs harvested without their knowledge or consent have highlighted the vulnerability of foreign workers there.⁸⁹

Fears that Saudi ‘giga projects’ will lead to more deaths

When Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup there was widespread evidence that thousands of migrant labourers died there in the years leading up to the competition, many as a result of extreme heat and unsafe working conditions. So when it was announced in December 2024 that Saudi Arabia would host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, there were widespread concerns that the same pattern of lethal exploitation could be repeated.⁹⁰

Subsequently, the organisation FairSquare released a report predicting that, if the absence of effective protections for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia is not addressed, the event “will in all likelihood lead to thousands of unexplained deaths of low-paid foreign workers”.⁹¹ This picture was confirmed elsewhere, with Human Rights Watch highlighting the prevalence of construction-related deaths including electrocution, decapitations and falls. Many of these workplace fatalities are recorded as “natural”, thereby denying families the right to hold employers to account.⁹²

With a plethora of so-called giga-projects planned in Saudi Arabia in the coming years, ranging from hotels and stadiums to smart cities and theme parks, the rush of construction could lead to many more fatalities, unless proper health and safety standards are adopted in the

83 UN (2025) [UN refugee agency calls for greater investment in Syrian returnees](#).

84 Santos, A. P. (2025) [UK resumes processing of Syrian asylum claims](#). InfoMigrants.

85 Von Brunnersum, S. J. (2025) [Austria becomes first EU country to deport Syrian since Assad's fall](#). InfoMigrants.

86 Euractiv (2025) [Germany to follow Austria and deport convicted Syrians](#).

87 Page, M. (2025) [Kuwait's exit permit requirement puts migrant workers at risk](#). Human Rights Watch.

88 Migrant-Rights.org (2025) [Deportation over care: Kuwait's failing mental health and suicide response for migrants](#).

89 Saraswathi, V. (2025) [Allegations of organ trade and illegal harvesting are rife as GCC and African states fail to conduct autopsies](#). Migrant-Rights.org.

90 Amnesty International (2024) [Confirmation of Saudi Arabia as 2034 FIFA World Cup host puts many lives at risk](#).

91 FairSquare (2025) [New report predicts surge in unexplained migrant worker deaths in Saudi Arabia](#).

92 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Saudi Arabia: Migrant workers electrocuted, decapitated, and falling to death at workplaces](#).

country.⁹³ Among the most pressing dangers, not only in Saudi Arabia but across the entire Gulf region, is the increasing prevalence of extreme heat.⁹⁴ While some restrictions now in place in the construction sector can reduce exposure, the monitoring and implementation of these protocols – as with many apparently progressive migrant labour reforms – are patchy and inconsistent.

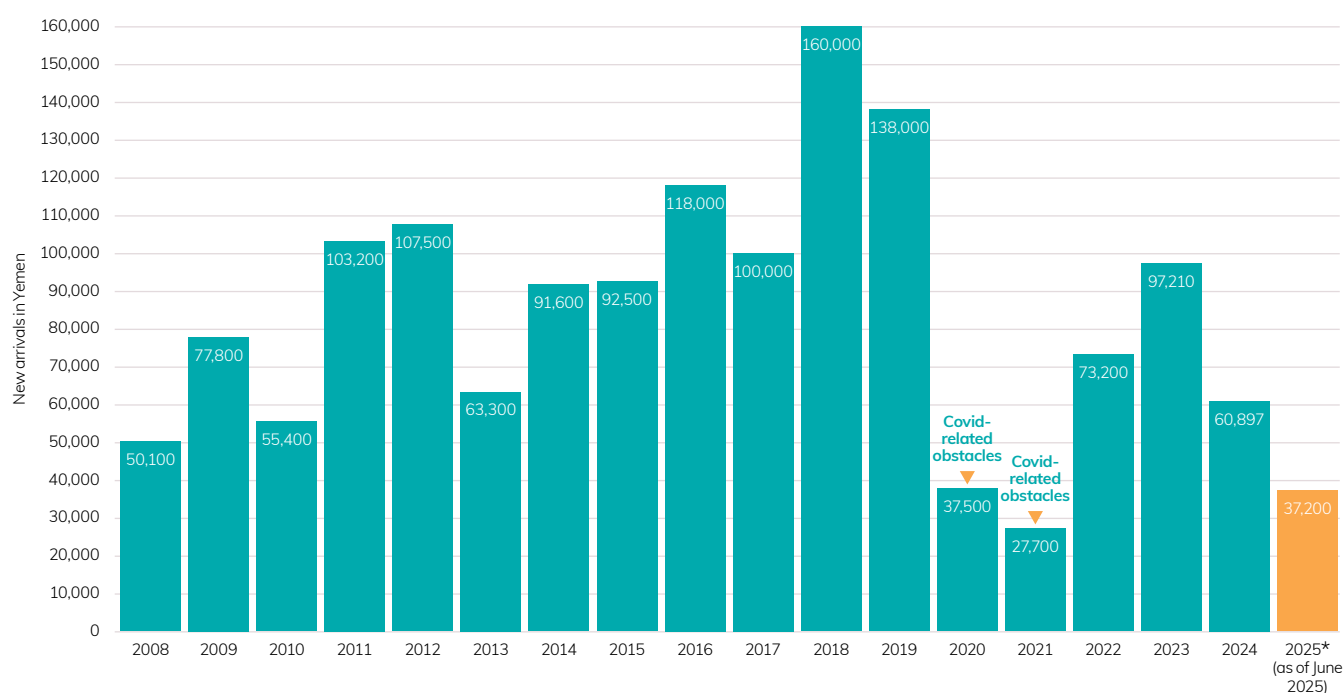
In practice, current measures are wholly inadequate for ensuring workers are protected from heat stroke and other related, potentially deadly effects of temperatures in excess of 50°C.⁹⁵ As the climate crisis intensifies, extreme heat is appearing earlier and more often, a situation that labour regulations in the country have yet to recognise.⁹⁶

Yemen

After a decade of civil conflict, conditions in **Yemen** are catastrophic, with more than half (19.4 million) of the population dealing with widespread food insecurity, little or no access to health care and in need of humanitarian assistance.⁹⁷ Together, conflict, insecurity and the intensifying impacts of climate change are driving large-scale displacement – in total, there are currently 4.8 million IDPs across the country – which has been made worse by the recent rollback of humanitarian funding by

the United States government.⁹⁸ Furthermore, in addition to the more than 50,000 predominantly Ethiopian and Somali refugees and asylum seekers in the country,⁹⁹ tens of thousands of migrants travel through Yemen en route to Saudi Arabia every year.¹⁰⁰ The dangers are significant at every stage of the journey, with 468 deaths or disappearances documented by IOM in the first eight months of 2025 alone, almost double the number recorded during the entirety of 2024 (255).¹⁰¹

Graphic 2. Seventeen-year summary of movement of migrants and refugees to Yemen from mainland Africa



Source: [IOM DTM Yemen quarter 2 report](#); [IOM DTM 2024 Yearly Eastern Route Report](#)

93 Human Rights Watch (2024) [“Die first, and I’ll pay you later”: Saudi Arabia’s “giga-projects” built on widespread labor abuses.](#)

94 Ben Romdhane, W. (2025) [Migrant workers, climate, and constraint: Behind the scenes of Saudi Arabia’s labour engine.](#) MMC.

95 MMC (2025) [Exploring the climate–labour–mobility nexus for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.](#)

96 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Gulf States: Protect workers from extreme heat.](#)

97 ECHO (2025) [Yemen.](#)

98 Amnesty International (2025) [Yemen: US military escalation and aid cuts will have ‘catastrophic consequences’ for millions of people – aid worker testimonies.](#)

99 UNHCR (2025) [Yemen.](#)

100 IOM (2025) [Yemen: Flow monitoring registry – December 2024.](#)

101 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Western Asia – Eastern route to/from EHOA.](#)

Migration from the Horn of Africa

Yemen has long been a transit zone for migrants travelling from the Horn of Africa towards Saudi Arabia or **Oman** in search of employment, with tens of thousands attempting the hazardous journey from the coast of **Djibouti** or **Somalia** across the Gulf of Aden every year. This has continued in the first months of 2025, with more than 37,000 migrants detected in the first quarter of the year,¹⁰² though some are likely not included in this figure. This is because the main source of data collection, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), has had to scale back its operations due to resource constraints and announced that it would be suspending its activities from April 2025.¹⁰³

The route is widely recognised as one of the most dangerous in the region, with smugglers controlling much of the movement across the Red Sea.¹⁰⁴ The risks of the route were highlighted by the sinking of two migrant vessels in March 2025, resulting in at least 180 deaths by drowning. The boats embarked despite official warnings about weather conditions, with the smugglers disregarding the obvious dangers posed by the high waves and strong winds. This reflects what appears to be an increasing willingness among smuggling gangs to dispatch boats in poor conditions to avoid detection, even at the cost of placing the lives of migrants at risk.¹⁰⁵ In June, a boat carrying 150 migrants was stopped at sea by smugglers who forced those on board to swim back to shore, despite being a long way from the coast. At least eight people died as a result, with many others missing.¹⁰⁶ In August, a boat carrying 154 Ethiopian migrants sank off the coast of Yemen, resulting in the deaths of at least 68 of those on board, with 74 others missing.¹⁰⁷

Even once they reach Yemen, the situation of migrants remains perilous, with many either held in abusive conditions by their smugglers to extort ransoms from their families or detained in squalid facilities. The escalation of the country's civil conflict, including aerial bombings by international actors, has also created further risks for migrants. Since mid-March 2025, the US government has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in the country, including an attack in April that hit a detention facility near Sana'a where migrants were being held, resulting in at least 68 people dying and many others injured.¹⁰⁸ In this context, while many migrants continue to try to reach Yemen, thousands are also attempting the equally hazardous route back to the Horn of Africa by crossing back from the coast to Djibouti.¹⁰⁹

The threats of physical violence and sexual assault as they travel through Yemen's conflict zones do not recede when they reach the border with Saudi Arabia, where reports by MMC, Human Rights Watch and others have documented torture, rape, indiscriminate killings and executions by Saudi security forces.¹¹⁰ Notwithstanding widespread condemnation by human rights groups, these attacks continue to be reported, with many migrants reportedly maimed.¹¹¹ MMC continues to receive testimony from Ethiopian migrants who have attempted to cross into Saudi Arabia from Yemen, confirming these targeted killings by Saudi security forces continue to this day. In addition to the mistreatment and abuse migrants in Saudi Arabia potentially face at the hands of their employers, many are at constant risk of detention and deportation. During 2024, the number of Ethiopians deported from Saudi Arabia totalled almost 93,500, more than double the number of the previous year.¹¹² In the first three months of 2025 alone, close to 24,000 had reportedly been expelled back to Ethiopia or Yemen, with smaller numbers also deported to Yemen from Oman.¹¹³ Tens of thousands more were subsequently expelled in the months that followed.¹¹⁴

102 IOM (2025) [Flow monitoring registry](#).

103 IOM (2025) [Flow monitoring registry dashboard: Non-Yemeni migrant arrivals in March 2025](#).

104 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Smuggling routes to and through Yemen: mapping journeys, remigration experiences, and onward movement intentions](#).

105 IOM (2025) [Over 180 migrants feared dead after shipwrecks off Yemen's coast](#).

106 IOM (2025) [IOM mobilizes urgent aid after tragic incident off Djibouti coast](#).

107 InfoMigrants (2025) [African migrant boat capsizes off Yemen, killing dozens](#).

108 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Yemen: US strike reportedly kills, injures dozens of migrants](#).

109 IOM (2025) [Yemen crisis response plan 2025](#).

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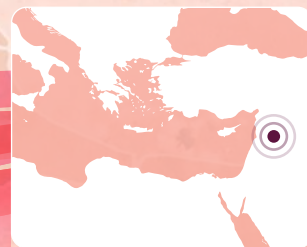
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Syrian president Ahmad al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, during the celebration of the revolution's victory and the lifting of sanctions against Syria in late May 2025. The question of whether it's time to return is on many refugees' and refugee-hosting countries' minds. (See Thematic snapshot *Returns to Syria: drivers, challenges and impacts on mixed migration dynamics*, [p.64](#)).





The pull of nostalgia and the push of reality:

Syrian refugees torn between staying and returning

I come from Palmyra in Syria's Homs governorate. I'm 56 and have a wife and seven children. Up until mid-May 2015, we were living peacefully in Palmyra, I worked at the Phosphate Company and as a tour guide. Then the conflict spread to my city and the security situation suddenly collapsed. We spent 10 days in danger, facing violence and crime, with no food or water, and then we decided to leave. We followed a big crowd out of the city into the desert, towards the Syrian-Jordanian border. Only my eldest daughter remained in Syria, in another city, for personal reasons. It was incredibly hard to leave her behind: my wife wanted to go back for her, but doing so would have put us all in danger.

We spent about 10 months in the desert, living in tents and in nearby farm villages to fetch food and water. No humanitarian organisations were there: we found help from local people. My youngest daughter was born during that time. After 10 months, we heard that Jordanian authorities were distributing water, food, clothing and blankets at Ruwayshid camp, so we went there, where crossing into Jordan was easier. Jordan was always my intended destination. There's no language barrier as they speak Arabic, plus its people and government showed us deep solidarity, ensuring our basic needs were met.

"Life has worsened dramatically after the aid reductions, causing tremendous pressures and amplifying existing challenges."

Life at Azraq Camp, where we are now, has worsened dramatically after the aid reductions, causing tremendous pressures and amplifying existing challenges. The only good thing is health care: we have one small clinic plus three health posts, and they're good. Protection is also excellent: officers listen respectfully, uphold the law and punish wrongdoing, unlike pre-war Syria's chaos. Everything else, though, is hard. Education is free but there are no university scholarships, so most young people stop at high school. Many students leave school and take on simple jobs because opportunities are scarce. Here, most organisations hire only those with formal qualifications or experience. Those without official education or training never get a chance, despite being willing and able. There are markets in the camp where we can buy goods using vouchers, but we now get JOD 15 per person per month instead of JOD 23, which means about JOD 0.5 per day – the price of a loaf of bread.¹ Other basic needs like clothing, prescription glasses and undergarments aren't covered; traders exploit that, driving prices sky-high.

"I feel a deep emotional pull and nostalgia for my homeland, but I also know I need to set aside emotions and think rationally."

I have considered returning to Syria, but it remains just a thought for now and I haven't made any concrete plans. I feel a deep emotional pull and nostalgia for my homeland, but I also know I need to set aside emotions and think rationally. The political changes in Syria and the fact that many people I know returned also led me to consider returning. That said, practical concerns like repairing my house, accessing basic services like schools and hospitals, and ensuring safety and security dominate my thinking. Finally, finding work to support my family with dignity is another major concern. Here, even with limited resources, I live in safety and dignity. I won't compromise that by returning prematurely.

"Many camp residents speak fondly of home – the sun, the air, the flowers, the traditions – but those who have gone back often regret it."

I stay informed through people who have returned to Syria – family members, neighbours and fellow camp residents. However, every governorate, and even neighbourhoods within the same city, can be very different. Also, not everything you hear is true; people spread rumours. As a community leader, I observe a mixture of strong nostalgia and deep apprehension. Many camp residents speak fondly of home – the sun, the air, the flowers, the traditions – but those who have gone back often regret it. They return expecting safety and normality, only to find widespread damage, insecure streets and spiralling costs. For most, the experience has been negative. There just isn't enough support. Beyond the USD 400 stipend (which is often unrealised), there is no cash, and proposed NGO projects for home repairs, health care upgrades or caravan-style temporary housing remain on paper.² Some Syrians have chosen to remain in Europe, because they fear losing the freedoms and rights they've earned over the years. After years of living "like humans", it's hard to give that up and return to uncertainty in Syria.

"I wish global leaders could look at our destroyed country and remember Syria's ancient heritage and Syrians' talents, and support us materially, economically, and by enhancing our security."

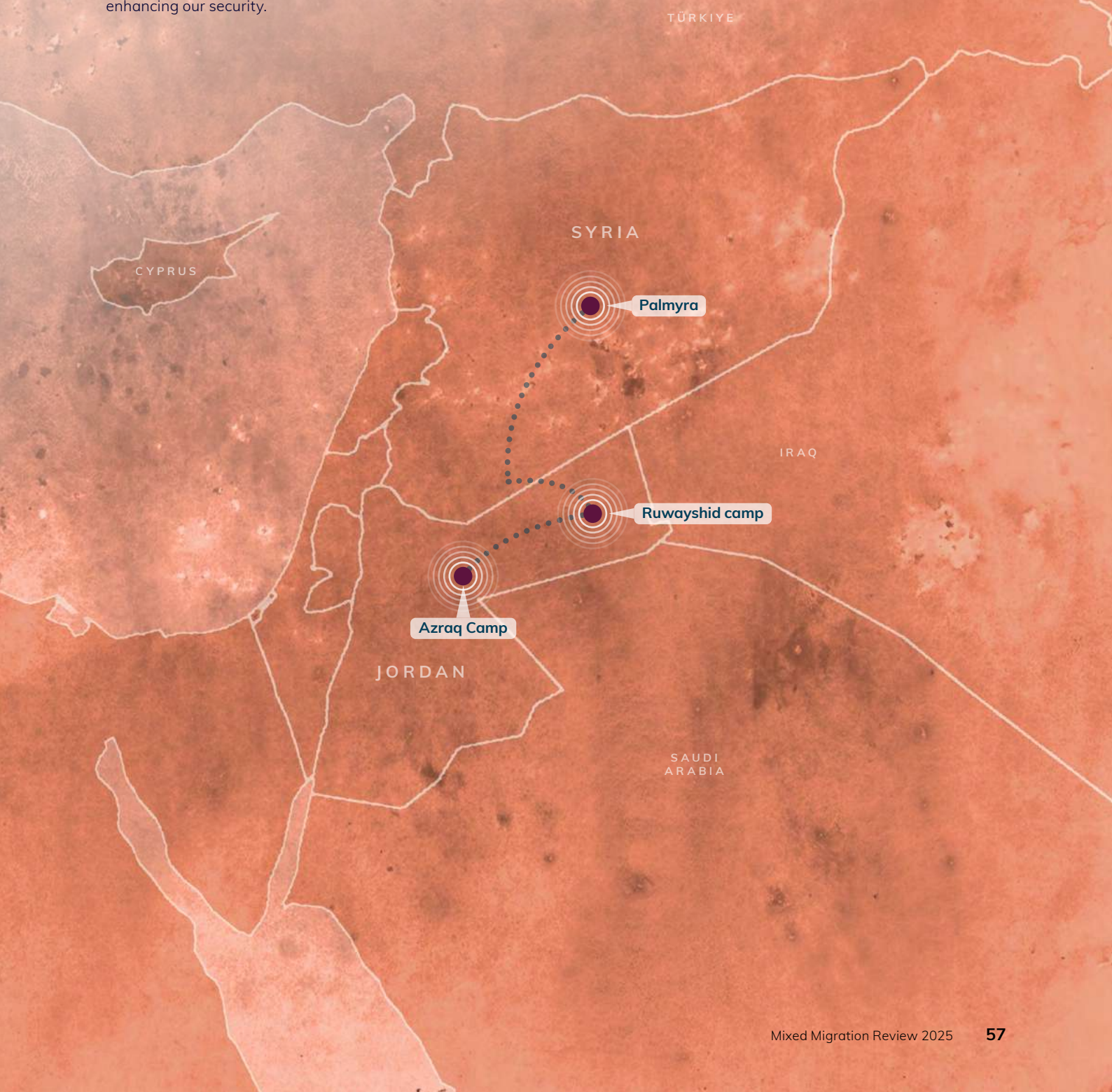
¹ JOD 15 is approximately USD 21.

² The UNHCR offers a one-off USD 400 cash grant to Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq or Türkiye and planning to return to Syria to support their reintegration. See more: UNHCR (n.d.) [Cash for Syrian Returnees](#).

To make returns sustainable, we'd need reliable, low-cost or free cargo transport that delivers belongings all the way to one's home inside Syria, as well as transitional shelters in each returnee's native area. Then direct cash grants or vouchers to cover home repairs and basic living costs for the first five to six months after return would be helpful. The Syrian government tries to respond, but financial constraints limit their ability to help. I'd like them to support us by ensuring security in the whole country and providing dignified public sector salaries. Host governments should also facilitate voluntary border crossings for returnees and European countries should keep protecting those at risk, instead of suspending asylum processes. Even European officials concede some areas are safe while others aren't, which highlights Syria's fractured stability. I wish global leaders could look at our destroyed country and remember Syria's ancient heritage and Syrians' talents, and support us materially, economically, and by enhancing our security.

"In five years' time, I see my family back home, living with dignity and proud of what we have rebuilt together, proud to say 'we are Syrians'."

I believe in God's will and hope that Syria will recover and thrive and be better than before. Even though there are some problems now, they will pass. The most important thing is treating every person as a human being first, regardless of their sect, religion, tribe or status. That alone would solve so many problems.



Interview



A fresh take on humanitarianism: the decolonising, people-centred approach of The New Humanitarian

As a mission-driven news organisation, The New Humanitarian does more than simply report on global news and events: it brings to light often neglected or under-reported stories of people on the move. Here its CEO **Tammam Aloudat** speaks about how his professional career in the humanitarian medical field eventually led him to run TNH and what migration might look like in an era of increasing geopolitical turmoil.

Dr Tammam Aloudat is a Syrian-Swiss physician with over two decades of experience at the forefront of international humanitarian organisations, including the Syrian Red Crescent, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The focus of his work is decolonising global health and advancing humanitarianism. Since November 2024, he has been the CEO of The New Humanitarian.

You took over The New Humanitarian in 2024. Do you see it as a news organisation or do you have a driving social mission?

At its core, The New Humanitarian (TNH) is a newsroom, a news organisation. There is also, however, a driving mission that has developed over the past couple of decades. TNH was started by UN OCHA – which, at the time, was called Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) – just after the genocide in Rwanda, with the view that the coverage of that genocide was inappropriate and unable to properly inform either the public or the leaders of the humanitarian sector. IRIN was part of OCHA until 2015, when it left the UN and became a non-profit and focused even more deeply

on humanitarian issues. I put humanitarian issues in a wider context, not only the policy and politics of the humanitarian sector, but the causes, consequences and situations in places that experience conflict or other crises. In 2019, it formally became known as The New Humanitarian. So, to go back to your question, the reason for it to exist is to share news. The difference here is both the focus on humanitarian settings, but also the fact that we consider The New Humanitarian a mission-driven organisation and, by that, we have a couple of really important aspects in our strategy that we focus on. The first is the idea of a decolonising journalism that covers humanitarian contexts. We don't fly foreign journalists in to report on crises. We commission journalists who are from the communities

that are being reported on. We work very hard to ensure that the voice is representative of the people and that the outcomes are for their benefit. We're concerned about the focus and consistency of our coverage and of how we represent the people affected. The second aspect is about impact. We seek to have a positive impact on people affected by humanitarian crises, whether by sharing the stories that they want to tell, covering neglected crises or holding the system accountable for the situations that they are in. Finally, these aspects are about having journalism that is vigorous, fact-based and verifiable, but also capable of pushing politics and practice into more effectiveness, accountability and agency for people affected by crises.

You've said that the role of journalism is to be "a stubborn pressure on the system to keep challenging the system". But isn't TNH itself part of the humanitarian system – a system that will only tolerate a certain degree of internal critique?

Journalism doesn't exist in a vacuum – it is always a part of the system. In a liberal democracy, journalism relies on the space it's offered to speak out and the protection it has while speaking out. This is a major difference between democratic societies and authoritarian societies. I don't think there is a context where journalism is completely outside the system. What differentiates it is its purpose. If you look at the coverage of many of the humanitarian crises by mainstream media, you will find that, by commission or omission, there is plenty of misinformation, even by the most rigorous journalistic outlets. This often happens when they only focus on the explosive moments of a conflict and ignore the long-term effects on populations. They need clicks and advertisements, and those come, sadly, with a language of urgency and immediacy rather than with long and complex stories, as important as they are.

“The question is no longer about rebalancing power, the question now is whether, under such a hegemonic approach to politics, humanitarianism has a place at all.”

The other thing is that, here, the system of humanitarian governance is much more ambiguous and expansive than it is inside a news outlet in a single country. If I was a newspaper in the UK, for example, I'd be expecting that there are checks and balances: there's judiciary, there's a rule of law whereby if journalism reveals a problem, that problem gets addressed by the authorities. The problem is that producing reliable knowledge about what's happening in the international system cannot rely on the rest of the system to have the same sort of checks and balances. We don't have that privilege. We might reveal a lot of problems. There's no guarantee, authority or enforcement that might actually

resolve the problems we highlight. That puts an extra burden on an outlet like The New Humanitarian, as we need to ensure that we not only reveal the stories or the perspective of witnesses, but that our stories reach a place where they are able to push for accountability.

In the 2021 podcast *Rethinking Humanitarianism* you spoke a lot about “decolonising aid”. Four years on, what kind of trends and momentum do you see on this issue, and how important do you think it is to humanitarianism's intrinsic aims?

You could say, when I had that discussion four years ago, I was under the impression that we have an international normative framework that is biased and continues to be affected by power imbalances that are practised by, in part, the countries that have been the colonial powers and continue to practise that kind of pressure. What that means is whether it is in a multilateral system that functions somewhat, the ex-colonial powers are still the veto powers at a deeper level. It's not only about who holds the keys to power explicitly, but also about the centring of one narrative that says, 'This is how humanitarianism is, this is how it should be practised and we know better than you.' The continuation here is we have a saving mission that puts the onus and the narrative in the mouth of 'the Saviour', just like the civilising mission of colonisation 100 years ago put the onus of civilising the rest of the world in the hands of the colonisers. What's happened in the past four years is that the very normative framework that allows such a negotiation to take place has crumbled. Without wanting to sound too dramatic, I'm not very optimistic: if we look at today, the humanitarian system has been pretty much disowned by the countries which have promoted it for the past 50 to 80 years.

How serious are the recent cuts in aid funding?

The cuts in humanitarian aid are drastic. It is going to lead to massive suffering and death, and the reason for that is not only the absence of money – although, as an example, the US recently cut over USD 60 billion in aid and increased its military expenditure to over a trillion dollars. Previously, humanitarianism had a compromise with Western liberalism; you do your politics and we clean up some of the dirty outcomes: we save lives. You give us space and resources. By extension, humanitarianism offers a level of legitimacy and the benefits of appearing benevolent to its sponsors. What seems to be the case now is those sponsors don't really care about that legitimacy or soft power or the appearance of benevolence in Europe and the US, or Australia and Canada. It seems that they have moved to a place where armament and hard power matter more and are being pursued. In that case, humanitarianism stops being a necessity for those sponsoring countries. The question is no longer about rebalancing power, the question now is whether, under such a hegemonic approach to politics, humanitarianism has a place at all.

But the cuts to aid didn't start on 20 January with the current Trump administration – they have been happening for years and TNH has published quite detailed accounts of how, progressively, governments have put limitations on aid.

“The cuts to aid didn't start on 20 January with the current Trump administration – they have been happening for years and TNH has published quite detailed accounts of how, progressively, governments have put limitations on aid.”

I can't tell you whether the discussion of decolonising, localising or empowering other entities and people outside the very narrow political interests of donors has caused the cuts in aid or participated in causing them. If that's the case, though, it would be worth asking, 'Where does that put us? Is it a place where we need to appease those who are using aid as a political tool increasingly aggressively or find a way to start a new discussion about what humanitarianism means?' Because if it means this bluntly, the assertion of political interests and financial powers, then it might raise questions for humanitarianism and lead us to seriously measure the harm that we'd be causing by legitimising them.

Do these issues shape migration globally?

Absolutely, and the first thing is the narrative. In 2015, there was talk about the refugee crisis, with more than a million refugees, including many from my country, Syria, coming to Europe. Interestingly, the crisis only becomes a crisis when it comes to Europe. At the same time, there have been tens of millions of refugees and migrants who fled their countries or were internally displaced and didn't come to North America or to Europe but, instead, moved to countries in the Global South, and most of them are in massively difficult situations. Yet that didn't constitute a crisis until it became a problem for Europeans.

Colonialism has always been linked to extractivism and commerce. Colonialism by the Dutch and the British started through commerce and relied fundamentally on the racist practice of 'othering' people in a way that doesn't allow them to be humanised in the same way as the citizens of the metropolis. When the war in Ukraine started, Western journalists looked at Ukrainians with shock and said, 'They look just like us.' The implication of this is that the Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis and Syrians, who are the victims of largely Western-imposed politics, don't look like us, hence they fundamentally have less right to be here. I think around 10 million Ukrainian refugees

were allowed to enter Europe quite rapidly and settled in with much less difficulty than brown and black migrants and asylum seekers.

The ethno-nationalist politics that is spreading in Europe is a dangerous creature. It might be tempting for politicians to feed the monster because it can bring them the votes of disaffected and disenfranchised poor white people, but that monster often eats its master when it gets too big. The West is losing any pretence to the moral high ground, whether on immigration, on the genocide in Gaza or on democratic leadership. This might not end well.

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What are your thoughts about irregular migration and human smuggling?

I worked for MSF, for a long time, and part of the effort made by MSF was search and rescue in the Mediterranean. The weaponisation of the accusations made is interesting, because in Italy there was an accusation of MSF being part of or collaborating with human smugglers. This is obviously not the case and has never been the case, but part of the issue we are facing now is how unrestrained, how easy it is to create narratives that are accusatory, inflammatory and potentially violent and that deal with this massive polarisation of politics. This, though, also has historical roots. Part of the history of the United Kingdom was the turning of workers in Northern England against India and making them capable of going and fighting in India under the pretext that Indians were taking industry away from the UK by producing cheaper stuff. There have always been forces that have put people in classes that should be in solidarity against each other, and it is extremely difficult to address those narratives. Zohran Mamdani, the son of a Ugandan political philosopher, is now the candidate for the mayor of New York and he's going against the fully corrupt institutional candidate. He said, 'My father told me, years ago, that every time the right wing gains power, the left wing gets to write an excellent book.' This is part of the issue: the critique is left to academic circles. And the left or whatever

progressive power still exists – I mean those who believe people are equal or that they shouldn't be left to drown in the Mediterranean or to be shot at or starved or killed on their migration route – is yet to be capable of addressing people at a more narrative, visceral level that really speaks to their problems and their interests, rather than give them big words and big expressions. Those words and expressions are absolutely important for us to understand the frames collectively, but for them to just exist in that sphere is not enough.

Looking at the elections all around the world last year, migration was unusually high on the agenda of various countries. What's your explanation for this?

Unfortunately, it has become overly easy to vilify migrants. As I mentioned, in the case of Ukraine this is clearly related to race, but in other cases it is not. It is related to work. It is related to xenophobic attacks that have happened in countries of the South among migrants even. To conservative, populist politicians going for elections, a migrant is almost the ideal 'other' that can be vilified and accused. They have no place or platform to defend themselves. They have no way of being inside the law and they can be used as scarecrows for people who are afraid for their place in their own societies, for their livelihoods and for their futures.

“Migration is an easy narrative to twist, which ultimately helps vilify migrants and builds that populist narrative. If it wasn't migrants, it would have been something or someone else.”

The US is a perfect example: almost 45 years of neoliberalism has hollowed out the economy and shifted wealth to very few people. Then, the answer to that is to find someone else to be hated after 9/11 instead of risking the working class understanding the situation. It was Muslims for a decade, now it's migrants and it's becoming violent. Look at Los Angeles in the past two weeks. If what happened in Los Angeles – deploying the army to oppress protesters – had been done anywhere else, it would have been condemned universally by liberal governments. But right now there's silence. Allowing that narrative to go rampant has played a part in creating the situation where extremists, fundamentalist right-wing candidates have become more viable. This is the case not just in the US, but in Germany and Israel too. Another good example is Romania, where an unexpected far-right candidate recently won. Migration is an easy narrative to twist, which ultimately helps vilify migrants and build that populist narrative. If it wasn't migrants, it would have been something or someone else.

Isn't this trend driven by people's perception that there are just too many migrants and too many asylum seekers in a relatively short period of time?

If you like, it is feeding into that narrative, because it's the easiest thing to feed into that now. Some people hold comical discussions about the expatriate versus the immigrant, the illegal versus the tourist. Movements are not accidents. They are constructed by political parties, political entities that have an interest in the outcome. We are in a time when lying in politics isn't a problem anymore and it is actually quite rampant. Reactionary forces have learned a lot and progressive forces have lost a lot of their knowledge. The progressive and leftist cause has lost its space and its argument. They have shifted from the working class into the urban elites. London is still Labour and everywhere else in the country is a lost cause. What I'm saying here is there's a need to overlap multiple social causes. I doubt that we can collectively defend migrants without fighting for climate justice, for example, or against discrimination, racism and corporate exploitation. We can't defend or speak on behalf of people subjected to deportations and other random actions without talking about the failures of democratic politics. We cannot just talk about how we do better for people so they can stay in their homes and not have to flee violence, conflict and exploitation. Most people who flee their homes were bombed using the same tax money of the same people who don't want them to come to them. So there are multiple narratives that need to be overlapped, and I would be hesitant to assign blame or credit to any single story.

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What challenges relating to migration do you envisage emerging in the face of the increasing geopolitical turmoil that we are facing today?

For migrants, or migration, I think there's a shorter- and a longer-term answer. I'm not so sure about the longer term but, in the short term, I fear there will be increased violence against migrants. Violence against migrants isn't new. Allowing migrants to drown in the Mediterranean or elsewhere and putting them in camps like those in Greece is systemic violence and that was signalled very clearly by Europe 10 years ago, when they put Frontex at the frontline to deal with migrants in the sea instead of search and rescue. I fear that violence has become quite systemic and quite blatant. Just look at the kidnapping of people from the streets by masked, plain-clothed US ICE agents. Having come

previously from a dictatorship, I understand the horror of plain-clothed and masked policemen with arms kidnapping people without warrants or without due process. This is happening now in the self-proclaimed 'greatest country in the world'! This is going on without appropriate popular reaction. This will all become more pervasive, and I wouldn't be surprised if that kind of violence became a norm: right now, it's practised on migrants, but it could be normalised in the future and practised against citizens.

“Most people who flee their homes were bombed using the same tax money of the same people who don't want them to come to them.”

Can you see any positive aspect of future migration, for example, in the context of current and future labour migration demands?

Yes, but concerning the demand for labour, I struggle with signalling too much optimism or being very joyous about the prospect of people being exploited as a way for them to survive. Cheap labour might be one of the ways that migrants get protected or have access. I'm not in a position, morally or in any way, to say what people should or shouldn't accept or how they make their own decisions. My fear is that we accept profit and loss as the motive for accepting migrants. My mid-to-long-term view is that there have been many projections, with some of them anticipating up to a half a billion displaced people by 2050 because of the climate crisis and from uninhabitable places in the world. This is not an issue that can be solved by humanitarianism. Five hundred million is not going to be manageable by any stretch of imagination given how poorly we manage the current levels.

What about the global multilateral system? Do you think it's already peaked and is now in decline? And, if so, what will replace it?

It is always a struggle to balance the need for understanding problems where they're systemic or incidental and the need to leave space for hope and action because, if we fall into despair, then there's nothing to do.

I think part of it is a need for a collective diagnosis of the problem. Rather than saying that everything is a lost cause, there are plenty of things that need to be revisited, but with a collective imagination. This is part of why I like the decolonisation discourse: because it doesn't give solutions for problems globally and it's quite common to talk about the fact that there isn't a theoretical or practical solution which applies everywhere. The historical power current means

disparities exist differently in every place, and the solutions can only happen through common discussion and understanding which emerge from communities. All of us are conditioned by a system that is shaped by those imbalances of power. None of us is free of prejudices. No one perceives the question as whether democracy is good and bad. The question is, how could it be applied in a way that is egalitarian? I don't know many who challenge the existence of nations, as much critique as there is about that, but what is the role of nations as part of a global community and the absolute protection or preference of its citizens? This is a bigger conversation. It cannot be solved in bits and pieces and certainly, as things go, it's not being solved by politicians. There's a need for a bigger conversation that doesn't assume that the retention of the current structures is a necessary condition. If we agree that democracy and people's sovereignty is important, who is to say that this is the only shape it can take? Switzerland and the UK have very different ways of implementing democracy, and both of them are very different from how popular grassroots democracy is practised in the Free Sovereign State of Chiapas in Mexico, for example. There might yet be other ways that balance this. Being part of a national community and a global community balances the need for equality and justice with the need for social protection and belonging to a society.

There is a collective responsibility to address politics, a collective responsibility to sidestep it when it's destructive and have a conversation among people, rather than among politicians. Politicians are proving they can't be trusted to speak on behalf of all of us these days and it might be time for that conversation to escape the confines of diplomats.

I think all of us have been indoctrinated. We are relentlessly being indoctrinated by society, by power, by material wealth, by the need to be drowning in mortgages and being told that you're only valuable in terms of how far you go in your career and how much more money you make.

Therefore, the role of a news outlet goes beyond reporting the news: there is an intention and a tone that aims for something. When we say that TNH is mission-driven, we mean that, yes, we want our stories to have an impact, but overall we want to be part of a narrative that reconciles the world. In that sense, we are a very niche publication that works on writing news about the humanitarian context and our leadership is largely people who know or understand the humanitarian context. But as a basis for that, we should aim to be part of the people. This is not easy and it might be wildly ambitious for a very small organisation, but the point is that we're never alone. It's about finding people who have those statuses and can exchange them, collaborating and producing things together.

TNH has had quite a special focus on the issue of migration and asylum. Do you plan to continue that? And if so, why?

Yes, absolutely, because we have two goals. The first one is to highlight issues that are neglected and the other is to be consistent in highlighting them when the mainstream media doesn't. That applies to conflicts and to migration. In my view, migration in particular is one of the overlaps of humanitarian crisis, conflicts, the climate crisis and many other forces, and it is uncovered until people drown or get killed or raped. Part of what we want is to keep the focus on migration and to make it much harder to neglect and ignore.

“ We don't fly foreign journalists in to report on crises. We commission journalists who are from the communities that are being reported on. We work very hard to ensure that the voice is representative of the people and that the outcomes are for their benefit. We're concerned about the focus and consistency of our coverage and of how we represent the people affected.”

Returns to Syria: drivers, challenges and impacts on mixed migration dynamics

In early December 2024, after swift military advances by the rebel opposition forces, the Assad regime in Syria collapsed. The rebels, belonging to the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, rapidly took control of the country's major cities, including Damascus, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee. This momentous event triggered immediate reaction in terms of mixed migration dynamics in the region and beyond.¹

Syrian returns in numbers

Until late 2024, approximately 6 million Syrians had left the country and sought refuge in countries in the region and, to a lesser extent, in other parts of the world such as Europe, while around 7.4 million were internally displaced.² The fall of Assad was welcomed by many Syrians, including some who sought to return immediately, in spite of the dire conditions of facilities, infrastructure and properties. According to data from UNHCR, more than 500,000 Syrian refugees returned to the country and over 1.2 million IDPs returned home between December 2024 and May 2025, with numbers expected to continually grow for the remainder of 2025.³

A 2025 UNHCR Regional Perception and Intention Survey (RPIS) showed that 80 percent of Syrian refugees living in five host countries stated their intention to return to Syria soon – up from 57 percent in April 2024.⁴ Some of them only planned to visit and assess the conditions, while others hoped for a permanent return.

Motivations to return

After decades of suppression, civil war and instability, the collapse of Assad was widely seen by Syrians in the country and abroad as the beginning of a new political, social and cultural era.

These 'winds of change' were a strong return driver for many, as were personal and emotional factors such as reuniting with family and the eagerness to go back to their home and start rebuilding their lives. The desperate and dire conditions in many refugee camps were another key motivation to return as, "living in the rubble [of one's former home] is better than living in the camps", where "a tent is not a home" and people live in constant fear and lack access to basic services.⁵ Additionally, Syrian refugees in Lebanon had been repeatedly faced with violence from Israeli attacks, while those in Türkiye began experiencing rising hostility and anti-refugee sentiment – causing many displaced Syrians to welcome the chance of return.⁶

European countries hoping to see Syrians return to their homeland in greater numbers were also approving significant aid grants and not cutting support to Syria even if individual countries were recalibrating their aid budgets, particularly as their spending on defence surged in 2024 and 2025.⁷ A widespread lifting of sanctions against the leadership of Syria by Europe, the UK and the US in May was also beneficial and should assist the economy as it emerges from years of conflict.⁸

Barriers to return

While scores of Syrians have made or are making their way back home throughout 2025, many feel more cautious about returning in the immediate future. Some Syrians who fled at the beginning of the civil war and are now well settled in their host countries, for example, are unwilling to uproot their lives once again.⁹ This reluctance is particularly due to the fact that the situation in Syria in the first half of 2025 remained volatile and fast-changing, with brutal sectarian violence and evidence emerging of the persecution of minorities and settling of scores.¹⁰ A mid-year ACAPS report trying to assess the second half of 2025 concluded that, "There is a high risk of tensions escalating between groups still

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- 4 Elayyan, H. (2025) [80% of surveyed refugees in five host countries intend to go back to Syria 'soon' - UNHCR](#). The Jordan Times.
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- 8 Freshfields (2025) [What does the US, EU, and UK easing of sanctions on Syria mean for companies?](#)
- 9 Faiola, A. and Brady, K. (2024) [6,000 Syrians work as doctors in Germany. Some weigh whether to stay or go](#). The Washington Post.
- 10 ACAPS (2025) [SYRIA: Risk analysis: escalating sectarian tensions and humanitarian implications, July–December 2025](#).

loyal to the former president and others affiliated with the transitional government. Resulting clashes in the next months could affect communities along religious lines, particularly conflict between Alawite communities and Sunni groups.”¹¹

One of the biggest obstacles faced throughout 2025 is the level of destruction that the country is still experiencing. With collapsed utilities, health centres, schools and homes, many Syrian refugees consider it too dangerous and precarious to go back.¹² Concerted reconstruction efforts by local and international actors will be required, in order to restore the country and provide humanitarian assistance to people.¹³ According to a 2025 report by the Norwegian Refugee Council, “Premature return without sufficient investments to infrastructure and service provision risk exacerbating tensions, destabilizing fragile equilibrium amongst communities, and undermining the limited progress made toward recovery so far.”¹⁴ Shortages in aid due to unprecedented funding cuts in 2025 will only exacerbate the problem of development and assistance support at a general level, but the EU, specifically, remains a major donor with substantial and increasing allocations for both humanitarian and development objectives.¹⁵

Other factors that are discouraging Syrians from returning include the high levels of unemployment in the country as well as the overall economic instability, not to mention broader regional instability following the conflict between Israel and Iran and Israel’s ongoing military action in Lebanon in their efforts to defeat Hezbollah.¹⁶ Certain Syrian laws also act as hurdles to people wanting to return, such as Law 10. Passed in 2018, this regulation enables the government to seize private properties and discourages people from returning to the country. While Assad claimed that the law aimed to “re-plan the destroyed and the illegal areas” without dispossessing anyone, human rights organisations immediately voiced their concerns about this law effectively creating “potential for abuse and discriminatory treatment of displaced residents”.¹⁷

Potential impacts on mixed migration dynamics

Events in late 2024 in Syria are having, and will continue to have, strong repercussions on mixed migration dynamics in 2025 and beyond, both in the region and elsewhere. The following phenomena are expected:

- Returns triggering new displacements: one possible scenario involves IDPs and refugees returning only to find their homes destroyed and a lack of basic services and facilities. These people might then feel compelled to move elsewhere within the country – possibly, to urban centres where reconstruction efforts might be stronger – thus generating new cycles of displacement which might put immense pressure on already strained facilities and infrastructure.
- Phased returns: many Syrians may adopt gradual return strategies, including phased visits, assessments and, eventually, family returns and reunifications, while others could wait a few more years until reconstruction is well underway.¹⁸ However, somewhat contradictorily in most cases, a Syrian in the EU will lose their refugee status if they voluntarily visit Syria, as this is considered reclaiming protection from their home country. It’s a changing situation, with some countries like Germany and France having changed or being in the process of changing laws to allow Syrians exploratory visits, while others such as Denmark and Austria are adopting a more hardline stance that reflects their position in recent years.¹⁹
- Onward migration: another possible scenario could see displaced Syrians continue to migrate to Europe or elsewhere in the world and form new diasporas.
- Deportations and forced returns: Lebanon and Türkiye have practised forced returns to Syria before 2025. However, in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Assad, host countries in Europe – such as Austria, Greece and Germany – froze asylum claims from Syrian refugees, which were already falling in number, but stopped short of forcible deportations. While no deportations were carried out from January to August 2025, Austria has already prepared an official deportation plan,

11 ACAPS (2025) [SYRIA: Risk analysis: escalating sectarian tensions and humanitarian implications, July–December 2025](#).

12 UNDP (2025) [Accelerating Economic Recovery is Critical to Reversing Syria's Decline and Restoring Stability](#).

13 IOM (2024) [Responding to Syria at a Time of Need: Statement by IOM Chief](#).

14 IOM (2024) [Responding to Syria at a Time of Need: Statement by IOM Chief](#).

15 Al Jazeera (2025) [EU, others pledge more than \\$6bn to Syria in post-al-Assad donor drive](#).

16 Hamzawy, A. (2025) [Israel's and Iran's Military Adventurism Has Put the Middle East in an Alarming Dangerous Situation](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

17 Human Rights Watch (2018) [Syria's New Property Law Questions and Answers](#).

18 Islam Times (2025) [Syrian Refugees Dilemma: Choosing between Return and Staying Abroad](#).

19 Bachels, C. (2025) [Germany wants to allow Syrian refugees to visit home](#), DW; Also Stel, N. and Lindberg, A. (2023) [Beware of the circular logic encouraging refugee returns to Syria](#), The New Humanitarian.

and other countries could follow suit.²⁰ Meanwhile, as of the start of 2025, the UNHCR and EU advisory bodies have strongly cautioned against forced returns due to ongoing instability and humanitarian risks in Syria. They also endorse Go and See visits under safe conditions as a voluntary means for refugees to make informed decisions.²¹

Fluid movements in an uncertain future

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria has experienced a sharp increase in refugee and IDP returns. Both drivers and obstacles to returns are powerful and they all have potentially long-term implications for mixed migration dynamics in the region – and beyond. The current transitional phase is likely to continue for some time, with fluid migration patterns that include returns (both voluntary and coerced), new displacements and onward movement. Just as the outward exodus of Syrians in the last decade or more has had a profound impact in the region and Europe, so might the return of millions to their homeland.

20 Fisayo-Bambi, J. (2024) [Austrian government prepares deportation plan for Syrian migrants](#). Euro News.

21 Beuze, J. N. (2025) [EU countries must not force Syrian refugees to return amid ongoing instability](#). EESC.

Photo credit: Spectral Design / Shutterstock

Ten years after more than a million Syrian refugees successfully requested Germany to help them, there may be a chance for them to return home. How many will want to do so? How tolerant will host countries be if they don't? (See Emerging perspective essay *The road to Damascus: a return deferred*, [p. 168](#) and Thematic snapshot *Returns to Syria: drivers, challenges and impacts on mixed migration dynamics*, [p. 64](#)).



The Americas

Overview

Peter Grant

The start of **United States** (US) president Donald Trump's second term in January 2025 has not only utterly transformed asylum and immigration policy within the country, it has also reverberated across the entire Americas. Besides reducing crossings at the southern border with Mexico to the lowest levels on record and suspending most existing protection pathways – including the CBP One app, Safe Mobility Offices and humanitarian parole for countries such as Haiti – hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people already living in the US have seen their legal right to remain in the country rescinded. This stripping of humanitarian protection has been accompanied by an extensive programme of highly militarised raids, detentions and deportations that have been widely criticised for their violations of human rights.¹ Beyond the US, the upheaval of its asylum and immigration policy has left numerous asylum seekers stranded in Mexico or en route in Central America and driven significant reverse migration back towards South America (for more see Thematic snapshot *US migration policies: regional impact on mixed migration in Latin America*, [p. 88](#)).

The implications of this large-scale, unmanaged north-south movement for both migrants and their intended destination countries, such as Colombia, are considerable and exacerbated by the limited framework for protection and assistance currently in place. At a time when the “spirit of collaboration, solidarity, and shared responsibility” envisioned in the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection is urgently needed, these qualities appear to be in short supply. With many countries stepping back their support to displaced Venezuelans and other migrants, Argentina under far-right President Javier Milei has gone even further, rolling back many established rights for migrants and asylum seekers. This demonstrates how, despite Latin America and the Caribbean's longstanding commitment to free movement and humanitarian assistance, the potential for Trump's migration policies to be exported to other countries in the region remains.

Venezuela crisis

With close to 7.9 million Venezuelans still living outside the country, the vast majority within the Americas, the situation continues to be the largest displacement crisis in the entire region and one of the largest worldwide.² According to data from the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), as of May 2025 there were 6.87 million Venezuelans living in Latin America and the Caribbean alone. While the most sizeable populations are in Colombia (2.81 million), Peru (1.66 million), Brazil (680,100), Chile (669,400) and Ecuador (440,500), there are significant Venezuelan communities distributed across most of the region, from Mexico to Argentina.³ While large numbers are now crossing back into **Venezuela**,⁴ in some cases driven to leave their host countries as conditions become more difficult, more Venezuelans are projected to leave in the near future: according to one survey, around 5 percent of the population in Venezuela (almost 1 million people in total) have plans to leave within the next six months.⁵ For migrants and returnees alike, the journey to the border between Venezuela and Colombia is fraught with risk, exacerbated by the recent rollback of humanitarian assistance.⁶

1 Sainato, M. (2025) “[Horrific: report reveals abuse of pregnant women and children at US ICE facilities](#).” The Guardian; Also Drenon, B. (2025) [Judge bars Trump administration from “indiscriminately” detaining immigrants](#). BBC.

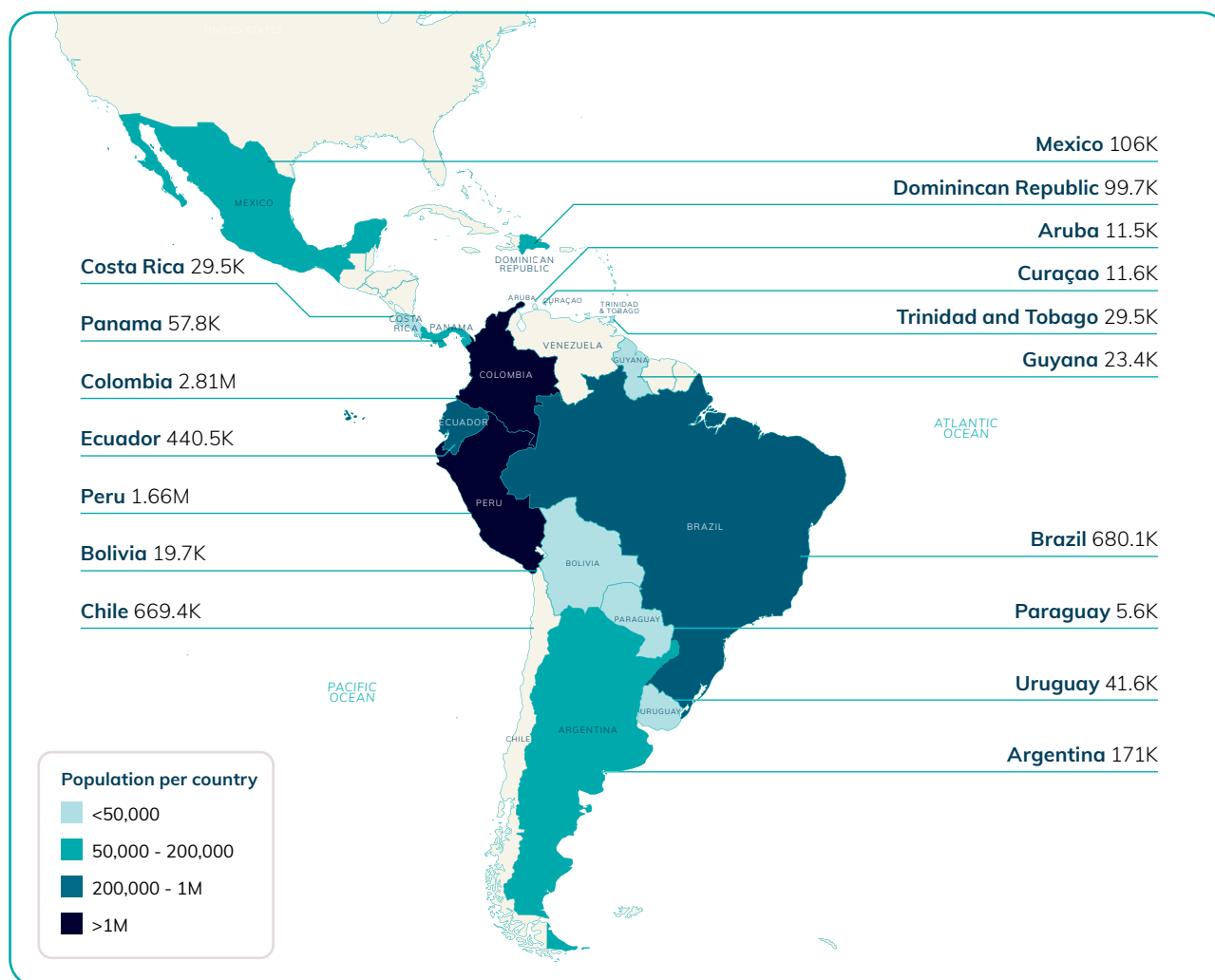
2 UNHCR (2025) [Venezuela situation](#).

3 R4V (2025) [May 2025: Venezuelan refugees and migrants](#).

4 Caracas Chronicles (2025) [A silent emergency is unfolding on the Colombia-Venezuela border](#).

5 Crónica Uno (2025) [Estudio proyecta que casi un millón de venezolanos podrían emigrar en 2025](#).

6 Caracas Chronicles (2025) [A silent emergency is unfolding on the Colombia-Venezuela border](#).

Graphic 1. Major locations of Venezuelans in Latin America as of May 2025

Source: [R4V MAP: Venezuelan refugees and migrants](#)

A more challenging environment in the region

More than a decade since it began, the widespread solidarity that characterised the initial response of neighbouring countries to those displaced has also given way to increasing restrictions. Many Venezuelans now struggle with deepening poverty, legal uncertainty, limited access to services and social discrimination.⁷ In **Colombia**, while around 2 million Venezuelans in the country already benefit from temporary protection,⁸ the expiry of the registration deadline of the Temporary Protection Statute in November 2023 has left Venezuelans who arrived afterwards with no accessible pathways to regularise their status. The main option for more recent arrivals, since December 2024, has been to apply for a special visitor's visa, an onerous process

that reportedly has had a success rate of just over one in every 10 applications. Those whose applications are rejected or who lack the resources to apply in the first place are being pushed into irregularity as a result.⁹

In **Chile**, the previously open policy towards Venezuelan migrants has hardened amidst a struggling economy, strained public services and rising crime – phenomena that many Chileans attribute to mass immigration, despite evidence suggesting that crime levels are still lower among immigrants than the general population.¹⁰ In the north – where, since 2023, the Chilean government has repeatedly extended the 'temporary' militarisation of areas near the border¹¹ – authorities announced, in March, the closure of two reception centres for migrants and will instead "re-route" arrivals back into Bolivia.¹² **Peru** has also

7 Rodríguez, M. (2025) [The future of Venezuela's diaspora](#). Americas Quarterly.

8 Observatorio de Migraciones, Migrantes y Movilidad Humana (2025) [Informe de migrantes venezolanos\(os\) en Colombia corte 31 de diciembre de 2024](#).

9 Gil Gutiérrez, J. (2025) [Colombia rechaza las solicitudes de visa de los venezolanos: solo el 11 % de los migrantes logra regularizarse](#). Semana.

10 Sanders, R. M. (2025) [Chile's immigration challenges heat up ahead of 2025 elections](#). USIP.

11 Government of Chile (2025) [Prorrogan por 90 días medidas de resguardo especial en la frontera norte de Chile](#).

12 ABC (2025) [Fin a la acogida en el norte de Chile y "reconducción" a Bolivia de migrantes irregulares](#).

recently introduced a raft of immigration requirements, with significant implications for undocumented Venezuelans. Legislation announced in October 2024 will require immigrants to have an employment contract and rental agreement in place to remain in the country. Activists have expressed concerns that, given the barriers some face in formalising their work and accommodation, the provisions could prove discriminatory.¹³

One of the most significant barriers for many Venezuelan migrants is a lack of legal documentation, a situation that can compound their vulnerability and constrain access to basic services, housing and formal employment. Positively, many host countries in the region have launched repeated regularisation drives to address this, including **Brazil** and **Uruguay**.¹⁴ However, in March, **Ecuador** revoked a regularisation programme launched the previous year, citing insufficient assistance from IOM and UNHCR as a reason. While the almost 5,000 visas already issued by the programme remain valid, the fate of 3,000 others under consideration was not clear.¹⁵ The decision also paved the way for the annulment, in August 2025, of the 2010 Migratory Statute between Ecuador and Venezuela – a bilateral document that established a principle of free movement between the two countries.¹⁶ Though, in practice, the provisions of the agreement had already been suspended back in 2019, when Venezuelans were again required to have visas to enter Ecuador – a development that Chile and Peru also introduced in the same year – some fear it could further weaken the status of migrants in the country.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the shift in policy has been most pronounced in **Argentina**, where the right-wing government has imposed wide-ranging restrictions on asylum and immigration.¹⁸ An emergency decree on asylum, passed in October 2024, reduces the ability of claimants to appeal negative decisions and expands the existing criteria for exclusion of refugee status, meaning that applicants accused of political crimes could be ineligible for support.¹⁹ Subsequently, an executive order in May 2025 drastically reduced access to permanent residency, citizenship and basic services for migrants in the country, while expanding the provisions for

deportations.²⁰ Venezuelans, while not specifically targeted in the legislation, make up most of the country's registered refugees and a significant share of its migrant population.

Migration in the Caribbean

Poverty, insecurity and environmental disasters remain potent drivers of displacement within the Caribbean. In **Cuba** for instance, against a backdrop of economic and demographic decline, the national population shrank to less than 10 million in 2024, compared to 11.2 million in 2012 – a decline of 13 percent²¹ – with the majority heading to the US. While there are deep-rooted structural and societal factors that continue to push Cubans to migrate,²² government officials have also warned that the imposition of fresh sanctions by the US government could trigger more migration.²³ With the cancellation of the Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela (CHNV) programme and the imposition of partial restrictions on travel from Cuba generally,²⁴ many recent Cuban migrants will end up having to choose alternative destinations in the Americas, including Brazil,²⁵ Mexico and Suriname.²⁶

Haiti's displacement crisis

The situation is even more acute in **Haiti**, with the country reportedly approaching what the UN warned was a “point of no return”, as a surge in gang violence and the steady deterioration of public security threatened to descend into “complete chaos”.²⁷ During the course of 2024, the number of IDPs tripled to over 1 million, with the country accounting for around three-quarters of all crime-related displacement worldwide that year.²⁸ In the capital Port-au-Prince, where an estimated 85 percent of the city is under the control of gangs, many residents have had to settle in displacement sites to escape the fighting.²⁹ However, with little in the way of basic services, adequate shelter or protection, IDPs are at heightened risk of cholera outbreaks and sexual violence.³⁰

13 La República (2024) [Migraciones exigirá contrato de trabajo y de alquiler a ciudadanos venezolanos para permanecer en Perú](#).

14 MMC (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 1 2025](#).

15 El Universo (2025) [Cancillería aclara que venezolanos que tengan la visa Virte II podrán renovarla por dos años más](#).

16 Rueda, R. (2025) [Asamblea pone fin al acuerdo migratorio de Ecuador con Venezuela. ¿qué implicaciones tiene esta decisión?](#) Primicias.

17 Primicias (2025) [¿Cómo quedará la migración venezolana hacia Ecuador tras la anulación del Estatuto binacional?](#)

18 Bueno, O. and Müller, C. (2025) [Trump 2.0? Argentina adopts anti-immigration policies mirroring US models](#). MMC.

19 MMC (2024) [Mixed migration quarterly update: Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 4 2024](#).

20 Bueno, O. and Müller, C. (2025) [Trump 2.0? Argentina adopts anti-immigration policies mirroring US models](#). MMC.

21 Hauteville, J. M. (2025) [Cuba faces population decline and aging amid mass migration exodus](#). Le Monde.

22 Torres Pérez, R. (2025) [The economic crisis in Cuba, its causes, and migration](#). Colombia University.

23 France24 (2025) [Cuba warns US pressure could trigger migration surge](#).

24 Beckett, L. (2025) [Trump travel ban barring citizens from 12 countries goes into effect](#). The Guardian.

25 Rosati, A. and Lopes M. (2025) [Cubans shut out by Trump are ditching Miami for Brazil's deep south](#). Bloomberg.

26 MMC (2025) [Mixed migration quarterly review: Latin American and the Caribbean – Quarter 2 2025](#).

27 Mishra, V. (2025) [Haiti faces 'point of no return' as gang violence fuels chaos](#). UN News.

28 IDMC (2025) [Global report on internal displacement](#).

29 Buschschlüter, V. (2025) [Number of internally displaced people in Haiti tripled in 2024](#). Il Patto Sociale.

30 Mishra, V. (2025) [Haiti faces 'point of no return' as gang violence fuels chaos](#). UN News.

The crisis has only deepened during 2025, with the violence – at least 2,680 people were killed in the first five months of 2025 alone, with another 957 injured and 316 abducted³¹ – spreading to previously unaffected areas. By June 2025, almost 1.3 million people were displaced, an increase of 24 percent from six months before.³² Many have been forced from the city in an “urban exodus”,³³ with the majority (77%) of the country’s IPDs now situated in the provinces.³⁴ Notwithstanding the growth of displacement sites, particularly in the capital, more than four in five IDPs (83%) are being hosted outside them – for instance, with local families – placing further pressure on impoverished rural communities.³⁵ Despite the severity of the situation, humanitarian support remains grossly underfunded, with OCHA having received just 8 percent of the USD 908 million requested for the year as of the end of June.³⁶

The dynamics of displacement in Haiti are distinct from many other superficially similar crises, such as civil conflicts, because of the dominant role of criminal organisations in the violence. Displacement, rather than being a side effect of the violence, is a primary instrument of the various armed groups and factions vying for control in the capital. The forced movement of communities from certain areas, as well as the managed return of residents once they are firmly under their control, is central to how these gangs terrorise, coerce and extort the civilian population. This ‘weaponisation of displacement’ is accompanied by systematic abuses including child recruitment, kidnapping and gender-based violence.³⁷

Even before the current crisis, extreme poverty and chronic insecurity were major drivers of emigration from Haiti itself, with around 16 percent of the national population (1.7 million people) estimated to be living outside the country as of 2020.³⁸ Despite the inhospitable environment in the wider region, described below, many continue to attempt to escape the violence by trying to leave by boat, with more than 600 Haitians intercepted on vessels by the US Coast Guard between 1 October 2024 and 2 September 2025 and returned to Haiti.³⁹

Deportations from the Dominican Republic and the wider region

The deepening crisis in Haiti has been exacerbated by the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Haitians from elsewhere in the region, in particular, the neighbouring **Dominican Republic**. While the Dominican Republic hosts a sizeable Haitian population, including both migrants and a large but marginalised Dominico-Haitian minority, this community has been exposed to discrimination, abuse, exploitation and the threat of deportation for decades.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding conditions across the border, Dominican authorities have escalated efforts to summarily expel thousands of Haitians, including unaccompanied minors and people born in the country who had their citizenship revoked following the passage of discriminatory legislation in 2013. In the first eight months of 2025, more than 175,000 Haitians were deported from the country, bringing the total since 2021 to over 593,600 deportations.⁴¹ Though some Dominican business leaders have called for the regularisation of Haitian workers, given the vital role they play in key sectors such as construction, the government has intensified its restrictions in employment, housing and other areas, heightening fears within migrant communities.⁴²

While these crackdowns are part of a long-standing policy of exclusion, they nevertheless entered a new phase in October 2024, when the Dominican government announced a quota of 10,000 Haitians deported every week. In April 2025, this programme was expanded to specifically target hospitals and maternity wards, sweeping up hundreds of pregnant or lactating women in the process. As a result, many women in need of maternal health care have reportedly chosen to give birth at home out of fear of deportation, with sometimes fatal consequences.⁴³ Those deported, meanwhile, are acutely vulnerable given the parlous state of health services in Haiti and shrinking access to essential services in the wake of funding cuts, in particular the rollback of assistance from USAID since the beginning of Donald Trump’s second presidency.⁴⁴ Though IOM is attempting to scale up its support

31 UN (2025) [Haiti: UN Human Rights Chief alarmed by widening violence as gangs expand reach](#).

32 IOM (2025) [Haiti — Information sheet on the displacement situation in Haiti — Round 10 \(June 2025\)](#).

33 IDMC (2025) [Global report on internal displacement](#).

34 IOM (2025) [Haiti — Information sheet on the displacement situation in Haiti — Round 10 \(June 2025\)](#).

35 IOM (2025) [Haiti — Information sheet on the displacement situation in Haiti — Round 10 \(June 2025\)](#).

36 OCHA (2025) [Haiti: Overview of the humanitarian response at the national level - Situation report No. 19 \(1 - 30 June 2025\)](#).

37 Le-Cour-Grandmaison, R. (2025) [A strategic tool in criminal hands: The weaponization of displacement by gangs in Haiti should be a warning flare to the international community](#). Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

38 IOM (2025) [Haiti Displacement Triples Surpassing one Million as Humanitarian Crisis Worsens](#).

39 US Coast Guard News (2025) [Coast Guard repatriates 191 aliens to Haiti](#).

40 Minority Rights Group International (2023) [World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Dominican Republic](#).

41 IOM (2025) [Statistiques sur les personnes déportées en Haïti depuis 2021](#).

42 MMC (2025) [Mixed migration quarterly review: Latin American and the Caribbean – Quarter 2 2025](#).

43 Llaveneras Blanco, M. (2025) [For Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, “reproduction is like a death sentence”](#). The Conversation.

44 UN News (2025) [UN alert over rising deportations of Haitian mothers and newborns from Dominican Republic](#).

to border towns, where tens of thousands of deportees are arriving in a state of acute vulnerability, this is especially difficult given the deteriorating humanitarian and security context across the country.⁴⁵ Many of those deported have not lived in Haiti for decades or, having been born in the Dominican Republic, never even visited the country.⁴⁶

While the situation in the Dominican Republic is especially egregious, deportations have also been carried out elsewhere, including from **Jamaica**. Among other incidents, in May 2025 more than 40 Haitians were sent back after being denied an asylum hearing in a move that was condemned by human rights activists as a violation of international law.⁴⁷ Other Caribbean countries, such as the **Bahamas** and the **Turks and Caicos Islands**, have also forcibly repatriated Haitians despite the dangers in their home country.⁴⁸ Across the Caribbean as a whole, the response to the situation in Haiti appears to be primarily informed by concerns around irregular migration, rather than protection: despite a widespread momentum towards free movement in the region generally, most countries within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) have specific visa restrictions in place for Haitian nationals. At present, Haiti is also excluded from the planned CARICOM agreement to establish freedom of movement between member states.⁴⁹

The US, for its part, has not only repatriated Haitians intercepted at sea⁵⁰ but has also undertaken a large-scale deportation of long-term Haitian residents in July, as part of its crackdown on migrants, many of whom were apprehended during official immigration processes.⁵¹ The move is especially concerning given that the Trump administration revoked the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of an estimated 500,000 Haitians in February 2025, a move that came into effect in August.⁵² Haitian TPS holders have been encouraged to return to Haiti,⁵³ despite the life-threatening conditions in the country, though a legal ruling has prevented the government from implementing the termination before February 2026.⁵⁴

Reverse north-south migration through Central America

For many years, an increasingly large and diverse migrant population – encompassing not only nationals from Latin America and the Caribbean, but also Africa, Asia and the Middle East – has moved northwards through Colombia, either by land through the notorious Darién Gap, or by boat to Panama and **Nicaragua**, before moving onwards through Honduras and Guatemala to Mexico and its northern border with the US. However, since the imposition of highly restrictive asylum and immigration policies by the US government in January 2025, discussed further in this section, this trend has been dramatically reversed. The majority of migrants are now effectively stuck en route or heading back to South America, either to their countries of origin or other countries in the region where they have previously resided.⁵⁵ This poses new protection risks for migrants who in many cases are now forced to experience the dangers of the journey again, including kidnapping, extortion and robbery,⁵⁶ as they transit back through Mexico, Central America and Colombia (see also Thematic snapshot *ICE wars*, [p. 98](#)).

Migrants stranded in Mexico

With the US-Mexico border now almost impossible to traverse, many migrants appear to have suspended their plans to move on. While significant numbers are deciding to return south, however, a recent survey by IOM found that almost three-quarters (72%) were planning to stay indefinitely in **Mexico**.⁵⁷ Though asylum applications in Mexico have already risen to record levels in recent years, informal reports suggest that the number of claims has more than tripled to around 1,000 a day since January 2025.⁵⁸ Despite the difficulties of remaining there, many thousands of migrants are choosing Mexico or previously popular host countries such as Ecuador over their countries of origin, given the continued dangers there. Some also lack the funds and

45 IOM (2025) [IOM strengthens humanitarian lifeline for displaced and deported in Haitian border towns](#).

46 Lemonnier, A. (2025) [Haiti: "I was deported to a country I never lived in"](#). UN News.

47 Jamaica Observer (2025) [Advocacy group calls for Jamaica to end "racist" policy against Haitian asylum seekers](#).

48 Duncan, N. and Lugg, A. (2024) [Stop "draconian" mass deportations of Haitians fleeing gangs, activists say](#). The Guardian.

49 MMC (2025) [Mixed migration quarterly review: Latin American and the Caribbean – Quarter 2 2025](#).

50 Chéry, O. (2025) [Nearly 100 Haitians intercepted at sea by U.S. Coast Guard near Turks and Caicos](#). The Haitian Times.

51 Chéry, O. (2025) [Ninety-six Haitians deported from US arrive in Cap-Haitien on Trump-era flight](#). The Haitian Times.

52 Ward, M. (2025) [Trump moves to end protections for 500K Haitian migrants – paving the way for deportations](#). Politico.

53 Department of Homeland Security (2025) [DHS terminates Haiti TPS, encourages Haitians to obtain lawful status](#).

54 US Citizenship and Immigration Services (2025) [Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Haiti](#).

55 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Migration dynamics and protection risks in North-South return movements in the Americas](#).

56 Defensoría del Pueblo en Colombia (2025) [Informe de Comisión de las Defensorías del Pueblo de Costa Rica, Panamá y Colombia revela aumento sin precedentes en la migración inversa desde el norte del continente](#).

57 Camacho, P. (2025) [Mexico faces new role as host nation as seven in 10 migrants staying there after U.S. border closures: Report](#). The Latin Times.

58 Linthicum, K. (2025) [Asylum requests surge in Mexico amid U.S. border crackdown](#). The Los Angeles Times.

documentation to return home – a particular challenge for Nicaraguan nationals, with many reportedly denied re-entry by authorities and even stripped of their citizenship⁵⁹ – or may be planning to resume their journey to the US in future should conditions change (see also *Interview with Luciana Gandini*, [p. 92](#)).⁶⁰

Nevertheless, those seeking to stay face significant barriers to accessing employment, education and other long-term needs, not least because of the extended waiting periods associated with Mexico's overloaded asylum system.⁶¹ Many are now living precariously in displacement sites and informal settlements close to the northern and southern borders or in Mexico City, with little or no access to services and at constant risk of sexual violence, kidnapping and infectious disease.⁶² Their vulnerability has been exacerbated by the rollback of humanitarian assistance – another central policy of the Trump administration – as well as regular reports of mistreatment by police.⁶³

Dwindling migration through the Darién Gap

The dangers of the Darién Gap, an area of mountainous jungle dominated by armed groups, have become notorious in recent years as increasing numbers of migrants have travelled through the region on their way to **Panama**. Besides the threat of criminal violence, other factors such as wild animals, sickness and flooding all contribute to the high number of fatalities associated with the route. In 2024, according to IOM, a record 174 deaths and disappearances were documented in the Darién, more than any other year since 2015, when data collection began.⁶⁴

During 2025, however, the death toll has plummeted to eight deaths between January and the end of July.⁶⁵ This reflects a sharp reduction in movement northwards, largely in response to increased restrictions. Having peaked in 2023, when 520,085 crossings into Panama were detected, numbers were already substantially lower in 2024 (at 302,203), in part as a result of tighter entry restrictions imposed by Panamanian authorities and an uptick in deportations from the US. All the same, the figures for 2025 show a far more precipitous fall: just 2,934 detected crossings in the first seven months, with the majority (2,229) occurring in January, before the new US administration's policies came into effect. As the year progressed, movement along the route has continued to dwindle, with just seven detected crossings into Panama in July.⁶⁶

59 France24 (2025) [Apatridia de facto: el nuevo temor de nicaragüenses dentro y fuera de su país](#).

60 Corpi Arnaud, S. (2025) [As Trump ends asylum, is Mexico a viable alternative for those left stranded?](#) The New Humanitarian.

61 Corpi Arnaud, S. (2025) [As Trump ends asylum, is Mexico a viable alternative for those left stranded?](#) The New Humanitarian; Also Gómez, A. (2025) [Solicitantes de asilo en Tapachula enfrentan barreras para conseguir empleo formal](#). Diario del Sur.

62 Díaz, D. (2025) [Stranded: The Trump-induced migration crisis in Mexico](#). The New Humanitarian.

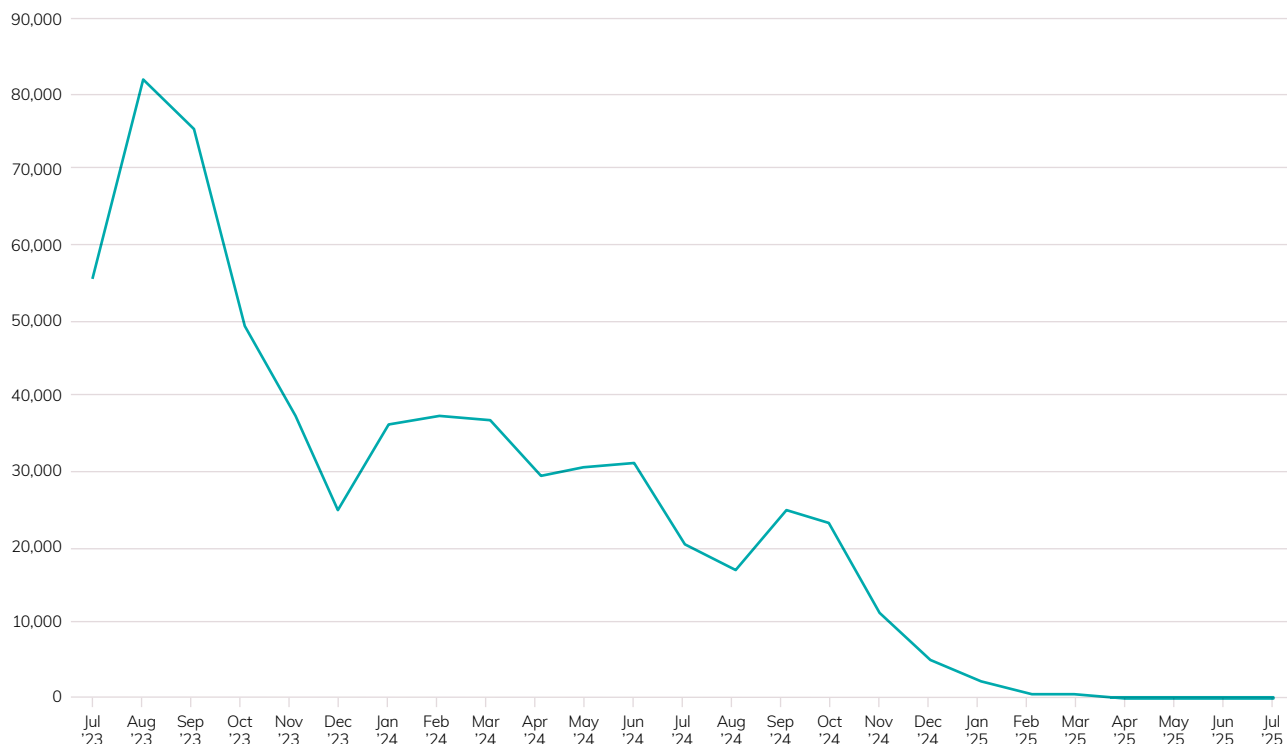
63 HRW (2025) [Mexico: Events of 2024](#); Also Amnesty International (2025) [Mexico 2024](#).

64 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Americas](#).

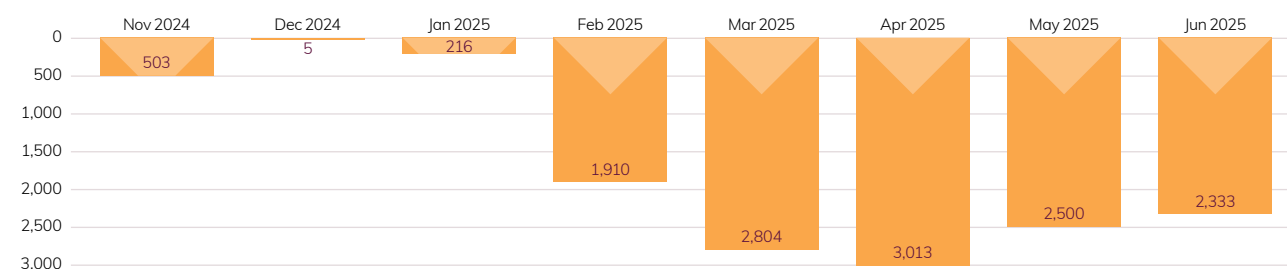
65 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Americas](#).

66 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) [Estadísticas—Tránsito irregular por Darién por año](#); Also MMC (2025) [Mixed migration quarterly update: Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 4 2024](#).

Graphic 2. Crossings through Panama's Darién Gap, July 2023 - July 2025



Reverse movements (north to south) through Darien Gap, November 2024 - June 2025



Source: migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/

By April, Panama's president José Raul Mulino was declaring that "for all practical purposes, the Darién is closed", summing up the situation as "mission complete".⁶⁷ Nevertheless, by the middle of June, he was expressing concerns about the scale of reverse migration now taking place,⁶⁸ which saw a rise to more than 14,000 migrants having moved southwards by August.⁶⁹ While Panama itself has been detaining and deporting migrants, prompting criticism from human rights groups, it has also been receiving hundreds of deported migrants from the US – many from countries to which they cannot be easily returned to directly, such as Afghanistan, China

and Iran – in what critics argue is illegal refoulement. Having forcibly detained these migrants for weeks, the government was pressurised by local rights groups in March to release them, with an order to leave the country within 30 days.⁷⁰ Months later, however, some were still stranded in the country, uncertain whether to apply for asylum in Panama or wait in the hope of resettlement in a third country.⁷¹

Onward movement to Colombia

Many migrants have also been heading south from Central America, a largely novel phenomenon:

67 La Silla Vacía (2025) [Presidente de Panamá declara "cerrado" el Darién](#).

68 SWI (2025) [El presidente de Panamá alerta que sube cifra de migrantes en flujo inverso hacia el sur](#).

69 Defensoría del Pueblo en Colombia (2025) [Informe de Comisión de las Defensorías del Pueblo de Costa Rica, Panamá y Colombia revela aumento sin precedentes en la migración inversa desde el norte del continente](#).

70 Gomez, V. (2025) [Reverse' migration: El Darien begins to see migrants returning to the South](#). Universidad de Navarra.

71 NPR (2025) [Asylum seekers deported by the U.S. are stuck in Panama unable to return home](#).

Panamanian authorities initially responded by sending back some arrivals into **Costa Rica** before the two countries reached an agreement in February to facilitate onward movement.⁷² From Panama, many of those heading on to Colombia are opting to travel by boat to avoid the Darién Gap, though these maritime routes carry other risks, including capsizing accidents.⁷³ While the scale of returns is not comparable to the volume of movement northwards in previous years, it has, nevertheless, put significant pressure on smaller border or coastal towns with limited resources to respond to new arrivals, including many vulnerable children and others with complex mental health needs.⁷⁴

An uncertain future for returnees

Tens of thousands of migrants previously travelling northwards or living near the US border, including many waiting for scheduled asylum appointments with US authorities before the CBP One programme was cancelled, are now either stuck in transit or in the process of returning through Central America. These groups, including many already traumatised and impoverished by their original journey north, face a variety of distinct protection risks.

To understand this new migratory dynamic, MMC's 4Mi initiative surveyed 479 returning migrants in Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico on their motivations, journeys and future plans.⁷⁵ Among other findings, the research uncovered the following:

- **Migrants are increasingly dependent on smugglers for their return:** close to half (46%) of respondents reported having used or intending to use smuggling services to facilitate their journey, with another 12 percent unsure. This is significantly higher than the proportion among northbound migrants surveyed by MMC in previous research in the region. This reliance may, in part, be a reflection of the fact that the novelty of these return routes, as well as the demand for maritime crossings as an alternative to previous land-based routes, has meant that migrants have a greater need for organised smuggling – something that smuggling groups appear to have quickly responded to.

- **Large-scale returns, particularly of Venezuelan migrants, could exacerbate pressure in other host countries within Latin America:** while around three in five (59%) of respondents were returning to their countries of nationality, a significant portion (41%) – predominantly Venezuelans – were planning to go to a third country instead. Among surveyed Venezuelans, half (50%) intended to return to Venezuela and the remainder planned to go elsewhere in the region, with the most popular destinations being Colombia (49%), Peru (17%), Ecuador (17%) and Chile (9%). Though these countries were typically chosen because migrants have previously lived there, the majority did not have legal residency in their country of choice. Given that, for many, the failure to regularise their status likely limited their access to services, housing and employment, they could face similar challenges upon their return.
- **Future plans remain uncertain:** unsurprisingly, given the speed with which the recent restrictions were imposed by the US government, many migrants remain unsure as to their plans in the long term, with fewer than half (47%) of those surveyed by MMC stating that they would stay in their intended destination for six months or more. Consequently, it is difficult to predict future migratory movements within the region and whether further large-scale movements will occur relatively soon.

The research points to the extraordinary disruption that large-scale returns could have both for migrants and host countries, with a significant possibility that further displacement could occur again in future. These findings underline the importance of regional solidarity and collaboration, in line with the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, to promote free movement, legal regularisation and a shared rights-based framework for the protection of migrants.

72 Government of Panama (2025) [Autoridades de Panamá y Costa Rica establecen protocolos para el flujo migratorio inverso](#); Also Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 1 2025](#).

73 SWI (2025) [Una niña muerta y 20 rescatados en naufragio de lancha con migrantes en Panamá](#).

74 MMC (2025) [Mixed migration quarterly review: Latin American and the Caribbean – Quarter 2 2025](#).

75 MMC and ProLAC (2025) [Migration Dynamics & Protection Risks in North–South Return Movements in the Americas](#).

The United States

While there were marked differences between current US president Donald Trump and his predecessor, President Joe Biden, in how they framed immigration – for instance, with some exceptions,⁷⁶ Biden generally shied away from the inflammatory, xenophobic rhetoric that characterised much of Trump's 2024 election campaign⁷⁷ – many were disappointed that Biden replicated important elements of Trump's first-term anti-immigrant agenda during his own presidency.⁷⁸ Despite some continuity in areas such as deportations and restrictions on asylum, however, the second Trump presidency represents a dramatic escalation. Alongside the almost total closure of the southern border to asylum seekers, regardless of their claims, the new administration has launched a highly militarised deportation drive within the US – a move that has been condemned as “unprecedented and deeply dangerous”.⁷⁹

By far, the most radical element of Trump's second-term agenda is the dismantling of vast swathes of the country's asylum and immigration law. The scale and intensity of this push is illustrated by the fact that no fewer than 181 immigration-related actions were carried out in the first 100 days of his administration⁸⁰ – an extraordinary barrage of legislation that has touched virtually every aspect of asylum, citizenship and immigration law. This process was launched on Trump's very first day in office with an executive order “protecting” the country against “invasion”⁸¹ and has since included, among other measures, the weaponisation of archaic laws, such as the 1798 Alien Enemies Act, to expedite removals. For instance, a rarely used section of the Immigration and Nationality Act authorising that any “alien whose presence or activities” could have “potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States” is “deportable” has been leveraged for the attempted expulsion of foreign nationals in the country who have expressed pro-Palestinian views.⁸² Many of these measures skirt the outer perimeter of constitutional law and have been contested by a multitude of challenges in the courts.

Closing the border

Just as “building the wall” was a key electoral promise in Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, Trump's new immigration policy includes elements of physical deterrence. Despite the financial, human and environmental costs associated with previous phases of the wall's construction,⁸³ the administration intends to build a new section⁸⁴ and has mooted plans to paint the entirety of it black to make it hotter and harder to climb.⁸⁵ US troop numbers at the border have been tripled, and large areas on the US side have been classified as militarised zones, enabling the government to deploy soldiers with the authority to apprehend any migrants who enter this territory on charges of trespassing.⁸⁶ This has effectively served as a loophole to circumvent well-established restrictions on military participation in immigration enforcement.⁸⁷ Alongside this intensified securitisation, the administration has suspended the right to asylum at the border and re-introduced legislation requiring asylum seekers to stay in Mexico while their claims are under consideration (see box, p. 78).

On one level, these measures seem to be working. Since Trump came to power, encounters at the southern border with Mexico have fallen to the lowest levels in decades, with just 4,601 encounters in July 2025 – a fraction of the monthly total in July 2024 (104,100) or July 2023 (183,479).⁸⁸ These figures prompted celebration from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem, who proclaimed that “President Trump didn't manage the crisis – he obliterated it”.⁸⁹ For many, the figures appear to corroborate the effectiveness of his deterrence-based strategy,⁹⁰ even if it comes at an extraordinary human cost.⁹¹

76 Al Jazeera (2024) [“Incendiary and wrong”: Biden spurs anger for calling migrant “an illegal”](#).

77 Sentner, I. (2024) [Trump uses harsher rhetoric to describe Haitians in Ohio](#). Politico.

78 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) [Mixed migration review 2024](#), p.74.

79 Gassama, H. (2025) [New detention camp at Fort Bliss marks dangerous expansion of militarized immigration enforcement](#). ACLU.

80 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.

81 The White House (2025) [Protecting the American People against Invasion](#).

82 Anderson, S. (2025) [Trump promises to deport immigrants for their foreign policy views](#). Forbes.

83 Marcus, J. (2024) [What ever happened to the border wall Trump promised 8 years ago?](#) The Independent.

84 Gilbert, S. (2025) [Trump's new border wall will threaten wildlife in an area where few people pass](#). The Guardian.

85 Debusmann, B. (2025) [Trump wants US-Mexico border wall to be painted black to stop climbers](#). BBC.

86 The Guardian (2025) [“Deterrence is boring”: the US troops at sharp end of Trump's border crackdown](#).

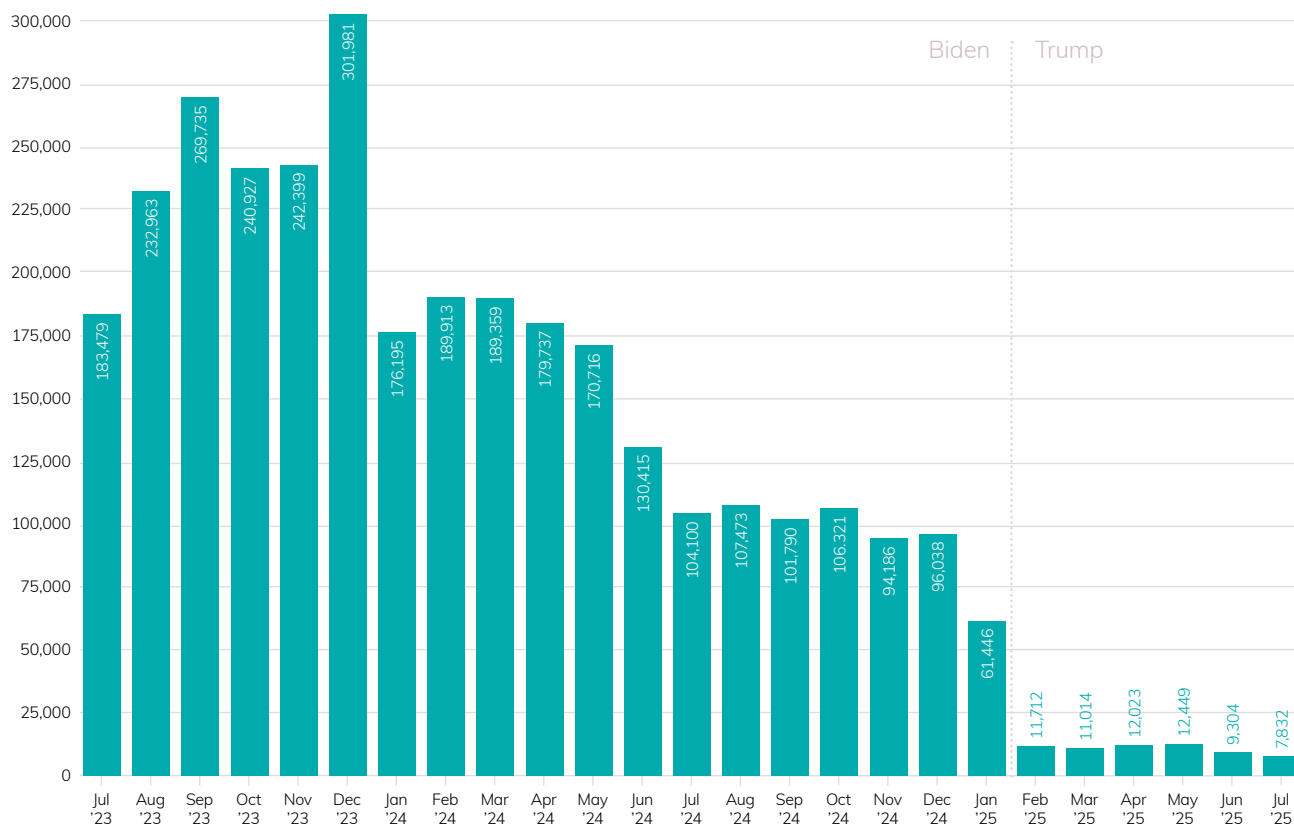
87 García Marco, D. and Ventas, L. (2025) [This armoured vehicle was used in Iraq - now it's stationed at the US-Mexico border](#). BBC.

88 Customs and Border Protection (2025) [Southwest land border encounters](#).

89 DHS (2025) [History made, again: Trump administration crushes border records in July](#).

90 The New York Times (2025) [Illegal border crossings plunge to lowest level in decades](#).

91 Díaz, D. (2025) [Stranded: The Trump-induced migration crisis in Mexico](#). The New Humanitarian.

Graphic 3. Southwest land border encounters (July 2023 - July 2025)

Source: cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters

Nevertheless, attempted entries at the southern border had already reduced significantly in the final year of the Biden administration. This decrease had been credited to a 'carrot and stick' approach that balanced, on the one hand, more restrictive asylum policies and an agreement with Mexico to intercept northbound migrants in its territory with, on the other, the expansion of safe and legal alternative pathways (such as the CBP One app, the CNHV programme and the Safe Mobility Offices).⁹² This has two implications. Firstly, while Trump's policies have undoubtedly had an enormous impact, they represent to some extent a continuation of downward trends already evident under Biden. More important, however, is the fact that the humanitarian parole programmes that the Biden administration implemented alongside deterrents have been dramatically rolled back. The authorisation of 30,000 individuals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela to enter the US every month, for example, played an important role in the 98 percent reduction in irregular entries that had been achieved by September 2024.⁹³

Altogether, removing these pathways may prove counter-productive in the longer term, particularly if (as seems likely) insecurity, political instability, economic stagnation and other drivers of migration in sending countries persist. In that scenario, it is uncertain whether the current low numbers will be sustainable indefinitely: indeed, it is possible that human smuggling networks could see their business expand under these conditions.⁹⁴ It is also the case that the cancellation of various humanitarian protections for displaced national groups has effectively irregularised more than 1 million people in the country, significantly expanding the existing number of "illegal" immigrants.⁹⁵

92 Putzel-Kavanaugh, C. (2025) [Can near-historic low migrant encounter levels at the U.S.-Mexico border be sustained?](#) Migration Policy Institute.

93 Anderson, S. (2024) [Undocumented immigration has plummeted by 98% from 4 key countries](#). Forbes.

94 Putzel-Kavanaugh, C. (2025) [Can near-historic low migrant encounter levels at the U.S.-Mexico border be sustained?](#) Migration Policy Institute.

95 Woodward, A. (2025) [How Trump's deportation push created 1 million MORE undocumented people](#). The Independent.

Suspending and obstructing the right to asylum

One of the first actions by the Trump administration was to halt all asylum applications at the southern border. While, during 2024, Biden had already implemented highly restrictive legislation that allowed for the temporary suspension of asylum processing there when the number of entries reached a certain threshold,⁹⁶ the indefinite suspension of asylum implemented by Trump marked a fundamental departure from US immigration policy over the past four decades.⁹⁷ In July, a federal judge ruled that Trump's suspension of asylum at the southern border was unlawful.⁹⁸

At the same time, the government cancelled the CBP One programme – a gateway established in 2023 to allow migrants to register for an asylum appointment as an alternative to irregular entry to the US – leaving thousands of applicants with scheduled appointments in limbo in Mexico. In April, the administration announced that it would be ordering others who had previously entered under CBP One to leave the US “immediately”, though it was not clear how many of the more than 900,000 beneficiaries of the programme would be affected.⁹⁹ In July, CBP One was rebranded as CBP Home, an application for “illegal aliens” to “self deport”, with the incentive of up to USD 1,000 in financial assistance and a paid flight back to their country of origin.¹⁰⁰

Another controversial announcement was the abrupt pausing of the country's refugee resettlement programme, a move that left an estimated 120,000 people who had been nominally approved for refugee status in the US unable to do so.¹⁰¹ In February, just a day after a federal court determined that the suspension was unlawful and ordered the government to resume admissions, the latter announced that it was terminating all its contracts with refugee resettlement and assistance groups in an apparent effort to outmanoeuvre the ruling.¹⁰²

The administration has also increased immigration processing fees, including a USD 100 fee (originally proposed at USD 1,000)¹⁰³ to file an asylum claim – something that was previously free of charge – and even higher fees for other applications. These additional costs will significantly obstruct the ability of many vulnerable individuals to access humanitarian protection.¹⁰⁴ The legal protections of asylum applicants have also been weakened by the Justice Department's publication, in April, of guidance calling for judges to drop “legally deficient” asylum cases – an opaque term that could be used to penalise unrepresented asylum seekers, in particular, for simple omissions.¹⁰⁵ The controversial Remain in Mexico protocols, requiring non-Mexican asylum seekers with pending claims to leave the US while their cases are under review, has also been reinstated, despite the known dangers of migrants being kidnapped, tortured or murdered by criminal groups.¹⁰⁶

The government has also rolled back other protections for vulnerable groups, including the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programme. As of August 2025, this initiative – designating specific national groups who have the right to claim temporary protection if already in the US due to chronic insecurity or instability in their country of origin – covered 15 different countries, with the Trump administration seeking to remove seven of these: Afghanistan, Cameroon, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua and Venezuela. In May, after a previous ruling by a federal district judge that blocked the efforts to cancel TPS for an estimated 350,000 Venezuelans, the Supreme Court approved an emergency appeal by the Trump administration that will enable it to move forward with the termination of their protections.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, in August, a federal appeals court greenlit the government's proposal to revoke the status of an estimated 63,000 TPS holders from Honduras, Nicaragua and Nepal,¹⁰⁸ overriding a ruling the previous month by a district judge that argued the move was motivated by “racial animus”.¹⁰⁹ The

96 Altman, H. (2025) [How the Biden administration's expanded asylum ban puts lives at risk and contradicts American values](#). NILC.

97 Martínez-Beltrán, S. (2025) [President Trump's suspension of asylum marks a break from U.S. past](#). NPR.

98 Singh, M. (2025) [“A win for humanity”: Trump's asylum ban at US-Mexico border ruled unlawful](#). The Guardian.

99 The Guardian (2025) [Homeland security revokes legal status for those who entered US via Biden-era CBP One app](#).

100 Department of Homeland Security (2025) [DHS releases new nationwide ads to encourage self deportation](#).

101 Drenon, B. (2025) [“It's not fair”: Other refugees in limbo as US welcomes white South Africans](#). BBC.

102 Woodward, A. (2025) [Trump cancels contracts with refugee groups one day after judge blocks suspension of resettlement program](#). The Independent.

103 Clark, S. (2025) [Trump admin to make millions off charging asylum seekers: What to know](#). Newsweek.

104 Global Refugee (2025) [How does the one Big Beautiful Bill Act affect immigration fees?](#)

105 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Mixed migration quarterly review: Latin American and the Caribbean – Quarter 2 2025](#).

106 The Guardian (2025) [Trump revives “remain in Mexico” policy as part of anti-immigration crackdown](#).

107 Gerstein, J. (2025) [Appeals court panel clears way for Trump admin to end TPS for Hondurans, Nepalis and Nicaraguans](#). Politico.

108 Gerstein, J. (2025) [Appeals court panel clears way for Trump admin to end TPS for Hondurans, Nepalis and Nicaraguans](#). Politico.

109 Woodward, A. (2025) [“Color is neither a poison nor a crime”: Judge rips Kristi Noem's “racial animus” in latest ruling protecting migrants](#). The Independent.

expiry of TPS for Afghan nationals could mean that more than 11,000 people who fled Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 2021 might be forcibly returned.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, the termination of TPS for Cameroonian nationals was announced in June, coming into effect in August,¹¹¹ with Haitian TPS holders similarly slated to have their status revoked in September 2025 – though a judicial ruling has meant that the termination date will now have to be postponed until February 2026.¹¹²

The administration has also sought to cancel other forms of humanitarian parole, including the CHNV programme, launched in 2021 for Venezuelans and expanded for the other three nationalities (Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua) in 2022. In May, the government was granted permission by the Supreme Court to temporarily suspend CHNV,¹¹³ with the former announcing in June that it would be ordering the more than 530,000 former parole holders to leave the country.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, around 120,000 Ukrainians who secured parole under the United for Ukraine (U4U) programme after 16 August 2023 have been left in limbo pending the renewal of their status. The U4U programme was suspended in January 2025 for new applicants and while arrivals before 16 August 2023 continue to benefit from TPS, this does not apply for the later contingent who at the time of writing, were no longer able to live or work legally in the US, pending the approval of an extension by the Trump administration.¹¹⁵

to be equal or slightly higher, as deportations increased at pace).¹¹⁸ In large part this is because, as movement to the southern border has reduced, the number of people apprehended and quickly returned – accounting for the majority of Biden-era deportations – has also fallen. Instead, the Trump administration has focused its efforts on the identification, detention and removal of irregular migrants already living in the US interior, a far more energy-consuming and disruptive process. As a result, while deportations by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have fallen since Trump took office, the number of arrests carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has doubled.¹¹⁹

The financial costs of this drive are considerable, reflected in the budget reconciliation bill passed in the summer and the estimated USD 170 billion allocated to immigration detention and enforcement, including an almost three-fold increase to USD 75 billion for the construction of new immigration holding facilities (USD 45 billion) and enforcement and deportation operations (USD 29.9 billion).¹²⁰ While ICE has been offering up to USD 50,000 as a signing bonus to new recruits,¹²¹ with reports (denied by government officials) of a daily quota of at least 3,000 arrests or deportations,¹²² the administration has mobilised a broad range of agencies to carry out immigration-related functions that would not normally fall within their remit.¹²³ For instance, by expanding the use of the so-called 287(g) agreement, ICE is delegating authority to participate in the identification, interrogation and processing of prospective deportees to local and state police officers. This approach risks promoting discriminatory policing and undermining trust between officials and local residents.¹²⁴

Mass deportations

A centrepiece of Trump's 2024 campaign was the promise to launch an unprecedented deportation plan, targeting as many as 15 million people.¹¹⁶ In the first months of 2025, however, the administration appeared to be lagging behind its targets, with lower deportation figures than those under Biden in the financial year of 2024¹¹⁷ (though, by the middle of the year, the figures appeared

While the hundreds of thousands of deportations carried out near the southern border for years have largely been out of sight of the American public, the recent crackdown on migrants across the country has been far more visible. Though most arrests and deportations have been carried out in jails and prisons, the crackdown has been notable for extending its operations to 'sensitive

110 Global Refuge (2025) [TPS for Afghanistan expires, leaving thousands at risk of deportation and job loss](#).

111 US Citizenship and Immigration Services (2025) [DHS terminates Temporary Protected Status for Cameroon](#).

112 US Citizenship and Immigration Services (2025) [Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Haiti](#).

113 Totenberg, N. (2025) [Supreme Court allows Trump administration to end humanitarian status for some migrants](#). NPR.

114 Wendling, M. (2025) [US orders 500,000 citizens of four countries to leave](#). BBC.

115 Visit Ukraine (2025) [U4U suspended: thousands of Ukrainians may remain in the US illegally](#).

116 Bennett, B. (2025) [What the data reveals about Trump's push to arrest and deport more migrants](#). Time.

117 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.

118 Bennett, B. (2025) [What the data reveals about Trump's push to arrest and deport more migrants](#). Time.

119 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.

120 American Immigration Council (2025) [Senate approves unprecedented spending for mass deportation, ignoring what's broken in our immigration system](#).

121 Debusmann, B. (2025) [US offers up to \\$50k bonus for would-be ICE deportation officers](#). BBC.

122 Betts, A. (2025) [Trump administration denies daily quota for immigration arrests](#). The Guardian.

123 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.

124 American Immigration Council (2025) [The 287\(g\) program: An overview](#).

areas' previously considered off-limits, such as schools, hospitals and places of worship.¹²⁵ Many incidents have involved the apprehension of long-term US residents, from a teenaged high-school student¹²⁶ to a 67-year-old woman living in the country for almost 50 years.¹²⁷ Critics have condemned these increasingly invasive raids as “cruel and inhumane”.¹²⁸ The government has done little to assuage these concerns, with detainees held indefinitely in squalid, overcrowded facilities such as Krome detention centre in Miami, where several people have died during the year.¹²⁹ Critics have argued that the deteriorating conditions in these facilities are expressly intended as spectacles of “visual cruelty”.¹³⁰ This appears to be the case, for instance, of the centre dubbed “Alligator Alcatraz”,¹³¹ built on an area of Floridian swampland known for its crocodiles and pythons – though, in August, a judge ordered its closure on environmental grounds.¹³²

Many deportations have been carried out arbitrarily and in violation of international law, including the transfer of hundreds of Salvadorans and Venezuelans to a mega-prison in **El Salvador**, despite the notoriously abusive conditions there.¹³³ Numerous incidents, such as the deportation, in April, of three US citizen children (including one with stage four cancer, who was sent back without any medication) with their mothers,¹³⁴ highlight the lack of due process that appears to have accompanied many deportations. Others, including deportees from Cuba, Laos, Mexico and Vietnam, have been deported to third countries, such as South Sudan and Uganda.¹³⁵ A key complication for the Trump administration's planned deportation campaign has been securing the approval of other governments to receive deportees. Countries such as Costa Rica and Panama, both with established partnerships with the US around migration, have also accepted expelled migrants, including non-nationals from various Asian countries.¹³⁶ The administration appears to be extending this partnership framework

further south, with a Safe Third Party Agreement with **Paraguay** (part of a broader trade and security deal) signed in August, to allow asylum-seekers in the US to be granted protection in Paraguay instead.¹³⁷ Trump has also reportedly used tariffs to pressure some countries to cooperate: for instance, the threat of higher trade tariffs has been deployed to push Canada and Mexico to increase security at their respective borders to prevent irregular entry into the US.¹³⁸

125 Woodward, A. (2025) [More churches are suing ICE over arrests in places of worship: “Congregations have gone underground”](#). The Independent.

126 Anguiano, D. and Clayton, A. (2025) [Community rallies around LA teen detained by Ice while walking dog](#). The Guardian.

127 Dunbar, M. (2025) [Iranian woman, who has lived in US for 47 years, taken by Ice while gardening](#). The Guardian.

128 ACLU (2025) [ACLU statement on ICE raids in Los Angeles](#).

129 Donegan, M. (2025) [“Alligator Alcatraz” showcases Trump’s surreal brand of stylized cruelty](#). The Guardian.

130 Villanueva, M. L. (2025) [“Alligator Alcatraz” showcases Donald Trump’s penchant for visual cruelty](#). The Conversation.

131 Amnesty International (2025) [Cruelty is the point of “Alligator Alcatraz”—and why it must be closed](#).

132 Luscombe, R. (2025) [Florida appeals against judge’s order to close “Alligator Alcatraz” immigration jail](#). The Guardian.

133 UN (2025) [UN experts alarmed at illegal deportations from the United States to El Salvador](#).

134 Andone, D. (2025) [3 children who are US citizens — including one with cancer — deported with their mothers, lawyers and advocacy groups say](#). CNN US.

135 Cardona, I. and Saltman, M. (2025) [South Sudan repatriates Mexican man deported from US](#). CNN; Also Savage, R. (2025) [Uganda reaches agreement with US to take in some failed asylum seekers](#). The Guardian.

136 Al Jazeera (2025) [Why have Costa Rica and Panama agreed to take Asians deported by Trump?](#)

137 Rahman, B. (2025) [US and Paraguay strike new asylum deal](#). Newsweek.

138 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.

Photo credit: Danny Oliva / Shutterstock

In 2025, second-term president Donald Trump dominated US and international news, disrupting the world order at multiple levels. His speech at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2025 illustrated again that this Trump administration holds deep-rooted scepticism – bordering on hostility – towards multilateral institutions, not least through his promised heavy-handed anti-immigration policies (See *The erosion of migration multilateralism and the 'new world order*, [p. 252](#) and Thematic snapshot *ICE wars: the rising tension between state and federal immigration policies*, [p. 98](#)).





Forced to return – Venezuelans on the move face harsher border policies, xenophobia and a lack of opportunities

“All I want is to work and lead a dignified life with my family.”

I'm a 24-year-old man from Venezuela. I left my country in 2020, bringing with me my wife, my two young daughters and my sister-in-law. We spent a few years in Colombia. Work there was scarce, things were difficult. In November 2024, I made the decision to cross the Darién Gap to get to the United States. That was a total nightmare. Nobody should take this route. When we entered Panama, they treated us like criminals and we experienced a lot of xenophobia. It was awful, it hurts just talking about it.

Thank God, despite all the hardship, there was also help from kind people. It's good, because the journey is full of dangers and unknowns. People rob you and take advantage of your vulnerability.

“As a father, I want to be able to provide for my family. Everything I do is for them, and many migrants are like me.”

We travelled through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and the south of Mexico. In each of these places, I had to beg on the street, which was sad and made me feel ashamed. As a father, I want to be able to provide for my family. Everything I do is for them, and many migrants are like me.

MEXICO

Villahermosa

Mexico City

GUATEMALA

HONDURAS

NICARAGUA

COSTA RICA

San José

PANAMA

In Mexico, we were robbed. It was terrible. We know many people were abused and others disappeared. Like in Panama, they treated us like criminals, there was a lot of xenophobia. Initially, the local immigration authorities helped us, but then they just abandoned us on the streets in Villahermosa, so we lived like that for about a week.

“Going back was painful, but after the new Trump policies, I knew I had to leave or risk mass deportation.”

Eventually, after many struggles, we arrived in Mexico City. I worked there for a while and managed to earn some money, but because I couldn't get an appointment through the CBP One app, I had no other choice but to return. Going back was painful, but after the new Trump policies, I knew I had to leave or risk mass deportation. What they're doing to Venezuelans now is inhumane, putting them in high-security prisons and treating migrants like criminals.

After leaving Mexico, we arrived at the Costa Rican border and stayed at a shelter there for about five days. There's a Migration Office nearby, so we booked an appointment to apply for asylum in Costa Rica. We ran out of money, and I couldn't find work anywhere. My phone was also stolen. I ended up selling my daughter's phone just to pay for the bus to Ciudad Quesada.

We arrived there at night and had to beg outside a supermarket. We collected around CRC 12,000 to CRC 13,000 (approximately USD 25), enough to buy dinner for the kids, but we had to sleep on the street. Then we headed to Alajuela, near San José. A man offered to let us stay in an abandoned house but, sadly, he ended up stealing from us.

After that, we went to San José and took a bus to Cartago. We slept on the street in Cartago too, and begged for food. I was robbed again. So we returned to San José and asked for help at a shelter. And thank God, that's where we are now, after being on the move for four months. I've been here for around 15 days, and I made an appointment for refugee status as soon as I arrived because I want to sort out my paperwork, leave everything behind and move forward.

“I want to stabilise my family, enrol my daughters in school... That's all I want.”

I'm doing my best to get my asylum appointment brought forward because I really want to work. I want to stabilise my family, enrol my daughters in school. That's all I want.

I don't necessarily want to settle in San José, I just want to find a job in Costa Rica because it has one of the stronger currencies of South America and more job opportunities. But again, without papers, it's very difficult. If I don't receive my asylum documents, I'll have to continue my journey, possibly to Chile, Peru, somewhere like that. Venezuela? No. It's just not liveable there anymore.

“People don't know what migrants go through and they make our lives miserable.”

There's a lot of xenophobia towards migrants. People don't know what migrants go through and they make our lives miserable. Some of us deal with trauma, loss and mental health issues because of xenophobia. Others lose their lives. I think people should have more compassion for migrants. Sure, if we want to stay, we need to legalise our status and get our documents sorted, and that's what I'm trying to do. That's what I want most – just to work, to get my family stable, to build a dignified life for us.

People will always migrate. Migrants will always exist in this world. It's not just about economic hardship. People migrate because of politics, extortion, kidnapping, robbery, threats – sometimes from gangs, sometimes from governments. One way or another, people will find a way to generate money, either to settle or to continue travelling.

“If you don't want to see migrants begging in the street, then let them work.”

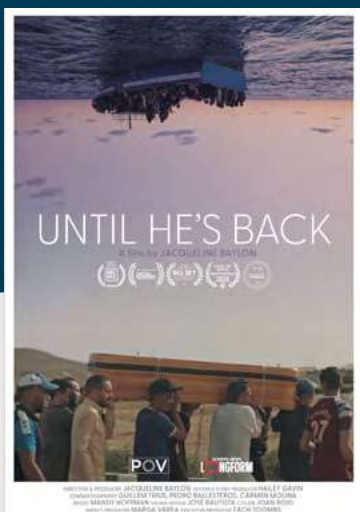
I wish governments could remove the restrictions that stop undocumented migrants from working. If you don't want to see migrants begging in the street, then let them work. I want people to understand that migration is very hard and complex. Migrating from your country is an awful nightmare. You're exposed to different climates and you risk your life without knowing what lies ahead. You'll encounter people with bad intentions, just as you might meet kind ones. But you're always exposed – to death, even. There are people who might hate you just for how you look. The only real security you have is God's blessing. You never know what will happen, or where you'll end up, because the journey is so unpredictable.



Interview

The power of moving pictures – stories of migration, love and loss through the lens of filmmaking

Print and online news reports can sometimes fall short when it comes to tell stories of migration with the necessary depth and compassion – and that's where documentary filmmaking comes into play. This medium represents a potent option for artists to tackle complex issues more closely and for migrants to raise awareness of their experiences, particularly in the case of families desperately seeking closure after a loved one has died while on the move. Mexican filmmaker **Jacqueline Baylon** reflects on this, as well as on broader migration-related issues.



*Jacqueline Baylon is a Mexican filmmaker whose work focuses on civil rights injustices and migration stories across the globe. Her short film **Until He's Back** (2024), about a father seeking to recover his son's remains after he died attempting to immigrate, was shortlisted for the 97th Academy Awards.*

When did you decide to be a filmmaker?

I started out as a writer – I've been a journalist for more than 15 years – but my real passion was always video, even though I kept landing jobs at newspapers. Eventually, I joined The New York Times as a web editor, but I knew I wanted to move towards documentary filmmaking after seeing so many powerful films being made. I began pitching short videos to The Times to

build my portfolio, and later I joined Scripps News, where I worked on the documentary team and pitched my film *Until He's Back*. In many ways, I still feel like I'm straddling journalism and filmmaking, but my goal is to eventually dedicate myself fully to filmmaking.

You were born in Chihuahua, Mexico, but you were raised in El Paso, Texas, is that right? So how did you get into and then live in the USA?

I came to the United States with my mother when I was about six years old. She made the decision to move us to El Paso, where I grew up. That experience shaped so much of who I am today. About 20 years ago, I became a US citizen, which opened the door to many opportunities and has allowed me to contribute in ways I'm very grateful for.

What do you think you'd be doing if you'd been raised in Chihuahua? Are there very different opportunities in the US, even for migrants?

Yes, I do think my life would have been very different if I'd stayed in Chihuahua. I come from a very humble family with limited means, and it might have been difficult to figure out a path to college in Mexico. That said, things have changed over generations, so I may be comparing my experience to my mother's era. In the US I became the first person in my family to go to college, and in doing so I showed that there are alternatives to starting work at a very young age. Now some of my younger cousins are going to college as well. I don't know if I directly influenced them, but I do think I helped demonstrate another possibility. At the same time, it's also part of a generational shift – my aunts, for example, have come to see education as a path out of poverty and they've encouraged their children to pursue it.

“I grew up on the border, with most of my family still in Mexico, and my mother and others migrating. That experience has stayed with me – the separation of families, the struggle to survive in an unfamiliar world. But I've always wondered about the families left behind: how they cope with the distance or what happens when their loved ones die along the journey.”

You made a sensitive and empathetic film last year, *Until He's Back*, about migrant deaths and rescue in the Mediterranean, with a particular focus on a Moroccan man trying to get the body of his son back. People often focus on the deaths of migrants, but you chose to focus on the closure for the family. Why?

I grew up on the border, with most of my family still in Mexico, and my mother and others migrating. That experience has stayed with me – the separation of families, the struggle to survive in an unfamiliar world. But I've always wondered about the families left behind: how they cope with the distance or what happens when their loved ones die along the journey.

That led me to the story of Martín Zamora, a mortician in southern Spain who has spent more than 25 years

helping return the bodies of Moroccans who died at sea. By the time I met him, I think I was the 12th journalist to knock on his door, and he was understandably burnt out. He felt that talking to the media hadn't changed anything. But I believed I could tell his story – and the story of a family – in a different way, with more intention and focus on what closure really means. Very few people understand the process of repatriation, or the importance it carries for grieving families. That was the story I wanted to highlight.

“If there were safer, legal ways for people to migrate, they wouldn't have to risk their lives this way. Martín [Zamora] focuses on those who don't make it – the bodies that wash ashore – and he works to identify them, find their families and bring them home. What struck me was not only the nature of his work, but also the compassion behind it.”

Tell us a bit more about Martín Zamora.

Martín Zamora is a mortician in Algeciras, a port town in southern Spain. I've known him for several years now, and much of his career has been dedicated to helping return the bodies of Moroccans who died trying to cross the Mediterranean. If there were safer, legal ways for people to migrate, they wouldn't have to risk their lives this way. Martín focuses on those who don't make it – the bodies that wash ashore – and he works to identify them, find their families and bring them home. What struck me was not only the nature of his work, but also the compassion behind it.

In the media, we often focus on numbers – how many arrive, how many die – but rarely on who those people were or what their families go through. At first, I intended to make a simple profile of Martín. But after spending months documenting his work, I realised the story was much bigger. I saw the countless phone calls, the small team he relied on and the enormous effort required just to return one person home. That led me to follow the journey of families searching for their loved ones, including Ahmed Tchiche, who was trying to recover his son's body. It was heartbreaking, but also a reminder of how vital closure is for those left behind.

Did you research the issues a lot and plan the film, or did you just jump in and let what you found kind of 'dictate' the direction of the film?

It was a bit of both. I always begin with a lot of research in the pre-production stage, but in documentary filmmaking, building trust with people is just as important, and that takes time. Trust can be very fragile in the beginning. After that, you have to let reality guide

Interview

Jacqueline Baylon

the story. Unlike fiction, you can't script it – you have to observe, adapt and film as life unfolds. That's what I love most about the process.

Why do you think so many Moroccan youths leave, mostly as irregular migrants?

I can only speak from my research and from the people I met while filming, not as a Moroccan myself. What I heard consistently was how difficult it is to escape poverty. One family I met had lost their son, who had been trying to start a small fishing business for five years. But the authorities repeatedly demanded money from him simply because he had a business, and eventually he went broke. Unable to keep up with the fees, he decided to pay for passage on a dinghy – and was never heard from again. Stories like his reflect how limited opportunities, combined with systemic pressures, push young people to take enormous risks.

“ People don't leave home because they want to, they leave out of necessity. Thinking of my own mother, and of the Moroccan families I met, I know how hard it is when governments like the US or Spain make it nearly impossible even to get a visa. Most people don't want to abandon their homes – they want the chance to build a decent life where they are. ”

Should better-off countries accept migrants from poorer regions merely because it's a compassionate act to give them opportunities or should poorer regions be given more development assistance to avoid the need for migration?

I think that's the central question for anyone who cares about immigration. My view is that people don't leave home because they want to, they leave out of necessity. Thinking of my own mother and of the Moroccan families I met, I know how hard it is when governments like the US or Spain make it nearly impossible even to get a visa. There's no real evidence that if you relaxed migration policies, everyone would rush to leave. Most people don't want to abandon their homes – they want the chance to build a decent life where they are. If they had the opportunity to visit, to work temporarily or to be vetted fairly, many would return home. For example, the Moroccan fisherman I mentioned earlier: if he had been able to sustain his business, he would never have risked his life at sea. What people need most is the ability to live with dignity in their own communities – and when that's not possible, migration becomes the only option.

What do you think about the deportations that are going on in Trump's America this year?

I don't think it's my place to judge who deserves to stay or go. Initially, President Trump talked about targeting people with serious criminal backgrounds, but what we're seeing now is a much broader effort where anyone who is undocumented is treated as a criminal. That's created a really difficult situation, because families are being separated and even children of US citizens are being affected. It's heartbreaking and I think it shows how complex and sensitive immigration policy really is.

“ What people need most is the ability to live with dignity in their own communities – and when that's not possible, migration becomes the only option. ”

Do you think there are double standards in some immigration policies?

Yes, I think there are clear inconsistencies in how immigration policies are applied. A good example is Europe's response to the war in Ukraine, where millions of Ukrainians were welcomed and given immediate access to work, education and health care. Meanwhile, people fleeing equally dangerous conditions in countries like Afghanistan were being deported. In the US, during the Title 42 period, asylum seekers from Latin and Central America were turned away at the border, yet Ukrainians were able to enter and claim asylum with far fewer obstacles. These contrasts show that immigration policies aren't always applied in a consistent or equitable way.

You are currently living in Spain. What are you seeing of Spain's very open policy on immigration?

Yes, I spend part of the year in Spain and I've noticed a significant number of immigrants arriving from Venezuela and Argentina, as well as from other Latin American countries. Many left because of economic collapse or political instability back home, and Spain has become a natural destination. It's an interesting situation, because much of Spain – what's called *España vacía*, or “empty Spain” – is underpopulated. You'd think immigration could be a solution to revitalise those areas.

What's striking, though, is the difference in how Spain approaches immigrants from Latin America versus those from Morocco or other parts of Africa. With Latin Americans, the cultural, linguistic and religious similarities make integration easier, and the government often highlights that. Meanwhile, many Africans do

come to work in agriculture, particularly in the south, but their path to residency or citizenship is much more limited. That contrast reveals both the opportunities and the challenges of Spain's immigration policies.

What about climate change? Do you think that's going to be a big game changer in terms of movements of people around the world?

Absolutely. Climate change is already shaping migration. Here in Madrid, for example, temperatures have reached nearly 40°C – locals say it never used to be this extreme. When living conditions become unbearable, people naturally start looking to move. And we're seeing this worldwide: rising sea levels are forcing people from coastal areas, prolonged droughts are making farming impossible and floods are displacing communities. Whether people move through official channels or informally, climate change is going to be one of the biggest drivers of migration in the decades ahead.

“The real question isn't whether migration will happen, but how we choose to manage it. Why can't countries work together to handle it in a more humane way? Humane certainly doesn't mean putting people in cages, criminalising them or deporting them without dignity. We need approaches that recognise migration as a constant part of human history and treat people with respect.”

What do you think the future of migration looks like in this very uncertain world? Do you think there's going to be more migration or less migration?

Migration isn't going anywhere. Throughout history, people have always moved – for economic reasons, to escape conflict or in search of better opportunities – and with climate change, that movement will only increase. Wars, instability and economic collapse will continue to push people across borders. The real question isn't whether migration will happen, but how we choose to manage it. Why can't countries work together to handle it in a more humane way? Humane certainly doesn't mean putting people in cages, criminalising them or deporting them without dignity. We need approaches that recognise migration as a constant part of human history and treat people with respect.

“In documentary filmmaking, building trust with people is important, and that takes time. Trust can be very fragile in the beginning. After that, you have to let reality guide the story. Unlike fiction, you can't script it – you have to observe, adapt and film as life unfolds. That's what I love most about the process.”

US migration policies: regional impact on mixed migration in Latin America

With Donald Trump's comeback after his 2024 election victory, migration in the United States is in the spotlight once again. His new measures build on policies from his first term, representing a continuation of an existing trajectory where immigration is portrayed as a national security issue.¹

As new research from the Mixed Migration Centre outlines, President Trump's second term and turbo-charged policies also build on the legacy of Joe Biden's presidency, which took a frenetic approach to migration – employing both expansive and restrictive policies with mixed results.² While Biden expanded and created new regular pathways, he relied heavily on executive orders, leaving his progressive policies vulnerable to reversal. This allowed the second Trump administration to quickly revoke protections, putting millions who entered the US under Biden's pathways at risk of losing their status.³ At the same time, Biden enacted restrictive policies that curtailed access to territorial asylum, contradictions that, some argue,⁴ have helped pave the way for the sweeping hardline measures implemented during Trump's first six months back in office.

Trump 2.0: new and tougher migration policies

On the January 2025 inauguration day of his second presidential mandate, Trump launched a series of executive orders that were particularly tough on migration.⁵ They included orders such as the Protecting the American People Against Invasion, Securing Our Border and Protecting the United States From Foreign Terrorists And Other National Security And Public Safety Threats – which introduced measures such as enhanced screening and vetting of migrants, swifter deportations and the creation of new detention facilities, higher militarisation and securitisation of the

US southern border (justified by declaring a “national emergency”) and the immediate halt of asylum processing.⁶ Biden-era programmes designed to offer legal pathways to the US, such as the CBP One app, the CHNV parole programme and the Safe Mobility Offices, were immediately cancelled and left hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and migrants in limbo and frustration. These events were widely anticipated by observers calculating what a second Trump presidency would deliver.⁷

Trump's hardline immigration measures continued throughout the year, with one of the most notorious examples being so-called Operation Safeguard – a massive crackdown led by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, which ended in the detention and deportation of tens of thousands of migrants, including several with no criminal records, during sweeping urban raids in sanctuary cities across the country. In May 2025, the clamp down intensified, with a sharp increase in the daily quota of arrests – from 650 to 3,000.⁸

Fewer arrivals, more deportations: the end of the ‘American dream’?

The results of these policies were almost immediate. In February 2025, border crossings plummeted to their lowest numbers in decades – from more than 130,000 encounters in February 2023 and 2024, to just 8,300 apprehensions – a drop of over 93 percent.⁹ In February 2025, only 408 crossings were recorded through the Darién Gap – a 97 percent decrease in migrants entering Panama through Darién from the first quarter of 2024 to the same period in 2025 – a dramatic drop, and the lowest crossing numbers since 2020.¹⁰

Meanwhile, between January and March 2025, 1,828 Ecuadorian nationals were deported on 18 flights and

1 Prokop, A. (2025) [What Democrats must learn from Biden's disastrous immigration record](#). Vox.

2 MMC (2025) [Opening Doors, Hardening Borders - a critical analysis of the Biden administration's approach to mixed migration](#).

3 MMC (2025) [Opening Doors, Hardening Borders - a critical analysis of the Biden administration's approach to mixed migration](#).

4 MMC (2025) [Opening Doors, Hardening Borders - a critical analysis of the Biden administration's approach to mixed migration](#).

5 Jayaretnam, M. and de Guzman, C. (2025) [Breaking Down All of Trump's Day 1 Presidential Actions](#). Time.

6 Sanchez-Guerra, A. and Cotto, C. (2025) [Como el endurecimiento de políticas migratorias de Trump impacta eventos latinos y la economía en Carolina del Norte](#).

7 Bueno, O. and Müller, C. (2025) [How the Trump administration may impact mixed migration in the Americas](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

8 Wiseman, P. (2025) [ICE raids and their uncertainty scare off workers and baffle businesses](#). AP News.

9 Lotz, A. and Kight, S. (2025) [Border crossing plunge to lowest levels in decades: New data](#). Axios.

10 Lotz, A. and Kight, S. (2025) [Border crossing plunge to lowest levels in decades: New data](#). Axios; Also UNOCHA (2025) [Latin America & The Caribbean Weekly Situation Update as of 9 May 2025](#); Contreras, R. (2025) [Migrant traffic through the Darién Gap plummets](#). Axios.

over 200 Venezuelans were sent to maximum security prisons in El Salvador. Of these, at least 50 were regular migrants.¹¹

Those still seeking to reach the US do so by clandestine means, exposing them to additional risks and vulnerabilities. For example, with the suspension of the CBP One app¹² and the cancellation of legal pathways like the CHNV¹³ parole programme, migrants en route to the US increasingly rely on smuggling groups for their irregular crossings. This, in turn, empowers gangs and organised criminality, while also increasing the levels of violence, trafficking, extortion and other exploitative practices towards people on the move.¹⁴

With such a sharp decrease in arrivals and an equally sharp increase in forced returns, Trump's policies are arguably putting an end to many migrants' 'American dream' – particularly those from Central and South America. Nonetheless, while the dream might no longer be within easy reach for many, Latin Americans continue to leave their home countries, driven by factors such as endemic crime, poverty, violence, corruption, lack of opportunities and climate-related events.¹⁵

Impact and response in the region

In much of Latin America, regional and southward movement is on the rise.¹⁶ In February 2025, for example, dozens of Venezuelan migrants travelled to Colombia instead of going to the US while, by mid-May 2025, up to 145,000 Colombians had left their home country and headed south, primarily towards Argentina, Brazil and Chile, again avoiding going north, which had previously been the typical direction.¹⁷

With most Latin American countries struggling to cope with a myriad of challenging issues, the arrival of potentially higher-than-ever numbers of migrants from other countries in the region could become problematic.

The region, in fact, is already feeling the pressures and impact from Trump's new measures. Unable to move northward to their original destination, migrants remain stranded in Mexico, with thousands weighing up whether to turn back or keep trying to enter the US. Both in Mexico City and in other parts of the country, scores of asylum seekers set up makeshift camps while waiting for news and updates on their situation – which, in turn, would dictate the route and destination of their travels.¹⁸ Previously, migrants and the 'caravans' of people on the move never stayed in main cities but passed through, going north.

The changing direction and destination of mobility, however, is not the only concerning effect of Trump's new policies. Another worrying outcome is the massive drop in remittances – on which many South American countries rely in order to bolster their own economy and avoid collapse. By April 2025, for example, Mexican authorities recorded a record drop in remittances of over 12 percent.¹⁹ With fewer migrants being legally admitted to the US,²⁰ as well as deportations (or the threat of deportations) of those already in the US making people afraid to go to work, external financial contributions will also plunge – in some countries, such as Guatemala, this could result in economic recession.²¹ After President Trump's so-called Big, Beautiful Bill was passed in July,²² the situation is likely to get even worse, as the bill includes a one percent tax on all remittances.²³

Fragmented flows and new vulnerabilities

In 2025, Donald Trump's new and harsh migration policies are seemingly achieving their desired results – drastically lowering arrival numbers, making asylum processing more difficult, deporting illegal arrivals, lengthening the list of banned countries and more.²⁴

11 Ecuavisa (2025) [EE. UU.: se acaba el sueño | 18 vuelos con más de 1 800 ecuatorianos deportados, han llegado al país, durante 2025](#); Also Murphy Marcos, C. (2025) [At least 50 migrants sent to El Salvador prison entered US legally, report finds](#). The Guardian.

12 Graham, T. (2025) [US asylum seekers in despair after Trump cancels CBP One app: 'Start from zero again'](#). The Guardian.

13 Lind, D. (2025) [Trump Administration Terminates CHNV Program, Impacting More Than a Half-Million Immigrants](#). American Immigration Council.

14 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Smuggling and migration in South America](#).

15 McMackin, C. (2025) [Push Factors: the Causes of Migration in Latin America](#). Oxford Student.

16 Bueno, O. and Müller, C. (2025) [Return towards South America: Dynamics, Challenges and Humanitarian Concerns](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

17 Lebrun, E. (2025) [Reverse migration: Venezuelans head back toward South America after US dreams dashed](#). Reuters.

18 Díaz, D. (2025) [Stranded: The Trump-induced migration crisis in Mexico](#). The New Humanitarian.

19 Torres, N. and Palaez-fernandez, A. (2025) [Mexico records steepest monthly remittance decline in nearly 13 years](#). Reuters.

20 Lyons, S. J. (2025) [Dispatch From Central America](#). The Globe Post.

21 Charles, J. (2025) [Trump's move to tax money sent abroad could devastate Latin America, Caribbean economies](#). Miami Herald; Also Dempster, H., Ward, C. and Huckstep, S. (2025) [Even at 1 Percent, the US Remittance Tax Hits Poor Countries Hard](#). Center for Global Development.

22 Torres, N. and Palaez-fernandez, A. (2025) [Mexico records steepest monthly remittance decline in nearly 13 years](#). Reuters.

23 Charles, J. (2025) [Trump's move to tax money sent abroad could devastate Latin America, Caribbean economies](#). Miami Herald.

24 Díaz, D. (2025) [Stranded: The Trump-induced migration crisis in Mexico](#). The New Humanitarian.

As a result, migrants from Latin America are faced with a twofold dilemma. On the one hand, those who are turned down at the US border remain stranded and stuck in legal limbo for indefinite amounts of time.²⁵ On the other hand, and particularly when the situation at home is desperate, migrants and asylum seekers find themselves compelled to move to other countries in the Latin American region, or even beyond to Europe (in particular, Spain) in search of better opportunities.²⁶

However, with much of Latin America experiencing high levels of poverty, violence and other long-standing socio-economic issues of an extremely difficult nature with no simple resolutions, the consequences of these new migratory flows could severely overwhelm the region as a whole, putting additional strains on countries that are already tackling endemic internal problems and simply lack the facilities and infrastructure to manage migration on such a large scale.

Meanwhile, exploitative actors and their practices – gang violence, trafficking, gender-based violence and smuggling – thrive. If this situation persists and more restrictions come into place, we are likely to keep seeing ever-fragmented migration patterns in the region, with more and more people opting to travel outside formal legal frameworks and experiencing an array of risks and vulnerabilities, or remaining trapped in dangerous and vulnerable conditions at home.

25 Al Yahyai, O. (2025) [Migrants stranded in Acapulco as Mexico implements 'dispersion and exhaustion' strategy](#). Euronews.

26 van Brunnersum, S. J. (2024) [Under the radar: The growing wave of Latin American asylum seekers fleeing to Europe](#). Infomigrants.

Photo credit: Canary4Stock / Shutterstock

Young North African migrants assisted in Arguineguín port, Gran Canaria, Canary Islands (Spain) after rescue at sea. Due to intensified cooperation between Spain and Mauritania, there was a significant decrease in arrivals compared to 2024. Despite its different and more welcoming approach to migration compared to other European countries, Spain also continues to support measures to reduce irregular arrivals, and irregular migration continues to be a rallying cause for far-right political groups in the country. (See Thematic snapshot Migration and economic growth: Spain's divergent path in an increasingly right-wing, anti-immigration EU, [p. 122](#)).





Interview

From south-north to south-north-south: US-driven route changes present fresh challenges for Latin American migrants

Historically, Mexico has been an origin country for people looking to emigrate to the US and elsewhere. However, the country has gradually and steadily turned into a transit country for countless Latin American and other migrants northbound. More recently it has also become, often reluctantly, a destination for migrants. **Luciana Gandini** discusses the reasons behind this transformation, while also offering her view on the future outlook for migrants and asylum seekers in the region.

Luciana Gandini is a senior researcher at the Institute of Legal Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in the field of sociology of law.

What's the approach of Mexico's president Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo to migration and border control? What kind of pressures is she under?

I'll start by saying that Mexico as a country has had the huge challenge of facing the new migration trends in the Americas, beyond Mexican migration itself. Mexico is in the most uncomfortable and difficult position in the region. It's not something new, but it has definitely intensified in recent years. Migration has turned into a kind of bargaining chip and this has worsened since the pandemic, as south-north flows in the hemisphere have picked up new momentum.

The pressure comes from the United States, which demands a reduction in irregular crossings – not just of Mexicans, but of people of many nationalities – under the threat of tariffs, trade tensions or even invoking

national security. Even though the US externalisation of migration control has a long history, in recent years the strategies have not only diversified, but they've also become more and more sophisticated, which has forced the last two Mexican administrations to face and try to manage them.

The current Mexican government has reinforced bilateral cooperation on migration, trying to find a balance between maintaining some sovereignty and responding to Washington's demands. In the official discourse, there's more talk about human rights than about security but, in practice, there are still big challenges. Among them, you can see different treatment between nationals who are returning and migrants of other nationalities who are in transit or stuck in the country.

“ Even though the US externalisation of migration control has a long history, in recent years the strategies have not only diversified, but they’ve also become more and more sophisticated, which has forced the last two Mexican administrations to face and try to manage them.”

After Trump came back to the presidency, the Mexican government quickly presented the strategy *México te abraza* (“Mexico embraces you”), centred on comprehensive attention to migrants. But, when it comes to people of other nationalities who are transiting, waiting or being deported from the US to Mexico, the government insists it’s adopting a ‘humanitarian’ approach. I think it’s important to stress that it’s not just about humanitarianism: there are also legal, political and ethical obligations that the Mexican state has taken on through international commitments and its own laws, and it has to respect and comply with them.

From my point of view, the most important step the Mexican government needs to consolidate is to recognise that Mexico has now become a country of destination for many people. Maybe it wasn’t the first option for these migrants, but it might be the last – or the only – option they have left.

Mexico has basically become a waiting room, largely a forced one. This is the result of various political decisions, especially those taken in the US, starting with Trump’s first administration and continuing up until now. The most recent was the suspension of CBP One, which left hundreds of thousands of people of different nationalities in limbo in Mexico. On top of that, the way migration is contained in Mexico has also changed: instead of deporting people in irregular status, they are detained and then released inside Mexican territory – usually further south – in order to make it harder for them to continue on to the north. In the end, migrants are just left hanging around, waiting inside Mexico.

Are we talking about policies of US externalisation of migrant management and asylum processing affecting Mexico? And what about other countries?

Yes, exactly. The strategy of externalising migration control, as well as the extraterritorialisation of the right to asylum, has been moving further and further south in the continent, reaching Central and South America like never before. The United States is trying to keep people in other parts of Latin America – Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama – and it’s doing so not only through militarisation but also with mechanisms like the Safe Mobility Offices. These offices, promoted by IOM and other agencies, are meant to offer safe and regular pathways of mobility, although in the end they

seek to contain people at different points across the continent. Right now, they operate with limitations and some are no longer receiving new applications.

Just like in Mexico, the US uses these externalised policies as bargaining chips within broader agreements, which encompass issues such as energy, strategic trade routes – like the Panama Canal – and security. Particularly in 2025, the strategy of externalisation is not only about blocking transit migration with the (mostly failed) goal of deterrence, but also about sending deported people to third countries – El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama – in exchange for US funding.

“ Mexico has basically become a waiting room, largely a forced one. This is the result of various political decisions, especially those taken in the US, starting with Trump’s first administration and continuing up until now.”

Do you have a sense of how fast the numbers of people applying for asylum or residency in Mexico are growing?

The trend of growth in asylum in Mexico has been clear, constant and systematic since 2013. Between 2013 and 2024, Mexico received around 650,000 applications. In 2021, it ranked third in the world in terms of the number of applications received and since then it has remained among the top receiving countries.

Mexico has very good refugee law, one that has incorporated the commitments of regional instruments, such as the Cartagena Declaration, which includes a broader definition of refugee than the 1951 international one. Mexico chose to apply this broader definition first to Venezuelans and later to Salvadorans and Nicaraguans, which made it easier to grant refugee status without the need to prove an individual risk to life. With the exception of Brazil, no other country in Latin America has used it systematically – only on an exceptional basis.

Despite the exponential growth in applications, the budget of COMAR, the agency in charge of refugees in Mexico, remained almost unchanged over the last decade. For the most part, it worked because UNHCR financed a large part of its staff. Now, with the cuts, there is a considerable backlog.

It’s important to reflect on the reasons why refugee applications have grown exponentially: and there are several. Many people fled their countries, went anywhere they could and found in Mexico a place where the asylum system was actually working. As with any type of migration, once flows begin, they get reinforced

by family or friendship networks and by the settlement of migrant communities. But it's also true that there are migrants (forced or not) who originally wanted to go to the US but couldn't and, in the end, they decided to stay in Mexico.

The big obstacle is that the regular migration pathways to Mexico are very limited, hard to access and expensive. So, in the end, as in other contexts, asylum ends up being the only option.

Do you think there's an issue of double standards in terms of treatment of different nationalities?

Well, that's a complex question. Not only here but in Latin America as a whole. The case of Venezuelans has really put this issue at the centre of the debate. Some people ask why governments use specific measures to welcome only Venezuelans. Of course, we know that at least 8 million people fled Venezuela in a very short time, trying to reach multiple destinations, with 85 percent of them going to the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, it's the only contemporary displacement of this magnitude worldwide that is not associated with an armed conflict, but rather with a political, institutional, economic and social collapse that created a situation of structural violence and widespread human rights violations.

However, in the rest of the region, there are various countries facing critical situations that would also warrant international protection – for example, Haiti, Nicaragua, Cuba and Ecuador, among others.

I think the reflections we need to make in Latin America and the Caribbean revolve around at least two questions. On the one hand, why, even with the situation in Venezuela, has the asylum system been so scarcely used in the region? Only about 15 percent of all Venezuelans displaced in Latin America have applied for asylum, and finally, only 3 percent have actually been granted refugee status, according to the official data published by UNHCR. Instead, some countries created a broad set of specific measures, others used their general migration systems and very few relied on asylum.

On the other hand, the next question is: why don't we treat people from other nationalities in as welcoming a way as we did with Venezuelans? There's an academic debate on this and, in a way, the Venezuelan experience is a very good lesson for the region: how do we react when faced with other displaced populations?

Do you think the criteria for applying for asylum are too broad, so much so that just about any person on the move feels able to apply for asylum?

No, I don't think asylum criteria are "too broad", I think the reflection has to be placed somewhere else. The

right to asylum has a very precise definition in the 1951 Convention and in Latin America it's also reinforced by regional frameworks like the Cartagena Declaration and national laws. To simply be 'on the move' is not enough to be recognised as a refugee – you need to show the causes.

“ In contexts of humanitarian crises, structural violence and extreme inequality, many people turn to asylum as a protection channel because it's one of the few legal methods available to actually get security and rights in the host country. That doesn't mean asylum itself is poorly conceived, it means there's a lack of complementary mechanisms and regular migration pathways which could respond to vulnerabilities that don't fall strictly under persecution, risk to life or safety. ”

What happens is that, in contexts of humanitarian crises, structural violence and extreme inequality, many people turn to asylum as a protection channel because it's one of the few legal methods available to actually get security and rights in the host country. That doesn't mean asylum itself is poorly conceived, it means there's a lack of complementary mechanisms and regular migration pathways which could respond to vulnerabilities that don't fall strictly under persecution, risk to life or safety.

It's even often said that there are "fake refugees", blaming people for the "misuse of asylum". However, as I already mentioned, governments have been reluctant to use the asylum system in the region. Some have even made instrumental use of asylum, which is something we studied with my colleagues in the CAMINAR research group. They've used asylum in a discretionary and pragmatic way, more as a management tool for migration flows than as a genuine protection mechanism. In some cases, it was applied selectively to certain nationalities (like Venezuelans), in others it was used as a substitute for migration regularisation and, in several cases, it was restricted through deterrence practices, administrative delays, militarisation or border closures.

The problem with the obstacles to accessing asylum created in different countries is that governments end up facing a kind of dilemma: either let the guilty go free or imprison the innocent. So asylum hasn't become too broad: what has become too limited is the menu of legal and protection alternatives for other categories of displaced people.

The number of migrants illegally crossing the US southern border plummeted in February to its lowest level in decades. According to your analysis, why is this?

Well, as I said, people are just waiting to see what will happen. Migrants are afraid to cross into the US. First, they were waiting to see what would happen with the Trump administration and now, after different events combined with threats and criminalising narratives, they are really scared. Many migrants are kind of in 'stand-by' mode.

A lot of them were waiting in Mexico City, because the CBP One app allowed them to request an asylum appointment in the US from here in Mexico City. That way, they avoided being in the south of Mexico, which is more marginalised, or in the north, where the risk of falling prey to organised crime is higher. Since February, many have been moving to the outskirts of Mexico City because it's cheaper to live and because there's already a network of migrants working in the periphery.

We were recently doing fieldwork in Mexico City and we saw an increase in buses with signs saying they were going to the northern border. Irregular migrants travelling in an informal situation don't use official buses because – even if it's not legally required – drivers often ask for an ID or residency permit. So this has created an economy around irregular migration. And although we're seeing more and more buses with signs saying "we go to the northern border", we're not seeing a clear change yet.

How about the Darién Gap? Numbers of crossing there have also dropped very sharply.

Well, the dynamics of the Darién Gap, as this strategic connector of the continent, confirm something we already knew: migration routes change in very drastic and abrupt ways, and they show the embedded feedback relationship between migration policies and flows.

Just as the south-to-north transit through this hemispheric corridor skyrocketed in response to visa requirements and other barriers imposed in several countries, with Trump's threats and measures it practically came to a halt. Between 2015 and 2024, around 1.3 million people crossed from south to north, with more than half a million crossings in 2023 alone. Since February of this year, that route has basically stopped in the south-to-north direction and instead we've seen close to 14,000 crossings the other way, north to south. Something that hadn't happened before. And this is taking place in a context where the humanitarian infrastructure in the area has been dismantled, which leaves people more vulnerable, exposed to multiple attacks and with very limited access to protection.

It's not easy to try to return. Many people don't even have a place to go back to. In general, they've been moving for many months or even years. I don't know if you know, but people who try to cross the continent – first, by crossing the Darién Gap, then the other countries until they reach Mexico and, finally, trying to make it to the US – spend around USD 9,000. That's an enormous amount of money for these people. So that's why many were waiting in Mexico, trying to get some work, to save a bit more and then attempt to cross.

Many migrants also have big debts back in their countries of origin, because they borrowed a lot to be able to make the journey. They owe money to their communities, to relatives or to other people. Right now, they don't have money, so it's hard to return and it's also hard to keep moving.

Isn't President Trump's migration policy just an extreme continuation of existing policies that were on an exclusionary trajectory?

Yes and no. On the one hand, as we've talked about, the trend towards punitive control of migration was already there and the development and sophistication of externalisation policies too. But there are some new situations. In recent times, given the different crises in countries of origin – autocratisation, economic disarray, violence and criminal governance, among others – many people have been forced to migrate. And, as we mentioned, the regular pathways to do so are insufficient.

That's why, in the last few years, many migrants of different nationalities have entered the US or obtained different humanitarian mechanisms: asylum applications, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), humanitarian parole and so on. What Trump is doing is weakening or making it harder to use those humanitarian mechanisms, with the goal of turning more people into 'deportable' ones – irregularising them, making them more vulnerable, exposing them to the risk of expulsion.

And for that, he's also relying on bending the rules: forcing the rule of law to accommodate or fit his aims. So, I think what we're seeing is not only a migration problem, but also an institutional and democratic one.

What is your assessment of the Venezuelan exodus and all the countries who accepted them? For example, two years ago you wrote an analysis of legal pathways for Venezuelans in many Latin American countries. Do you see that as successful?

Without a doubt, the Venezuelan displacement experience has put the migration and refugee laws of many Latin American countries to the test – laws that had been created or reformed in this century. Even though, in general, what prevailed was a pragmatic approach, the results were not homogeneous. Some countries gave innovative medium- or long-term

responses, like Colombia, which offered a temporary protection status for 10 years to nearly 3 million Venezuelans. Other countries went for more transitional and fragile responses, which did not necessarily guarantee regularisation, and regularisation is the first and necessary step for integration.

In that study I did with Andrew Selee¹ a couple of years ago, we did very detailed estimates and we found that between 50 and 75 percent of Venezuelans in Latin America had obtained some type of regular status. However, we can't know exactly how many of them still hold it.

The best thing Latin American governments can do is to take note and learn from the lessons of the Venezuelan displacement to face other human mobility situations. There are many lessons and also examples of good practices. Governments have strong tools already – laws and policies – they just need to make implementation work.

What about the multilateral system dealing with migration and asylum? Do you think it's already peaked and is in decline? If so, what will replace it?

I think not only the Global Compact, but also the different agreements and regional spaces in Latin America – some of them created specifically to respond to Venezuelan displacement, like the Quito Process – have helped build a progressive narrative and a collective consensus around migration. Even if they are not binding, they've put on the table the importance of guaranteeing regular status for migrants, providing international protection when needed and expanding legal pathways.

“Migration will continue to be the guinea pig in turbulent geopolitical contexts. There are two narratives that converge and are functional in this context, and they need to be dismantled: the notion of a ‘migration crisis’ and the criminalisation of migration based on the idea that it's a problem.”

In a context where both the rule of law and international law are being weakened, these instruments become even more relevant and important. It is precisely now that we need to bet on them and on multilateral and regional agreements that can strengthen the governance of human mobility in a continent where migration systems are being reconfigured, apparently with a trend toward fusion and interconnection.

What challenges relating to migration do you envisage emerging or compounding in the face of increasing geopolitical turmoil? What will the future of migration look like? Amidst this uncertainty, what opportunities, if any, do you see for potential positive change?

Unfortunately, it's likely that migration will continue to be the guinea pig in turbulent geopolitical contexts. There are two narratives that converge and are functional in this context, and they need to be dismantled: the notion of a 'migration crisis' and the criminalisation of migration based on the idea that it's a problem. There's another consequence of talking about a migration crisis: if you frame it as a crisis, then migration is seen as something out of the ordinary and governments and humanitarian aid are expected to respond with extraordinary measures.

“More than a migration crisis, what's really happening is that there are more and more migrations taking place in contexts of multiple crises that put some migrants in extremely difficult and desperate situations. And, as a result, it's the responses to migration that seem to be in crisis.”

None of this is true. More than a migration crisis, what's really happening is that there are more and more migrations taking place in contexts of multiple crises that put some migrants in extremely difficult and desperate situations. And, as a result, it's the responses to migration that seem to be in crisis: because the rules stop being applied, exceptional measures are used and, by emphasising control so much, human rights end up being violated, even though states have commitments in that area. In the end, the problem is not control itself, but that, in the name of control, rights are trampled.

But migration – especially when it happens in forced conditions – is like this: it's sudden, it doesn't give advance notice, and it takes whatever path it can. There won't be a prior warning. And governments have to be prepared for that. There are many examples of countries, and especially local spaces, that have managed to take advantage of migration.

So migration is going to continue; it's not something that can be stopped, much less eliminated. The point is how we react: if we keep seeing it as a problem and as a crisis, we're just going to repeat the same thing again and again. But if we start seeing it as part of social life, as something that also brings opportunities, that's where there can be a positive change.

1 Gandini, L. and Selee, A. (2023) [Betting on Legality: Latin American and Caribbean Responses to the Venezuelan Displacement Crisis](#). MPI.

Photo credit: Douglas Rissing / iStock

Since the early summer of 2025, the Trump administration's policy towards migrants has become highly contentious, as US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been deployed in an increasingly militarised and reportedly unaccountable manner. (See *The erosion of migration multilateralism and the 'new world order'*, [p. 252](#) and Thematic snapshot *ICE wars: the rising tension between state and federal immigration policies*, [p. 98](#)).



ICE wars: the rising tension between state and federal immigration policies in 2025

In the US, in 2025, violent and headline-grabbing clashes between federal immigration agents, local authorities and local communities are emblematic of a highly divided country on issues of mixed migration. On the one hand, tough, hardline, Trump-mandated anti-immigration measures seek to slash migrant numbers dramatically through extreme actions such as mass raids, detentions and deportations; on the other hand, more liberal localities, their communities and state agents continue to reaffirm the need to safeguard the rights of those with irregular migration status by choosing not to cooperate, outright oppose and defy the central government.

Large urban centres such as New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Washington stand at the forefront of this resistance, while state courts, local grassroots organisations and civil society representatives are progressively becoming powerful voices. People have been galvanised like never before because, instead of watching events unfold at distant border locations, they are witnessing first-hand individual community members targeted, neighbours uprooted and families separated.

While immigration enforcement is the remit of the federal government, states and localities still have power in terms of controlling priorities and resources related to law enforcement. Increasingly, and especially in the case of sanctuary cities and jurisdictions, local actors are rejecting and resisting hardline anti-migration policies from federal authorities.¹

Trump's new immigration laws in 2025: widening the federal-local divide

Immediately after being sworn in at the end of January 2025 and acting on the platform and agenda that elected him, US president Donald Trump began announcing, in rapid succession, a series of provisions and executive orders aimed at slashing immigration in the country.

Among these, the January Executive Order 14159 directs officials from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) to identify and cut funding to parts of the country where local authorities challenge or defy the government's immigration laws in so-called sanctuary jurisdictions, resulting in hundreds of them being listed and some sued.² In April, the government launched Strengthening and Unleashing America's Law Enforcement to Pursue Criminals and Protect Innocent Civilians, a bill that bolsters the presence of both military and national security officers working alongside city and state law enforcement agents.³ In June, Federal Law H.R. 1 – dubbed the Big Beautiful Bill – allocated USD 170 billion to DHS, which included USD 3.5 billion specifically designated for local- and state-level enforcement. Throughout 2025, the ICE budget was tripled and, in parallel, tent-detention sites were erected on military bases.⁴

This massive cash injection paved the way for federal immigration enforcement agents to put increasing pressure on cities and states – including those that identify as sanctuary jurisdictions – by:

- requesting local jails to detain immigrants awaiting due process
- demanding that cities and states provide sensitive and personal data to be used by ICE agents
- operating in the proximity of schools, hospitals, courthouses and places of worship
- threatening to withhold grants and remove law enforcement funding from sanctuary cities and jurisdictions if they fail to cooperate.

As expected, such tough provisions were met with fierce opposition by many liberal, immigrant-heavy cities and states, fuelling their resistance and generating major and, in some cases, violent clashes with the federal government.

1 The expression 'sanctuary city' or 'sanctuary jurisdiction' refers to specific areas such as urban centres, counties and states that either limit or fully deny their support of and cooperation with the central government in enforcing immigration law. See here for more: Global Refuge (2021) [What are Sanctuary Cities?](#)

2 Homeland Security (2025) [DHS Exposes Sanctuary Jurisdictions Defying Federal Immigration Law](#).

3 Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (2025) [Strengthening and unleashing America's law enforcement to pursue criminals and protect innocent citizens](#).

4 The Week (2025) [Big, beautiful bill: Supercharging ICE](#); Also Reuters (2025) [US races to build migrant tent camps after \\$45 billion funding boost, WSJ reports](#); Also Hackman, M. and Findell, E. (2025) [Newly Flush With Cash, ICE Races to Build Migrant Tent Camps, The Wall Street Journal](#).

Resistance and riots at the local level

A few days after Trump's announcement of the January 2025 executive orders, US cities and localities began sending out reminders "about the delicate balance of sanctuary laws, which draw distinctions between not cooperating with federal immigration officials ... and actively undermining those federal officials".⁵

New York City circulated a notice throughout its police forces forbidding them to "assist in any manner with civil immigration enforcement" while, at the same time, not taking "any action that will interfere with or impede civil immigration enforcement undertaken by federal authorities".⁶ This signals the willingness to strike a delicate balance between not complying with federal mandates without, however, actively hampering the operations of ICE officials. With the city's mayoral elections coming up in November 2025, it remains to be seen whether the latter will, in fact, continue to happen, especially in case of the – highly anticipated – victory by Democrat Zohran Mamdani. The socialist candidate for the Democratic party has announced a Trump-proofing New York City policy memo, pledging to protect immigrants and bolster legal support in order to, ultimately, "make NYC the strongest sanctuary city in the country."⁷

In June, the sweeping ICE raids that had started across California in late January and early February intensified.⁸ In Los Angeles, protests against the raids erupted quickly and included clashes with ICE agents, vandalism and blockages. Trump deployed approximately 2,000 National Guard soldiers and 700 marines – under federal authority – to suppress the protests, without gaining prior consent from California's governor Gavin Newsom or Los Angeles' mayor Karen Bass, who vowed to seek legal action – and with the former calling Trump's action an "assault" on democracy.⁹ By the end of June, raids targeting warehouses, factories and even car parks in Los Angeles had culminated with the arrests of more than 500 people.¹⁰

Other California cities such as San Francisco and Santa Ana strongly reaffirmed their non-support of and non-participation in the federal-mandated crackdowns, while people nationwide continued to express their dissent through street protests and demonstrations.¹¹

While large cities across the country continue to stand at the forefront of the resistance, heterogeneous groups of people comprising faith leaders, lawyers, college students, professors and elderly people have consistently shown up at immigration courts nationwide to provide immigrants at risk of detention and deportation with both moral and logistical support, before they are often escorted away by masked ICE officials.¹²

Representatives at both the state and the city level have mobilised to request that ICE agents stop wearing masks and instead provide regular identification through visible badges. These requests were advanced, for instance, by California, New York and Massachusetts in July 2025.¹³ To many observers, masks visually represent authoritarian, non-democratic regimes, not to mention the absence of individual accountability for acts that may be excessive or illegal.

Bipartisan and Republican responses

While Republican leaders have generally supported stricter immigration enforcement, some have expressed reservations about certain aspects of ICE's recent operations, especially the targeting of non-criminals. In June 2025, for example, a group of six Hispanic Republican lawmakers wrote a letter to the Trump administration urging ICE to focus enforcement efforts on criminals rather than non-criminal undocumented immigrants.¹⁴

Republicans are concerned that controversial ICE actions could provoke a political backlash in 2025, particularly in the lead-up to the 2026 mid-terms. While the push for increased enforcement enjoys strong support

5 Durkin Richer, A. and Sullivan, T. (2025) [Justice Department orders investigation of local compliance with Trump immigration crackdown](#). AP News.

6 Durkin Richer, A. and Sullivan, T. (2025) [Justice Department orders investigation of local compliance with Trump immigration crackdown](#). AP News.

7 Zohran for New York City (2025) [Trump-Proofing NYC](#).

8 Fry, W. (2025) [‘It was just a regular morning’: Californians picked up in recent ICE raids include kids, volunteers](#). Cal Matters.

9 Lamb, K., Corlett, E., Mackey, R., Campbell, L., Chao-Fong, L., Clinton, J. and Moloney, C. (2025) [Arrests as curfew begins in downtown LA: Newsom decries Trump’s ‘assault’ on democracy – as it happened](#). The Guardian.

10 Witt, E. (2025) [The People Being Disappeared by ICE in Los Angeles](#). The New Yorker; Also Padilla, D. and Rodriguez, O. R. (2025) [Federal immigration agents asked to leave Dodger Stadium parking lot, team says](#). AP News.

11 Pedroza, A. (2025) [The City of Santa Ana reassures residents that they will not help ICE](#). New Santa Ana; Also Sosa, A. (2025) [Ripple effects from Los Angeles ICE raids hit San Francisco](#). SF Gate.

12 The Week (2025) [Volunteers flock to immigration courts to support migrants arrested in hallways](#).

13 Holden, L. (2025) [California tries to unmask ICE](#). Politico; Also Toole, M. (2025) [ICE agents wouldn’t be allowed to wear masks in Massachusetts in proposed legislation](#). CBS News.

14 Hesson, T. (2025) [Trump’s ICE arrests non-criminals despite crime-focused message](#). Reuters.

among the Republican base, concerns about negative public perception, economic disruption and potentially alienating key voting demographics have led some to express caution about tactics used. The extent of the political fallout remains to be seen, but the issue is a notable point of division and concern within the party.¹⁵

A June 2025 Reuters/Ipsos poll showed Americans are split on Trump's use of military against immigration enforcement protests, indicating a significant divide in public opinion. However, the same report also showed that Trump's support on immigration policy has been consistently higher among his base than on other issues.¹⁶

The reality that immigration has become an increasingly polarised issue, with politicians from each party often using it to galvanise their base, adds to the factors that limit bipartisan opposition to Trump's extraordinary use of ICE in 2025.

An unfinished battle of values

With the ICE raids in California and elsewhere continuing through September 2025 and showing no sign of slowing down, it is likely that the situation will not see a firm resolution in the near future. Recent developments confirm that immigration enforcement has, in fact, intensified, with reports indicating actions in cities and against specific groups.¹⁷

The divide between federal and state, central and local, therefore, will continue to deepen, showcasing that non-federal actors possess powerful dissenting voices and the determination to protect the most vulnerable in the face of what many regard as increasingly inhumane measures.¹⁸ This is an unfinished war of values and actions, bringing into sharp focus the different interests on a state and on a federal level whilst also, arguably, offering a visceral illustration of democratic, community-led protest to locally unpopular and unwanted policy implementation.

15 Espinoza, M. (2025) [The 2026 Midterms: The Republican Party's embrace of Trump will continue to be the most important influence on its electoral fortunes](#). LSE.

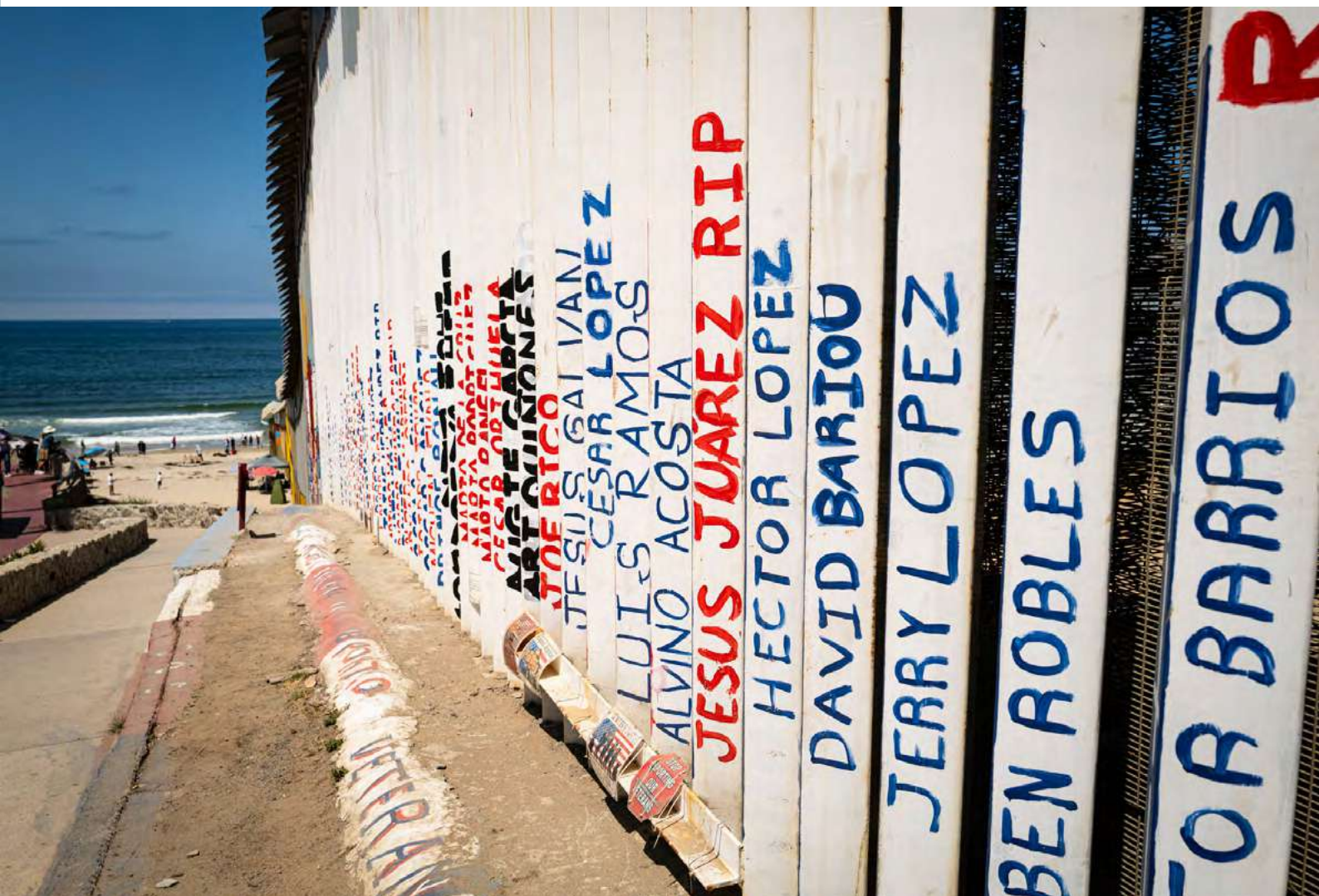
16 Lange, J. (2025) [Trump approval steady at 42%, support weakens for his immigration policy, Reuters/Ipsos poll finds](#). Reuters.

17 Marquez, A. (2025) [Kristi Noem confirms plan to expand ICE operations in major cities](#). NBC.

18 Li, H. and Singh, M. (2025) [Troops, terror and tears in Los Angeles as ICE raids show no sign of slowing](#). The Guardian.

Photo credit: Chris Allan / iStock

"Rest in peace" messages and names on painted metal border fence posts honouring lost loved ones in the Playas de Tijuana beach area at the end of the Mexico-California border wall. In 2025, migrants continued to perish in jungles, mountains, plains and the sea in their efforts to find new homes in countries around the world that are increasingly hostile and closed to irregular migration. (See Interview with Helena Malena Garzón, [p. 126](#) and Interview with Tareke Brhane, [p. 42](#)).



Europe

Overview

Peter Grant

Having risen year on year between 2021 and 2023, irregular migration to Europe appeared to dip in 2024 and continued to fall in the first seven months of 2025.¹ EU officials have attributed this downward trend to the successful implementation of various deterrence-based policies, including the expansion of Europe's partnership agreements with governments in North Africa, West Africa and the Middle East.² However, even as some routes have seen less movement, others

have experienced a resurgence – including, notably, the increasing prominence of previously marginal migration routes connecting Algeria with the Balearics and Libya with Crete.³ Given the historic fluctuations in arrivals, the adaptability of smuggling networks and the continued demand to migrate – particularly, in conflict-affected countries, such as Mali – it may be premature to conclude that irregular migration into Europe is in retreat.⁴

Graphic 1. Irregular arrivals to Europe 2018 - 2025⁵



Source: [UNHCR Operational Data Portal – Europe Sea Arrivals](#)

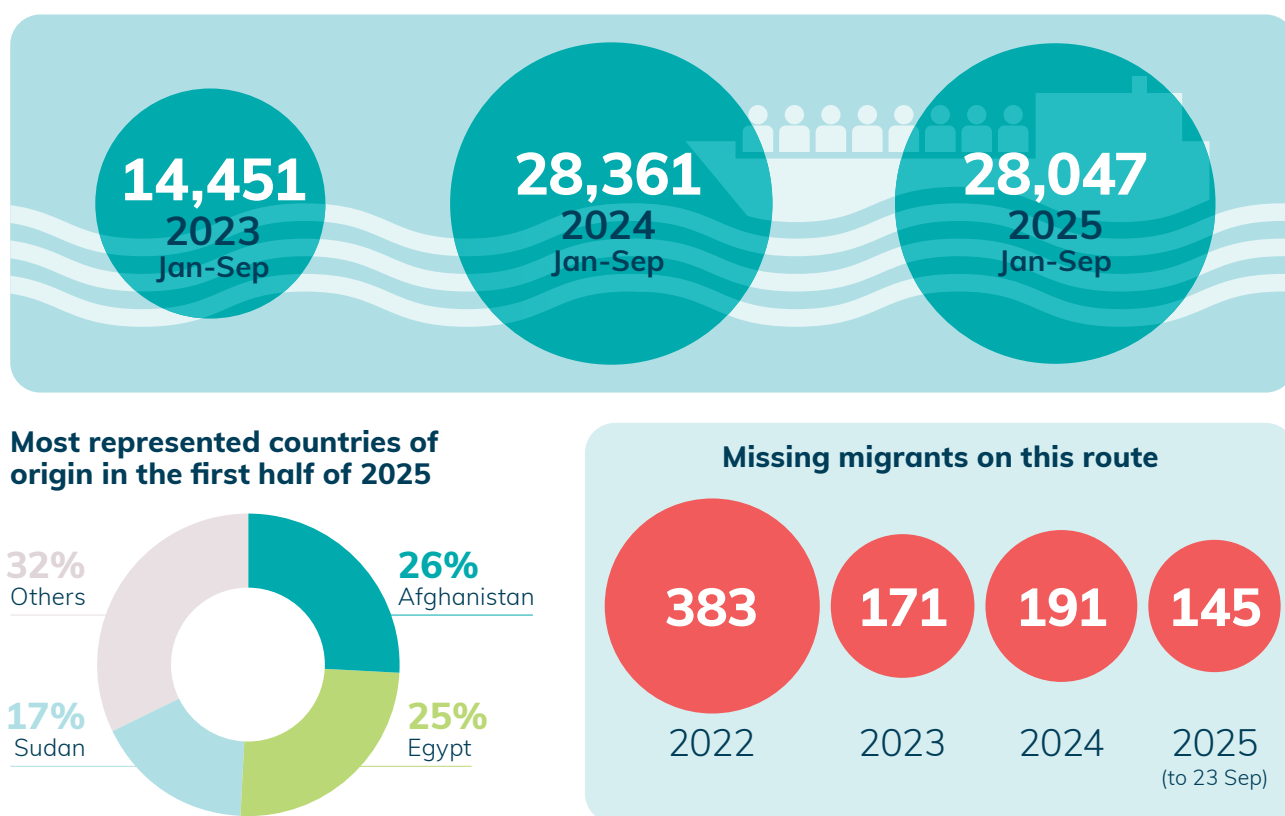
- 1 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals](#); Also Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025](#).
- 2 European Commission (2024) [Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel following the meeting of the European Council of 17 October 2024](#).
- 3 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Are Crete and the Balearics revealing cracks in the EU migration deterrence?](#) Mixed Migration Centre.
- 4 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Beyond restrictions: how migration and smuggling adapt to changing policies across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the English Channel](#).
- 5 The 2025 estimates are calculated using the published January-to-August 2025 figures and the average share of yearly arrivals occurring in the same period during 2018 to 2024, with an additional adjustment to reflect most recent trends using % change from 2024 and 2025 January-to-August figures applied to the September-to-December 2025 estimates.

In the meantime, the mood across the continent has become markedly more hostile towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, which is reflected in recent deportation drives, increasing establishment of intra-EU border controls within the Schengen-zone and the rollback of refugee resettlement programmes, migrant welfare provisions and family reunification. This apparent shift is vividly illustrated by Germany's vocal calls for tougher migration and asylum policies. While previously a leading advocate within the EU for fair and inclusive asylum processes, the German government is now implementing a series of harsh provisions that signal a very different approach to migration and asylum moving forward.

Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece

After a significant increase in movement during 2024, with the annual total rising more than 27 percent to 62,119, the number arriving in **Greece** in the first seven months of 2025 (25,870) was almost identical to the total in the same period in 2024 (25,887). Between January and June 2025, the most represented groups among arrivals were from Afghanistan (29.9%), Egypt (23.4%), Sudan (14.4%) and Eritrea (4.4%).⁶ Syrians, having been the most represented nationality in 2024 at more than a third (35%) of all arrivals,⁷ accounted for just 2.9 percent⁸ – a decline largely attributed to the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024.

Graphic 2. Eastern Mediterranean route 2025: three-year comparative data of arrivals



Source: [IOM Missing migrants project](#); [UNHCR situations Europe sea arrivals](#)

However, while overall movement along the Eastern Mediterranean route remained much the same, a noticeable uptick was evident in the number of migrants entering Greece through **Crete** and the neighbouring island of **Gavdos**, with 9,753 arrivals as of 13 July.⁹ Much of this uptick in movement comprises Egyptians,

Sudanese and Bangladeshis embarking from Libya,¹⁰ in contrast to the predominance of Syrians and Afghans evident among those journeying from Türkiye. While the situation has generated considerably more media coverage in recent months, the increase in popularity was already evident in 2024, when the total number of

6 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Greece](#).

7 UNHCR (2025) [Greece sea arrivals dashboard – December 2024](#).

8 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Greece](#).

9 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Greece](#).

10 Mellersh, N. (2025) [Migrant arrivals in Greece drop, but asylum suspension draws sharp criticism](#). InfoMigrants.

migrants travelling along this route rose by around six times compared to the year before.¹¹

Migration to **Cyprus**, having already decreased by more than 44 percent in 2024 to an annual total of 6,097, continued to fall in the first seven months of 2025 to 1,414 – less than a third (30%) of the total in the same period the previous year (4,645).¹² This reduction has been driven by a range of restrictive measures by Cypriot authorities to curb arrivals, beginning with the suspension of Syrian asylum applications in May 2024. In May 2025, Cyprus and Syria signed an agreement to enable the return of Syrians apprehended at sea, with authorities also announcing, the same month, a planned cash assistance programme to promote returns to Syria, with one family member permitted to stay on the island to work for a period of three years.¹³ Nevertheless, Syrians still made up the largest group among arrivals (36.7%) in the first six months of 2025, followed by nationals from Sudan (12.1%), Afghanistan (11.6%), Somalia (8.8%) and Iran (7.7%).¹⁴

According to IOM's Missing Migrants data portal, a total of 132 people died or disappeared in the first half of 2025 along the Eastern Mediterranean route, compared to 85 during the same period of 2024.¹⁵ Among the most deadly incidents was the sinking of a boat off the coast of Cyprus on 17 March 2025, with seven dead and 14 missing following the incident.¹⁶

Uptick in migration from Libya to Crete

In recent months, the emergence of the Libya-Crete route as a major entry point to Greece has led to an increasingly fraught relationship between the EU and authorities in Libya. While the EU has called on Libya to do more to prevent these crossings,¹⁷ in line with its long-standing arrangement around migration management, thousands have continued to arrive on the island. This latest impasse highlights the fragility of the various 'partnerships' underpinning the EU's externalisation strategy, particularly against a backdrop of growing geopolitical uncertainty.¹⁸ In this instance, a major source of contention is the controversial 2019 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Libya and Türkiye around maritime oil and gas exploration, brokered without any

recognition of Greek and Cypriot claims over some of the areas covered in the agreement.¹⁹

In light of these tensions, some analysts have even privately suggested that Libya may be exploiting irregular migration to put pressure on Greece and the EU – though it should also be noted that the internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli has, in fact, controlled only a portion of the country.²⁰ Much of Libya, including the eastern areas from where most Crete-bound boats are departing, is under the aegis of the rival, Russia-backed Government of National Stability (GNS). The GNS's importance for Moscow has only intensified since the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 and the loss of its naval base in Tartus.²¹ Other analysts fear that, with Russian backing, General Khalifa Haftar, the warlord and de facto ruler of eastern Libya, is attempting to weaponise migration against the EU.²²

The complications of having two competing authorities in place have further hampered efforts to reach a diplomatic agreement, as highlighted in early July, when several senior EU officials were deported from eastern Libya by the de facto authorities there. The delegation, who had arrived to discuss irregular migration, were apparently denied entry because they had first visited the internationally recognised rival government in Tripoli. However, some reports suggested that their refusal to be photographed alongside GNS ministers on arrival may have provoked their expulsion.²³ Since then, however, the EU migration commissioner has called for renewed negotiations with Haftar to reach an agreement.²⁴ See also *Keeping Track in Africa*, p. 14.

Greece imposes more restrictions against migrants

In early July, in response to the uptick in movement from Libya, the Greek government – having threatened to send warships to intercept migrant vessels²⁵ – announced a three-month suspension of asylum applications from those who had embarked from North Africa.²⁶ Under the proposal, anyone arriving in Greece would be automatically sent back to their country of origin without registration.²⁷

11 RSA (2025) [Crete – Gavdos: Sixfold increase in refugee arrivals in 2024 – Lack of organised first reception and accommodation infrastructure](#).

12 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Greece](#).

13 Blackburn, G. (2025) [Cyprus offers Syrians resettlement money to return home, migration minister says](#). Euronews.

14 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Cyprus](#).

15 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Mediterranean – Eastern Mediterranean route](#).

16 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Mediterranean – Eastern Mediterranean route](#).

17 AP (2025) [Greece, EU to press Libya on migrant crossings as Mediterranean numbers surge](#).

18 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Are Crete and the Balearics revealing cracks in the EU Migration Deterrence?](#) MMC.

19 The Arab Weekly (2025) [Libya rejects European interference in maritime agreement with Turkey](#).

20 Michalopoulos, S. and Mandilara, S. (2025) [Greece faces migrant surge as Libya, Turkey intensify Mediterranean energy ties](#). Euractiv.

21 Knipp, K. (2025) [Russia's role in trafficking, smuggling from Libya to EU](#). DW.

22 Knipp, K. (2025) [Russia's role in trafficking, smuggling from Libya to EU](#). DW.

23 Ross, T., Giordano, E., Stamouli, N. and Roberts, H. (2025) [The great Benghazi blunder: How a Libyan warlord humiliated Brussels](#). Politico.

24 Wallis, E. (2025) [EU Migration Commissioner calls for further negotiation with Libya](#).

25 Droukga, B. (2025) [Greece plans to deploy navy ships off Libya to 'send a message' to migrant smugglers](#). Euronews.

26 Cossé, E. (2025) [Greece's asylum suspension denies rights, puts lives at risk](#). HRW.

27 Cossé, E. (2025) [Greece's asylum suspension denies rights, puts lives at risk](#). HRW.

This controversial move (echoing a 2020 move to suspend asylum, that was widely criticised at the time)²⁸ appears to not even include exceptions for vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors and pregnant women, and overlooks the fact that some of those attempting the journey (including displaced Sudanese) would typically be recognised as refugees. Ultimately, the worst affected by these provisions – which have been condemned by human rights groups as a violation of international law²⁹ – are people seeking protection.³⁰

The asylum suspension is only one of a number of measures during the year that threaten to erode migrant and refugee protections, including the announcement in May of an eviction order for refugees and asylum seekers in camps across the country, prompting criticism from human rights organisations.³¹ The government is also reportedly mulling the implementation of a “disincentive-based policy” to deter arrivals by reducing benefits for asylum seekers, and is developing legislation that could see rejected asylum seekers jailed for up to five years if they do not leave the country “voluntarily”.³²

Western Balkans

The Western Balkans has seen one of the most precipitous drops in irregular migration of any route, falling from a peak of 145,600 in 2022 to just over 21,500 in 2024.³³ This trend appears to have continued in 2025, with just over 6,540 detected crossings in the first seven months – a fall of 47 percent compared to the same period the previous year.³⁴ The most represented countries of origin were Türkiye, Afghanistan and Syria.³⁵ However, concerns have been raised about the quality of data collection in the region and the potential incentives for governments to report low arrivals figures as proof of the effectiveness of migration restrictions.³⁶ The Italian Consortium of Solidarity has also argued that some of the apparent reduction in movement along the route may be due to the growing frequency of illegal pushbacks and the invisibility of smuggling operations there.³⁷

Increasing border security in Bosnia leaves migrants exposed

In recent years, the EU has invested significant efforts in bolstering security not only at the borders of member states such as Croatia, but also in neighbouring countries such as **Bosnia and Herzegovina** to stem irregular migration there. In June, an agreement was signed allowing Frontex personnel to operate alongside Bosnian security officials and deploy its personnel along the country’s borders, including those with other non-EU states.³⁸ Recent investigations have highlighted the deleterious living conditions, protracted processing times and lack of access to essential services that migrants face in the country’s detention facilities.³⁹ Reports have also emerged of how, in response to more restrictive border policies, smuggling groups have adapted their tactics to focus on kidnapping and abusing migrants for ransom, with victims of pushbacks particularly targeted.⁴⁰

Europe tightens restrictions on migration – with Germany leading the way

2025 saw a further rightward shift in Europe’s attitude to irregular migration. This was epitomised by **Germany’s** apparent volte face, following the election of Friedrich Merz as chancellor, from the EU’s lead progressive voice on the issue to a vocal advocate of tougher policies, tighter border control and increased deportations. Besides calling for stricter measures to curb irregular migration, including the resumption of deportations to Afghanistan and Syria,⁴¹ Germany has also rolled back various rights and protections for recognised refugees, freezing the country’s refugee admissions programme⁴² and announcing a two-year suspension of family reunification for refugees already in the country.⁴³

Other countries have passed similar measures, often either ahead of or in the wake of national elections, but the dramatic repositioning of Germany around migration and asylum is especially striking. In the words of the German

28 Mouzourakis, M. (2025) [Neglect needs, manufacture crisis, rinse, repeat: The new Greek asylum ban and a textbook breach of international law](#). ECRE.

29 Fenix (2025) [Joint statement: Suspension of access to asylum](#).

30 Amnesty International (2025) [Greece: New asylum and return proposals flagrantly breach international law and punish people seeking protection](#).

31 MobileInfoTeam (2025) [Joint statement: The Ministry of Migration and Asylum must rescind the eviction order of people on the move from camps](#).

32 Stamouli, N. (2025) [Greece plans new “disincentives” to deter migrants](#). Politico.

33 Frontex (2025) [Irregular border crossings into EU drop sharply in 2024](#); Also Frontex (2023) [EU’s external borders in 2022: Number of irregular border crossings highest since 2016](#).

34 Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025](#).

35 Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025](#).

36 MMC (2024) [Mixed migration in the Western Balkans: Shifting policies, smuggling dynamics and risks](#).

37 InfoMigrants (2025) [Frontex data on Balkan route “only part of reality,” says ICS](#).

38 European Commission (2025) [EU strengthens cooperation on migration and border management with Bosnia and Herzegovina](#).

39 HRW (2025) [Bosnia and Herzegovina: Rights of detained migrants at risk](#).

40 Dragojio, S. and Siviero, T. (2025) [BWK: The armed Afghan gang terrorising migrants, refugees crossing Bosnia](#). Balkan Insight.

41 France24 (2025) [Germany and EU allies back tougher asylum measures, including deportations to Afghanistan and Syria](#).

42 AfricaNews (2025) [Germany’s refugee programme freeze leaves asylum-seekers stranded in Kenya](#).

43 Whittle, H. (2025) [Germany suspends refugees’ family reunification](#). DW.

minister of the interior, Germany is “no longer sitting in the brakeman’s cab on migration issues in Europe, but is in the locomotive.”⁴⁴ This attitude is increasingly in evidence across Europe. The mood among many European governments was illustrated in May 2025, when Denmark, Italy and seven other countries (Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the Czech Republic) issued a joint statement calling for a “new and open-minded conversation about the interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights”, with particular reference to its interpretation in migration-related cases.⁴⁵

At the EU level, a major milestone was the proposal, in March, of the Common European System for Returns, a new framework designed to clarify and accelerate return procedures across all member states.⁴⁶ A central rationale of the legislation, if it is approved, is to expedite (including through the use of forced returns, if necessary) the speedy repatriation of migrants who are not authorised to remain in the EU. This is, in part, a response to the very low return rates evident across the EU, estimated at around 20 percent.⁴⁷ Germany, building on an uptick in deportations in recent years, deported around 11,800 people in the first half of 2025 – a significant rise from the 9,500 deported in the first half of 2024.⁴⁸ Other countries, such as Portugal, have also launched deportation drives to remove undocumented migrants from their territories.⁴⁹

One of the instruments highlighted in the proposed system is the use of so-called return hubs to facilitate returns by sending unauthorised migrants scheduled for return to a designated third country while their repatriation to their country of origin is arranged. Though stopping short of establishing a shared EU-wide system – previously mentioned as a possibility under consideration in the draft legislation⁵⁰ – it nevertheless paves the way for more countries to outsource detention in this way. While Italy has recently reconfigured its external asylum processing facilities in Albania for this purpose, it seems likely that other EU countries might follow suit. The UK, meanwhile, has already announced that it is considering a number of countries including

Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as potential locations for a return hub system of its own.⁵¹

Among the most significant stumbling blocks to the implementation of more restrictive migration policies is the contested notion of ‘safe countries’ – a concept that was showcased in the Pact on Asylum and Migration, passed in 2024. This designation for countries deemed safe for unauthorised migrants to be returned to has been repeatedly challenged in different contexts in both domestic and European courts. Italy’s original proposal to detain intercepted migrants from a selection of designated ‘safe’ countries in facilities in Albania was rejected by the Italian courts precisely because, while generally safe, the countries in question were not safe for all regions and minorities – the benchmark stipulated in EU law.⁵² However, in April, the EU published a list of safe countries that included, in addition to EU candidate countries such as Albania and Türkiye, seven other countries: Kosovo, Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, India, Morocco and Tunisia.⁵³ It is hoped that the list will provide a common frame of reference for different EU member states, many of whom have separate lists: Germany, for instance, currently lists 10 non-EU countries and is looking to expand these to include four more,⁵⁴ despite vocal criticism from activists and opposition MPs.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, a ruling by the European Court of Justice at the beginning of August in relation to Italy’s proposed facilities in Albania may complicate these plans. While allowing for countries to develop safe country lists for fast-tracked asylum procedures, it also stipulates that the sources for these assessments should be disclosed and the classification subject to legal scrutiny. It also reiterated that, to be included, countries should be safe for their entire populations, minorities included.⁵⁶

The issue of ‘secondary migration’ – the movement of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers between different countries within the Schengen zone – has been in the spotlight as a result of Germany’s pushback of migrants to Poland and Lithuania. While this phenomenon is not new, as Germany has sent back migrants in previous years under the EU’s Dublin Agreement or bilateral

44 Al Jazeera (2025) [Germany and EU allies push for “tougher, stricter” asylum rules](#).

45 France24 (2025) [Italy, other EU states urge rethink on European rights convention](#).

46 European Commission (2025) [New Common European System for Returns](#).

47 European Commission (2025) [Migration: Commission proposes new European approach to returns](#).

48 Daily Finland (2025) [Germany sees rise in deportations in H1 of 2025](#).

49 InfoMigrants (2025) [Portuguese government announces major migrant expulsion plan](#).

50 InfoMigrants (2025) [Sweden hints at introduction of EU migrant ‘return hubs’ in near future](#).

51 Bancroft, H. (2025) [UK draws up list of nine countries for migrant ‘return hubs’ plan](#). The Independent.

52 Kirby, P. (2025) [EU names seven countries as safe in plan to fast-track migrant returns](#). BBC.

53 Genovese, V. (2025) [Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco in EU list of safe countries of origin](#). Euronews.

54 Fürstenau, M. (2025) [Immigration: Germany seeks “safe countries of origin”](#). DW.

55 Bathke, B. (2025) [Germany: Move to determine safe countries via government decree sparks controversy](#). InfoMigrants.

56 Fürstenau, M. (2025) [Immigration: Germany seeks “safe countries of origin”](#). DW.

readmission procedures, what distinguishes these pushbacks is that the majority have been facilitated by Germany imposing border controls with its neighbours, within the free-movement Schengen area. Though Germany's implementation of border controls extends back to 2023, the Merz government has taken this further by announcing, in May, a new policy of turning back asylum seekers at the border without assessing their claims. While the move has been challenged by a Berlin court,⁵⁷ Poland – contending with far-right protests on this issue – has itself imposed similar controls on its borders with Germany and Lithuania.⁵⁸ The standoff speaks to the profound impact that irregular migration has had within the EU, in particular around the fundamental principle of passport-free movement within the Schengen zone. For more details see Thematic snapshot *Migration policy in a rightward-shifting political landscape: the case of Germany*, p. 134.

Central Mediterranean route to Italy

According to UNHCR, in the first seven months of 2025 there were 36,406 registered sea arrivals in **Italy**, up almost 9 percent compared to the same period in 2024.⁵⁹ In the first half of the year, the most represented countries of origin among sea arrivals in Italy were Bangladesh (32.4%), Eritrea (14.5%), Egypt (11.8%), Pakistan (8.7%) and Ethiopia (4.8%) (see also *Keeping Track in Africa*, p. 14.).⁶⁰

According to data from IOM's Missing Persons Project, at least 666 people died or disappeared along the Central Mediterranean route in the first seven months of 2025, compared to 1,032 during the same period in 2024.⁶¹ Even with the apparent reduction in the fatalities, this means that more than three people on average are dying or disappearing every day along the route. The increasing restrictions on search and rescue operations are one factor in the high mortality rates, as evidenced in a June 2025 report by MSF. Following the implementation of legislation at the beginning of 2023 that severely constrains the ability of NGOs to undertake humanitarian rescue, the number of migrants rescued by

MSF's boat Geobarents reportedly halved from 4,646 in 2023 to 2,278 in 2024.⁶² On 24 August 2025, the Libyan coastguard (using an EU-funded vessel) shot directly at the humanitarian boat Ocean Viking, inflicting serious damage. Though the action generated significant criticism in Italy from opposition parties and was described by Frontex as “deeply concerning”,⁶³ commentators have argued that it was a predictable outcome after “years of impunity” and “EU-funded aggression”.⁶⁴

Italy's failed Albania migrant facilities repurposed as return hubs

Italy's controversial migration facilities in **Albania**, originally built with the aim of holding asylum seekers while their claims were processed, were suspended shortly after opening in October 2024, following repeated legal rulings against their continued operations.⁶⁵ While the two centres were designed to hold up to 3,000 migrants intercepted at sea every month, the government was forced to transfer the first group of asylum seekers sent to the facilities back to Italy almost immediately following a court ruling on 18 October that their countries of origin (in this case, Bangladesh and Egypt) could not be considered safe to return to, in line with the EU's categorisation at the time.⁶⁶ Despite widespread condemnation by human rights groups,⁶⁷ the European Commission has been broadly supportive of Italy's proposal.⁶⁸ However, further court rulings, in November 2024 and January 2025, against the detention of migrants at the facilities appeared to stymie their use indefinitely, pending a ruling by the European Court of Justice as to its legality under EU law.⁶⁹ In August, the European Court of Justice ruled that the Italian government's current definition of what constitutes a ‘safe country’ (a central component of its offshore processing model) was in violation of EU law, further undermining the basis for the original proposal.⁷⁰

However, at the end of March, in response to these legal roadblocks and in anticipation of the August ruling, the Italian government passed a decree to enable these centres to be used as holding facilities for rejected asylum seekers prior to their deportation.⁷¹ In April, 41 rejected asylum seekers were sent to the facilities, though 16 were subsequently sent back to Italy. An opposition MP who visited the facilities towards the end of the month described conditions as “a hell compared to

57 Notes from Poland (2025) [German court rules against sending asylum seekers back to Poland at border](#).

58 Connolly, K. and Krupa, J. (2025) [Poland begins controls on borders with Germany and Lithuania](#). The Guardian.

59 UNHCR (2025) [Italy weekly snapshot - 18 August 2025](#).

60 UNHCR (2025) [Europe arrivals: Italy](#).

61 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within the Mediterranean – Central Mediterranean route](#).

62 MSF (2025) [Deadly manoeuvres: Obstruction and violence in the Central Mediterranean](#).

63 Giordano, E. (2025) [Migration ties with Libya criticized after patrol boat shoots at NGO rescue team](#). Politico.

64 Statewatch (2025) [EU-funded aggression: How years of impunity led to the attack on the Ocean Viking](#).

65 MMC (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Europe – Quarter 4 2024](#).

66 Tondo, L., Henley, J. and Kassam, H. (2024) [Blow to Meloni's Albania deal as court orders asylum seekers' return to Italy](#). The Guardian.

67 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: New report questions government's "safe countries" decree for migrants and asylum seekers](#).

68 Peretti, A. and Ionta, N. (2025) [Commission backs Rome in ECJ hearing on Italy-Albania migration deal](#). Euractiv.

69 Giordano, E. and Ford, A. (2025) [Giorgia Meloni's Albania migration plan blasted after third failure](#). Politico.

70 Peretti, A. (2025) [EU Court deals blow to Meloni's Albania migration deal](#). Euractiv.

71 Euronews (2025) [Italy approves new decree to use Albania migration centres as repatriation hubs](#).

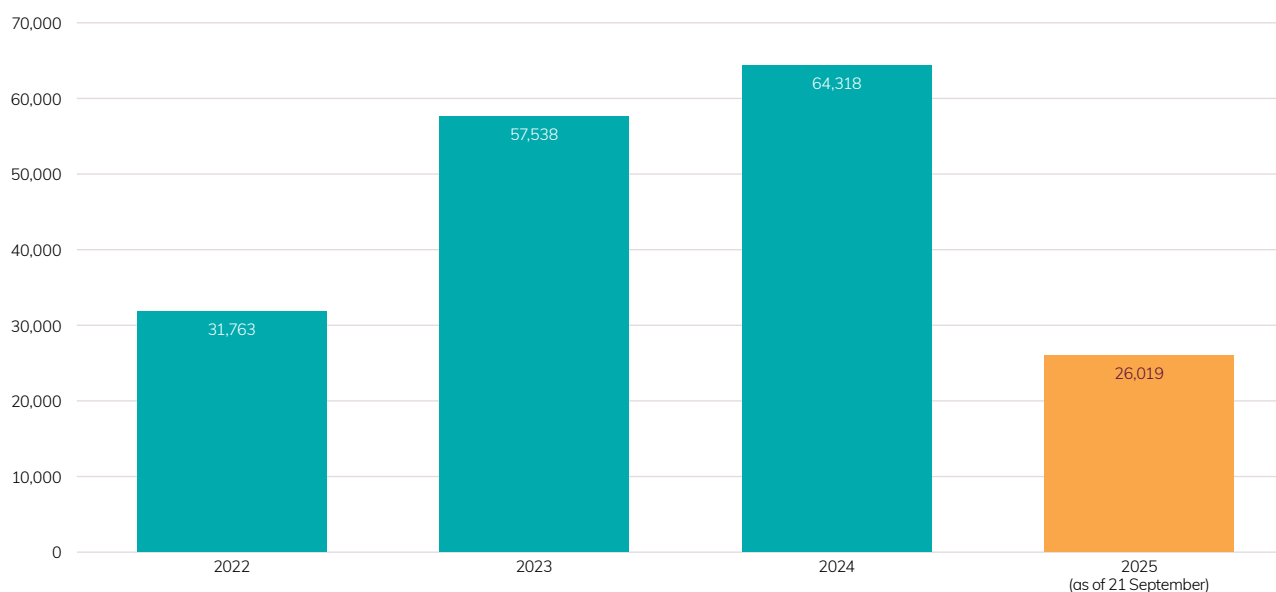
Italian detention centres” and highlighted the numerous incidents, including self-harm and suicide attempts, that had reportedly occurred since their reopening.⁷² Nevertheless, the use of the facilities for repatriation was subsequently approved in the courts, before being passed in the Lower House and then the Senate in May.⁷³

Though the first deportation – of a Bangladeshi national – related to the Albania facility occurred in late April, the deportation ultimately took place from Italy rather than Albania. The first deportations direct from the facilities in Albania took place in early May.⁷⁴ The detention facilities have been widely criticised,⁷⁵ with calls from NGOs for the agreement with Albania to be suspended.⁷⁶ Despite these controversies, the Italian repatriation centres follow a similar model to the ‘return hubs’ now being proposed across the EU.

Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes to Spain

According to UNHCR, the total number of arrivals in **Spain** in the first seven months of 2025 was 20,629, a reduction of 30 percent compared to the same period the previous year (29,790). However, when disaggregating by route, the picture was much more mixed. Movement along the Atlantic route, while still accounting for the majority of arrivals (11,614) during this period, was nevertheless down by 48 percent compared to the same period in 2024 (22,035). Along the Western Mediterranean route, on the other hand, the total (9,025) was 16 percent higher than during the same period the previous year (7,755).⁷⁷ This is partly due to the sharp rise in migration to the Balearic islands, with 4,388 detected arrivals as of 17 August.⁷⁸ Arrivals from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta have also increased during 2025, with more than 2,400 as of the end of August,⁷⁹ with a marked spike from late July, when large groups of migrants tried to cross by swimming across the border.⁸⁰

Graphic 3. Atlantic and Western Mediterranean routes – arrivals to Spain (sea and land arrivals including the Canary Islands)



Source: [UNHCR Operational Data Portal – Europe Sea Arrivals - Spain](#)

72 Euronews Albania (2025) [Mystery in Gjadër: 16 migrants disappear from reception center in Albania](#); Also Siviero, T. (2025) [Italy queried over fate of 16 “missing” migrants outsourced to Albania](#). Balkan Insights.

73 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Senate gives final approval to Albania asylum deal reform](#); Also InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy’s highest court green lights center in Albania](#).

74 Rondi, L. and Millona, K. (2025) [La prima operazione di rimpatrio del governo italiano direttamente dall’Albania](#). Altreconomia.

75 Bathke, B. (2025) [Top EU court questions premise of Italy’s Albania migrant camp scheme](#). InfoMigrants.

76 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italian NGOs call for suspension of Italy-Albania agreement](#); Also InfoMigrants (2025) [Italian detention model in Albania is ‘inhumane and must not last’, warns Caritas](#).

77 UNHCR (2025) [Spain arrivals snapshot – June 2025](#).

78 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

79 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

80 Raynal, M. (2025) [L’enclave espagnole de Ceuta confrontée à un nouvel afflux de migrants en provenance du Maroc](#). RFI.

The most represented countries of origin among arrivals in Spain in the first five months of 2025, according to Frontex data, were Mali (37.5%), Senegal (16.8%), Algeria (12.2%), Morocco (9.2%) and Guinea (8.2%).⁸¹ However, there are significant differences in the composition along the different routes: while Algeria, Somalia and Morocco were the most represented countries of origin along the Western Mediterranean route, migrants travelling the Atlantic route were predominantly from Mali, Senegal and Guinea.⁸²

In terms of deaths and disappearances, according to IOM, 152 people died or disappeared along the Western Mediterranean route and 199 along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands in the first half of 2025, compared to 330 and 325, respectively, during the same period in 2024.⁸³ However, fatalities along this route are significantly under-reported.⁸⁴ According to estimates by the NGO Ca-minando Fronteras, for instance, 1,865 people died or disappeared in the first five months alone attempting to reach Spain, including 1,482 along the Atlantic route.⁸⁵ Following anti-migrant crackdowns in Mauritania, there have even been reports of boats sailing from as far south as Guinea-Conakry;⁸⁶ these longer journeys lead to additional hazards for those attempting to reach the Canary Islands.

The increasing importance of the Balearics

Until recently a relatively minor entry way to Europe, the Balearics have emerged as a more prominent route for migrants travelling from **Algeria**. Most depart from the central coast of Algeria towards a range of destinations within the Balearics, including Ibiza, Cabrera, Mallorca and Menorca.⁸⁷ While the trajectory of the route was already evident in 2024, with close to 6,000 migrants arriving in the Balearics (almost six times the total in 2023),⁸⁸ the speed and scale of the uptick during 2025 has rapidly evolved. As concerns mount over the increasing number of deaths and disappearances along the route – at least 31 bodies of potential migrants washed ashore in the first half of the year alone, including the remains of five people who had been tied at their

hands and feet – there have been urgent calls to expand local search and rescue capacity.⁸⁹

With the exception of a minority from Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa, most migrants heading to the Balearics are Algerians themselves.⁹⁰ The increasing popularity of the route has been driven by a number of factors, including economic and political instability within Algeria, as well as the indirect impacts of Europe's restrictive migration policies in countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, making departures from these countries more difficult.⁹¹ A further issue is the limited availability of opportunities for legal migration from Algeria, with Schengen visa denial rates now among the highest of any country.⁹²

Unaccompanied minors in the Canary Islands to be redistributed to other regions

Against a backdrop of worsening humanitarian conditions for migrants held on the Canary Islands, including recent reports of abuse at one of the local shelters,⁹³ there has been limited progress around discussions to redistribute some of the more than 5,000 unaccompanied minors currently there. Despite a Supreme Tribunal ruling in March requiring the Spanish government to arrange the redistribution of at least 1,000 unaccompanied minors across mainland Spain within 10 days, by May – with no apparent progress in the ensuing months – the court called on the government to explain what actions it had taken to implement the order.⁹⁴

The proposal has been stalled by continued resistance to resettlement from some autonomous regions in Spain and rising anti-migrant sentiment.⁹⁵ The president of the Canary Islands condemned the lack of progress, saying that “progress is only going to be made because it is ordered by the courts, not because of the political will to respect the human rights of minors, nor out of solidarity with the Canary Islands people.”⁹⁶ The first transfer of migrant children finally began in August, with a total of

81 UNHCR (2025) [Europe sea arrivals: Spain](#).

82 Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: Irregular crossings drop by 20% in first half of 2025](#).

83 IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Europe – Western Mediterranean](#); Also IOM (2025) [Missing Migrants Project: Migration within Africa – Western Africa / Atlantic route to the Canary Islands](#).

84 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Uncounted and unknown: Tracking deaths and disappearances on the Atlantic and other irregular migration routes](#). MMC.

85 Ca-minando Fronteras (2025) [Monitoreo del derecho a la vida – Primeros 5 meses 2025](#).

86 InfoMigrants (2025) [Guinée : 26 migrants meurent dans un naufrage au large du Sénégal](#).

87 Ca-minando Fronteras (2023) [Muro de indiferencia: La ruta argelina del Mediterráneo Occidental](#).

88 InfoMigrants (2025) [Spain: More migrant arrivals, regions overwhelmed](#).

89 CBS News (2025) [Multiple bodies found with hands and feet tied in the Mediterranean Sea off Spain](#); Also Panara, M. (2025) [Alarming rise in shipwrecks on Algerian migratory route to Spain](#). InfoMigrants; Also Carter, H. (2025) [Call for more help to tackle Balearic small boat crisis](#). Majorca Daily Bulletin.

90 Panara, M. (2024) [Spain: More than 700 migrants rescued off the Balearics over four days](#). InfoMigrants.

91 MMC (2024) [Quarterly mixed migration update: North Africa – Quarter 4 2024](#).

92 Taddele Maru, M. (2024) [Africans who apply for Schengen visas face high rejection rates – migration scholar explains why](#). The Conversation.

93 InfoMigrants (2025) [Migrant minors center in the Canary Islands seized, ten arrested](#).

94 InfoMigrants (2025) [Spanish court demands government explain measures for migrant minors](#).

95 InfoMigrants (2025) [Spanish government-regions discuss relocation of migrant minors](#).

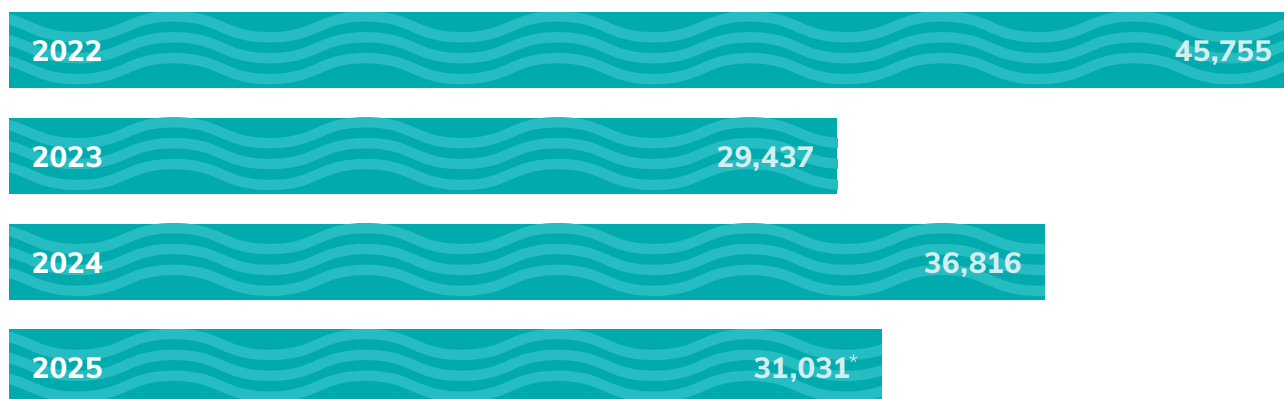
96 Sanderson, S. (2025) [Canary Islands President: “No one in Spain seems to want little Black children”](#). InfoMigrants.

800 minors (predominantly Malians) due to be distributed across the country, though both the Conservative People's Party and the far-right Vox continue to obstruct their resettlement.⁹⁷

Channel crossing from France to the UK

In 2023, while the number of migrants entering the **United Kingdom (UK)** irregularly from **France** in small boats fell from a record-breaking peak in 2022, arrivals rose again during 2024 by 25 percent to a total of 36,816.⁹⁸ Movement along this route has continued to rise in 2025, with 25,436 arrivals between January and the end of July – an increase of 50 percent compared to the same period the previous year (16,903).⁹⁹

Graphic 4. Arrivals to the United Kingdom via the Channel crossing 2022 – 2025



*Figures until September 2025.

Source: [UK Government: Migrants detected crossing the English channel in small boats](#)

France and the UK reach agreement on maritime interceptions

With the number of crossings to the UK reaching unprecedented levels in the first four months of 2025, in early June the Home Office announced plans for France to intercept migrant vessels at sea for the first time.¹⁰⁰ This proposal was supposedly intended to tackle a shift in smuggling tactics in the Channel, including the deployment of smuggler-operated vessels which travel along the coast picking up paying customers.¹⁰¹ Until then, French police focused on apprehending migrants on land before they embarked on the water since maritime law prohibited them from operating at sea except to undertake rescues (though, in practice, some interceptions at sea have reportedly been carried out unofficially since at least 2022).¹⁰² From July, a new 'maritime doctrine' authorises French security personnel to intercept vessels up to 300 metres from the shore.¹⁰³

A coastguard log leaked the same month, involving an incident where a dinghy slashed in the waters by the French *gendarmerie* still managed to reach the UK despite being damaged, highlighted concerns about the safety and effectiveness of this approach.¹⁰⁴ In the wake of a recent investigation by Lighthouse Reports on the brutal interceptions of boats by French security forces in Mayotte, including a number that have led directly to the deaths of migrants on board, there are concerns that these violent tactics could be replicated in the Channel.¹⁰⁵

97 Hedgecoe, G. (2025) [Spain starts sending hundreds of asylum-seeking children from Canary Islands to mainland](#). Irish Times.

98 The Guardian (2025) [UK small boat arrivals in 2024 up 25% compared with previous year](#).

99 UK Government (2025) [Small boat activity in the English Channel](#).

100 Syal, R. (2025) [France plans to begin intercepting small boats at sea, says UK Home Office](#). The Guardian.

101 Harding, A. (2025) ["Taxi boats" pick up migrants in waist-deep water as Channel smugglers switch tactics](#). BBC.

102 Phillips, R. (2025) [English Channel: France considering interceptions at sea](#). InfoMigrants; Also Le Monde (2024) [French police use aggressive techniques to stop migrants from crossing English Channel](#).

103 Harding, A. (2025) ["Taxi boats" pick up migrants in waist-deep water as Channel smugglers switch tactics](#). BBC.

104 Taylor, D. (2025) [Leaked document shows boat slashing failed to stop migrants reaching UK](#). The Guardian.

105 Lighthouse Reports (2025) ["They hit us and watched us drown"](#).

The UK-France ‘one in, one out’ migration agreement

A recent agreement brokered between the United Kingdom and France in response to the continued rise in migrant Channel crossings may signal the possibilities of a different approach to irregular migration.¹⁰⁶ Their ‘one in, one out’ agreement, signed in June and coming into force in August, allows the UK to immediately apprehend and return people who have entered irregularly on small boats in return for accepting an equivalent number of people in France with strong ties or family in the UK.¹⁰⁷ The pilot programme will initially be capped at around 50 a week, but will likely increase over time.¹⁰⁸

While French authorities have highlighted the potential opportunities this could offer to reduce smuggling activity, the UK government has framed it as a means to “increase returns to Europe”.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the arrangement offers a more nuanced and pragmatic approach than previous efforts to deter irregular migration – from the failed ‘Rwanda plan’ put forward by the former Conservative government, to recent legislation by the current administration barring refugees who entered the country irregularly from ever gaining citizenship.¹¹⁰ UNHCR responded with tentative optimism to the proposal, stating that “if appropriately implemented, it could help achieve a more managed and shared approach, offering alternatives to dangerous journeys, while upholding access to asylum”.¹¹¹

What distinguishes it from conventional deterrence-based approaches is its recognition of the reality of irregular migration. While representing one aspect of the UK’s migration policy, which in other areas has become increasingly restrictive in recent months, the agreement has the potential to offer a more positive approach to managing irregular migration while at least offering a limited pathway to safe, regular movement. However, local charities have criticised the programme as insufficient, addressing “only a drop in the ocean” of current need, and highlighted the potential for migrants with valid protection needs to be deported to France

under the scheme.¹¹² In August, dozens of migrants were reportedly detained in the UK to be sent back to France as part of the new arrangement.¹¹³ On 18 September, the first person to be removed under the scheme (an Indian national) was removed to France, with another (an Eritrean national) transferred the following day.¹¹⁴ Returns scheduled for the week of 15 September were cancelled at the last minute for days in a row, due to various legal challenges (for example, when those scheduled for removal claimed to be victims of trafficking or torture). While the UK government denies the deal is in chaos, it is clear it is not yet working as planned, with French authorities also warning it could be abandoned if it is not functioning well.¹¹⁵

Eastern Border

The Eastern Border, a 6,000-kilometre land border separating various EU member states from Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, has become increasingly prominent in recent years since first Belarus and then Russia were accused of “weaponising” migration against the EU. With movement having trebled in 2024, the number of detected irregular crossings in the first seven months of 2025 fell by 45 percent compared to the same period the previous year. The most common country of origin was Ukraine – a group comprised primarily of military-age men who, unlike the millions living as refugees in Europe, are prohibited by the Ukrainian government from leaving the country – followed by Somalia and Ethiopia.¹¹⁶

Pushbacks and denial of asylum

In 2021, in response to what appeared to be a coordinated effort by President Aleksandr Lukashenko to send thousands of migrants into its territory, **Poland** closed its border with **Belarus**. As a result, thousands of migrants were left trapped in deteriorating humanitarian conditions, without access to food, shelter or medical assistance. According to IOM, at least 113 people have died in the area since 2021, including 20 between January and July 2025.¹¹⁷ While the right-wing Law and Justice party lost power in Poland in 2023, there has been little sign of improvement since the progressive, pro-EU Donald Tusk took power, with militarisation at

106 Syal, R. and Taylor, D. (2025) [Channel crossings in 2025 pass 25,000 – faster than any year since records began](#). The Guardian.

107 Sky News (2025) [France yet to agree how many migrant returns it will accept, says Yvette Cooper](#); Also UK Government (2025) [UK-France treaty targeting illegal crossings comes into force](#).

108 Mitchell, A. and Maddox, D. (2025) [What is Starmer and Macron’s “one-in, one out” migrant deal and will it work?](#) The Independent.

109 Stacey, K., Sabbah, D. and Henley, J. (2025) [Anglo-French talks over migration deal hanging in balance](#). The Guardian; Also Sky News (2025) [UK in talks to swap small boat migrants for asylum seekers in France](#).

110 Easton, M. (2025) [UK to deny citizenship to small boat refugees](#). BBC.

111 UNHCR (2025) [News Comment: UK-France pilot arrangement](#). BBC.

112 Murphy-Jhons, S. (2025) [Migrant charity says new UK and France deal will be “drop in the ocean”](#). The Independent.

113 Taylor, D. (2025) [‘We can’t eat. We can’t sleep. It’s a disaster’: the small boat detainees waiting to be sent back to France](#). The Guardian.

114 Grierson, J. (2025) [Eritrean man is second to be deported to France under UK’s ‘one in, one out’ deal](#). The Guardian.

115 Taylor, D. and Syal, R. (2025) [No 10 denies ‘one in one out’ migrant deal with France is ‘shambles’](#). The Guardian.

116 Frontex (2025) [EU external borders: Irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025](#); Also Frontex (2025) [Migratory routes](#).

117 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2025) [Migration within Europe: Belarus-EU border](#).

the border increased. In March, the Polish government voted to impose a 60-day suspension of the right to asylum at the border, subsequently extended in May for another 60 days.¹¹⁸

Polish security forces continue to violently expel migrants, often with the use of batons and tear gas, back into the so-called exclusion zone between the two countries.¹¹⁹ The growing securitisation of the border has only increased the risks for migrants who find themselves exposed to beatings and mistreatment by both Polish and Belarusian guards, locking them into a “cycle of abuse”.¹²⁰ A monitoring report published in February 2025, documenting pushbacks across Europe, found that Poland had committed at least 13,600 incidents between January and the end of November 2024. However, while accounting for the majority of cases at the Eastern Border, Poland was by no means the only country to engage in these practices: for the whole year, 5,388 pushbacks to Belarus were reported in **Latvia** and 1,002 in **Lithuania**.¹²¹

The ‘weaponisation’ of irregular migration by hostile governments has also encouraged other states to impose more restrictive border policies in response. In October 2024, the EU expressed concerns about Poland’s proposal to suspend asylum;¹²² by December of the same year, it had issued a statement authorising Poland and other countries bordering Belarus and Russia to do so temporarily, if the latter are instrumentalising irregular migration against them.¹²³ Under the Crisis and Force Majeure provision introduced under the framework of the Pact on Asylum and Migration, EU member states are able to “request the authorisation to apply derogations or to benefit from solidarity measures”,¹²⁴ including the temporary suspension of the right to seek asylum. In June, **Finland**’s parliament voted to extend its suspension of asylum (first introduced in July 2024) at its border with Russia until the end of 2026.¹²⁵ In addition, in June, the Finnish government launched a pilot reception centre to promote voluntary returns,¹²⁶ shortly after completing the first section of a fence it is constructing along the border.¹²⁷

Ukraine

Almost four years into the conflict that began in February 2022 with **Russia**’s illegal invasion, **Ukraine** continues to be Europe’s largest displacement crisis. In addition to almost 3.8 million IDPs, dispersed across the country but particularly concentrated in the eastern oblasts of Dnipropetrovska and Kharkivska, as well as in and around the capital Kyiv, there are more than 4.1 million IDP and refugee returnees who also face a range of assistance needs. For many IDPs, their situation has been protracted, with two in three (66%) having been displaced for two years or more. For some, this prolonged state of upheaval has left them with limited access to basic services, adequate shelter and livelihood opportunities.¹²⁸

While their current conditions are desperate, the future for much of this displaced population remains uncertain. A survey conducted in April 2025 found that fewer than one in five (19%) of IDPs intended to return to their place of origin in the medium term, of whom the majority (68%) would only do so once the war had ended. In the longer term, around a third (34%) intended to return, with another quarter (24%) still unsure as to their plans.¹²⁹ This points to the lasting disruption and upheaval wrought by the conflict, a legacy that will likely persist long after the fighting has ended. Given the enduring impacts that displacement will have for many civilians, particularly for women, children, persons with disabilities and marginalised communities such as Roma, development agencies have emphasised the need for an inclusive process of “human-centred recovery”.¹³⁰

An uncertain future for Ukraine’s refugees

In addition to the internally displaced population, there are nearly 5.7 million registered Ukrainian refugees worldwide, the majority in Europe (5.1 million), including Germany (1.23 million), Poland (1 million) and Czechia (0.37 million). Around 1.2 million others, not formally included in UNHCR’s figures, are based in Russia in a “refugee-like situation”.¹³¹ Thanks to the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive (TDP), agreed shortly after the Russian invasion, Ukrainians have been able to seek sanctuary across the EU – a remarkable gesture at a time when European immigration policy in general has

118 De Ruiter, E. (2025) [Polish parliament votes to extend asylum suspension at Belarus border](#). Euronews.

119 HRW (2024) [Poland: Brutal pushbacks at Belarus border](#).

120 Oxfam (2025) [Brutal barriers: Report on the Belarus-EU border](#).

121 11be (2025) [Pushed, beaten, left to die: European pushback report 2024](#).

122 Gavin, G. (2024) [EU warns Poland over bombshell plan to suspend asylum claims](#). Politico.

123 AP (2024) [EU says asylum rights can be suspended for migrants ‘weaponized’ by Russia and Belarus](#).

124 EU (2024) [EU migration and asylum policy – situations of crisis and force majeure](#).

125 P. Santos, A. (2025) [Finland extends law that restricts asylum rights](#). InfoMigrants; Also Helsinki Times (2025) [Finnish parliament extends pushback law until 2026](#).

126 STT (2025) [Finland pilots a reception centre specialised in promoting returns](#).

127 Saleem, A. (2025) [Finland completes first part of fence on eastern border with Russia](#). InfoMigrants.

128 IOM (2025) [Ukraine internal displacement report – General population survey, Round 20 \(April 2025\)](#).

129 IOM (2025) [Ukraine internal displacement report – General population survey, Round 20 \(April 2025\)](#).

130 Norwegian Refugee Council (2025) [Bridging the gaps: Ensuring a human-centred recovery for internally displaced people in Ukraine](#).

131 UNHCR (2025) [Ukraine refugee situation](#).

become far more exclusionary. In June 2025, the TPD was again extended until March 2027.¹³²

Despite this, some cracks in this solidarity have begun to emerge, with individual countries imposing restrictions for the first time on established welfare programmes. In Poland, where rising anti-Ukrainian sentiment has been fanned by right-wing politicians,¹³³ new requirements have been put in place for Ukrainian children to continue receiving benefits.¹³⁴ In **Czechia**, legislation passed in the lower house in June reportedly includes provisions preventing Ukrainians who have already claimed TPD in another EU country from doing so again.¹³⁵ Germany, too, announced in August that it would be lowering welfare benefits for newly arrived Ukrainians.¹³⁶

While, at the time of writing, efforts at a US-brokered peace deal were ongoing, observers fear that these negotiations could lead to an inequitable ceasefire on Moscow's terms, permanently entrenching the displacement of many Ukrainians from areas under Russia's control in the process. There are also concerns that, once an agreement is in place, EU member states may begin to pressure displaced Ukrainians to return,¹³⁷ despite the potential dangers of renewed conflict and the widespread damage to services, housing and infrastructure there. While the Ukrainian government is already urging its refugee diaspora to come back once the fighting has ended,¹³⁸ surveys suggest that returns will be gradual rather than immediate, highlighting the need for a phased and consultative approach from host countries.¹³⁹

132 European Commission (2025) [EU member states agree to extend temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine](#).

133 Gera, V. (2025) [Poland once threw its doors open to millions of Ukrainian refugees, but the mood has shifted](#). AP.

134 European Commission (2025) [Poland sees changes to family reunification, new benefit requirements for those displaced from Ukraine and the launch of a vaccination campaign](#).

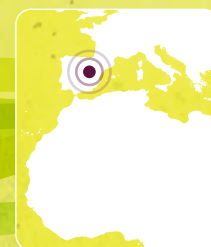
135 Bathke, B. (2025) [Czechia to tighten asylum and migration rules](#). InfoMigrants.

136 Sanderson, S. (2025) [Germany to start legal procedure to lower welfare benefits for new Ukrainian arrivals](#). InfoMigrants.

137 RFERL (2025) [If peace returns to Ukraine, what next for Europe's millions of refugees?](#)

138 Tokariuk, O. (2025) [The Ukrainian refugees being called home](#). Chatham House.

139 MPI and IOM (2025) [Exploring refugees' intentions to return to Ukraine](#).



Sexual abuse, labour exploitation and a never-ending wait for papers: Senegalese women and their perilous journeys to a better life

Senegalese migrants are increasingly relying on smugglers for their journeys to Europe. This reliance, however, is routinely fraught with abuses of various kinds, particularly for women – including transactional sex in exchange for passage. Arguably, this is the result of global practices and restrictions on asylum that governments have been implementing in the past few years, as well as controversial ‘fast-track’ systems that seem to prioritise migrants from specific countries while neglecting asylum requests from migrants originating from other countries.

I'm a 33-year-old woman, originally from Guinea-Bissau and raised in Senegal. I left Senegal 18 months ago. First, I went to Nouakchott in Mauritania, where I stayed for three months. Then, I moved north to Nouhadibou for 11 months. From there, I crossed by pirogue [small canoe] to Tenerife and stayed for about six weeks. Afterwards, I was sent to Barcelona for three months, and finally to Madrid, where I am now. I've been here for six months.

In Tenerife, the police kept me for three days. Then they released me with papers ordering me to leave. In Barcelona, they told me that only asylum seekers could stay in the centre. At first, I hesitated because I had always heard that Senegalese never received asylum, that it was pointless to apply. I was completely by myself. I had no family or friends and I didn't speak the language. Later a social worker explained things better: asylum would give me protection, time, training, a chance to learn. So, I applied. My request was accepted for processing and I was transferred to Madrid.

I left because I had no choice. When you have no choice, all options are good, including risking your life at sea. If I could have lived safely at home, I would have never left.

When I was thirteen, my father forced me to marry the son of his spiritual guide. My husband was powerful, surrounded by lots of disciples, and he even practised black magic. He mistreated me. I had children with him, but there was no love between us. He abused me and traumatised me.

At one point, I couldn't take it anymore and I tried to kill myself. His disciples found me and took me to hospital. Later I tried to report him to the police, but my husband knew lots of people within the police, so he found out what I was up to. He threatened to kill me or lock me up. A friend warned me never to return home. He gave me money and I fled to Mauritania. I left because I had no choice. When you have no choice, all options are good, including risking your life at sea. If I could have lived safely at home, I would have never left.

In Nouakchott, I slept at the station for two nights, then I met an elderly Senegalese woman who offered to help me. She gave me a bed for the night and took me to a Senegalese religious association during the day. I stayed there for three months, working in her restaurant. She always promised me that she would look after me, but then she never paid me. She was taking advantage of my situation. Because so many people

travelled back and forth to Senegal, I was afraid someone would recognise me and inform my husband. So, I moved to Nouhadibou, hoping to find a boat to cross into Europe.

Women were often told to stay with smugglers as ‘wives’ until they could cross. This basically meant that smugglers would be free to sexually abuse them.

Life there was much harder. If you had money, you paid smugglers and left quickly. If you didn't, you suffered – especially women. Women were often told to stay with smugglers as ‘wives’ until they could cross. This basically meant that smugglers would be free to sexually abuse them. They even went as far as to say to us that, if you're pregnant, it's easier to get papers in Europe. It was all a lie, but many women got pregnant. I refused. I swore I'd never sell myself again.

I met a very old man who was selling goods, so I offered to help him during the day and I slept outside in a little corner at night. This went on for almost a year. During the day, I would work and then I would walk for hours and hours to the embarkation points to see if there was a pirogue ready to leave. Each time I returned with nothing. Finally, one smuggler who had seen me for months asked why I never boarded. I explained I had no money. He let me on for free.

The sea was rough, our compass broke and we got lost. We thought we would die. Many boats never make it. More people drown than survive.

The crossing lasted four days and it was a catastrophic experience. The sea was rough, our compass broke and we got lost. We thought we would die. Many boats never make it. More people drown than survive. Nobody would choose this route if there was any other option, because nobody wants to go back to Senegal.

Things are OK here in Spain for now. I have NGOs that help me, and I feel safe. I only had one problem, once. In some shared accommodation, I had a conflict with a Latina woman who accused me of attacking her. It wasn't true, but when the police came, I couldn't defend myself because I didn't speak Spanish. In the end, I was moved to another place. Since then, I have lived with other asylum seekers and have been treated well. Spain was always my destination of choice, but I have no family here. My husband turned everyone against me, even my brothers in France and Italy. They no longer speak to me.

If we had the choice, we wouldn't come at all, or we would come on planes.

What worries me most is the asylum process. People say Senegalese almost never get it, while Malians, for example, are accepted more easily because of politics. It feels unfair. Only part of Mali is at war, but anyone from there is granted asylum. And then you have people like me, who faced the abuse and violence of a forced marriage and had to escape to save their lives, who are always rejected. I could say I'm Malian and get the papers, but then I would be lying and I don't lie.

The system should treat everyone fairly, it should look at each person's situation instead of just their nationality. Migration is never easy. If we had the choice, we wouldn't come at all, or we would come on planes. Malians with money can pay smugglers directly and cross quickly. For Senegalese without money, it is much longer and more painful, with months of waiting, exploitation and violence. And for us women, it often means having to sell our body for sex. My future depends on the asylum decision, but I believe an opportunity will come.



A portrait of Nathalie Tocci, a woman with long brown hair, smiling and wearing a bright pink turtleneck. She is positioned in front of a blurred background featuring green foliage on the left and a stone pedestal with a white vase on the right.

Interview

Europe: alternative political majorities and the normalisation of extreme migration approaches

In the past decade, the issue of migration has increasingly taken on a much stronger political characterisation, often weaponised by far-right parties and movements. This risks legitimising and normalising extreme policies and approaches, argues **Nathalie Tocci**.

Nathalie Tocci is director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, part-time professor at the School of Transnational Governance (European University Institute), honorary professor at the University of Tübingen and independent non-executive director of the multi-utility company Acea. Nathalie is also a frequent media commentator, with regular op-eds in Politico Europe, La Stampa and The Guardian, as well as being a regular panellist on BBC's The Context.

In your work, you have emphasised the need to address the root causes of migration, rather than focusing solely on the border control and externalisation of migration management. In essence, this means development assistance, doesn't it? Haven't OECD countries been doing this for the last 60 years?

Development assistance is a part of our answer, but it's not the only part. There is trade, there is governance, there is security, there is climate action and the green energy transition. All of these are the bits and pieces that make up a decent life and the possibility to have a decent life. We need to start with the assumption that no-one migrates willingly, or rather, they migrate willingly but due to difficult circumstances that cause movement. These can be issues around security, rights, poverty, lack of access to health care and education.

Therefore, there are various pieces of the policy puzzle that one needs to put together in order to respond. But coming to the nexus with migration, the question is whether we do these things because our aim is to reduce, limit or contain migration, or because it's part of an actual development policy. So you could end up doing different things depending on what exactly the goal is. If we want to unpack the 'root causes' part of the conversation, we really need to have clarity on the goal.

Do you accept that there's been some breathtaking examples of double standards and hypocrisy in the EU's approach to migration and asylum?

Actually, the tragedy is that it is not hypocrisy at all. The tragedy is that, instead, there is a level of remarkable coherence. Yes, we have now become very coherent in ignoring rights-related questions all

around, right? So, whether it's the Libya question, or Tunisia or anywhere else, it's actually very coherent. But it is cynical, because I think the assumption underpinning the hypocrisy and the double standards is that, at least somewhere, we're doing things right from an ethical perspective. In fact, though, it just gets worse as time goes on. Let's look at the deal with Türkiye: what could be so wrong with that? Why not pay some money in exchange for some return migrants or for them to stop more from coming? Is that so bad? You could also justify it in terms of saying, 'Well, is it really that wrong for Türkiye to be receiving funds from the EU, given that Türkiye has been hosting four or five million Syrian refugees?' But then it becomes, 'Oh, let's try and replicate the same Türkiye model with Libya.' And of course, in Libya, there is no state, so what you have to end up doing is buying off different militias.

Therefore, not only is there a problem of legitimacy and accountability, but it then becomes even more likely that the dirty deals that you sign are also going to be part and parcel of growing rights violations in the country. Then, you carry on, and you do it with Tunisia, or you get to the extremes – like the UK-Rwanda deal, which was not just about paying a third country to keep migrants, but it was actually about externalising jurisdiction itself. If the deal had happened and people had been given refugee status in Rwanda, they would be allowed to be refugees in Rwanda only, not be flown back to England, of course. However, if they had not been granted asylum, which presumably would be the vast majority, then they would be in this kind of legal limbo in a country that they had never planned to reach. Rather than double standards, it's something that's increasingly becoming less normative, like a vicious circle.

“Not only is there a problem of legitimacy and accountability, but it then becomes even more likely that the dirty deals that you sign are also going to be part and parcel of growing rights violations in the country.”

You were directly involved in the EU-Turkish migrant deal 10 years ago. What are your reflections now?

It's interesting to me that, in many of these cases, nation states and the EU are pushing back, pulling back, sending back, deporting people to countries that a court of law would deem unfit to return to, whether it be Türkiye for human rights abuse and lack of democracy, or Morocco, Egypt or Libya. There is a kind of dichotomy: when human rights lawyers pull people off airplanes while they're sitting on the runway ready to be deported, they win the case in court. Yet, in terms of public policy, our governments and the EU itself are doing something quite different. There's a kind of

schizophrenia going on there, or at least they're trying to get away with as much as they can.

“[The EU-Turkish migrant deal] was a one-for-one idea that is, in some respects, a healthy principle, because it was supposed to convey the message that resettlement in the EU was right and it was possible, but it had to be done through legal routes.”

Back to the Türkiye deal for a moment. On paper, of course, what was supposed to happen was the fact that every irregular migrant who tried to reach Greek coasts would be sent back, and the equivalent of one person, one asylum seeker who was in Türkiye, would be sent across into the EU. It was a one-for-one idea that is, in some respects, a healthy principle, because it was supposed to convey the message that resettlement in the EU was right and it was possible, but it had to be done through legal routes. And then, of course, on top of it, there was the financial assistance, given how much Türkiye was already spending. On paper, it kind of sounds more or less all right. But the one-for-one was never implemented and it ended up being something along the lines of, 'We give you money, you keep the migrants.' Then, as I said, you see the way in which the logic of the Türkiye agreement was attempted elsewhere.

On the one hand, you end up with this push on the political level to extend and distort, essentially, the notion of safe countries, to the point of including all sorts of countries with dodgy regimes into the list of safe countries. On the other hand, and maybe I'm very much affected by the Italian angle to all of this, what's fascinating and very disturbing is the way in which this also connects and interlocks with the confrontation between the nationalist far right and the judiciary.

Essentially, you have prime ministers like my own, Giorgia Meloni, tell the courts the definition of a 'safe country' is a political question, not a legal question. By not extending that definition, the courts are being politicised. I think this is part of the way in which this migration polemic fits into this much bigger story about the weakening and undermining of liberal democracy. This is the vicious circle. I see a scenario where migration is such a dangerous issue for democracy because, in the effort to be more generous, more inclusive, more humanitarian or even more

“But the one-for-one was never implemented and it ended up being something along the lines of, 'We give you money, you keep the migrants.'”

compassionate, they are actually opening the door for the far-right and anti-democratic forces. They're running the risk of ruining the whole thing throughout Europe, and it's actually happening. It's an irony.

“You have prime ministers like my own, Giorgia Meloni, tell the courts the definition of a ‘safe country’ is a political question, not a legal question. By not extending that definition, the courts are being politicised. I think this is part of the way in which this migration polemic fits into this much bigger story about the weakening and undermining of liberal democracy.”

Part of the problem is that liberals and the left have not been acknowledging the issue and are making it sound like anyone who is concerned about it is basically just unethical and a bad person, a racist and a bigot. Politically, it's actually very hard to get the balance right. On the one hand, you could stick your head in the sand and pretend that the problem doesn't exist and that anyone who talks about it as a problem is a bigot, which obviously doesn't work. Or you could try and do something which is not totally unethical, but a little bit restrictive. That's also not good enough, because you're always going to be outflanked by the right.

I think part of the story also has to do with how much the issue is talked about. Again, I don't want to sound like I'm 'overly Italianising' my examples, but I think it's interesting that, in Italy, we have a government dominated by a far-right party. If you look at the actual numbers in terms of migration, it's more or less in line with the past. Migration numbers are up this year compared to 2024, but they went down in 2024 compared to 2023. Anyway, does anyone talk about migration in Italy now? No, and the reason is that those in power are in the far right, and so the migration issue is not going to be hyped up by the left, because it's just not their thing.

The far right in power has an interest not to talk about it and to make it look like it's perfectly under control, which it is, but then it was as well in the past, right? I say all this because I think that the kind of tragic truth is that there isn't an obvious answer as to how to deal with this issue in a manner that actually disconnects it from this movement leading to the far right. There isn't an obvious recipe.

Are you saying that one has to conclude that the issue of migration is an almost irresistible object of politicisation and weaponisation for the far right? Whenever they want to use it, it's just a low hanging fruit that they can grab.

Totally. And yet, how Meloni has dealt with migrants recently is not dissimilar to the approach that centre-left parties have, simply on a much bigger in scale in terms of regularisation. But the point is that you don't talk about the regularisation. You also don't talk about regular migration. You just hype up what you're doing on the irregular side, to the point that you make it look like what is being done in Albania is part of the solution, when two and a half years on not a single migrant application has been processed in Albania. It's not just about which aspects you talk about, but also which aspects you do not talk about – that is just as important.

Do you think economic necessity will eventually trump everything and, one way or another, Europe will become increasingly multicultural and dependent on migrant labour?

Yes, exactly. Either we do, and we can do it with a quiet, subtle, without loudspeakers approach and we do proceed along these lines, or we're just a suicidal continent. There's no other way of putting it.

“If you want to grow in a situation of demographic decline, the only way to square that circle is migration. Because all of the empirical evidence, not just from Europe, but pretty much from anywhere in the world, is that alternative policies to fix that demographic problem, such as policies to incentivise fertility and birth rates, don't work.”

Right now, Spain stands out as an EU exception. It's opening its doors to migrants even if they are predominantly from Spanish-speaking, culturally similar nationalities.

That's right. Spain is the fastest-growing economy, not just in Europe, but also across the OECD, and the fact that it is obviously a country which has seen very high inflows of migrants means that these things are two sides of the same coin. Now you may say, in the case of Spain, it helps that most of the migrants come from Latin America, which means they speak the same language and have those family connections there, so they're far easier to integrate.

So yes, obviously, all this helps, but it still doesn't detract from the basic fact: if you want to grow in a situation of demographic decline, the only way to square that circle is migration. Because all of the empirical evidence, not just from Europe, but pretty much from anywhere in the world, is that alternative policies to fix that demographic problem, such as policies to incentivise fertility and birth rates, don't work. To address the economic problem, you basically have two solutions. One is what we just

talked about, migration, and the other is technology. And that's an interesting dynamic, because automation – especially AI – is fast upon us, driven at a time when people are also talking about needing migrants, and it will be interesting to see which one will displace the other. We all know there are some jobs that AI and robotics will struggle to replace.

Again, on the topic of Spain, it looks like the government is adopting an 'open door' policy but only to some migrants. Do you see this as being discriminatory in terms of who the country invites or accepts as migrants? And could this kind of welcome eventually turn sour after some years, when the electorate starts seeing the numbers as too high and the arrivals as too fast?

Yes, we should acknowledge it, even if it's a problematic aspect. Spain has the option of having Latin Americans come over and Poland has the option of Ukrainians coming over. But if you're Italy, and you're in demographic decline, frankly speaking, you're not going to get Latin Americans come to Italy, because they'll go to Spain. And you're not going to get Italy to have Ukrainians. So inevitably, geography will play a role here, and history too. This is why I'm saying we can acknowledge that peoples and countries have a higher tolerance for certain immigrants than others. We should not simply say that countries should accept only white Christian Latin Americans or Eastern Europeans, because in reality some countries will not even have the possibility of attracting those groups, yet they will still face serious demographic challenges.

As for the welcome turning sour, as you say, that is to do with the economy. Look at how the story went in Germany, which is probably the most telling example. In Germany, Merkel opened up to Syrians. Initially, there was some immediate pushback, but the AfD were in the low 10s in terms of percentage points. Then, it starts picking up again, because Germany enters an economic crisis as a consequence of the energy crisis, which itself happened as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine. That is the moment when the AfD comes back up, picking up on the migration theme because it latches on to an economic crisis and connects the two issues.

I think that part of these waves of welcoming and then less welcoming that you're referring to may have to do with just pure politics. Sometimes, it may have to do with particular incidents that set off an anti-migrants dynamic, perhaps something related to crime or a terror incident that somehow interlocks with migration but I think that, very often, it has to do with the state of the economy.

When the economy is doing fine, as Germany's was in 2015, 2016 and 2017 after it opened its doors for the first time, things seem to calm down. Then, when the economy starts going wrong, it kind of lights up again. So maybe in Spain all is well for the moment, because

the economy is fine. But if Spain was to go back into a recession as it was during the Eurozone crisis, maybe you could end up having a very different political debate on migration.

Why did the EU effectively stop its search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean? Was it seen as incentivising migrant movement and offering impunity to smugglers?

No, it stopped for other reasons. Mare Nostrum basically started as an Italian operation in 2013, then it morphed into a European operation, Operation Sofia. Once we got to 2017 and 2018, the first nationalist populist government in Italy emerged, with the country ruled by the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. That's when they tried to pull out. It became very difficult for an operation that had really been inspired in many ways by Italy to continue to remain in place once Italy itself had basically pulled its support.

It had to do with both politics and perception. People saw that these big ships were picking up people and bringing them to Europe like a taxi service. But this was also a major difference between the approach that that government in Italy had back then and, for instance, the Meloni government now. Especially when Matteo Salvini was minister of the interior, the only thing he was interested in was the kind of 'showbiz' of it. It was all about stopping NGO ships. Interestingly, Meloni's approach to migration is less about showbiz and more about ideology. She really doesn't want migrants. Whereas I would say someone like Salvini actually needs migrants as an essential part of his politics and political persona.

“Interestingly, Meloni's approach to migration is less about showbiz and more about ideology. She really doesn't want migrants. Whereas I would say someone like Salvini actually needs migrants as an essential part of his politics and political persona.”

What's going on between France and England right now? Why can't these two powerful nations stop the small boats?

Whether it's France and the United Kingdom or whether it's within the EU, these so-called secondary movements happen because the country which those migrants are leaving has not much of an interest in keeping them, so, inevitably, even if there isn't an active push away from the country or an active policy, migrants don't have much incentive to remain. Until we find a formula which is understood politically by both sides as being a win-win, like a social contract, in which both sides stand

to win, there won't be a resolution. Because if it's just a matter of doing something to control your borders, I will say, 'Of course, I will,' but then I won't. There has to be something in it for me and it has to be perceived as such on both sides.

You've talked about the Italy-Albania deal as a PR stunt, saying the numbers are not interesting. But in Australia, offshoring and outsourcing have been successful, have they not?

If you are Europe with a very blissful sea called the Mediterranean and a very big continent next door called Africa, it's not going to work. It would end up with you flooding Albania with hundreds of thousands of migrants. It's just not going to work. Aside from the fact that, as of today, not one single asylum application has been processed in Albania after two and a half years since the agreement was signed, let's assume that the deal was eventually going to work. If this happened, we would be talking about, at most, a few tens of thousands, or maybe not even that, sent to Albania. And how many countries like Albania, with the relationship that it has with Italy, can we really think of and how many of these third countries could be used in the same way and are going to be willing to do this, whether they are in North Africa or in the Balkans? If this kind of deal is part of the solution, and I have my doubts, it's only a very small part of the solution, given Europe's political geography, which is very different from Australia's.

“Especially in Europe, I think that we're going to see a far more restrictive approach in terms of migration. Aside from the actual results this is going to achieve, which will at best be limited, the main political implication is that those restrictive policies have started constituting an alternative political majority in Europe, which basically sees a convergence between the centre right and the far right.”

We appear to be in a moment of significant geopolitical turmoil; what are going to be the repercussions or implications for mixed migration?

Especially in Europe, I think that we're going to see a far more restrictive approach in terms of migration. Aside from the actual results this is going to achieve, which will at best be limited, the main political implication is that those restrictive policies have started constituting an alternative political majority in Europe, which basically sees a convergence between the centre right and the far right. It's now been defined as the 'Venezuela majority', simply because the first time

that that alternative majority occurred in the European Parliament was over a resolution on Venezuela and something actually fairly innocuous, but nonetheless, it was the first time that that alternative majority was constituted. I think that same majority is formed around migration issues and also around climate and rowing back on climate commitments. A more restrictive approach to migration also politically serves the purpose of a normalisation of the far right, to the extent that the policies that are being pursued also by the centre right are developed together with the far right itself.

“A more restrictive approach to migration also politically serves the purpose of a normalisation of the far right, to the extent that the policies that are being pursued also by the centre right are developed together with the far right itself.”

And do you think the climate change issue is going to be a real game changer in migration eventually?

I think it will. In a sense, it already is. It's very difficult to pinpoint a single, reasonable cause, but I think the increase that we've seen, post-Covid, of those arriving from Africa was underpinned by climate as one of the main reasons and I believe this is destined to grow.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist in terms of the politics of migration in Europe going forward?

That depends on which day you ask me. I'm in a pretty dark mood right now, but this has more to do with Iran-related reasons than anything else. I don't think that these questions, and especially the migration issue, are insoluble problems politically. I don't think that the management of migration is an impossible hole, but whether or not we're going to actually achieve it, that depends on the day you ask me.

Photo credit: Torsten Pursche / Shutterstock

Heavily loaded trucks transporting goods and people continue to cross the Sahara Desert towards Europe. Despite irregular migration becoming harder and asylum space shrinking globally, the drivers of migration only increase in a turbulent and climate-changing world. (See Emerging perspective essay *Invisible crossings: how climate and conflict converge to displace the unseen*, [p. 170](#)).



Migration and economic growth: Spain's divergent path in an increasingly right-wing anti-immigration EU

In 2024, The Economist named Spain the “world’s best economy”, thanks to the country’s high economic growth (increased by 3.2%) and increase in job creation.¹ A few months later, in May 2025, the country’s new migration regulations came fully into effect.

These open and progressive regulations are one of the key drivers behind Spain’s ‘economic renaissance’, as they aim to enable migrants to relocate to the country more easily, fill critical labour gaps more quickly and receive more extensive support on settlement and integration, ultimately allowing migrants to positively contribute to Spanish society and the economy.²

This showcases Spain’s very different stance compared to its European peers while, at the same time, bucking the endemic anti-migratory trend that currently pervades the region.

Anti-migrant, far-right and exclusionary policies: the European context

Across the world and particularly in Europe, a large number of countries saw a marked shift to the right – and far right – following sweeping victories at various 2024 elections.³ Countries like Italy, Germany, Austria and Hungary regularly portray immigration as a ‘crisis’ whose only solutions lie in strict controls, forced returns or other exclusionary practices.⁴ Frightened of losing an increasingly concerned electorate, mainstream parties adopt harsher migration policies in a bid to out-manoeuvre migration policies which are giving the far right unprecedented wins.

Anti-immigrant sentiment is generally adopted throughout the EU, leading to tighter border controls, the externalisation of asylum processing and a stronger focus on returns as opposed to integration.⁵

‘Enlightened’ migration reforms: the divergent case of Spain

Bucking the trend, over the course of 2024 and 2025, Spain’s prime minister Pedro Sánchez has widely spoken about the benefits of migration to countries like Spain, which have long experienced a sluggish economy, high unemployment rates and a corrosion of the welfare state.

During a late 2024 speech to the lower house of parliament in Madrid, Sánchez recalled how Spain, too, has a history as a “country of migrants”, and stated that it “has to choose between being an open and prosperous country or a closed and poor one.” To address this, Sánchez unveiled a series of migration reforms aimed at simplifying and streamlining critical aspects such as regularisation, settlement, integration and job security.⁶

Coming into effect in late May 2025, the new measures included:

- the introduction of five pathways to integration – social, socio-training, socio-occupational, family and second chance – as well as fast-track pathways for study and work permits
- the regularisation of 300,000 migrants per year
- the creation of seasonal residence and work permits

1 Landauro, L. and Serafinko, M. (2025) [Spain's economy outperforms euro zone in 2024 with 3.2% growth](#). Reuters. The Economist (2024) [Which economy did best in 2024?](#)

2 Kassam, A. (2025) [How Spain's radically different approach to migration helped its economy soar](#). The Guardian. Etias (2025) [Spain's Economy Booms as Foreign Workers Fill Critical Labor Gaps](#).

3 Lory, G. and Hess, A. (2024) [European political landscape shifts right in 2024 as far-right gains ground](#). Euro News.

4 Bermejo Casado, R. (2025) [The trail of Trump's \(anti-\)immigration policies in Europe](#). Real Instituto Elcano.

5 Federal Ministry of the Interior (2024) [Limiting irregular migration and protecting internal security: Border checks at all German land borders to start 16 September 2024](#). Corti, A. (2025) [What are the legal implications and human rights concerns of the 2024 Italy-Albania agreement on migration?](#) Blogs LSE. European Commission (2025) [Migrant integration in Denmark](#).

6 La Moncloa (2024) [Pedro Sánchez: “Welcoming the outsider is not only a duty, but a step towards guaranteeing the welfare state”](#); La Moncloa (2024) [The Government of Spain improves the social and labour integration of migrants](#).

- the expansion of the age limit for family reunification – from 21 to 26 years
- increased protection for migrants who are victims of trafficking and gender-based violence
- simpler and quicker processes for foreign relatives of Spanish citizens.

Economic boost or social cohesion threat?

Importantly, South Americans make up a very significant proportion of new arrivals to Spain, accounting for approximately 70 percent of all 167,366 asylum applications submitted in the country in 2024.⁷ More specifically, Colombians and Venezuelans dominate the numbers of those who arrived in the country seeking protection as well as those who came through formal immigration channels (e.g. work, family, study), with Peruvians also featuring to a lesser degree and primarily as asylum seekers. Arguably, the process of integration of South American migrants and asylum seekers could be easier compared to some other populations, due to the linguistic, religious and cultural affinities with Spain.

While Spain's 2025 migration regulations are, indeed, more open and progressive than most other EU countries at present, they still pose a series of challenges. If, on the one hand, the easier regularisation and integration of migrants have bolstered the economy – in 2024, over 40 percent of new jobs created were filled by migrant workers – on the other hand, there are considerations to be made on matters of social cohesion.⁸ Youth unemployment in the country, for example, is still relatively high, with many higher-educated Spaniards moving abroad in search of better job opportunities or as a way to advance in their careers.⁹

Similarly, integration challenges remain, as highlighted in a February 2025 monitoring report presented by Spain's Ministry for Inclusion, Social Security and Migration.¹⁰ The report stressed that, "Inequalities persist in education, employment, housing and access to basic public services such as health, where foreigners have been found to make less use of health services, except for in emergencies." Similarly, the report also uncovered that

structural discrimination towards North African as well as Muslim migrants continues, with Spain's Observatory of Xenophobia and Racism (OBERAXE) finding that 80 percent of hate-related content on social media targets these migrant minorities.¹¹

A stark illustration of tensions blew up during the summer. In July 2025, the Spanish town of Torre Pacheco experienced severe anti-migrant violence following the arrest of three men of North African origin for an alleged attack on a pensioner. This sparked days of racially motivated attacks on homes, businesses and vehicles linked to migrant communities. Reportedly, the events were fuelled by hate speech promoted by the political party Vox, other far-right groups and misinformation spread on social media.¹² Police responded by detaining individuals and authorities called for calm to restore order in the town.

Additionally, despite the current approach and relatively welcoming narrative, Spain has always maintained – and arguably even spearheaded – fairly robust containment and externalisation agreements with countries in West and North Africa (such as Mauritania), and implemented a hard-handed approach to prevent arrivals to its territories of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco.¹³

Lastly, the right-wing Vox party has experienced a surge of support since the 2023 national elections and is currently the country's third most popular party. Although irregular arrivals in the Canaries have fallen in 2025 compared to 2024, this trend stands in contrast to growing migrant arrivals in the Balearic Islands, where Algeria has emerged as the main point of departure. According to July 2025 data from UNHCR, 3,431 migrants made their way to the island group in the Mediterranean on 182 boats from Algeria, landing mainly on the Balearic Islands of Ibiza and Mallorca. This marks an increase of 124 percent compared to 2024.¹⁴

Migrant routes switching to the Balearic Islands could potentially be attributed to the increase in controls on the Atlantic route to the Canaries from Mauritania. Politically, the rising numbers of irregular arrivals, their detention and the debate around how to treat them fuels headlines and polemical debate, no doubt favouring Vox's political fortunes. The situation is also giving rise to new far-right

7 ECRE (2025) [AIDA Country Report on Spain – Update on 2024](#); Also additional ECRE update [Update on 2024: Spain AIDA](#).

8 La Moncloa (2025) [Elma Saiz: "Employment would not have grown so much in recent years if it were not for the contribution of foreign workers"](#).

9 Salame, T. (2025) [Spain's lowest unemployment in 17 years — but deeper issues remain](#). EuroWeekly.

10 La Moncloa (2025) [The Government of Spain presents a detailed overview of the progress and challenges around coexistence and inclusion of the migrant population](#).

11 La Moncloa (2025) [The Government of Spain presents a detailed overview of the progress and challenges around coexistence and inclusion of the migrant population](#).

12 AFP (2025) [Several people injured in second night of anti-migrant unrest in Spanish town](#). The Guardian.

13 Fanjul, G. (2018) [Why Spain Is a Window into E.U. Migration Control](#). The New Humanitarian; Also Migration Control Info (2020) [Spain](#).

Human Rights Watch (2025) [Mauritania: Years of Migration Control Abuses](#). Lighthouse Reports (2022) [Reconstructing the Melilla Massacre](#).

14 Sanderson, S. (2025) [Spain: Government registers drop in Canary Island arrivals](#). Infomigrants.

parties, such as Aliança Catalana, promoting Catalan regionalism together with a strong anti-immigrant rhetoric.¹⁵ Should these groups gain increased popularity and their anti-migrant stance take root, the efforts that the Spanish government has been making in the past few years to regularise, settle and integrate migrants might be at risk.

A fine balancing act

Spain's current open migration stance stands in sharp contrast with the rest of the EU. This strategic approach to migration is currently proving effective, but its continued success hinges on a fine balancing act between bolstering the economy while implementing social cohesion policies alongside pro-migration initiatives.

Further questions also remain, particularly in terms of the outward movement of higher-educated Spaniards. With their foreign counterparts entering the country and filling lower-skilled labour gaps while they seek a more prosperous future abroad, will Spain be faced with new gaps in other sectors?

Public opinion on prime minister Sánchez's migration policies is also divided, with some Spaniards supporting them for their economic benefits, while others express concern about the potential impact on society and infrastructure. A 2025 YouGov survey, for example, revealed that 81 percent of Spaniards think that immigration rates in the past decade have been "too high", pointing to a potential discontent across sections of the Spanish population, which could stoke anger and resentment towards foreigners and, in turn, provide fertile ground to both current and emerging far-right, anti-migrant parties.¹⁶ This has been the trajectory of other countries – including Germany and Sweden, as well as Lebanon and Türkiye (towards Syrian refugees), and various South American countries (towards Venezuelan nationals) – whose initial welcome of refugees and migrants turned sour relatively quickly.

The government promotes a pragmatic approach, aiming to address labour shortages and boost the economy by facilitating migration and regularising undocumented migrants, but this is not universally popular. Is Prime Minister Sánchez making a pragmatic bet while showing fearless leadership by setting a relatively unpopular course that will later (or already, even) yield positive results for the economy and society?¹⁷

Will Spain's relative stability, growth and open migration policies characterise its future in the medium-to-long term, or is this a 'calm before the storm' reaction that will cause the country to follow the anti-migrant patterns of its European peers? Arguably, for now, Prime Minister Sánchez's commitment to positively reframing widespread, fear-based migration narratives demonstrates that it is possible – and profitable – to manage the migratory phenomenon in ways that do not imply control, containment and exclusion.

15 Castaño, P. (2025) [Will the Margins Now Turn Right?](#) Tribune.

16 YouGov (2025) [EuroTrack: publics across Western Europe are unhappy with immigration.](#)

17 Finotelli, C. and Rinken, S. (2023) [A Pragmatic Bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System.](#)

Photo credit: Papi8888 / Shutterstock

The 'border industrial complex' is a powerful, multi-billion-dollar industry. The integration of AI, biometrics, big data and automated systems leads to increased surveillance and data collection on migrants, often outpacing legal and ethical frameworks and raising serious human rights concerns. (See *The rise of the border industrial complex: AI, surveillance and the privatisation of migration management*, [p. 220](#)).





Interview

Community-led action: the key role of grassroots organisations in protecting the rights of people on the move

Helena Maleno Garzón is a Spanish-Moroccan human rights defender, journalist, researcher, documentalist and writer. She specialises in migration and human trafficking and has conducted extensive research on border violence and the rights of people on the move. Maleno holds an honorary doctorate (*Doctor Honoris Causa*) from the University of the Balearic Islands. She is the founder and director of Ca-minando Fronteras/Walking Borders, a human rights organisation dedicated to protecting the lives and dignity of migrants at the borders.

From opposing the sweeping ICE raids in Los Angeles to pressing governments for a ceasefire in Gaza, grassroots organisations have been at the forefront of resistance movements against far-right, anti-migrant actions and parties in 2025. One of these organisations is Ca-minando Fronteras and its founder Helena Maleno reflects on the necessity of working tirelessly to safeguard the human rights of people crossing borders around the world.

What led you to work with migrants and what keeps you going despite the difficulties?

I come from a village in southern Andalusia, near Almería – a small village with a lot of poverty. Some time ago, they started installing *invernaderos* – greenhouses, to grow vegetables – that very suddenly changed the development of my village. Migrants started arriving to work in the *invernaderos* and found themselves in conditions of outright exploitation.

It really struck me. I come from a poor family, but also one very committed to defending rights, ever since the

Civil War. And that's how I got involved. I'm a journalist, but also a researcher. At one point, I was doing research on company outsourcing. I went to Tangier to finish that research and to work with Moroccan women in factories. There I discovered how migrants lived. I started working with migrant communities and, little by little, I stayed in Tangier working on other research projects. We created Ca-minando Fronteras with migrant communities. It wasn't something planned – it was organic.

I've always worked with participatory action research methods, with communities. It's a method I know very

well. We started working in a horizontal way, with migrant communities, and we kept going. And since I'm a border girl – my village was also at the edge, between two worlds – I ended up on the other side of the border. That's how it happened.

You've continued defending migrants' rights despite often hostile contexts. How have these experiences shaped your understanding of your role and that of Ca-minando Fronteras in human rights defence?

From the beginning, I wasn't fully aware of the criminalisation. Maybe because it was already part of my family history: both my grandparents had also experienced repression. So, for me, it felt normal when you engage in rights work. In 2005, I was arrested after a serious incident in the desert while I was documenting mass deportations of migrants. We were the only ones able to follow the convoys. After that, I was injured, arrested, sent back to Spain. It was complicated.

But at that time I didn't grasp the full extent. Later, in 2014, I survived an assassination attempt during a raid in Tangier which was racially motivated, where Moroccans attacked Black people. I tried to mediate, and they tried to kill me. I was injured, but Black Africans protected me and got me out. I thought it was just bad luck, but no – it was planned. The police had marked me. It happened again with ongoing harassment, and so on.

In 2017, Moroccan police summoned me to court. First, we didn't understand why. Then we discovered that a file on me had been compiled by Spanish police since 2012. For five years, Spanish police, Frontex and Europol had been monitoring me – phones, movements, everything. In 2016, they sent the file to the Spanish justice, which closed the case. But Spanish police still sent the file to Morocco – outside official channels – to reactivate prosecution.

Before my first hearing, the Spanish consul told me: 'Tomorrow, you're going to provisional prison.' Thankfully, there was massive mobilisation – in Morocco's migrant communities and in Spain. Morocco's government backed down. I got to see the file – it was unbelievable. The first section was a list of sexual relationships, comments on my private life – like a morality report. Nothing criminal. It was a political file. The Spanish police even asked for a life sentence.

Fortunately, mobilisation reached even the United Nations. Both the Moroccan judge and the Spanish prosecutor recognised there was nothing criminal in my case. But afterward, I was expelled from Morocco. I lost everything – my home, bank accounts, belongings. My underage daughter was left in Morocco, and the UN had to intervene.

Since then, it's been the same. I travel to Geneva or elsewhere, and sometimes I'm followed. Even at a UN

meeting in February, people were following me. I'm declared a 'national security threat' in Morocco. They wanted to use me as an example to justify persecuting others. The worst part is that Frontex and Europol were involved. The documents show police asking newly arrived migrants on beaches: 'Do you know Helena? Did she tell you anything?' It's absurd. We are not protected. We're threatened both by criminal networks and by states. And the only protection we have is each other.

“ We work for access to rights for all people on the move. Tragically, one key priority is the right to life. No one should die crossing a border. We also defend the rights of victims, the dead and the disappeared, and their families. We demand recognition, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition. ”

Can you briefly describe the main actions and priorities of Ca-minando Fronteras today?

If we can say one thing, it's that our dream is a world without borders. So that freedom of movement is for everyone. But until that happens, there are serious issues at the borders. There are violations of freedom of movement, and there's also a business around borders. A border regime.

We work for access to rights for all people on the move. Tragically, one key priority is the right to life. No one should die crossing a border. It's horrific. Nothing should justify that. We also defend the rights of victims, the dead and the disappeared and their families. We demand recognition, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition.

According to your figures, 2024 was the deadliest year on the western Euro-African border, especially on the Atlantic route. What do you attribute this dramatic rise in deaths to?

The Atlantic route became active around 2019, when Morocco shut down the north and pushed the migrant population towards areas between Agadir and Dakhla. From there, they started departing in inflatable boats toward the Canary Islands.

In 2021, the route from Senegal also became active, but became heavily used in 2023, with the political problems in Senegal. It's a very long and difficult route. If something goes wrong in a certain area, you go straight to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

When we analyse each tragedy, we see that a large percentage of the boats could have been saved if the

Interview

Helena Maleno Garzón

states had acted normally – with rescue equipment, planes and coordination between countries. But that coordination doesn't exist. Salvamento Marítimo, our public rescue service, is excellent, but since 2018 it has been diverted by border control policies.

In 2024, there was a political shift. The Senegal route slowed, but the Mauritania route intensified. People from the Sahel attempted crossings in extreme weather conditions. In some cases, seven boats departed and only three arrived.

Despite the growing danger of this route, many migrants continue to attempt the crossing. In your view, what explains this persistence or even increase in departures?

If you look at the profiles of people moving, the last boat intercepted came from Guinea Conakry. That's at least a day's journey from there to the coast. We're also seeing departures from Algeria to the Balearic Islands. There are also people who were kidnapped in Libya – including Somalis and Bangladeshis. What we're seeing is that borders and departure points change very quickly – faster than before. We constantly have to adapt our vision and our work. And, above all, many people are being expelled because of climate change and extractivism of natural resources. Over the past two years, we've clearly seen violence linked to natural resource exploitation, armed groups and conflicts – and a rise in child migration as a result.

In 2024, the president of the European Commission presented the drop in arrivals via the Central Mediterranean as a success, crediting deals with third countries and efforts against smuggling networks. What do you think of this framing?

The European Union doesn't want to stop human movement – it wants to redirect it, because there's a business behind it. The Transnational Institute has studied this business well: outsourcing, arms manufacturing, security systems. It's a huge market. And Israeli technology – the same used in Gaza to carry out genocide – is used in migration control systems.

Maybe they want to make arrivals less visible, but the business is still there. When they give money to Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, it's to buy control systems, weapons and technologies – from European companies. So it's not about protecting lives.

In 2025, there's been a drop in arrivals on the Atlantic route. Are you also seeing a decrease in attempted crossings? And what do you think about claims from Mauritania that it has stopped tens of thousands of departures? Does that really 'save lives'?

There is a drop in arrivals, but that doesn't mean there are fewer attempts. The routes are changing. For

example, we've seen boats that left Mauritania and arrived in Brazil. These were boats we had reported as missing.

But despite alerts, authorities didn't act. Even a progressive government like the current Spanish one behaves the same at the borders as more right-wing governments, like the Italian. It's a 'let them die' policy. And it's easy to let people die – you just have to do nothing.

“ Even a progressive government like the current Spanish one behaves the same at the borders as more right-wing governments, like the Italian. It's a 'let them die' policy. And it's easy to let people die – you just have to do nothing. ”

Do you think US migration policies – for example under Trump – have had an impact, even indirectly, on migration routes to Europe?

Yes, there's an impact. I was in Los Angeles recently, and organisations there knew an explosion was coming. The current US administration seems proud to openly violate migrants' rights – it's becoming 'trendy'. Trump paved the way for the far right to dominate the narrative, and now we're seeing an unapologetic defence of 'whiteness'.

It's very serious. We're going to pay a heavy price for what's happening in Palestine and in the US. But what struck me was that American activists look to Europe as a source of hope. They say, 'Not all is lost over there yet.'

“ The current US administration seems proud to openly violate migrants' rights – it's becoming 'trendy'. Trump paved the way for the far right to dominate the narrative, and now we're seeing an unapologetic defense of 'whiteness.' It's very serious. ”

Your organisation collects highly valuable data on migrant deaths and disappearances. Can you explain how you do this, especially in relation to the families of the victims?

We never set out to have a project like this. We're a small organisation that works using participatory methods, as I told you, and everything we do is organic. We don't decide our actions in advance. It comes from the research, from the migrant communities themselves.

In 2007, we received a call from an inflatable boat in distress, just off Almería. It was at night. We contacted the rescue service, and they were able to save them. We said to ourselves: 'Phew, let's hope this never happens again.' But then the calls kept coming. When we asked the women in our workshops why they were calling us instead of the official rescue service, they said: 'I don't know if, when I call the official service, they'll let me die or not. But I know you don't want me to die.'

So, our phone became one of the protection systems that migrant communities put in place during their journeys. It's not just criminal networks. To survive, people also need solidarity, a kind of emerging citizenship and internal protection mechanisms. Our phone is one of those mechanisms.

We started training ourselves, learning maritime law, etc. In 2014, after the Tarajal massacre, we were able to identify the victims' families very quickly. We went to Cameroon. We saw that there were many affected families, and we started reflecting on their situation. In 2015, we created an observatory. At first, our database was only used to respond to families and inform our research. But families asked us to publish the numbers. They wanted their memory to be recognised. So we published them – not for the media or institutions, but for the communities.

And then it became more visible. Today, we have two phones operating 24/7: one for emergencies at sea, one for assisting families. Even in court, a judge once asked me: 'Why does everyone have your number?' And I answered: 'I don't know, sir.'

In the absence of official verification systems, how do you ensure the reliability of your data?

We use primary sources. In our database, there's no secondary information – no information from newspapers or the media. When we get an alert, we conduct transnational follow-up: we notify all the authorities involved in the migration route. The Spanish authorities receive exactly the same information as us, because every time we call Morocco or elsewhere, we also inform Spain.

We open a case and follow it. If the people are saved, we note that. If there's a shipwreck, we verify who the victims were – women, children – and try to identify them. We also work with the Spanish Guardia Civil, which often asks us for help identifying recovered bodies. And once we have all the information, we only publish when we're 100% certain. It's heavy work, but it's very rigorous.

How does your work differ from that of actors like IOM or UNHCR? More broadly, what can civil society data show that official figures don't?

We mostly collaborate with communities in Africa – mayors, local government officials, community-based organisations. But we don't have the capacity to coordinate at a large scale, for example with European states.

Our goal isn't for the governments of the Global North to know people are dying – they already know that. Our data is for the families, for the communities. If it helps elsewhere, great, *al-hamdulillah*. But our goal is memory, justice, truth.

“Our goal isn't for the governments of the Global North to know people are dying – they already know that. Our data is for the families, for the communities. If it helps elsewhere, great, *al-hamdulillah*. But our goal is memory, justice, truth.”

Have you ever faced tensions or pushback when your data contradicted official sources? And do you think there's space for more collaboration between different actors?

Yes, but as I said, our position is clear. We don't have the millions that the UN has. And at a certain point, we decided to stay a small organisation focused on supporting families and communities. If we grow too much, we'll lose that spirit. We're not against others. But our place is at the borders, with the communities – and we want to keep it that way.

Ca-minando Fronteras also supports families in justice efforts, through the From Pain to Justice programme. Can you tell us more about that?

We've seen that the thousands who have died at the border are dehumanised – they don't exist. We are deeply engaged in this because families ask us to ensure that the dead and disappeared have rights. The families have rights, too.

When we talk about disappearances at the border, we're not talking about isolated cases. Often we're talking about mass disappearances, like during the Spanish Civil War or in Argentina during the dictatorship. It's the same.

When we work with local authorities in countries of origin, we sometimes come across lists showing hundreds of young people missing from the same village. These are macro-disappearances – injustices on a massive scale that will never be addressed, not even in a single case.

Families go as far as Morocco to search for their loved ones in detention centres. And in this context, we're not thinking of punitive justice, but restorative justice. We work with families in that framework.

For example, Algerian diaspora families have blazed a trail in Spain. When Algerians started disappearing at sea, these families went to the Spanish police. But the police would always say: 'Go to the Red Cross.' We started working with them using a disappeared-persons-centred approach. We reflected together: if your father with Alzheimer's goes missing, you go to the police – not to an NGO. So why don't migrant families have that right? A person who disappears at the border has the right to be searched for. The police must receive those complaints.

Why, when it comes to migrants, do authorities want us to take a different path? NGOs or the Red Cross can support, yes, but they can't guarantee that right. It's the states that must do so. And that's how we begin. That's how we work. There's a large European association, well known in Spain called Fundación QSD GLOBAL. Its director, Paco Lobatón, is a journalist known for his work on disappearances. This organisation advocates for the rights for all missing persons and their families. They invited us to speak about disappearances at the borders and, for the first time, we felt truly understood. The families of other disappeared people fully understood the pain of migrant families. Thanks to our work, today some families of people who disappeared at the border are able to file complaints. Now there are official procedures in Spain where you can see the term 'disappeared at the border'. And that's a path forward. A good beginning.

The right to life is central to your work. Yet, despite commitments made by states in texts like the Global Compact for Migration, people continue to die. Do you think we are collectively failing to uphold that commitment? Why?

It's the same as I said before – behind all the propaganda there's a business around necropolitics, around death at borders. Many people profit – not only when people die, but also once they enter the system. As you know very well, exploitation in Europe shows that there is a political will. The European migration pact isn't just a signature – what they've been doing for years aligns perfectly with what they signed.

For us, there's no real commitment. And the propaganda, you see, is like the multinationals – you've explained it well: it's a war at the borders. A war against people on the move.

Ten years ago, shipwrecks like the Lampedusa or the photo of Alan Kurdi caused global shock. Today, similar tragedies occur but generate far less reaction.

Do you agree? Why do you think this is and do you think this trend can be reversed?

Yes, there's a normalisation of the idea that a person crossing a border might die. That's the result of propaganda. 2015 already feels far away. Back then, we were talking about Syrians: even though they're Muslim, their skin looks a bit like that of Ukrainians. And everyone was saying: 'They're like us.' Even in Spain. But me, with my skin colour, I say: I'm not like a Ukrainian, that's clear.

And for people coming from Africa, it's worse. It means that their lives are worth nothing in the dominant mindset. We're in a different moment. Look at the images from Palestine: there's no real solidarity movement. Because now, as I said before, the trend – after all this propaganda – is no longer to value human rights. It has become a problem, not something beautiful. The human aspect is lost.

We're no longer talking about human beings. They're treated like animals. Look at the images from Melilla in 2022, or the migrant prison with alligators that Donald Trump opened in Florida.

What role should countries of origin play in protecting migrants? And how do they respond to your work – do they support it or oppose it?

We don't work with large state structures in countries of origin, and what we do serves the community and families. We work with grassroots, community-based structures, and that's simpler. But there's another problem: these countries of origin are not really free. Even Senegal depends on France. Their vast natural resources don't belong to them. They're still colonised states. And since they're colonised, it's the colonisers who decide who can travel and who cannot.

“The resistance of ordinary Palestinian people is an example for all humanity. When I see their courage – journalists killed, doctors targeted – I'm reminded of what migrant communities endure. Gaza is fighting for our future. Those committing genocide want to eliminate human rights.”

Do you think they could or should do more?

The people in power don't offer support. The colonial powers decide. They install corrupt or easily manipulate governments to exploit natural resources. And it's not just in Africa. It's also Russia, China, the European Union, France. There are photos of people killed by paramilitaries just for going to fetch water from a river. African

governments are corrupt because of this colonial system. Remember the time of slavery in America? There were the 'house slaves' and the 'field slaves' – it's a metaphor. Colonialism is very serious, and it will only get worse with the scramble for natural resources.

You recently travelled to the United States and Mexico. What did you take away from that experience? And how do you see the possibilities of building solidarity networks across the Atlantic?

In Los Angeles, we saw highly organised community associations. Every street had megaphones to warn residents when immigration authorities (ICE) arrived. Churches hosted legal workshops where parents could sign documents to ensure their children would be cared for if they were detained. It's surreal – people prepare for every possibility.

In San Diego, at the Mexican border, we were told that land crossings were shut down, and deportations were happening by air to other borders in Central America. Everything can change from one day to the next depending on political decisions. The organisations are exhausted – stressed out by these unpredictable decisions. They reached out to us to ask how we resist, what our strategies are in the hardest moments. And when I returned, I took part in a workshop on border externalisation with participants from Central America and the US.

We have to understand that this is a global policy. It's important to build connections, to share strategies from places like Morocco or Libya. We need to build links across the Atlantic and with the Global South, too. Otherwise, we're lost.

In light of the current situation, how does what's happening in Gaza – and especially the international community's response – illustrate a crisis of multilateralism and the collapse of human rights commitments? And what do you think the wider consequences will be, particularly for migration governance?

Gaza shows what we already knew: that the United Nations is useless. It must rethink its role. It has no capacity to exert pressure, not even at very basic levels. In this global war, everyone sees the genocide.

They want to show that you can kill an entire population – because they think they have the right to do so. This discourse of dehumanisation will cost us dearly. The same applies to migration. The drones, the control systems used in Gaza are also used at borders. I've also followed the Zionist surveillance systems that have been adopted by Macron, Pedro Sánchez, etc.

When you witness a genocide live, with all the images and all the evidence, and there's no response... We're

going to pay a heavy price for all this – the role of Germany, the propaganda, the Zionism that has even reached social movements.

The resistance of ordinary Palestinian people is an example for all humanity. When I see their courage – journalists killed, doctors targeted – I'm reminded of what migrant communities endure. It's about the ability to struggle, to sacrifice, to say 'no' – not just for yourself, but for the future of the world. Gaza is fighting for our future. Those committing genocide want to eliminate human rights.

This is a critical moment. In Spain, there's a clear stance being taken – but the UN doesn't even have money, not even for UNHCR, which is starting to shut down.

This year's theme of the Mixed Migration Review is migration in times of geopolitical turmoil. In this context, what are the priorities of Ca-minando Fronteras? What challenges do you anticipate? And, despite everything, do you see opportunities for positive change?

As I said earlier, for us, the organised families are the future of the borders. They are the ones who make visible the impact of necropolitics. They are the survivors.

And they are also transformative forces – not just in countries of origin, but also in destination countries, through the diaspora. Communities are also essential. Despite all the repression, life continues, day by day. People live, they fight for freedom of movement.

But mobilisation in the North is dead. That's a reality. We'll see if it can be revived in the coming years. We saw that repression in the US reawakened people – we hope that could happen in Europe, too. But in the meantime, we must truly turn toward the South.

“I see a life force that resists necropolitics – a force rooted in communities. Often invisible in the media, it's nonetheless very real. It's life that renews itself daily, quietly, through the actions of mothers who rise each day, who may face deportation with their children yet still cling to hope.”

What might the future of migration look like? In today's climate of uncertainty, do you see any – even limited – opportunities for positive change?

I see a life force that resists necropolitics – a force rooted in communities. Often invisible in the media, it's nonetheless very real.

Interview

Helena Maleno Garzón

It's life that renews itself daily, quietly, through the actions of mothers who rise each day, who may face deportation with their children, yet still cling to hope. Despite the violence, they continue to seek a future with dignity and rights.

These aren't institutional projects – but these women and families are there, every day. They build life at the borders, in transit. It's not just 'getting into a rubber boat', as some imagine. During these transits, people fall in love, they work, they drink a beer. There's life, even in the middle of repression. And I think we must cling to that. For me, love is what changes the world. In activism, we often think with our heads, without considering what it means to put our bodies on the line. But our wounds can be healed through love and solidarity.

In Spain, people mock *buenismo* – goodness – as if it were useless. But I was raised by a mother who told me: 'You must be good.' And I think we've forgotten that. But it's so simple.

“It's not just 'getting into a rubber boat', as some imagine. During these transits, people fall in love, they work, they drink a beer. There's life, even in the middle of repression.”

Photo credit: Penofoto / Shutterstock

The CDU contested the 2025 German federal election with Friedrich Merz as their chancellor candidate. Their manifesto signalled a shift to the right on immigration, as well as greater support for Ukraine. The CDU eventually won the election and controversially opened discussions with the 'firewalled' AfD – of the increasingly powerful far right. (See Thematic snapshot *Migration policy in a rightward-shifting political landscape: the case of Germany*, [p. 134](#)).



Migration policy in a rightward-shifting political landscape: the case of Germany

Following a record-breaking turnout (82.5% of the voting population – the highest figure since the country's unification in 1990), the February 2025 elections in Germany saw the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), led by Friedrich Merz, and the Christian Social Union (CSU) win with 28.6 percent of the vote, with far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) coming in second at 20.8 percent.¹

Significantly, the AfD gained 69 new seats in the 21st German Bundestag compared to 2021, reaching a total of 152 seats.² These election results are greatly reshaping migration discourse – one of the core topics of the winning parties' election campaigns – leading to tougher policies, stricter border controls, deportation plans and more.

Migration, the German elections and the end of the *Willkommenskultur*

The subject of migration played a pivotal role throughout the federal election campaigns of both the winning party and the AfD. Reflected in the record-high voter turnout, this seems to suggest a widespread concern among the electorate about asylum and migration, fuelled by damning political narratives in campaigning cycles that continue to frame migration as a crisis that must be solved.

While some have observed that a generalised, xenophobic sentiment has been on the rise in Germany in the past few years, voters' preoccupation with migration also likely stems from the country's famous *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture) – Angela Merkel's open-door approach to welcoming asylum seekers in response to the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/2016 which, at the time, stood in stark contrast with many of Germany's European peers.³

In 2015 alone, the country received over 1 million asylum seekers, primarily from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴ Arguably, the country struggled to manage such large numbers over a short period of time, experiencing strained public services and logistic problems, which led some, if not many, voters to believe that too much immigration can pose tangible threats and that arrival numbers must be brought down.⁵

Hardline measures

Only a few weeks before his election victory, and despite criticisms from German experts and politicians, Merz accepted the AfD support in one parliamentary motion on immigration, breaking the country's long-standing 'firewall' agreement by mainstream parties to never cooperate with the AfD, even if they agreed on certain topics. Merz, for his part, responded that alignment on migration-related issues did not mean that the two parties would begin to cooperate formally and continuously.⁶

Nonetheless, with a winning party that puts hardline migration measures high on its agenda and a far-right and anti-immigration party increasingly gaining ground, voice and power, there are evident far-reaching consequences of this rightward shift for migrants and asylum seekers in Germany.

In just a few months, for example, the new government has already announced a range of hardline measures to curb and control immigration, all mirroring the tough stance of the AfD.⁷ They include:

- tightened borders, with biometric security screening and greater funds allocated to border agencies
- attempts to send back asylum seekers who passed through other European countries based on the 'safe third country' concept and EU's Dublin Regulation (though this is legally controversial and not consistently applied due to court rulings)⁸

1 The term "21st Bundestag" refers to the 21st electoral term of the German parliament (Bundestag) since the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. Each Bundestag is elected for a four-year term, and the 21st Bundestag was elected in the 2025 federal election. See Zeier, K. and Grün, G. C. (2025) [German election results explained in graphics](#). DW.

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4 Kroet, C. (2016) [Germany: 1.1 million refugee arrivals in 2015](#). Politico.

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7 Aktaş, K. (2025) [The Rise of the Far Right in Germany: Implications for Refugee and Immigration Policies](#). TRT World Research Centre.

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- plans, announced by the interior minister, for a deal with the Taliban to deport Afghans⁹
- stricter asylum laws, including faster deportations, limited family reunifications and tougher requirements in terms of cultural and linguistic knowledge
- the active exploration of offshore asylum processing options and, in parallel, the expansion of Germany's list of 'safe countries' to include Algeria, India, Morocco and Tunisia.¹⁰

National and global reactions

These newly introduced anti-migration policies immediately found strong opposition both in Germany and abroad. Concerns were expressed, for example, by former German chancellor Angela Merkel over Merz "breaking the firewall" and effectively siding with the far-right on such a critical and politicised issue as migration.¹¹

Criticism also came in hard and fast from German human rights organisations and activists, with Benjamin Etzold from the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) labelling the new policies "not suitable for current global challenges" in a 2025 study.¹² Civil society's opposition to the government's anti-migration agenda resulted in large demonstrations in Berlin at the beginning of 2025, during which tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against what they saw as an extremisation of immigration legislation.¹³

International actors, as well as several EU member states, also challenged these measures, pointing to the fact that many of them are in breach of migrant and refugee rights.¹⁴ Additionally, there is also concern that other European countries might follow Germany's example by reinstating border controls, which could hamper freedom of movement within the Schengen area, causing fragmentation and redefining border regimes.¹⁵

A bleak outlook for migrants in Germany

At this point, two scenarios might materialise: on the one hand, if successful, Germany could serve as a 'template' for other EU countries looking at stricter migration reforms. In fact, referring to what Germany is doing, leader of the Dutch PVV Geert Wilders, whose party formed a coalition government with three other parties after winning the 2023 elections, demanded a series of more stringent asylum and immigration measures, which led to the collapse of the Dutch coalition government.¹⁶ On the other hand, the new policies could continue to generate strong backlash and opposition, potentially leading to some of the harshest measures being reviewed or, maybe, even scrapped – as in the case of the UK's infamous Rwanda Plan.

Ensuring a balance between strict immigration measures and the maintenance of skilled migrant labourers who have lived in Germany for decades and positively contributed to its economy will also be crucial for the new government, and equally complex to achieve. The labour needs in Germany's economy have been evident for some years and previous governments were – more or less publicly – using migration to fill the gaps.¹⁷ Chancellor Merkel's governments, for example, laid much of the groundwork for Germany's progressive labour migration policies, opening pathways through the Blue Card,¹⁸ the Western Balkans scheme¹⁹ and the 2019 Skilled Workers Act,²⁰ establishing Germany as a structured and relatively welcoming destination for skilled migrants. After Merkel, Chancellor Scholz went further with explicit recruitment targets and bilateral labour agreements which further liberalised immigration policies to attract skilled labour from outside the EU.²¹

Overall, today's Germany is a far cry from that welcoming, open-door country that the world witnessed 10 years ago. It remains to be seen whether this evolution is also a sobering warning to countries like Spain, currently engaged in and promoting more inclusive and liberal migration policies.

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20 Cedefop and ReferNet (2025) [Skilled Immigration Act: Germany](#).

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Asia

Overview

Peter Grant

The situation of some of the largest displaced populations in Asia has become even more precarious in 2025. In particular, the forced return from Iran and Pakistan of millions of Afghans – including significant numbers who have never set foot in the country or not lived there for decades – has taken place despite the deepening economic and humanitarian crisis there, as well as the specific risks of persecution that many returnees could face from the de facto authorities. In Myanmar, meanwhile, in addition to the estimated 3.6 million people internally displaced, tens of thousands of Rohingya have been forced to flee the country due to growing insecurity in Rakhine, at a time when humanitarian assistance in host countries is being rolled back. Across the region, India, Malaysia and other governments are implementing increasingly hostile policies towards Rohingya, including detentions and deportations.

Though much of the region's displacement continues to be rooted in conflict and insecurity, it is also the case that governance challenges, a lack of protections for migrant workers and the growing threat of natural disasters are all driving migration-related vulnerability. In 2024, for instance, there were an estimated 24 million disaster displacements across Asia and the Pacific, more than half of the global total.¹ From drought to flooding, the impacts of extreme weather are exacting profound human and economic costs on countries and communities. These and other risks are magnified by the failure of governments across the region to offer adequate rights and protections for migrants and their families, with widespread restrictions and barriers to regularisation causing great harm – a reality that has prompted the UN Human Rights Office to call for an urgent “policy redesign” to address these shortcomings.²

Afghanistan

Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021 and the end of **Afghanistan's** protracted civil war, the number of people displaced by conflict has greatly reduced, with disasters now accounting for the majority of new displacements. During 2024, more people were newly displaced by disasters (over 1 million) than conflict (3,200),³ with floods accounting for the majority of these displacements.⁴ The combined effect of these new events and the continued impacts of previous disasters, such as the devastating 2023 earthquake in Herat, meant that, by the end of 2024, more people – a total of 1.3 million – were displaced in Afghanistan as a result of disasters than any other country worldwide.⁵ At the end of August 2025, a catastrophic earthquake in the east of the country resulted in more than 2,200 deaths and the destruction of almost 6,800 homes, affecting numerous communities including IDPs and returnees already living in a state of vulnerability.⁶

Nevertheless, the legacy of the conflict continues to be felt, with around 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country,⁷ though this is a significant reduction from previous years. Many continue to live in informal settlements in Kabul and other cities, at constant risk of eviction or expropriation, unable or unwilling to return to their places of origin due to a lack of housing, livelihood opportunities or reintegration support.⁸ Furthermore, the country is contending with an ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis which is having a particularly hard impact on both displaced populations and the growing number of former IDP and refugee returnees. The situation has been aggravated by the return of around 3 million Afghans from Iran and Pakistan since September 2023, including 2 million in the first seven months of 2025 alone.⁹

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Returns and deportations from Iran and Pakistan

Iran and Pakistan have hosted millions of Afghan nationals for decades, with successive periods of conflict from the 1980s onwards driving mass displacement. While both countries have repeatedly undertaken intermittent deportation drives, often the result either of domestic tensions or friction with Afghanistan, the past two years have seen a turning point, beginning in October 2023 with **Pakistan's** announcement of the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan. The first phase of this legislation, which ultimately envisions the return of the majority of the Afghan population, was the issuance of a 30-day deadline for undocumented Afghans to leave the country, with almost half a million people returning to Afghanistan in the final quarter of 2023 alone.¹⁰

This process has continued with the announcement, in April 2025, that the government would be deporting the estimated 800,000 Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders, as well as expelling all Afghan nationals from the cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi.¹¹ The final group, the more than 1.3 million Afghans with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, is now being targeted; having had their status extended for another year in June 2024, the government announced in July 2025 that their continued stay in the country was illegal. PoR holders were encouraged to return voluntarily before authorities began deportation and repatriation proceedings from the beginning of September.¹² In practice, arrests and forcible expulsions of some PoR holders were already reportedly taking place in the first week of August¹³ and are projected to

continue despite widespread condemnation, with the UN calling on the government to reconsider the revoking of international protection for this vulnerable group.¹⁴

Iran has also launched a similar deportation drive that has gained particular momentum during 2025. While the expulsion of Afghan nationals from Iran is not new, the phenomenon has increased in scale and intensity year on year, rising from around 485,000 in 2022 to 650,000 in 2023 and 750,000 in 2024.¹⁵ Having announced plans, in September 2024, to expel up to 2 million Afghans by March 2025,¹⁶ the government subsequently cancelled the so-called census slips that had until then provided some legal protection and told all holders that they would need to leave Iran by 5 June 2025.¹⁷ As of 6 August, more than 1.8 million Afghans had left Iran, with the majority (almost 1.1 million) being deported.¹⁸ The pace of returns increased substantially following the outbreak of conflict between Iran and Israel: in the wake of the attacks, a wave of anti-Afghan sentiment swept the country amidst rumours of Afghan nationals engaging in espionage for Israel.¹⁹ In July alone, an estimated 460,000 people were deported.²⁰ The process of deportation is itself frequently brutal: many Afghans have their possessions seized or confiscated, leaving them with few or no assets upon their return, and there have been widespread reports of mistreatment and physical violence at the hands of police.²¹ Families are also often separated during the deportation process, further compounding their trauma.²² For more see Thematic snapshot *Iran's Afghan expulsion surges: bitter and dangerous returns for scapegoated Afghans*, [p. 162](#).

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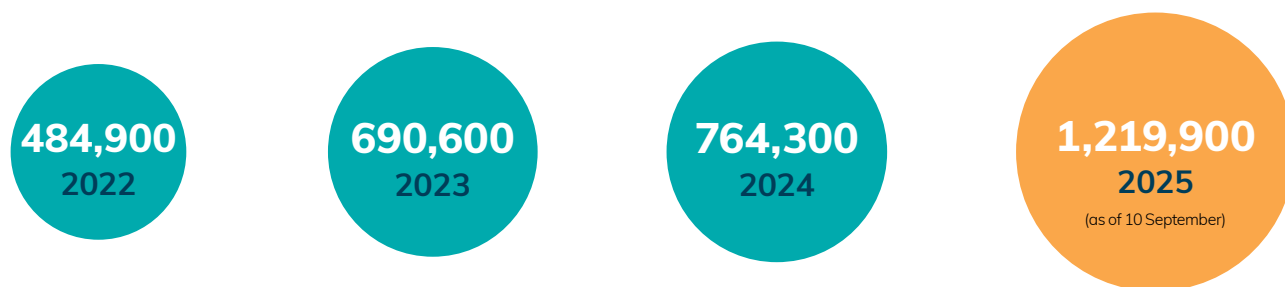
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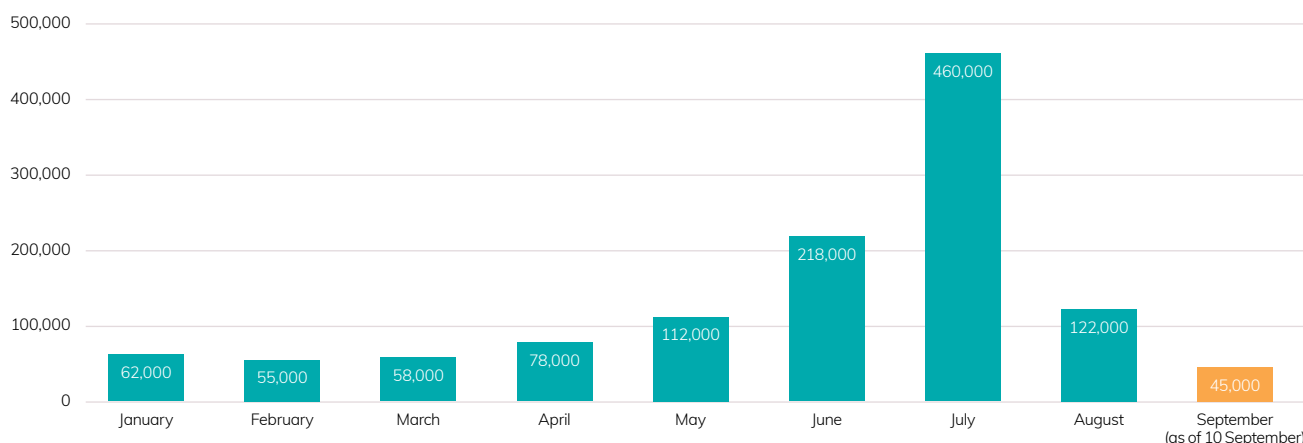
21 Aram, F. and Radan, R. (2025) [Jobless, homeless and helpless without a man: Afghan women expelled by Iran into hands of the Taliban](#), The Guardian; Also Motamedi, M. (2025) [Inside Iran's crackdown on Afghan migrants after the war with Israel](#), Al Jazeera; Also Sanderson, S. (2024) [Afghan migrants expelled from Iran subject to abuse and trauma](#), InfoMigrants.

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Graphic 1. Afghan deportations from Iran by year 2022 – 2025



Monthly Afghan deportations from Iran in 2025



Source: [UNHCR Iran-Afghanistan – Returns Emergency Response #20](#)

As with Pakistan, these latest measures have left the remainder of the Afghan population in a state of fear and uncertainty. Afghans, even individuals with long-term legal residency, face an increasingly toxic context within Iran. Besides official harassment and restrictions on work, education and movement, many are routinely subjected to hate speech and social discrimination in their everyday lives.²³ Consequently, even among those Afghans who leave of their own accord rather than being forcibly deported, in many cases their departure cannot be classified as voluntary in any meaningful sense, given the increasingly hostile environment they face.²⁴ This is also evident in other countries that have ramped up their deportations of Afghan nationals. In **Türkiye**, for example, officials have been accused of detaining and mistreating Afghans before pressuring them into signing “voluntary agreements” to be sent back to Afghanistan.²⁵ **Tajikistan** has also reportedly forcibly deported Afghans from the country, including many with valid refugee documents or legal residency.²⁶

The challenges of return

One of the most troubling features of the mass expulsions being carried out is the apparent absence of any vetting procedures to assess the vulnerability of deportees once they return to Afghanistan. This includes former government officials, journalists, human rights activists, members of persecuted minorities, LGBTQI+ groups and other individuals who face clear and present dangers upon return.²⁷ Despite promises of an amnesty, there have been numerous reports of returnees being specifically targeted by de facto authority officials based on their profile and subjected to a range of abuses, including intimidation, arbitrary detention and torture. Many are effectively forced into hiding to evade detection, unable to leave their home or go back to their place of origin out of fear of reprisals.²⁸

Female returnees, in particular, face additional challenges due to the oppressive restrictions that the de facto authorities have imposed on women and girls since coming to power. These include, among other

23 Latifi, A. (2025) [Iran uses Israeli bombings to speed up Afghan expulsions](#). The New Humanitarian.

24 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Afghan returns: Experiences, challenges and prospects for reintegration](#).

25 Lighthouse Reports (2024) [Turkey's EU-funded deportation machine](#).

26 Mohammadi, A. (2025) [Iran's deportation drive and the growing crisis of forced Afghan returns](#). The Diplomat.

27 OHCHR (2025) [UN experts appalled by mass forced returns of Afghan nationals](#).

28 UN (2025) [No safe haven: Human rights risks faced by persons involuntarily returned to Afghanistan](#).

measures, denial of education for girls beyond the age of 12, sweeping bans on a variety of employment sectors for women, the compulsory wearing of *hijab* in public, the prohibition of women in many public spaces and the requirement of a male guardian for long-distance travel.²⁹ In this context, the challenges women and girls face, particularly in female-headed households, are especially severe and impact on almost every area of their lives, including housing and livelihood access.³⁰

These gendered restrictions only serve to reinforce the daunting challenges that all returnees face in a country still struggling with an acute economic and humanitarian crisis. At present, 22.9 million people – close to half of the entire population – are in need of humanitarian assistance.³¹ One factor in this is the continued imposition of sanctions on Afghanistan since the Taliban's takeover, and the decision of many donor governments to cut or suspend assistance due to human rights concerns. The de facto authorities have made matters worse by banning women from working in NGOs, further underlined by their announcement, in December 2024, that any domestic and international NGOs with Afghan women on their payroll would be prohibited.³² More generally, the substantial reduction of humanitarian assistance by the US and the UK since early 2025 has also constricted funding flows to Afghanistan. As of the end of August 2025, just over a quarter (28.4%) of the requested USD 2.42 billion in the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan had been funded.³³ In this context, many are facing hunger and food poverty, with an estimated 3.5 million young children suffering from wasting, including 850,000 in a state of severe wasting and in need of urgent life-saving support.³⁴

In this context, many of those deported from Iran or Pakistan enter Afghanistan traumatised and in a state of destitution, having had to either leave their belongings in their host country or hand them over to officials. In most cases, with limited assistance at the border and no meaningful reintegration programmes, there are few safety nets in place for vulnerable returnees. A significant proportion have lived their entire lives outside the country, meaning they are 'returning' to Afghanistan for the very first time, with little or nothing in the way of established networks or contacts to draw on.³⁵ Despite their wide-ranging needs, the limited availability of resources to support returnees leaves them struggling with high housing costs, restricted access to basic services and considerable barriers to securing stable

employment, even among those who had been able to leverage sustainable livelihoods for themselves in their host country. As a result, some end up being pushed into indebtedness.³⁶

The de facto authorities have struggled to mobilise an adequate response to the unprecedented number of arrivals in Afghanistan, placing further strain on already scarce resources. One proposed solution has been the development of new townships to accommodate hundreds of thousands of returnees. However, given the important role that established relationships and host communities can play in supporting returnees, there are valid concerns that the creation of new settlements could serve as an impediment to their long-term integration – particularly, if basic services and livelihood opportunities are lacking.

The Rohingya crisis

Myanmar's Rohingya minority have faced severe discrimination for decades, including denial of citizenship, a situation that has contributed to them being the largest stateless population in the world.³⁷ Alongside hundreds of thousands confined to camps or villages in Myanmar, well over a million Rohingya are now displaced in neighbouring Bangladesh as well as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and India. For many, the insecurity and violence they face in Myanmar continues in different forms not only during their journey but also in their destination countries, where their exclusion has become increasingly entrenched.

Conflict and environmental crisis in Myanmar

The situation in Myanmar has become even more precarious since the military coup in February 2021 and the subsequent escalation of hostilities between junta forces and an array of opposition groups and ethnic armed organisations. As of June 2025, around 6,800 civilians had been killed and more than 22,000 were being arbitrarily detained.³⁸ The spread of the conflict across much of the country has resulted in widespread displacement: as of the end of August 2025, around 3.4 million people had been internally displaced since the coup, bringing the total IDP population to 3.6 million.

29 UN (2025) [No safe haven: Human rights risks faced by persons involuntarily returned to Afghanistan](#).

30 AP GIHA WG (2025) [Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning from Iran and Pakistan \(June 2025\)](#).

31 OCHA (2025) [Afghanistan: Humanitarian update, March 2025](#).

32 France24 (2024) [Taliban to close all NGOs that employ Afghan women](#).

33 OCHA (2025) [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025](#).

34 UNICEF (2025) [Child food poverty nutrition crisis in early childhood in Afghanistan](#).

35 UN (2025) ["The real challenge is still ahead": UN warns on Afghan returnees](#).

36 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Afghan returns: Experiences, challenges and prospects for reintegration](#).

37 UN (2025) ["Don't cut the aid": Insecurity worsens for stateless Rohingya, says UNHCR's Grandi](#).

38 Mishra, V. (2025) [Myanmar human rights crisis deepens as aid collapses, attacks intensify](#). UN.

Though significant IDP populations are present in every state in Myanmar, the largest groups are in Sagaing (1.26 million), Magway (260,900), Kayin (257,400), Rakhine (222,500) and Bago (219,900).³⁹ While the effects of the conflict have been felt in every corner of the country, some states and communities have been disproportionately impacted. In Chin State, for instance, more than a third of the predominantly ethnic Chin population have been displaced internally or across the border into India. Fighting here has continued, even after the withdrawal of the Myanmar army from much of the territory, with ongoing military air strikes as well as sporadic clashes between rival rebel groups.⁴⁰

Civilians have also been displaced across the border to Bangladesh (many of them Rohingya, as discussed below) as well as India and Thailand, often as a result of clashes with armed groups. For instance, in July 2025, thousands of Myanmar nationals were forced across the border into the northeastern Indian state of Mizoram, following clashes between two competing Chin armed groups.⁴¹ The same month, more than 500 Myanmar civilians and soldiers were displaced across the border with Thailand after an attack by a Karen armed group.⁴² Many others are attempting to cross the border into Thailand to escape military conscription and the deepening economic crisis.⁴³

The escalation of the violence is contributing to an ever-worsening economic, political and humanitarian “polycrisis”,⁴⁴ with almost 22 million people in need of assistance amidst food shortages, disease outbreaks and infrastructural collapse.⁴⁵ Climate change and environmental vulnerability are exacerbating these impacts, with Myanmar highly exposed to natural disasters such as flooding and cyclones. In July 2025, for instance, severe flooding affected around 85,000 people in Bago, Kayin and Mon states, destroying communities and spreading malaria, dengue and other disease.⁴⁶

Even more devastating, however, were the two earthquakes that hit the central regions of the country in March 2025. The shocks caused catastrophic levels of destruction and displaced tens of thousands of people in the worst affected areas,⁴⁷ including households already displaced by the conflict.⁴⁸ Vital relief efforts in the aftermath of the disaster were reportedly slowed by roadblocks and curfews, with the junta accused of weaponising aid flows.⁴⁹ As with other crisis-affected countries in the region, just a fraction of the humanitarian assistance needed has been made available so far. As of the end of August 2025, only 12 percent of the USD 1.1 billion outlined in the original Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan has been received. An additional USD 275.2 million in funding was also requested in the aftermath of the earthquake, of which 64 percent had been funded in the same period.⁵⁰ For more see *From violence, exclusion and statelessness to resistance, activism and freedom: lived experience leadership as key to addressing issues faced by refugees and migrants*, p. 156 and in more detail Thematic snapshot *Migration in a polycrisis: the impact of Myanmar’s crises on mixed migration in the region*, p. 152.

Mass displacement from Rakhine

While almost all of the Myanmar population are having to live with the devastating impacts of civil conflict, the estimated 600,000 Rohingya still based in Myanmar – following the mass displacement in 2017 of more than 700,000 community members into Bangladesh, bringing the total number of Rohingya refugees there to more than 1 million⁵¹ – are especially affected due to their longstanding marginalisation. In Rakhine, where the majority of remaining Rohingya are based, around 130,000 have been forced to live in internment camps since 2012,⁵² often in brutal, life-threatening conditions, unable to leave and with little or no access to education, basic services or livelihood opportunities. Hundreds of thousands of others have effectively been confined to their villages by restrictions on movement.⁵³ While there is widespread food insecurity across Myanmar, conditions in Rakhine are particularly acute, with the UN predicting that famine is “imminent” – a situation that

39 UNHCR (2025) [Number of people displaced since Feb 2021 and remain displaced as of 25 Aug 2025](#).

40 International Crisis Group (2025) [Disquiet on the Western Front: A Divided Resistance in Myanmar’s Chin State](#).

41 Agarwala, T. (2025) [Thousands of refugees flee into India’s Mizoram state after clashes in Myanmar](#). Reuters.

42 The Straits Times (2025) [Hundreds of Myanmar troops and civilians flee across Thai border](#).

43 Küng, J. (2024) [Escaping to Thailand: Fleeing military service in Myanmar](#). DW.

44 UNDP (2025) [Myanmar’s enduring polycrisis: Four years into a tumultuous journey](#).

45 IRC (2025) [Crisis in Myanmar: What is happening and how to help](#); Also Mishra, V. (2025) [Myanmar human rights crisis deepens as aid collapses, attacks intensify](#). UN.

46 UN News (2025) [In Myanmar, conflict and floods collide as UN warns of deepening crisis](#).

47 Mishra, V. (2025) [“Still reeling”: Myanmar quakes worsen humanitarian crisis in fractured country](#). UN.

48 Pwint, P. and Myint, Y. Y. (2025) [Myanmar quake piles fresh suffering on families fleeing conflict](#). UNHCR.

49 San, H. (2025) [In Myanmar, a disaster in a war zone means a slow and difficult aid response](#). The New Humanitarian.

50 Humanitarian Action (2025) [Myanmar: Original Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan](#).

51 Ratcliffe, R. (2022) [Five years after the crackdown, Myanmar’s remaining Rohingya “living like animals”](#). The Guardian.

52 International Crisis Group (2024) [War in western Myanmar: Avoiding a Rakhine-Rohingya conflict](#).

53 Fortify Rights (2024) [U.N. Security Council: Refer mass internment of Muslims and other atrocities in Myanmar to ICC](#).

could trigger an uptick in human trafficking, especially among Rohingya due to their heightened vulnerability.⁵⁴

As fighting has intensified between the military and the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic Rakhine armed group, many Rohingya – an estimated 150,000 in the 18 months between the beginning of 2024 and July 2025, and despite repeated pushbacks by Bangladeshi border guards⁵⁵ – have been forced to flee across the border to Bangladesh, marking the largest exodus since 2017.⁵⁶ Though the majority of Rakhine state is now under the AA's control, the situation of the Rohingya does not appear to have significantly improved: the AA has, in fact, been accused of a litany of abuses against the community, including arson, forced labour, continued restrictions on movement and extortion.⁵⁷ The NGO Fortify Rights has catalogued a range of violations allegedly carried out by the AA against Rohingya civilians, including abductions, torture and beheadings, and called on the International Criminal Court to investigate them.⁵⁸

An uneasy refuge in Bangladesh

Following the recent exodus of around 150,000 refugees escaping conflict in Rakhine, **Bangladesh** now hosts a total of almost 1.15 million Rohingya.⁵⁹ The large majority are concentrated in Cox's Bazar, an area of approximately 24 km², making the camps some of the most crowded settlements in the world.⁶⁰ Conditions there have been difficult for years, with limited basic services and little or no access to education and livelihood opportunities, and the rapid growth of the refugee population has placed further pressure on communities living there.

While the situation is already extremely precarious, with soaring levels of child malnutrition,⁶¹ it risks being greatly exacerbated by cuts to international humanitarian assistance, forcing agencies to roll back the already inadequate provision of essentials such as food, health care⁶² and education, with as many as 300,000 children at risk of losing access to schooling.⁶³

As a result of these funding cuts, vital communal infrastructure is already falling into disrepair.⁶⁴ In August 2025, the interim Bangladeshi prime minister called on the international community to reach a durable solution to the crisis, warning that Bangladesh did not have any further resources to allocate to support refugees.⁶⁵ Given the current situation in Myanmar, however, safe and voluntary return on a large scale seems unfeasible in the near future.

In the meantime, the camps are increasingly being affected by criminal gangs, adding to the already desperate atmosphere there. The threat of being targeted by these groups creates considerable fear and anxiety, particularly at night, preventing refugees from accessing health care and further aggravating their trauma.⁶⁶ Besides kidnapping for ransom, young Rohingya boys have been abducted and smuggled into Myanmar to fight.⁶⁷ Gender-based violence, ranging from domestic abuse and sexual assault to forced marriage, are also entrenched problems for many Rohingya women and girls.⁶⁸

Displacement in the wider region

While many Rohingya in Rakhine are trying to cross to the relative safety of Bangladesh, many of those in Cox's Bazar are risking their lives to attempt the dangerous overland and maritime journeys to Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia. Increasing numbers of Rohingya are leaving by boat directly from Myanmar as well.⁶⁹ The human cost of these perilous journeys was illustrated by the sinking of two boats in early May 2025, resulting in the deaths of at least 427 Rohingya on board: both vessels were carrying a mix of passengers who had departed from either Cox's Bazar or Rakhine. Estimates suggest that around one in five people who attempt the journey across the Andaman Sea die en route.⁷⁰ Even for those who manage to reach other countries, however, insecurities persist due to the absence of an effective framework for refugee protection in the region.

54 UNDP (2024) [Rakhine: A famine in the making](#).

55 Fortify Rights (2024) [Bangladesh: End Rohingya refugee pushbacks](#).

56 UN (2025) [150,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh amid renewed Myanmar violence](#).

57 Lovett, L. (2025) [China, India watch as Arakan Army advances on key western frontier](#). Al Jazeera; Also Uddin, N. (2025) [The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army's hands](#). Al Jazeera.

58 Fortify Rights (2025) [International Criminal Court: Investigate Arakan Army war crimes against Rohingya](#).

59 UNHCR (2025) [Bangladesh](#).

60 UN (2025) [150,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh amid renewed Myanmar violence](#).

61 UN (2025) [Bangladesh: Rohingya children's acute hunger surges amid funding cuts](#).

62 European Commission (2025) [Crisis in Cox's Bazar: Aid cuts push Rohingya to the brink](#).

63 Save the Children (2025) [About 300,000 children risk losing education as learning centres in Rohingya camps shut due to funding cuts](#).

64 Shathy, S. (2025) [Funding cuts heighten monsoon risks for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh](#). UNHCR.

65 Paul, R. (2025) [Bangladesh runs out of resources for Rohingya refugees](#). Reuters.

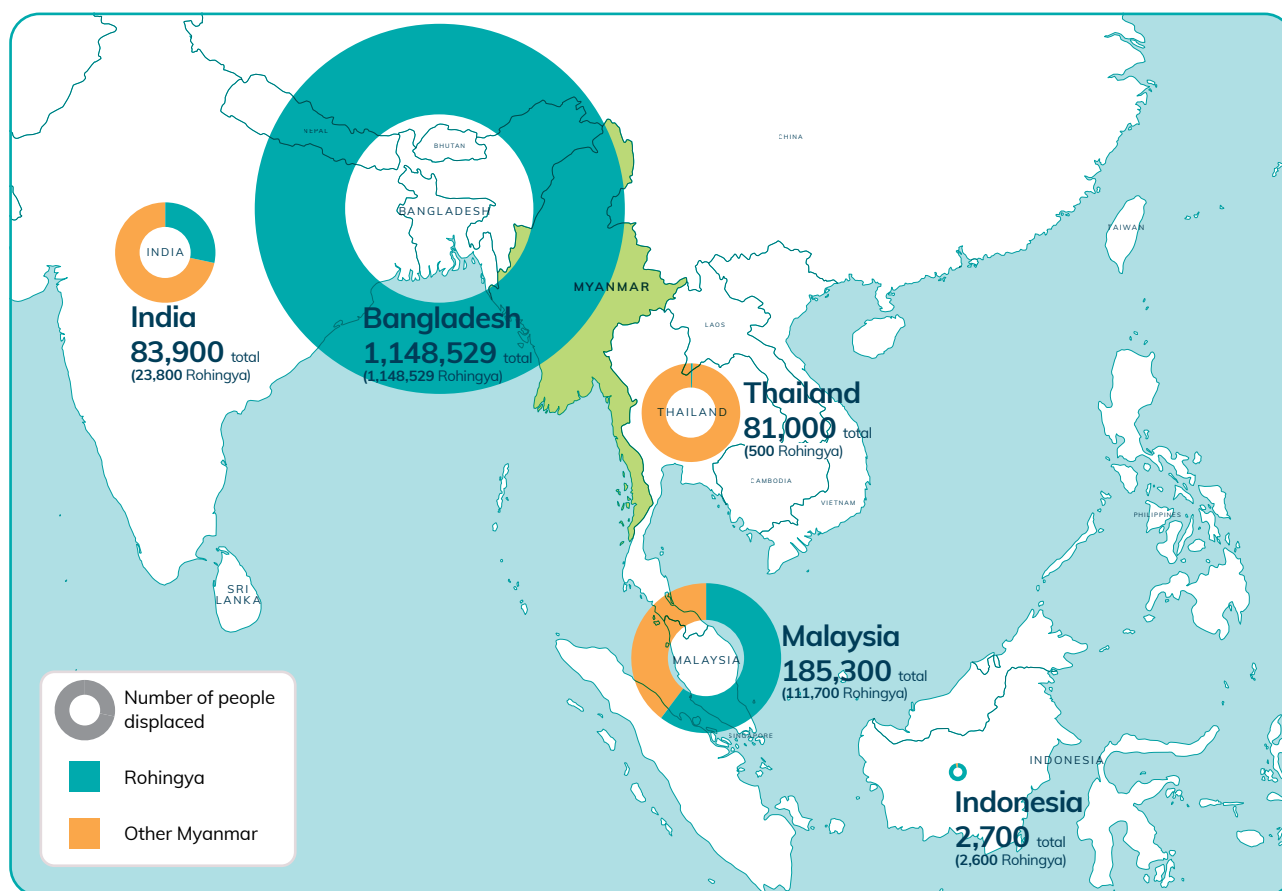
66 MSF (2025) [Echoes of violence in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar](#).

67 Uddin, S. and Seiff, A. (2024) [Terror in Rohingya refugee camp as boys kidnapped to fight in Myanmar](#). RFA.

68 IRC (2025) [The Rohingya crisis: What to know and how to help](#).

69 UNHCR (2025) [Focus on saving lives, urges UNHCR as more Rohingya flee by sea](#).

70 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR fears extreme desperation led to deaths of 427 Rohingya at sea](#).

Graphic 2. Myanmar displacement (including Rohingya) in the region as of 31 August 2025

Source: [UNHCR Situations Myanmar](#)

In **Thailand**, Rohingya are classified as “illegal immigrants”; without access to any asylum procedure, they are at risk of being detained indefinitely in camps or centres.⁷¹ Though Myanmar nationals in general face significant challenges in Thailand, the situation for Rohingya is especially precarious. A survey carried out by the Mixed Migration Centre in 2024 found that 97 percent of 568 Rohingya respondents sampled in the country were undocumented, compared to 55 percent of non-Rohingya.⁷² Lack of documentation has potentially serious implications in a country that launched an unprecedented crackdown in 2024, resulting in the detention of around 200,000 Myanmar nationals, with significant numbers fined, prosecuted or even deported despite the threat of military conscription there.⁷³ In August 2025, in the wake of the exodus of many Cambodian migrant workers from the country, Thailand took the positive step of allowing some 81,000 long-term refugees from Myanmar living near the Thai-Myanmar border to work legally, a move welcomed by UNHCR.⁷⁴

However, it is unlikely this will benefit any Rohingya in the country, who have until now been managed differently to non-Rohingya Myanmar nationals by Thai immigration authorities.⁷⁵ The lack of protections in place was highlighted by the plight of six unaccompanied Rohingya minors from Rakhine state who were abandoned by smugglers. The children, rather than being granted assistance, were instead arrested in December 2024 and subsequently charged with “illegal entry” before disappearing from government-run facilities in March 2025. Activists fear that the children may have been smuggled out into Malaysia.⁷⁶

Malaysia, against a backdrop of growing resentment towards refugees, has also become steadily more unwelcoming in recent years towards Rohingya. While it hosts around 200,000 UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum seekers, including 117,700 Rohingya,⁷⁷ it is not itself a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. This means that anyone entering irregularly is designated as

71 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Rohingya in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand: Refugee protection, human smuggling and trafficking](#).

72 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) [Comparing smuggling dynamics: From Myanmar to Malaysia and Thailand](#).

73 RFA (2024) [Some 200,000 Myanmar workers detained in Thai immigration crackdown](#).

74 UNHCR (2025) [Thailand grants work rights to long-term refugees from Myanmar, UN welcomes resolution](#).

75 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Rohingya in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand: Refugee protection, human smuggling and trafficking](#).

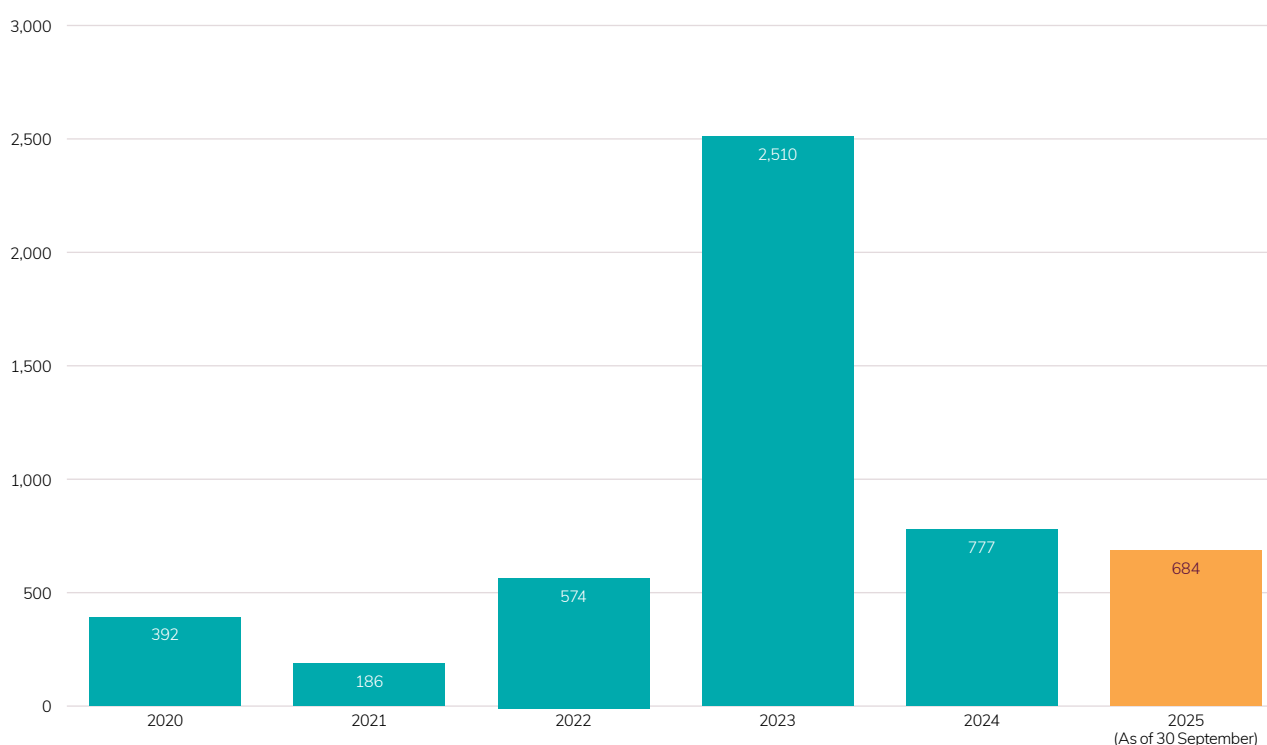
76 Fortify Rights (2025) [Thailand: Protect unaccompanied refugee children, provide legal status, prevent detention](#).

77 UNHCR (2025) [Figures at a glance in Malaysia](#).

“illegal” regardless of their protection needs, though those registered with UNHCR generally have better access to services and are less likely to be deported.⁷⁸ Malaysia has repeatedly been accused of engaging in pushbacks, including two boats carrying almost 300 Rohingya which were intercepted in January in Malaysian waters and forced to move on.⁷⁹ The government had intensified surveillance just before the pushbacks in response to the arrival of a boat with 196 Rohingya on board, including 71 children, all of whom were detained.⁸⁰ Authorities have also been conducting regular raids in urban areas where migrants are concentrated to apprehend migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. These include Rohingya people, who were among the 530 Myanmar nationals arrested alongside 100 other foreign nationals in an operation targeting a market in the city of Klang.⁸¹ These actions create further uncertainty for Rohingya living in the country who are already forced to live on the margins, working informally and with limited access to education or healthcare.⁸²

Similarly, in **Indonesia**, Rohingya have had to contend with a growing popular backlash as the number of arrivals has steadily risen. From 2023 to August 2025, a total of 3,770 people have arrived in Indonesia by boat, with most disembarking either at Aceh or North Sumatra.⁸³ This included, in the final quarter of 2024, a total of six boats that arrived in Aceh with more than 800 Rohingya on board,⁸⁴ followed, in January, by three boats carrying 343 Rohingya.⁸⁵ In one instance, a vessel with at least 75 people on board was forced to remain in the water for several hours before landing due to demonstrations from local residents.⁸⁶ This is an increasingly common occurrence in Aceh in particular, where Rohingya refugees have been framed as a security threat and burden on communities.⁸⁷ Recent cuts in refugee assistance in Indonesia⁸⁸ are likely to only increase these tensions, while placing Rohingya in even more desperate conditions – a reality highlighted by the death of two young Rohingya men in April due to lack of medical treatment and inadequate conditions.⁸⁹

Graphic 3. Rohingya refugee maritime disembarkations in Indonesia



Source: [UNHCR Situations Myanmar](#)

78 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Rohingya in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand: Refugee protection, human smuggling and trafficking](#).

79 Voice of America (2025) [Malaysia turns away 2 boats with nearly 300 Rohingya refugees](#).

80 Leong, I. (2025) [Malaysia detains 196 Rohingya migrants from Myanmar](#). Barrons.

81 DVB (2025) [Malaysia immigration raid leads to arrest of 530 Myanmar nationals](#).

82 Rafique, R. (2025) [Living in limbo: The precarious existence of refugees in Malaysia](#). Monash University.

83 UNHCR (2025) [Rohingya boat arrivals: 20 August 2025](#).

84 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Asia – Quarter 4 2024](#).

85 UNHCR (2025) [Rohingya boat arrivals: 20 August 2025](#).

86 The Jakarta Post (2025) [Rohingya refugees blocked from landing in Aceh](#).

87 Ratcliffe, R. (2025) [The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees](#). The Guardian.

88 Widianto, S. (2025) [Exclusive: UN slashes support for Rohingya refugees in Indonesia due to U.S. cuts, sources say](#). Reuters.

89 Rahman, A. (2025) [2 Rohingya refugees die in Indonesia amid global funding crunch](#). The Diplomat.

The situation for Rohingya appears to be growing more precarious in **India**, where the country's refugee policy is intertwined with nationalist political concerns. This is reflected in the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, which grants citizenship to members of six religious minorities – in addition to Hindus, this includes Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians – from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Persecuted Muslim minorities, on the other hand, including Rohingya, are not afforded the same protections.⁹⁰ On the contrary, migrants with Muslim backgrounds are increasingly being targeted by authorities, especially in the wake of a terrorist attack in the contested region of Kashmir in April 2025 that killed 26 Indian civilians. Shortly afterwards, in May, the government mandated the creation of “special task forces” to apprehend and remove undocumented nationals from Bangladesh and Myanmar.⁹¹ Along with around 2,000 Bangladeshi migrants, Rohingya refugees have also been rounded up and summarily deported.⁹² Among other incidents, there were disturbing reports of at least 40 Rohingya being flown out of the country and then abandoned by the navy in the sea, where they were forced to swim to a nearby island in Myanmar.⁹³ Around the same time, approximately 100 others were removed from a detention centre in Assam and abandoned at the Bangladesh border.⁹⁴ While these operations have gained momentum since the Kashmir attack, anti-Rohingya migration policies were already being enacted earlier in the year, such as the detention of almost 400 Rohingya in Jaipur in January.⁹⁵

Labour migration in South and Southeast Asia

Millions of migrants from across South and Southeast Asia, in particular Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines, migrate every year in search of economic opportunities elsewhere – either in other countries within the region, such as Malaysia or Thailand, or further afield. Though offering a vital source of income and remittances, many migrant workers end up being exploited and mistreated by their employers. In Europe, for instance, the limited availability of regular labour migration pathways means that migrants from countries

like **Nepal** are instead compelled to engage human smugglers to reach their destination.⁹⁶ As a result, many end up being trafficked or forced into poorly paid, exploitative conditions in the shadow economy.⁹⁷

In the Gulf, in particular, the persistence of many elements of the inequitable *kafala* system affords migrant workers – the large majority from South and Southeast Asia, including India, Bangladesh and Pakistan⁹⁸ – few protections, especially if the companies or households they work for become abusive. Many also rely on private agencies to reach host countries, in some cases illicitly, leaving them vulnerable to erroneous recruitment costs, leading to debt bondage and/or illegal or unfair work practices when they reach their destination. Extreme heat is also a major threat, which is only intensifying with climate change. In **Saudi Arabia**, where temperatures can rise above 50°C in places, a building boom ahead of the 2034 FIFA World Cup has potentially deadly implications for migrants now engaged as construction workers.⁹⁹ According to an investigative documentary by ITV, around 21,000 migrants from India, Nepal and Bangladesh are believed to have died since 2016 working on the NEOM megacity project.¹⁰⁰ With numerous ‘giga-projects’ planned in the next few years, human rights organisations are predicting a further spike in migrant deaths, unless meaningful action is taken now to impose protections and safeguards.¹⁰¹ Even those who survive these conditions may face long-term health challenges. In Nepal, for instance, elevated infertility levels have been reported among returnee migrants, with doctors attributing it to the stressful environment they worked in abroad.¹⁰²

It is often the case that the governments of both sending and receiving countries are failing in their duty of care to migrant workers. A statement by the International Migrants Alliance in July 2025, for instance, highlighted the injustices and rights violations that workers from Bangladesh continue to experience in Malaysia, calling on the two countries to do more to end these abuses. While Bangladesh was not doing enough to tackle the proliferation of unscrupulous agencies and middlemen profiting from the process there, Malaysia has to address an opaque and costly system that frequently serves to push migrants into debt and informality.¹⁰³ In May 2025,

90 Human Rights Watch (2024) [India Activates Discriminatory Citizenship Law](#).

91 The New Indian Express (2025) [MHA directs states to set up Special Task Forces for identifying, deporting illegal migrants from Bangladesh](#).

92 Singh, N. (2025) [Concern grows as India ramps up deportation of alleged migrants to Bangladesh](#). The Independent.

93 UN (2025) [Alarmed by reports of Rohingya cast into the sea from Indian navy vessels, UN expert launches inquiry of “unconscionable, unacceptable acts”](#).

94 UN (2025) [Alarmed by reports of Rohingya cast into the sea from Indian navy vessels, UN expert launches inquiry of “unconscionable, unacceptable acts”](#).

95 Times of India (2025) [City cops detain 394 Rohingya refugees](#).

96 Global Press Journal (2025) [Nepali migrant workers risk their lives in Europe](#).

97 Rai, B. (2024) [Europe is the new destination for Nepali migrant workers](#). Nepali Times.

98 Kramer, S. and Tong, Y. (2024) [Geographic spotlights: A closer look at 4 migration stories](#). Pew Research Center.

99 MMC (2025) [Exploring the climate–labour–mobility nexus for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia](#).

100 Ames, N. (2024) [Saudi Arabia’s World Cup bid gathers pace – but at what cost to human life?](#) The Guardian.

101 Hawley, C. (2025) [Human rights groups warn of “surge” in migrant worker deaths in Saudi Arabia](#). BBC.

102 Neupane, S. (2025) [Nepali migrant workers face an infertility crisis](#). Global Press Journal.

103 International Migrants Alliance (2025) [End exploitative recruitment and employment of Bangladeshi migrant workers](#).

around 280 Bangladeshi workers filed complaints to Malaysia and Bangladesh after a manufacturing plant closed down, leaving them with eight months of unpaid back wages amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars.¹⁰⁴ The same month, a Bangladeshi migrant had his visa revoked by the company that employed him after he spoke out about the working conditions there.¹⁰⁵

While many migrant workers end up being exploited and mistreated by their employers abroad, extreme exploitation also occurs within the region. This has been highlighted by the 'humanitarian and human rights crisis' faced by hundreds of thousands of trafficking victims – some lured from as far away as East Africa¹⁰⁶ – forced to work in scam centres in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar and the Philippines.¹⁰⁷ Even within their own countries, migrant workers may be subjected to exploitation. In India, for instance, millions of internal migrants – many from impoverished rural areas – toil in dangerous and demoralising conditions for long hours and little pay, with employers frequently disregarding even basic rights and protections.¹⁰⁸

Cambodians leave Thailand in the wake of conflict

Migrant labourers are especially vulnerable to changing geopolitical conditions, particularly between their country of origin and the host country. This is demonstrated by the current situation of Cambodian workers in Thailand, following the outbreak of conflict between the two countries on 24 July 2025. The hostilities, rooted in longstanding tensions over the disputed territory of Preah Vihear, resulted in dozens of deaths and the displacement of around 300,000 people on both sides of the border.¹⁰⁹ While a tentative ceasefire was reached on 28 July, diplomatic relations remain fraught – with troubling implications for the large Cambodian migrant population.

For many years, migration to Thailand has been an important coping strategy for rural Cambodians in particular (as well as migrants

from Laos and Myanmar), due to the limited economic opportunities available locally. However, the majority cross the border irregularly¹¹⁰ and live without legal documentation, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and arrest. The precarity of their existence has been highlighted at various moments of political crisis in Thailand, such as the 2014 military coup, when around 200,000 migrant workers returned to **Cambodia** over the course of a fortnight.¹¹¹ This time round, following the beginning of hostilities, there were reports of Cambodians being physically assaulted by Thai gangs¹¹² as well as widespread harassment.¹¹³ Despite the attacks being explicitly condemned by Thailand's government and the subsequent brokering of a ceasefire between the two countries, the uncertain climate has driven an extraordinary exodus of Cambodians from the country. Though estimates vary as to how many exactly have departed, the Cambodian Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training suggested that as much as 65 percent of the approximately 1.2 million Cambodians in Thailand had returned – a figure that, if accurate, would amount to around 780,000 people.¹¹⁴ Some migrant organisations, nevertheless, believe that the true number, when undocumented and unreported cases are included, could be much higher.¹¹⁵

For both countries, not to mention the migrants themselves, the implications of this exodus could prove highly damaging. Thailand, for its part, has been left with a significant hole in its workforce in key industries such as agriculture, fisheries and construction, that it is seeking to fill as best it can. This includes expediting labour migration from other countries such as Sri Lanka, where 10,000 working visas were approved for migrants in August.¹¹⁶ The exodus is also likely a factor in the government's decision to grant tens of thousands of refugees in camps on the Myanmar border with the right to work legally.¹¹⁷ In Cambodia, on the other hand, the arrival of large numbers of unemployed and, in many cases, heavily indebted returnees will likely

104 Ghosal, A. (2025) [Migrant workers in Malaysia seek unpaid wages from a supplier to Japanese companies](#). AP.

105 Palma, P. (2025) [Migrants in Malaysia: Worker faces deportation after speaking up](#). The Daily Star.

106 Kelliher, F. and Mureithi, C. (2025) ["I broke completely": how jobseekers from Africa are being tricked into slavery in Asia's cyberscam compounds](#). The Guardian.

107 UN News (2025) [Scam centres are a "human rights crisis", independent experts warn](#).

108 Kuttappan, R. (2025) ["Open prison": The forced labour driving India's \\$5 trillion economy dream](#). Al Jazeera.

109 Setboonsarng, C., Azhar, D. and Naing, S. (2025) [Ceasefire takes effect between Thailand and Cambodia after five-day border battle](#). Reuters.

110 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Use of smugglers on the journey to Thailand among Cambodians and Laotians](#).

111 Nurick, R. and Hak, S. (2019) [Transnational migration and the involuntary return of undocumented migrants across the Cambodian-Thai border](#). The Institute of Development Studies and Partner Organisations.

112 RFA (2025) [Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand attacked amid border tensions](#).

113 Board, J. and Vantha, P. (2025) ["Unprecedented exodus" of Cambodian workers from Thailand leaves both countries reeling](#). Channel News Asia.

114 Delgado, A. L. and Cheang, S. (2025) [Cambodian migrant workers face an uncertain future as Thai border conflict drives them home](#). The Independent.

115 Board, J. and Vantha, P. (2025) ["Unprecedented exodus" of Cambodian workers from Thailand leaves both countries reeling](#). Channel News Asia.

116 Reuters (2025) [Thailand turning to Sri Lankan workers to cope with Cambodian exodus, official says](#).

117 Reuters (2025) [Thailand grants some Myanmar refugees right to legal work](#).

prove challenging in a context where the demand for work already far outstrips the available supply. This, together with a sharp drop in the flow of remittances from Thailand, could lead to increasing levels of destitution.¹¹⁸

Australia

Australia's immigration policies have been notoriously restrictive for years, with the country responsible for establishing one of the first offshore processing and detention facilities for asylum seekers. In particular, its approach to asylum is regarded as among the most punitive in the world, and typically involves forcing back anyone who enters Australian territory irregularly by plane or boat to their country of origin or detaining them in a third country facility.¹¹⁹ While Australia finally closed its offshore detention facilities on Manus Island (part of **Papua New Guinea**) in 2017, its legacy persists for the estimated 75 former asylum seekers still stranded there (for more see Thematic snapshot *How offshore processing and migration management went global*, p. 229). Though Australia has, in the past, funded some limited assistance for them through an agreement with Papua New Guinea – an arrangement that was extended in the middle of 2024 after Papua New Guinea threatened to send them back to Australia – the government has denied they are their legal responsibility.¹²⁰ In December 2024, it emerged that, from the start of 2025, the Australian government would no longer be providing asylum seekers with housing or health care, and that they would have to cover this through a single allowance payment – a situation that activists fear could drive them into insecure accommodation, given the limited funds they will receive.¹²¹

Notwithstanding some isolated but significant steps forward – for example, the recent 'climate visa' agreement with Tuvalu (discussed further below) or the temporary three-year humanitarian stay pathway for Palestinians and Israelis in Australia announced in October 2024¹²² – the overall approach to irregular migration and asylum remains "draconian".¹²³ The passage of controversial new legislation, in November 2024, has granted the government further powers over asylum seekers in

the country, including the ability to impose travel bans on entire countries and the issuance of 'directions' to individuals compelling them to assist with their own deportation, with criminal penalties for those who fail to comply. Under the new legislation, Australia's immigration minister is also granted greater latitude to strip recognised refugees of their status unilaterally.¹²⁴ Perhaps the most troubling provision, however, is the way it enables the government to strike deals with any willing third country to deport people: under the terms of this agreement, even recognised refugees could be subject to deportation orders, exposing more than 80,000 people in Australia to the risk of being removed from the country.¹²⁵ Activists have warned that this could result in the separation of families and expose refugees to persecution, particularly if the government should decide, in future, to orchestrate large-scale removals for political gain.¹²⁶ In August 2025, the Australian government also passed an additional amendment to "expressly exclude procedural fairness from applying" in cases involving foreign nationals with criminal backgrounds in order to expedite their removal to a third country.¹²⁷

New deal with Nauru as a deportation hub

While the Australian government has been continuing to invest in its domestic detention facility network – including an AUD 2.3 billion, five-year contract with a subsidiary of private US operator MTC, despite numerous accusations of the company's negligence, egregious abuses and mismanagement of prisons there¹²⁸ – the centrepiece of its expanded immigration policy is the announcement, in September 2025, of a new deal with **Nauru**. This establishes that Nauru should accept foreign-born migrants with criminal convictions and no legal right to remain in Australia who cannot be returned to their country of origin.¹²⁹ The agreement, involving an initial AUD 408 million upfront payment to Nauru and, ultimately, amounting to around AUD 2.5 billion over the next 30 years, would initially involve the transfer of 354 detainees deemed by the government to have no legal right to remain in Australia.¹³⁰ The terms of the agreement allow for the possibility that it could be significantly expanded down the line. However, critics warn that the government's new "sledgehammer" powers could lead to tens of thousands of people being deported in the future.¹³¹

118 Board, J. and Vantha, P. (2025) "[Unprecedented exodus](#)" of Cambodian workers from Thailand leaves both countries reeling. Channel News Asia.

119 Refugee Council of Australia (2024) [Australia's asylum policies](#).

120 Karp, P. (2024) [Australia to strike new funding deal with Papua New Guinea to manage transferred asylum seekers](#). The Guardian.

121 Gillespie, E. (2024) [PNG asylum seekers stripped of government-provided housing and healthcare under new deal](#). ABC.

122 Government of Australia (2024) [Hamas-Israel Conflict: Temporary Humanitarian Stay pathway for Palestinians and Israelis in Australia](#).

123 Refugee Council of Australia (2024) [Refugee Council of Australia dismayed at new draconian migration laws](#).

124 Human Rights Law Centre (2024) [Standing with migrants and refugees against Australia's new anti-migrant laws](#).

125 Karp, P. (2024) [More than 80,000 at risk of deportation from Australia under Labor bill likened to UK's failed Rwanda plan](#). The Guardian.

126 Crowley, T. (2024) ["A dark day in our history": Refugee advocates warn Labor laws put thousands at risk](#). ABC.

127 Butler, J. (2025) [Labor accused of trying to 'sneak through' law change to strip non-citizens of fair process](#). The Guardian.

128 Bogle, A. and Knaus, C. (2024) [Labor to pay \\$2.3bn to controversial US prison operator subsidiary to run onshore detention](#). The Guardian.

129 McGuirk, R. (2025) [Australia will pay Nauru to resettle foreign-born criminals](#). AP.

130 Al Jazeera (2025) [Australia to send hundreds to Nauru in \\$1.6bn migrant resettlement deal](#).

131 Basford Canales, S. (2025) [Up to 80,000 people in Australia may be affected by 'sledgehammer' powers to deport noncitizens to Nauru, lawyers warn](#). The Guardian.

The prime minister of Nauru has justified the move as necessary for its survival. Given the limited economic opportunities available on an island that has become increasingly dependent on migration management in the absence of any alternatives, the agreement is seen as a way to bring in much needed income.¹³² Nevertheless, many Nauruans are reportedly anxious and resentful of the programme, particularly since the proposed deportees have been vilified by Australia's home affairs minister as “violent offenders” of “appalling character”. In practice, while some of the group have served sentences for serious offences, including murder and rape, others have no criminal history or have convictions for minor offences, such as cannabis use. Besides raising serious questions about the potential impact that large-scale deportations could have on Nauru's small and socially cohesive community, the arrivals – who will be readily identifiable in this context – will likely struggle to integrate if faced with an inhospitable reception from locals.¹³³

The launch of the world-first climate visa for Tuvalu

The low-lying Pacific state of **Tuvalu** is one of the world's countries most vulnerable to climate change. Two of its nine islands have already been submerged, with projections suggesting that rising sea levels could render the remainder uninhabitable by the end of the century.¹³⁴ Well before that, however, as soon as 2050, much of the land where most of its housing and infrastructure is located could be underwater.¹³⁵ Saline intrusion, storm surges and rising temperatures also threaten to destroy fisheries and crops, undermining key sources of livelihoods for many Tuvaluans.¹³⁶ This has raised increasing concerns about the potential displacement of the Tuvaluan population in the near future.

Australia already has longstanding mobility programmes to promote temporary labour migration for countries across the Pacific, providing a valuable source of income and remittances for migrants and their families at home. However,

the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union – signed in November 2023 and entered into force in August 2024 – represents an unprecedented milestone in the form of the “world's first bilateral agreement on climate mobility”.¹³⁷ Combining climate cooperation, security and “human mobility with dignity”, among other components, the agreement includes a provision on “a special human mobility pathway”.¹³⁸ The creation of a dedicated visa programme for Tuvaluans was announced in 2024 and opened for applications in June 2025, with 280 spaces available annually: Tuvaluans have the opportunity to register their names into a ballot and the permits are then allocated randomly. Unlike other frameworks established to promote Pacific mobility to Australia, it does not require applicants to have a job offer in place, meaning a wider range of groups (including the elderly) can apply.¹³⁹ Ultimately, more than 80 percent of Tuvalu's 11,000-strong population had registered for a visa by the time applications closed in July.¹⁴⁰ Given the scale of demand and the fact that the programme allows for almost 3 percent of the national population to be allocated visas every year – a figure rising to around 4 percent when other Pacific mobility programmes are also factored in¹⁴¹ – the culminative effects over the space of the next decade could be far-reaching.

The agreement, despite its evident popularity, has generated some concerns about whether the programme could help accelerate the country's demographic decline, though potential anxieties around brain drain or the specific thinning of the working-age population are arguably less relevant, given that it is not tied to labour migration explicitly.¹⁴² Some politicians have also been sceptical about the terms of Falepili Union and what they regard as its bartering of Tuvalu's national sovereignty, specifically the commitment to “mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters”.¹⁴³ It is also the case that proper planning, including culturally appropriate orientation, will be needed to support

132 Basford Canales, S. (2025) [Up to 80,000 people in Australia may be affected by 'sledgehammer' powers to deport noncitizens to Nauru, lawyers warn](#). The Guardian.

133 Doherty, B. (2025) [People banished to Nauru by Australia face hostile reception as \\$2.5bn cost of deal revealed](#). The Guardian.

134 The Guardian (2025) [Nearly a third of Tuvalu citizens enter ballot for climate-linked visa to relocate to Australia](#).

135 Firstpost (2024) [Climate change: Pacific's sinking island nation Tuvalu recreating itself on the metaverse](#).

136 SPREP (2024) [Risks to food security in Tuvalu discussed during Tuvalu National Adaptation Plan Stakeholder workshop](#).

137 McAdam, J. (2023) [Australia's offer of climate migration to Tuvalu residents is groundbreaking – and could be a lifeline across the Pacific](#). The Conversation.

138 Government of Australia and Government of Tuvalu (2023) [Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union](#).

139 McAdam, J. (2023) [Australia's offer of climate migration to Tuvalu residents is groundbreaking – and could be a lifeline across the Pacific](#). The Conversation.

140 Norman, J. (2025) [Bateteba left what once felt like 'the safest place in the world' to build a life in Australia. Thousands hope to follow](#). The Guardian.

141 McAdam, J. (2025) [1 in 3 Tuvaluans is bidding for a new "climate visa" to Australia – here's why everyone may ultimately end up applying](#). The Conversation.

142 Edwards, R. (2025) [The first Falepili Union visa ballot: a preliminary assessment](#). DevPolicy.

143 Government of Australia and Government of Tuvalu (2023) [Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union](#).

the arrival and integration of Tuvaluan visa holders in Australia,¹⁴⁴ bearing in mind that many Tuvaluan migrants already in Australia are concentrated in the lowest socioeconomic quintiles.¹⁴⁵ A major strength of this programme is that, unlike other labour migration pathways, visa holders will be granted permanent residency before their arrival and be able to access health, education and other services in full.¹⁴⁶

While there are legitimate reasons to worry about the potential implications of sustained emigration on Tuvalu's long-term prospects, the flow of remittances abroad may help communities back home ensure their survival by investing in infrastructure and services.¹⁴⁷ In this regard, the visa programme offers a vital safety net for Tuvalu and other environmentally vulnerable nations that may increasingly need migration as an adaptive tool to cope with the impacts of climate change. Besides providing a means for more Tuvaluans to access education and employment, as well as send money back home, it enables at least some of the population to make empowered decisions about their future ahead of any potential existential threats. Furthermore, while the visa programme offers permanent residency, it allows for regular and extended travel back to Tuvalu, meaning visa holders will have the option to return regularly to maintain their connections there.¹⁴⁸ This balance between the opportunities opened up by emigration and the importance of retaining Tuvalu's identity is reflected in the union's text, with both countries committing "to work together to help the citizens of Tuvalu to stay in their homes with safety and dignity",¹⁴⁹ an approach that, if properly implemented, could help ensure Tuvalu's continuation.

144 McAdam, J. (2025) [1 in 3 Tuvaluans is bidding for a new "climate visa" to Australia – here's why everyone may ultimately end up applying](#). The Conversation.

145 Edwards, R. (2025) [The first Falepili Union visa ballot: a preliminary assessment](#). DevPolicy.

146 Jackson, L. C. (2025) [A climate crisis, a ballot, and a chance at a new life in Australia](#). The Guardian.

147 McAdam, J. (2025) [1 in 3 Tuvaluans is bidding for a new "climate visa" to Australia – here's why everyone may ultimately end up applying](#). The Conversation.

148 Jackson, L. C. (2025) [A climate crisis, a ballot, and a chance at a new life in Australia](#). The Guardian.

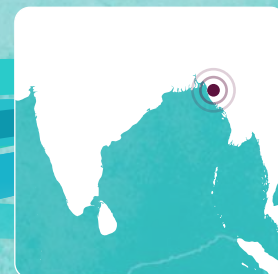
149 Government of Australia and Government of Tuvalu (2023) [Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union](#).

Photo credit: Waheedullah Jaresh / Shutterstock

Torkham Border, Nangarhar, Afghanistan, 8 November, 2023. Drone footage shows thousands of Afghans returning from Pakistan. Pakistan's push for Afghans to leave the country has intensified since 2023, forcing hundreds of thousands to return amid growing safety and rights concerns, particularly for women and girls. (See Thematic snapshot Iran's Afghan expulsion surges: bitter and dangerous returns for scapegoated Afghans [p.162](#)).



The endless violent plight of the Rohingya risks crushing the hopes (and lives) of young people



I'm an 18-year-old Rohingya girl, living in Bangladesh since 2017. I wasn't even 10 when my family and I left Myanmar. We didn't want to go, we wanted to be recognised as citizens of Myanmar, but the government wouldn't let us. They called us "stateless" and they were killing lots of us. Near our village, all women, pregnant women and girls over the age of 18 were taken to a police/military office and burned alive. The Myanmar government burned one of my relatives in that office. So we had to flee or they would harm and kill us too. Nobody wants to leave their own country, but we were forced to do so.

"I don't want to ever see smugglers again. Whenever I move, I want to do so legally."

I don't know why we chose to come to Bangladesh. I was little and just followed my parents. Bangladesh is the nearest country and it's also a Muslim country. We thought that maybe the Bangladeshi people would help us, and they did help us a lot in the beginning. When we were travelling to Bangladesh, in the middle of the night, we met some smugglers who held us at knife point and forced us to pay BDT 30,000 (approximately, USD 247) per person to continue on our journey. After that encounter, we managed to arrive in Bangladesh safely by boat. I don't want to ever see smugglers again. Whenever I move, I want to do so legally.

I lived in a camp for five years. There was some access to education, but not to higher education. I studied there for one year and then I had to stop, until one of my friends told me about an opportunity to study at a university. My family didn't want me to go ahead with my studies, because in my community it's uncommon for women to get higher education. Yet I didn't let them stop me. Since starting university, my life has changed, and I'm a lot more independent.

"Being a refugee is becoming very risky now, and I think it's going to get worse."

The situation in the camps surrounding Cox's Bazar is becoming very dangerous. In the past, we had a lot of donations. Now, the Bangladeshi people kidnap Rohingya babies and take money from us. Being a refugee is becoming very risky now, and I think it's going to get worse. Since funding has been cut, informal learning centres in the camps have been closed, so no one can get an education. In the past, I received everything at the camp: food, shelter, basic education, everything. When we came to Bangladesh first, we received a lot of support, but now it's decreasing, I think because the Bangladeshi people are tired of us.

My dream is to keep studying and I'd like to go abroad to do that. I want to be a business woman. They offered me some study opportunities in Canada and Japan, but then they withdrew them because I don't have a passport or citizenship. I only have a refugee card, but they rejected it. I'd like to apply for resettlement, but I don't know how to. I want to go to Switzerland, because I have some books about it and I know about its history. It seems like a very nice country – it's my favourite country, in fact, and there are lots of good universities. But if I can't go there, I will try Canada.

"I don't know if migration will become easier or harder, but I know that people will keep moving, and sometimes they will do so in dangerous ways."

INDIA

I'm very young but I've faced so many challenges. I saw burnt houses and people. Everyone hates us. People in Myanmar hate us because we're stateless. People at the university hate us too. They discriminate against us a lot. One of my cousins went to a Bangladeshi school after the school illegally asked for BDT 700,000 (approximately, USD 5700) from his family to allow him to attend. When they heard he was a Rohingya boy, they punished him. The teacher removed him from the school even though the school had already taken this money. We want education but nobody gives us access to higher education. I don't know if migration will become easier or harder, but I know that people will keep moving, and sometimes they will do so in dangerous ways. People my age, for example, went to Malaysia by boat because of the situation in the camp.

"Everyone wants to be free, no one wants to be a refugee. We have a motherland and a hometown and home country, but they forced us to leave everything. That's why we are refugees."

I would like for the international community and leaders to understand what being a refugee means, and to explain and advocate about our journey and our situation. We are innocent people, we never wanted to leave our country. We were forced. They discriminated against us, they burned our hometown, they looted everything, they raped our mothers and sisters.

Everyone wants to be free, no one wants to be a refugee. We have a motherland and a hometown and home country, but they forced us to leave everything. That's why we are refugees.

It would be great if the Bangladeshi government and international community gave refugees access to things like work, this would definitely change their lives. So far, we've been relying on rations and donations, but I don't want to depend on that. I want to be independent. If the government allowed refugees to work freely, this would hopefully change things for the better.

One day I will write a book about my experiences. I want people to understand our situation, our journey and the challenges that we experienced, both in Myanmar and in the camp. I want people to understand what refugees go through by sharing my life as a refugee.



Migration in a polycrisis: the impact of Myanmar's crises on mixed migration in the region

Of the many conflicts and crises currently taking place globally, the situation in Myanmar is arguably one of the most under-reported. However, the country is experiencing protracted conflict, military oppression, punitive tax policies against its overseas migrant population and the effects of climate change and natural disasters. Characterised by the UN as a “polycrisis”, all these factors have increasingly become major displacement and migration drivers, generating large and complex mixed migration dynamics in the Southeast Asia region.¹

Migration in a polycrisis

Four years after the 2021 military seizure of power, in which the Tatmadaw ousted and imprisoned elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) colleagues, the military continues to fight its own population on many fronts, despite effectively controlling only 21 percent of the territory.²

Before the military coup, approximately 1 million people within Myanmar were already in need of humanitarian aid, but now the figure has exceeded 18 million – around one third of the population – with more than 3.5 million of them being internally displaced.³ Importantly, migration dynamics post-2021 are not happening in a vacuum. For decades, Myanmar's instability and its history of persecuting minorities – particularly, Rohingya – drove people into exile across the region.⁴ Bangladesh, for example, continues to host nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees, while Thailand is home to over 2 million Myanmar migrant workers (plus many more with irregular status) and Malaysia remains a key destination for both asylum seekers as well as those seeking employment.⁵ Another prominent destination – as well as transit

country – is Indonesia, which has been receiving scores of boat arrivals in recent years.⁶ The current movements, therefore, essentially compound a larger, long-standing migration and displacement situation in the South and Southeast Asia region.

New challenges for regular migrant workers

In 2025, Myanmar's de facto authorities introduced new laws around taxes and remittances, largely as a way to obtain regular cash injections that could bolster its insufficient finances.⁷ According to these, regular migrant workers must return at least 25 percent of their monthly earnings via official channels that are recognised by the de facto authorities, while also paying between 2 and 25 percent of taxes on foreign income.⁸ Essentially, migrant workers are taxed twice, while also having to pay income taxes in their host countries.⁹ These financial constraints could push thousands into economic instability, as well as deter people from pursuing regular mobility pathways, as the taxation laws only apply to documented migrants. The millions of Myanmar nationals working in precarious employment in Thailand and other countries in the region are particularly targeted by this.¹⁰

Compounding this, the Tatmadaw introduced new conscription policies in 2025, mandating men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 to serve in the military. While likely driving outward migration from Myanmar for those who wanted to escape military conscription, returning home becomes almost impossible for migrant workers, due to insecurity and forced conscription.¹¹ This results in migrant workers being increasingly pushed into irregular types of work – leading to irregularity and exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

1 United Nations (2025) [Four years after the coup, Myanmar remains on the brink](#). The European Sting.

2 The Guardian (2025) [The Guardian view on Myanmar, four years on: the army unleashed terror, but the people are defiant](#).

3 Kim, K. (2024) [Concurrent Challenges of Conflict and Climate Change in Myanmar](#). Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.

4 Doctors without Borders (2025) [A timeline of the Rohingya crisis](#).

5 UNHCR (2025) [Bangladesh](#); Also IOM (2025) [Overview of Myanmar Nationals in Thailand](#); Also UNHCR (2025) [Figures at a glance in Malaysia](#).

6 Reuters (2025) [Over 200 Rohingya arrive by boat in Indonesia over weekend, official says](#).

7 Yin Chuah, H. (2024) [Myanmar's New Taxation and Conscription Policies Are Likely to Increase Irregular Migration](#). The Diplomat.

8 Yin Chuah, H. (2024) [Myanmar's New Taxation and Conscription Policies Are Likely to Increase Irregular Migration](#). The Diplomat.

9 Yin Chuah, H. (2024) [Myanmar's New Taxation and Conscription Policies Are Likely to Increase Irregular Migration](#). The Diplomat.

10 Frontier Myanmar (2025) [Hard grind: Migrants in Thailand face steep costs to stay legal](#).

11 Zsombor, P. (2025) [Myanmar's military drafts thousands in first year of conscription drive](#). Al Jazeera.

The Rohingya: a crisis within a crisis

Among the 3.5 million IDPs living in Myanmar, an estimated 619,429 are Rohingya living in Rakhine State, where fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA) has raged ever since the military seizure of power.¹² The persecution of this minority Muslim community has been long-standing and, in 2017, a military offensive resulting in violations that are widely regarded as genocide forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee into Bangladesh, bringing the total refugee population there to nearly 1 million.¹³ Those left behind in Rakhine continue to face ongoing persecution and are routinely confined to IDP camps, where they face severely restricted freedom of movement and little access to education, health care or livelihoods, while also being effectively stateless.¹⁴

At present, approximately 1 million Rohingya refugees live in the camps in and around Cox's Bazar, in Bangladesh.¹⁵ These remain some of the largest and most densely populated refugee camps in the world and living conditions are dire: international funding cuts mean that food rations have been slashed, while services such as health care and education are almost non-existent.¹⁶ Similarly, opportunities for livelihoods are extremely scant. For these reasons, some Rohingya have attempted to leave these camps, moving onwards via boat to reach countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

In January 2025, the Malaysian coastguard announced that it would be doubling patrols to locate more boats carrying people from Myanmar, after detaining almost 200 on a northwestern island a few days prior to the announcement.¹⁷ Malaysia is also working with the Thai coastguard to intercept boats from Myanmar.¹⁸ Those who manage to reach Thailand are deported back to Myanmar, where they are routinely conscripted to join the junta's armed forces.¹⁹ In this complex and layered scenario, issues such as crime, violence, smuggling, human trafficking, sexual assault and murder are rife.²⁰

In India, despite the country being publicly condemned for its decisions and actions on this, Rohingya refugees are regularly deported.²¹ May 2025, for example, saw a total of 140 Rohingya refugees pushed back by Indian authorities in two separate incidents, including one during which dozens of them were effectively abandoned at sea after being provided with life jackets.²²

Climate change as a key displacement driver

Persecution, conflict, forced conscription and taxes are not the only pressures facing the Myanmar population in 2025. With Myanmar being one of the most climate-vulnerable countries globally, natural disasters – such as cyclones, floods and landslides – and global warming are also becoming powerful drivers of displacement.²³

In March 2025, an earthquake killed nearly 4,000 people, injured 5,000 and left a further 6 million in urgent need of humanitarian aid. Described as “the strongest [earthquake] the country has experienced in a century”, the catastrophe displaced tens of thousands of people.²⁴ In the aftermath of the quake, the Tatmadaw “intensified attacks instead of facilitating relief”, thus worsening an already desperate situation.²⁵ This behaviour also led some international analysts to note that this was an attempt to “weaponise” humanitarian aid by blocking or stealing resources at a time of crisis.²⁶ Crucially, these two crises “interact ... in a mutually reinforcing manner”: on the one hand, the ongoing conflict impedes environmental efforts while, on the other, the effects of climate change generate more instability which, in turn, worsens the conflict.²⁷

What lies ahead?

Despite Myanmar's crisis being poorly covered in mainstream media, the country is experiencing a convergence of grave issues, such as conflict, forced conscription, punitive taxes, aid cuts and extreme climate

12 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR Myanmar Operational Update \(January - March 2025\)](#).

13 OHCHR (2023) [UN expert demands accountability for the Rohingya and an end to 'paralysis of indifference'](#).

14 Concern Worldwide (2025) [The Rohingya crisis: Eight years and counting](#).

15 UNHCR (2025) [Bangladesh](#).

16 Rescue (2025) [The Rohingya Crisis: What to know and how to help](#).

17 Reuters (2025) [Malaysia doubles patrols to find Myanmar migrant boats after nearly 200 detained](#).

18 Reuters (2025) [Malaysia doubles patrols to find Myanmar migrant boats after nearly 200 detained](#).

19 The New Humanitarian (2025) [Myanmar migrants forced to join junta forces after deportation from Thailand](#).

20 Al Jazeera (2024) [Conflict, climate, corruption drive Southeast Asia people trafficking: UN](#).

21 Amnesty International (2025) [India: Stop unlawful deportations and protect Rohingya refugees](#).

22 Amnesty International (2025) [India: Stop unlawful deportations and protect Rohingya refugees](#).

23 UN Habitat (2024) [Severe Flooding Hits Myanmar: Climate Change Takes a Toll](#).

24 Mishra, V. (2025) [‘Still reeling’: Myanmar quakes worsen humanitarian crisis in fractured country](#). United Nations News.

25 Mishra, V. (2025) [Myanmar human rights crisis deepens as aid collapses, attacks intensify](#). United Nations News; Also Kim, K (2024) Op. Cit.

26 Lamb, K. and Ratcliffe, R. (2025) [Myanmar junta accused of blocking aid for earthquake victims as airstrikes continue](#). The Guardian.

27 Kim, K. (2024) [Concurrent Challenges of Conflict and Climate Change in Myanmar](#). Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.

events. These are progressively becoming compelling migration and displacement drivers in the region, with the likelihood of growing numbers opting for irregular routes in the face of migrant worker taxation and the absence of formal pathways.

Despite the protracted nature of the crises, regional responses, particularly from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have so far been limited. ASEAN, for example, maintained its principle of non-interference, which prevented the establishment of a coordinated and structured approach to supporting Myanmar and tackling mixed migration in the region.²⁸

Funding is another major factor adding to Myanmar's crisis.²⁹ With protracted cuts to international aid, millions of Myanmar nationals – as well as services and facilities sustaining the population – are at increased humanitarian risk, threatening not only the stability of the country but of the region as a whole.

Unless both local and global actors reinstate the necessary aid and circumstances in Myanmar improve on all fronts, the situation in the country is likely to deteriorate further, continuing to push vulnerable people into treacherous migration journeys outside legal pathways.

28 Jones, W. J. (2025) [Myanmar shows ASEAN centrality is weakening](#). East Asia Forum; Also NG, E. (2025) [Southeast Asia foreign ministers seek breakthrough in Myanmar conflict and South China Sea dispute](#). AP; Also Bauchner, S. (2024) [ASEAN Needs to Rethink Its Myanmar Strategy](#). Human Rights Watch.

29 United Nations (2025) [Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 45](#); Also United Nations (2025) [WFP Warns One Million in Myanmar to be Cut Off from Food Aid Amid Funding Shortfall](#).

Photo credit: Reza Saifullah / Shutterstock

Aceh, Indonesia, 19 November, 2023. A boat carrying 220 Rohingya refugees lands on the Aceh coast. Arrivals like this have continued into 2024 and 2025, as Rohingya refugees flee worsening conditions in Myanmar and overcrowded camps in Bangladesh, facing perilous sea journeys in search of safety. (See Thematic snapshot *Migration in a polycrisis: the impact of Myanmar's crises on mixed migration in the region* p.150 and Interview with Hafsar Tameesuddin [p. 156](#)).



A close-up photograph of a person with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark jacket, speaking into a microphone. Their right hand is raised in a gesturing motion. The background is dark and out of focus.

Interview

From violence, exclusion and statelessness to resistance, activism and freedom: lived experience leadership is key to addressing issues faced by refugees and migrants

As a Rohingya human rights activist, **Hafsar Tameesuddin**'s lived experience has equipped them with a profound knowledge and in-depth insight into the plight of refugees globally, ultimately leading them to run a network working to secure refugee rights in the Asia Pacific region. In this interview, they provide an account of their childhood and life in Rakhine, as well as offer fresh ideas to build a more equitable, effective, “whole-of-society” approach to refugee response.

Hafsar Tameesuddin is a Rohingya human rights defender and activist for gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, refugees and statelessness and preventing child marriage. Currently, they work as the co-secretary general of Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) while also serving as an advisory member of the Global Movement of Statelessness, board member at Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia and member of the Board for Azadi Project.

Can you describe the moment you realised you were stateless and how that shaped your sense of identity?

Well, I didn't pick it up when I was in the country [Myanmar]. It's just a norm that you live like that since you are born, you just don't have any other sense of it because the whole community is in the same situation. It's in your life all the time. So, in Myanmar, in Rakhine

and Arakan, where I was born, you see many other younger kids around my age, just normalising that treatment. There was a lot of discrimination in our daily routine and daily life. But when I left the country in my mid-20s, I sought asylum in Thailand for two years and was not successful. When I was a refugee seeking asylum in Malaysia, in my late 20s, I started to work at UNHCR as a translator. That's when I came across particular terminology that people were starting

to use for the Rohingya community, which identified them as 'stateless'. That's when I knew that I, too, am a stateless person.

“ When I was a refugee seeking asylum in Malaysia, in my late 20s, I started to work at UNHCR as a translator. That's when I came across particular terminology that people were starting to use for the Rohingya community, which identified them as 'stateless'. That's when I knew that I, too, am a stateless person. ”

But now you're not stateless. You're a citizen of New Zealand, right?

Almost. I resettled to New Zealand six years ago, but then, because I travelled a lot for my human rights and advocacy work and did not spend enough time in New Zealand, my citizenship application was declined. I appealed, and it finally got approved. Now I'm waiting for my ceremonial event so I will formally become a citizen in the near future.

What memories of Rakhine do you carry with you?

When we were young, the 'immigration' department used to come over and take photos of us and every single member of our families. Even in the middle of the night, immigration officers would randomly show up at our doorstep and just walk into our bedrooms and check how many people were in our family, in case we were trying to deceive them. They would ask, 'Do you have a new family member?' That sort of thing went on all the time.

Why would immigration officers come so often?

Because even though we were born in our own country, and living in our own house, being Rohingya meant that we were stateless. Indeed, as a Rohingya person, even though I did not know the terminology back then, I was not even allowed to travel from one village to another. I couldn't stay overnight at another location without authorisation or travel documents. So that's why they do random checks: to see if you have your Rohingya neighbour's relatives staying in your home without having the travel authorisation to stay. Usually, in our culture, people will take off their shoes before they come into the house, but immigration officers would just come into our bedrooms with their military boots. It's very rude, very offensive. They would then go into the women's and girls' rooms, lift up the mosquito nets and ask, 'Who do you have there?', or, 'Do you have any additional people in here?' We literally lived in fear every single day. Those are my memories of Rakhine. Even if I didn't know I was 'stateless' at that time, I felt

a sense of injustice as I was growing up. Like, when you go to school, you are discriminated against by your own schoolmates and your teacher. No matter how well you do in school, they will not give you any recognition, in fact, you will get additional punishment, every day. The moment you go out on the street, people will call you names and exclude you. They call us Kalar, it's a very offensive and derogatory term. It's like using the N word to refer to African Americans. People would call us 'intruders' even though we knew our great and great-grandparents also lived there. So, despite being fortunate to have a loving family, my childhood memories are about exclusion, alienation and feeling like I didn't belong to Myanmar society. Even the bedtime stories I listened to as a child, as young as seven or eight, were about the injustice we face.

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I had a lot of curiosity, even as a child. I was like, 'Why? Why am I being treated differently from other kids in the classroom? What is the difference?' And the adults would just say, 'It is just the way it is.' But then, I started to become more curious about what the world outside looked like. The only way to know about things at that time was by reading books and listening to the radio. My father had a small radio. I would listen to different radio channels, and then that's how I connected to the outside world. I was slowly learning more about world history. At that time, Princess Diana was my role model. She was very sympathetic and kind to many vulnerable people, she was a sort of humble queen of London. Mother Teresa was also my idol. Around the age of 11, I started to tell people that I would leave Myanmar someday. I would say, 'I'm going to tell the world about all the injustice against us', and everyone laughed at me and told me that it was impossible as we were not even allowed to travel from our village, so how would I be able to leave the country?

And was (Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1991) Aung San Suu Kyi also one of your heroes?

She was when I was young. Every evening, when my father came back from work, he would listen to the BBC and VOA on the radio, learning about the progress of Aung San Suu Kyi's movement for democracy. He would always tell us that she was our hope. So we grew up dreaming that, the day she finally came into power, she would be our hope and give us equal rights. But it turned out to be the opposite. At the time she came into

power, I was still in Malaysia as a refugee. I was very happy but then, after a year or so, when all the violence was turned against the Rohingya, we started seeing her true colours. At ICC and the Gambia Court, she denied that genocide was taking place against the Rohingya.

So how did you come to leave Myanmar?

In my early 20s, I wanted to have a proper degree and find employment. But if you're Rohingya, nobody will hire you. And without an ID, no university will accept you, even if you had very good marks in secondary school. Even if they did, though, you couldn't travel anyway. At some point, in 2009, I got smuggled out of my hometown to the capital city, Rangoon. As a Rohingya, I had to literally move from one place to another every single night, hiding because immigration officers were continually looking out for any Rohingya travelling somewhere without legal authorisation.

At that time, things became particularly bad, so much so that people wouldn't let me stay at their homes or sleep at their house as it could also put them at risk. I literally didn't have anywhere to go. I also couldn't get a job, and things were just becoming very intense. There were also a lot of immigration raids so I could not leave, and I could not come back to my hometown again because I'd already taken a very risky journey. If you are arrested on the way from your town to Rangoon, you can be imprisoned for seven to ten years. So I simply dared not go back to my country, but I also couldn't remain in Rangoon. Then, I thought, 'Okay, I'm just going to escape to a nearby country.'

“You don't read about the Rohingya anymore, but the reality is that, if anything, things for Rohingya are getting worse, especially in Rakhine itself. Now they're not only being oppressed by the junta, but by the Arakan Army (AA) too – the armed group of Rakhine soldiers, who are all exploiting people for money, as well as detaining people and perpetrating sexual exploitation.”

Even though it's fallen off the international news, the treatment of Rohingya in Myanmar and the troubles they face in Bangladesh are still ongoing, right?

Yes. I know it's off the news headlines and you don't read about the Rohingya anymore, but the reality is that, if anything, things for Rohingya are getting worse, especially in Rakhine itself. Now they're not only being oppressed by the junta, but by the Arakan Army (AA) too – the armed group of Rakhine soldiers, who are all exploiting people for money, as well as detaining people

and perpetrating sexual exploitation. Of the few who made it out of Rakhine State and into Bangladesh alive, there are Rohingya men, women and girls in refugee camps who are providing testimonies of the atrocities committed against them by AA and the junta. They say, 'We're not only targeted by the Myanmar junta, but we're also being targeted by AA.' People come and take away our properties, assault our women and girls and now they are also recruiting younger Rohingya men to fight in the war and use as human shields during the battles between the Myanmar junta and AA. There are about 600,000 Rohingyas who are now stuck inside the country. They cannot go out. They're stuck in this war. No international aid can go in either. It's really bad. As you said, it's kind of fallen off the international media, with Gaza and Ukraine dominating, and yet the problem has far from disappeared.

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Would you say that the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh and within Myanmar is the biggest displacement and mixed migration issue in the region?

As you know, I work for the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network. We have about 600 members from 28 countries in the Asia Pacific region, including refugee-led organisations, so we consider we have a good understanding of the issues in the region. There are massive displacements in our region from Myanmar as well as from Afghanistan, because there were massive displacements in Pakistan, India and other countries in the Asia Pacific region. In terms of refugee camps in the region, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh is, of course, the largest. And the number of those internally displaced inside Myanmar is pretty large. As for Afghanistan, I can't tell you the precise figure but, in our network, we always assume and categorise that Afghanistan and Rohingya in Myanmar are the two largest displacements in the region.

Do you think there are many failings in the global refugee system?

Yes, of course, and I'm very upset. Even before the news about funding cuts arrived, I always talked to the donors and funders and asked them, 'What happens when the funding is withdrawn and all these refugees remain

wherever they are? What's going to happen to them?', or, 'Do you still want to give them a fish, or do you want to teach them how to catch fish themselves and do their own fishing?' I think the most important and effective thing for refugees is self-reliance. All these countries in the Asia Pacific region, but I'm sure in Europe and Central Asia as well, use the term 'burden-sharing' and talk about refugees as being the 'burden' of refugee-hosting countries. The very reason that this is a burden is because they literally confine people to prison-like refugee camps, without allowing them to work – without even allowing them to have any access to their basic human rights.

If you allow refugees to work or enable them to make a contribution to society, I can guarantee you, every human on this Earth would love to earn and feed themselves. It's about humanity, decency and dignity. Because when I was a refugee, I hated to beg for anything – I wanted to work. Asking others for food or anything else is really dehumanising. If we could incorporate this as a critical, durable solution, instead of just resettlement and repatriation, it would be hugely beneficial. It would provide refugees with the ability to empower their own community, wherever they are. Look at all these refugee camps now, in many different parts of the world that we don't talk about. They've fallen off the radar. There are many refugee children who are born in those camps, younger people who grow up witnessing massive atrocities without access to education. What do you think these younger people will grow up as, if we don't allow them to experience normal human lives and society? The next thing you know, 30 years have passed without them being able to have an

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education or connect with life outside the camp, and then you have to deal with their pain, anger, frustration and resentment. When they finally either get resettled or repatriated, how do you think it will go? Of course, we're setting them up for failure. Long story short, I would always strongly encourage the consideration and incorporation of an element of building and enhancing refugees' self-resilience in refugee responses. They are their own best resource. We don't have to depend on US aid funding. We don't have to be so anxious about one powerful individual or entity in the US cutting off all the funding. These refugees are so capable of living their

own life. You just have to allow them to have access to work and education in a way that does not compromise host countries and communities. People have always migrated and they will continue to do so: why are you so fearful of allowing them to integrate?

Are you concerned about irregular migration potentially damaging the reputation of asylum seekers?

I am concerned to some extent. I also have to tell you that, even in this capacity, as secretary general of APRRN, there are many events that I speak at about the rights of migrants as well, not just refugees. I know there is ongoing debate between IOM and UNHCR about what we need to call everybody, and I think we still need to have that distinction between 'migrant' and 'refugee', because there is a very significant bottom-line difference as to why people are leaving their home country. When you are a refugee with a grounded fear of being persecuted, you are compelled to leave and you do not choose to leave, it's like a life-or-death kind of situation. You don't get to sit and think for five minutes, or ask yourself, 'Do I have a visa or a passport? Which country should I go to?'

At that very moment, whether you are a child or an adult, you're just running for your life. So it would be very wrong to categorise all of these groups in the same way. It could potentially compromise the international appetite to do the little bit that they are doing through the humanitarian lens. However, I'm not saying that the issue of migration and irregular migrants is not important, but it's crucial not to forget the distinction between migrants and refugees.

If you were the leader of a refugee-receiving country where the population appears to resist welcoming more refugees or migrants, what kind of policies would you promote, or would you promote more open borders?

Well, if I was the leader of a country, I'd be responsible for making sure that all citizens are happy and protected and have the right to exercise whatever rights they are entitled to exercise. But what I would be interested in doing is looking into a framework that doesn't compromise the opportunity of the local communities, including refugees. If I ever made a refugee policy, it would also come with responsibility and accountability from the refugee community itself. It's not something you get for free without contributing to society. I've always believed that fear comes from a sense of not knowing, and resistance also comes from a fear of the unknown. I don't know about Europe as much, but in the Asia Pacific context, fear is a major factor that divides refugees, migrants and local population. These groups don't even talk to each other or have very basic knowledge of why refugees come to their country in the first place. They just think, 'Oh, these people simply

come because they can earn good money or have a good life.' When you talk to ordinary people, you will be surprised at how little knowledge they have and how much fear and worry they hold in their heart regarding refugees. If I was the leader of a country, I would just try to bring the communities together so they get to know each other, then they can respect and have empathy towards each other and coexist peacefully.

But the reality is, once somebody comes as a refugee, they very rarely go back.

Once you've raised your kids in a country, it's a big decision to go back, especially if it's a bit unsafe and premature to do so. For example, look at the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar, in Bangladesh. I mean, what is their future? What are the chances of them going back? Before they conducted the census about who might want to go back, we always said the bigger question will be how the international community is ensuring that the place that they are going back to is safe enough for them. And I think, at the moment, we know for sure that there is no safety in Myanmar, especially for the Rohingya. The conditions have not changed and are perhaps worse than when they left. Why would they go back? If we are bringing these people from a camp to another kind of confinement, such as an internally displaced camp, I, too, would be hesitant to move from one camp to another, particularly to a country where I have witnessed these atrocities. I know they could easily kill me if I am a Rohingya there. Would you go back? You can be killed at any time and nobody is coming to rescue you. At least if you stay in Bangladesh, nobody's coming and randomly killing you, although the situations in the camps are also deteriorating. Of course, there were a lot of security issues, but the core one is how the international community and the Burmese government can work together to make sure that there will be safety and protection in place. If there was certainty on that issue, they would go back right away. Everyone wants to go home. It's a lot better than being in a refugee camp with no certainty about your life or future. You should see what happens in those camps during monsoon season, with people swimming in water which is half made up of waste. There is nothing to cook and everything is mud and water. It's not a dignified life and there are also random fire risks. Why would you live in those refugee camps if you could go home?

Do you see it as necessary that organisations like the APRRN are led by refugees such as yourself?

With due respect, although all these academics and people without lived experience who dedicate decades of their lives to migration have, of course, a very sound knowledge of what migration looks like, I'm not convinced that they will have the same kind of in-depth understanding that people with lived experience do. If people without lived experience work with people with lived experience, who are at the centre of the struggle,

that will then bring us to a much more comprehensive, practical and needs-based refugee response. It's vital to get affected people on board – it's the only way to really understand what's best for them. Also how have refugee responses been working so far? How well have they been informed by the community itself? So yes, I think it is very much needed for refugees like me to lead these organisations. We all have roles to play. We just need to know our space. Am I the main person making the decision, with the knowledge and skills that I bring? Where do I sit? I think knowing our space, not just in the refugee space, but in many other indigenous contexts around the world as well, is so important. Every role is important, whether you're an ally or an impacted person who's also the main driver of the cause.

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What about climate refugees? Do you think there should be a special category for them, and do you think they should be included in the Refugee Convention or something similar?

I do agree and believe that climate refugees should also be considered as refugees, and they should have something like a convention – though not the Refugee Convention, specifically – that ensures they are a protected category.

In terms of priority or getting favoured over other refugees, I can't comment on that, because it depends on the severity of the climate event affecting them and how much danger they're facing.

Isn't there a risk that, with climate change impacts increasing, we would then be talking about hundreds of millions of people? In the current context, it's unlikely that any OECD country is going to open their doors to all of them.

I think it's always difficult. I think world leaders are well aware of this, but they're just overwhelmed with the amount of humanitarian obligations that they already have. Getting countries to agree on receiving such high numbers of climate refugees will take time, because they will also need to consider the long-term effects on their own citizens. Countries would need to have so many things in place, and that requires investing taxpayers' money, so country leaders will always have a lot of push and pull from different directions. We must, though, do something, at least on a small scale. I also see another risk. If we keep knocking on the door of the same

countries to take the lead in responding to the refugee crisis, they might become more and more hesitant to offer their support. There's an expression that we always use in advocacy, the 'whole of society approach', which involves looking at sharing this responsibility on a global scale and asking that every country starts taking responsibility. Even if you're a poor or developing country, you should still be able to offer whatever kind of capacity you have – this shouldn't just fall on a handful of rich countries.

Finally, the world is currently experiencing a period of geopolitical chaos. What kind of implication is this going to have on displacement and migration, in your view? What can we expect, going forward?

I think if the world leaders are still hesitant and fail to step up and welcome innovative ideas, it will be catastrophic. It is already happening in some parts of the world, because nobody's doing anything. We're just counting the dead bodies as if they were numbers and not people. We're not feeling it, acting on it. If this state of affairs is going to continue, unfortunately, we will be witnessing a similar human catastrophe to the ones that happened in World War One and World War Two, with massive numbers of people going through terrible stuff, including conflict and climate change, or a combination of both. Also, look at the funding and resettlement cuts: people are not getting resettled. Meanwhile, climate issues are overwhelming and conflicts are intensifying, especially those in Ukraine and in the Middle East. If global leaders don't step up and welcome innovative ideas, we are just going to be complicit in failing humanity again and on a global scale. Otherwise, the alternative is to welcome innovative ideas of some sort of responsibility-sharing, also allowing people on the move to be a part of the solution.

“ If world leaders are still hesitant and fail to step up and welcome innovative ideas, it will be catastrophic. It is already happening in some part of the world, because nobody's doing anything. We're just counting the dead bodies, as if they were numbers and not people. We're not feeling it, acting on it. ”

Iran's Afghan expulsion surges: bitter and dangerous returns for scapegoated Afghans

Historically, Iran has been home to many Afghan refugees and migrants – some of them fleeing persecution, while others are in search of work and migrating cyclically. This includes a sizeable Hazara community who are also Shi'a – like the majority of Iran – and face ongoing persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Iran relies on Afghan labour, but it still profoundly discriminates against them. In this context, the country has been ambivalent at best and hostile at worst towards Afghans.

Deportations of Afghans from Iran have become increasingly prevalent. According to reports, over 559,000 Afghans were deported in 2024, marking an 18 percent increase compared to the previous year.¹ During 2025, the situation has intensified further, with Iran carrying out deportations at an unprecedented and extraordinary speed. According to the Centre for Human Rights in Iran, “Iran is casting out entire communities – men, women, and children – based on prejudice and politics, to a country where their lives and most basic rights are under immediate threat.”²

A sudden ultimatum underpinned by ongoing scapegoating and fuelled by war

On 28 May 2025, Nader Yar-Ahmadi, head of Iran's Interior Ministry's Office for Foreign Nationals and Immigrants, announced that Afghans were required to leave Iran by 6 July 2025.³ Formally, this deadline applied to Afghans without valid residency documents or those whose temporary census registration papers had expired, although evidence suggests authorities have been indiscriminate, in what could more accurately be described as targeted “Afghan phobia”. Ultimately, as many as 4 million undocumented Afghans could be affected.⁴

The timing was striking. Just over two weeks later, on 13 June 2025, Israel launched surprise attacks on key military and nuclear facilities in Iran, assassinated prominent military leaders, nuclear scientists and politicians, and damaged or destroyed Iran's air defences. This marked the beginning of the so-called Twelve-Day War, which ended on 24 June, when a ceasefire was agreed.⁵

While deportations paused briefly during the initial days of the war, they quickly resumed with force, sweeping up both documented and undocumented Afghans across multiple Iranian cities.⁶ Indeed the Twelve-Day War triggered one of the largest forced movements of the decade. State media incited violence, labelling Afghans “traitors” and accusing them of spying for Israel.⁷ Allegedly, some Afghans confessed on television to spying and were used to justify a harsh deportation drive of the whole community in what has been described as unlawful collective punishment.⁸

This aftermath of the war has resulted in what the MMC warned would be the “mounting weaponisation of anti-Afghan sentiment.”⁹ In just 16 days across June and July, over 500,000 Afghans were expelled, including many thousands of unaccompanied children.¹⁰ Apart from the emotional trauma of sudden upheaval and forced return, people speak of rough handling, shredding of personal documentation, insults, beatings and abuse by the security forces.¹¹

The 2025 deportation numbers, spiking in the wake of the Twelve-Day War, are alarming but the action is part of a longer-term policy aim of the Iranian government to expel up to 4 million Afghan nationals from Iran out of an estimated 4.5 million.¹² At the same time, Iran has been building a concrete and barbed wire wall along its lengthy eastern borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan,

1 UNHCR (2024) [UNHCR Afghanistan Border Monitoring Report January-September 2024](#). Operational data portal.

2 The Centre for Human Rights in Iran (2025) [Iran Forcibly Depports Nearly 600,000 Afghan Migrants Amid Post-War Crackdown](#).

3 IOM (2025) [Sharp Rise In Forced Returns From Iran](#).

4 IOM (2025) [Sharp Rise In Forced Returns From Iran](#).

5 Al Jazeera (2025) [Israel \(& the US\) vs Iran – what just happened? | Start Here Q&A](#).

6 Frouws, B. et al (2025) [Mixed Migration consequences of the war between Israel and Iran](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

7 The Centre for Human Rights in Iran (2025) [Iran Forcibly Depports Nearly 600,000 Afghan Migrants Amid Post-War Crackdown](#).

8 The Centre for Human Rights in Iran (2025) [Over 1,300 Activists Demand End to Iran's Brutal Anti-Afghan Crackdown](#).

9 Frouws, B. et al (2025) [Mixed Migration consequences of the war between Israel and Iran](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

10 Amnesty International (2025) [Stop the mass deportations of Afghans](#).

11 Motamedi, M. (2025) [Inside Iran's crackdown on Afghan migrants after the war with Israel](#). Al Jazeera.

12 Sadeghi, F. (2024) [Afghan Community in Iran: Five Decades On](#). ISPI. However, [Al Jazeera stated in an article](#) that “the official number of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran was at least 6.1 million people; only about 780,000 have been given refugee status.”

allegedly to stem the flow of irregular migration as well as intercepting smuggled drugs and fuel and combatting the possible entry of IS or other terrorist groups.¹³ Reportedly, the Iranian “parliament is also planning for a national migration organisation that would take over its efforts to crack down on irregular migration.”¹⁴

For Afghans, the scapegoating that has intensified in the aftermath of the Israel-Iran conflict is not new. Afghans have long been blamed by Iranians as the cause for poor national economics and unemployment. In late 2024, reports documented hundreds of deaths and disappearances at the Afghan-Iran border, with Iranian border guards using live rounds against people crossing.¹⁵ Almost all Afghan returnees interviewed in 2025 by the Mixed Migration Centre in Afghanistan identified police, military and officials as the primary perpetrators of human rights violations during their return journeys.¹⁶

Bitter and unwanted homecoming on multiple fronts

Afghanistan has been riven with decades of civil and international war and is among the countries with the highest levels of multidimensional poverty, especially in conflict-affected regions, with the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022-2023) reporting that 64.9 percent of the population lives in poverty.¹⁷ Between January and September 2024, UNHCR conducted over 110,000 monitoring interviews in Iran, revealing that many Afghans fled there due to economic hardship, food insecurity, uncertainty about the future, health issues, restrictions on female education and a lack of access to essential services.¹⁸

As people are desperate to leave Afghanistan, the sudden return of so many Afghans from Iran – some of whom have never lived in their homeland – is creating both a socioeconomic crisis as well as a multi-layered human rights crisis.¹⁹ Afghans are not only being expelled

from Iran, but from Pakistan too, in a mass expulsion drive started in 2023 under Pakistan's Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan. To a lesser degree, Afghans are also being expelled from Tajikistan. There, in early July 2025, the government instructed all Afghan nationals (refugees or otherwise) to leave within 15 days.²⁰ Meanwhile, Türkiye expelled over 6,000 Afghans in the first four months of 2025.²¹

While just hundreds have left Tajikistan to date, over a million Afghans have left Pakistan since 2023 – many more recently under intensified pressure and intimidation – with 200,000 leaving between May and June 2025 alone.²² The majority (80%) of those expelled are irregular in status in all three countries, a characteristic used by the respective governments to justify their actions and a fact confirmed by those returnees themselves when recently interviewed in Afghanistan.²³ The asylum space and channels for legal migration in all these countries are vanishingly small, and options for protection when the state is organising expulsions at this scale are minimal.

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Mai Sato, warned that “Afghanistan remains unsafe under Taliban rule. These mass returns violate international law and put vulnerable people, especially women, children, and minorities, at severe risk of persecution and violence.”²⁴

Under the Taliban, women and girls are systematically deprived of their rights and are particularly at risk upon their return, where undue restrictions imposed on them have the cumulative effect of preventing them from accessing basic services and, effectively, erasing them from public life.²⁵ Others among those deported include journalists, former civil servants, rights activists and employees of the previous Afghan government, who are particularly exposed to reprisals and torture upon their return – let alone having little opportunity to find work, shelter and support to survive in what the UN's Human Rights office calls Afghanistan's “acute humanitarian and human rights crisis”.²⁶

13 Infomigrants (2024) [Iran hopes to boost security with Afghan border wall](#).

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Photo credit: Waqas Khan Swati / Shutterstock

Both Pakistan and Iran have greatly accelerated forceful expulsions of Afghan migrants in 2025, forcing poor and vulnerable families back into a potentially dangerous 'homeland' where they will struggle to survive and may be subject to political victimisation and persecution. Both countries have also started to build fences along their previously open borders. (See Thematic snapshot *Iran's Afghan expulsion surges: bitter and dangerous returns for scapegoated Afghans in 2025*, [p. 162](#)).



Section 2

Emerging perspectives prize

Each year, the Mixed Migration Centre runs an essay competition for young and emerging writers, researchers and thinkers from the Global South. This section showcases five essay winners from the 2025 competition, selected for their unique perspectives on contemporary mixed migration issues. These essays – sometimes deeply personal, creative and always insightful – offer nuanced reflections on the lived realities of mixed migration challenges in the author's own contexts. In addition to publication in the Mixed Migration Review 2025, each winner also receives a cash prize.

This year's essays explore themes ranging from a personal journey from Syria to Europe and the dilemmas of return; a conversation between friends about migration in a cafe in Morocco; solidarity among Chinese migrants along mixed migration routes in Latin America; the intersection of climate and conflict in South Asia; and the global plight of Filipino migrant workers.



Crossing shadows: solidarity amid violence on the migrant trail

Aaron Zou

Aaron Zou researches the role of information and trust for vulnerable communities. His work examines how these communities build networks of trust and solidarity, and how those dynamics can inform more effective humanitarian interventions.

"Two weeks ago, people woke up to find two bodies there." Daniel pointed behind him, lowering his voice. "The local groups executed them for scamming migrants – bad for business."

Daniel's words cut through the chaos – vendors shouting, motorcycles kicking up dust along Necoclí's unpaved roads. His matter-of-fact delivery surprised me, yet it captures the paradox of Necoclí: it looked like any other rural town I'd visited, where vendors sold mangos and children played in the streets. Yet, beneath this normality, violence had become routine – sustained and necessitated by the migration economy. The two executed men exploited the people who made this town profitable: the thousands of migrants who passed through each month, heading north towards their American dreams.

This town was the last stop for many before the Darién Gap – a treacherous stretch of rainforest connecting Colombia and Panama that over 25,500 Chinese migrants crossed in 2023, making them the fourth-largest group attempting this passage to reach the United States. From there, these migrants face the long remaining journey traversing Central America, until they reach the Mexican-American border. Stories of exploitation, drug trafficking, sexual assault and murder are commonplace.

In Necoclí, migrants stock up on supplies and hire guides for the trek ahead. Daniel and I walked around the town's two main streets in search of the Chinese travellers. Shopkeepers lounging in plastic chairs shrugged: "You won't find them wandering here – they stay in hotels and only come out to shop."

Their invisibility made sense. Many had never left China before this journey – terrified on this strange continent, they were driven here by circumstances that left them no choice. As a Chinese researcher, I understood why: US visas denied to entire provinces, livelihoods destroyed by Covid-19 lockdowns, and Ecuador's visa-free policy opening an unexpected door. When traditional routes closed, they found another way – but this path exposed

them to dangers I was only beginning to understand. Caught between US-funded enforcement and systematic exclusion from international protection, they had created their own networks of survival.

We'd nearly given up when I spotted three people huddled over rain boots in a dusty shop off Necoclí's main street. I approached one man and introduced myself in Mandarin, explaining I was a Chinese student researching migrants' journeys north. The man, whom I would later know as Li, paused, studied me for a moment, then surprised me by stepping forward. "This place is too noisy," he replied. "Come to my hotel and I'll tell you everything." Trust was a rare commodity here – but I followed him anyway.

The cramped room smelled of damp canvas. Li motioned me towards the edge of the bed. A tangle of water bottles, passports and phones lay splayed across the mattress. He swept them aside, clearing a space. "Sit," he urged, patting the sheets.

“I trusted the taxi driver when I shouldn't have. He took us to a shed in the mountains, locked us in. There, I saw four other Chinese people in the same room.”

He leaned forward so that I could see his phone, pointing to the map showing the Colombian-Ecuador border on the screen. "This is where we were kidnapped," his voice heavy with regret. "I was careless, too rushed. I trusted the taxi driver when I shouldn't have. He took us to a shed in the mountains, locked us in. There, I saw four other Chinese people in the same room." He paused, gestured to the two ladies in the hallway. "And that's where we met Yi and Hui."

Li resisted at first. They hit his head hard enough to draw blood, which seemed to scare them. When they found his grandmother's fake gold chain, they stopped searching – missing the dollar bills he'd hidden in his underwear; he

was lucky. Yi and Hui weren't. As they later told me, the kidnappers forced them to strip naked, taking everything – money, phones, even their shoes.

Li exhaled slowly, "So I lent them money for the plane tickets, accommodation and guides."

He paused, as if waiting for me to digest. I asked quietly, "Why give them your money when you don't have much left yourself?"

He shrugged, almost dismissively. "I couldn't turn my back. I had some; they had none."

When I left their hotel, the sun had already set. Li's story stayed with me as I made my way back through the roads on the outskirts of Necoclí, watching for the headlights of cars and motorcycles that periodically lit up the darkness. Crickets filled the otherwise silent summer night, until my phone buzzed.

They were notifications from group chats Yu had created for fellow migrants. For months, he'd been sharing real-time updates – photos of muddy boots disappearing into the jungle, ATM locations that accepted Chinese bank cards, maps marked with refugee camps.

Then he vanished for nearly two weeks. When he finally resurfaced, his name lit up the chat with a raw plea:

"Friends, I'm stuck. I don't have any money for bus or papers. If anyone can spare even JPY 30 (\$4), please help. I really have no other choice, and I don't know what to do... I'll repay as soon as I can."

I messaged him immediately. "What happened?"

He replied with a voice message, his voice hoarse and slow, each word an effort. "People think the rainforest is the worst, but Mexico was hell."

He described repeated stops by Mexican immigration officers. These officers, empowered by millions of dollars in US security assistance aimed at stopping migrants before they reach American soil, had learned that Chinese migrants – already excluded from formal protection systems – made perfect targets.

"They turned it into a business," he said. "Immigration police were waiting. As soon as I got off the boat at La Paz, they arrested me and forced me into an interrogation room. They said nothing, and just showed me a WeChat Pay QR code, and left me there for a day, without food or water."

A day later, after seeing that Yu didn't do anything, they escorted him to a phone. "On the other side of the phone, a man was speaking perfect Mandarin. I could tell he was from the South of China." The man threatened Yu, "If you don't send CNY 4000 (\$560) within 10 minutes, we will send you back to Guatemala."

Faced with this threat, Yu called up his friend back in China. Combined with his savings, he managed to gather the money. His savings evaporated.

"And that's why I disappeared for two weeks. In Colombia, I could share all the experiences of robbery and extortion on Twitter. If I did it in Mexico, I wouldn't have made it out alive."

I watched his plea hang in the chat for a moment. Then, the responses poured in: "Just sent JPY 50 – stay strong!" "We've all been there. We've got you." Others urged all members to "give whatever we can, no matter how small it is".

Twenty-four hours later, Yu posted another update: he'd raised more than enough for his bus fare, nights in safe hostels and the lawyer fees he feared he'd never cover. He closed with a promise:

"If any of you get stuck, post here. We're all fighting for the same dream – and none of us walks alone."

The alienation follows Chinese migrants at every turn. Colombian police single them out for extortion. Mexican checkpoints force them to hide their faces among Latino travellers. Media portrayals paint them as wealthy "VIP migrants" undeserving of sympathy. Even NGOs – supposedly neutral – turn them away, hiding behind excuses of language barriers they make no effort to bridge.

As I write this, this corridor has already closed. Ecuador terminated its visa-free policy; Panama announced Darién Gap crackdowns. Though US officials never explicitly confirmed they requested these changes, the pattern was unmistakable – each closure followed American pressure on regional partners to stem migration flows.

The story won't end here. It will simply shift elsewhere, as will the networks of solidarity that arise when geopolitical manoeuvring leaves human beings with no choice but to protect each other. Perhaps the answer isn't in more enforcement or restrictions, but in recognising and legitimising these organic support networks – allowing aid organisations to learn from migrants' own systems of care rather than perpetuating exclusion through bureaucratic blindness.

Days later, my phone lit up with a message from Li. They'd survived the Darién and reached Panama's first refugee camp.

"We made it through the jungle," he wrote. "But when we approached aid workers for clean clothes, while still covered in mud, they looked at our faces and refused. Because they saw that we were Chinese."

The road to Damascus: a return deferred

A. Assaf

A. Assaf has studied linguistics, political science and global affairs, with a broad academic interest in language, identity and power. He has lived in Syria, Egypt, Austria and the United States, experiences that continue to shape his perspective.

More than a decade ago, I sat in the backseat of a taxi leaving Damascus. It was early morning. The air felt off, thin and unsettled. The city, still asleep, looked tired. Sad. The driver and I didn't talk much.

The decision to leave had come quickly, maybe too quickly. We told ourselves it was temporary. A month or two, we said.

By then, the regime was bombing more neighbourhoods, closer ones. We kept folding inward, like retreating from a fire that would not stop burning.

We stayed with relatives. That, too, was exhausting, in a way that matched the war around us. So we left. No goodbyes. No last looks. Just the smooth hum of a car on an empty road.

Years later, the fall of Al Assad struck like a storm we had long feared – sudden, ruthless and hauntingly unreal.

By then, I had built a life elsewhere, in a place that never stopped reminding me I didn't belong. And still, going back felt harder than leaving ever did.

How could that be? How could returning to the place you once called home be harder than walking away from it?

Now, a naturalised citizen, the choice is mine. That's what marks the difference. For millions, the decision was never theirs to make.

We landed in Cairo. Not for good, just for now, though no one said it that way. We got off the plane into a wall of heat. The kind that doesn't just surround you, but settles on your skin and stays.

Outside, the city buzzed relentlessly. Horns blared, people shouted and engines roared without a moment's rest.

We sat in the back of a taxi, not speaking, sweating through our clothes. No one opened a window.

We rented a furnished apartment with fake leather couches and a washing machine that shook like it might

tip over. The balcony looked out onto another building. Nothing moved. The sun was too bright, always. The cockroaches came at night. Big ones, slow and visible. We didn't talk about them. We just learned to turn the lights on fast, to stomp when necessary.

School started. I memorised new streets. We stayed long enough to forget that we were still waiting.

Two years passed like that, not quickly, not slowly. Just days piling on top of days. Ramadan, summer, another school year. I learned how to answer questions in Arabic with an accent that marked me as not quite local. We weren't running anymore, but we weren't settled either. Just surviving in a waiting room that felt endless.

“I learned how to answer questions in Arabic with an accent that marked me as not quite local. We weren't running anymore, but we weren't settled either. Just surviving in a waiting room that felt endless.”

Then came the second goodbye. The revolution had returned, loud this time, unstable in a different way. Tanks rolled and voices shouted, but what truly undid us was silent: expired visas, refused renewals, a bureaucratic cage closing quietly around us. Our legal status had collapsed and, with it, the illusion that we could wait this out.

This time, it wasn't all of us. Just me and my brother. We had already left the extended family behind in Damascus – the cousins, the uncles, the noise of a full house. Now we were leaving the close one, too. The core. Just the five of us at the table, now reduced to two. The part that still felt like home, even when everything else didn't. The dinners, the glances, the private jokes that still made it feel like home.

Leaving Egypt wasn't clean. The idea of a boat, of Europe, felt absurd, a plan with no shape, no edges. We resisted. We clung to routines: grocery runs, schoolwork, dinners eaten without appetite. We told ourselves it wasn't time yet. But the truth sat there, in our passports, in the lines outside the immigration office, in the silence after the phone calls. Our residency had expired. The country had closed its doors without ever saying so.

This goodbye was different. It wasn't rushed or numb. It lingered. It pressed on the chest. We were old enough now to know what it meant – to leave not just a place, but the people who had held the place together.

We left. Not all at once, not with certainty. Just an evening, a taxi, and backpacks too big for our bodies, pulling us off balance, hanging awkwardly as we cast one last, long glance from the taxi window. And then the road again.

“The boat changed everything. Something slipped away between the waves and the salt. A quiet unravelling. The person who stepped off wasn't quite the same as the one who'd stepped on.”

The boat changed everything. Something slipped away between the waves and the salt. A quiet unravelling. The person who stepped off wasn't quite the same as the one who'd stepped on. What came after wasn't a return, but a quiet beginning of something unfamiliar.

Documents piled up. Endless papers, waiting rooms heavy with quiet desperation, the sharp call of a number on a screen. Waiting, hoping, enduring. Then asylum status arrived. The 1951 Convention Travel Document, a new ID number. We celebrated. A strange kind of joy, more relief than triumph, more survival than arrival.

“Then came the lessons. Not just language, but how to pronounce your own name in a way they'd understand. How to sit still in integration courses without vanishing.”

Then came the lessons. Not just language, but how to pronounce your own name in a way they'd understand. How to sit still in integration courses without vanishing. How to nod politely when they told you what freedom meant. School followed. Then university. Life went on, quietly, steadily. And somehow, ten years passed.

It's been ten years since I last spoke to a cousin or an aunt. My grandparents have died since then. No goodbyes, no graves I could reach, no calls to soften the news. Family dissolved like smoke slipping through a cracked window, scattered across borders, melting away into silence or swallowed by war. Yet here I am called “well integrated”, as if knowing the right answers ever meant belonging.

Citizen, at last. And home, finally freed from the grip of tyranny. Recognition here. Liberation there. Two freedoms, too long delayed.

I watch the celebrations from a screen, alone. Faces I no longer know, waving flags I still fold quietly in the back of my mind. Fireworks stutter in low resolution. The chants arrive a few seconds too late.

And still I dare to hope. For the first time in a long time.

But hope, like memory, comes carefully. It doesn't burst in. It lingers at the threshold, knocks softly and waits to see if there's room. I want to say yes. I want to believe the door I closed over a decade ago might still open, that something of me is still waiting on the other side.

But I'm no longer sure which side that is.

I want to go back. Some days, I ache for it. The way jasmine clung to the night air, the call of a voice that once knew how to say my name without hesitation. But what's left there for me? The streets I knew have collapsed into memory. The people scattered. The furniture sold or shelled. There's no house, no job, no soft landing.

And here, here, I've built something. Slowly, stubbornly. A life held together by language learned late, by routines practiced into permanence. Friendships formed from the wreckage. Papers once begged for, now folded in my wallet. To give it up would be to undo a decade. But to stay is to live slightly beside myself. I long for the familiar, and belong to neither place. Somewhere in between, I carry the weight of both.



Invisible crossings: how climate and conflict converge to displace the unseen

Hadia Khan

Hadia Khan is a climate activist and law student from conflict-affected Kashmir, focusing on the intersection of climate change, displacement and justice. She works with Together for Health and Education (THE) Society International to advance youth-led action on environmental resilience and human rights.

In the valley of Kashmir where I was born the rivers once sang with life. Today, they roar with the anger of floods. Glaciers retreat, forests shrink and homes disappear, not only to conflict but to climate. Here, we are not just living through war – we are losing the very ground beneath our feet.

Yet, for many of us, there is no category to belong to. We are not ‘war refugees’ or ‘economic migrants’. We are victims of an invisible collision: climate breakdown amplified by geopolitical abandonment. The world debates borders and numbers, but it rarely sees us – the displaced who never crossed a border, or those who did but found no welcome.

“There is no category to belong to. We are not ‘war refugees’ or ‘economic migrants’. We are victims of an invisible collision: climate breakdown amplified by geopolitical abandonment. The world debates borders and numbers, but it rarely sees us...”

This essay is a reflection of that silence. Through my lived experience as a climate activist from a conflict-torn region and my engagement with youth-led environmental movements across Asia and the Middle East, I explore how global migration narratives miss the most vulnerable – and how a more just, humane and climate-conscious policy is not only possible but urgent.

In today’s shifting world order, climate and conflict do not exist in isolation – they feed into one another. The melting glaciers in Kashmir are not just an ecological crisis;

they are a geopolitical one. Water scarcity exacerbates border tensions, destabilises livelihoods and deepens militarisation. In regions like Yemen, Sudan and parts of Pakistan, drought and extreme weather directly fuel unrest, making migration a matter of survival.

However, those displaced by this intersection are often excluded from formal migration frameworks. There is no legal definition for a ‘climate refugee’. People fleeing floods, crop failures or slow-onset disasters are rarely granted asylum. In conflict regions, this invisibility is even more profound. Families forced from ancestral lands by flooding find themselves trapped between hostile state borders and unresponsive aid agencies.

This invisibility isn’t just bureaucratic – it’s existential. In the eyes of global migration systems designed around 20th-century wars, our 21st-century displacement is an anomaly. But the numbers tell a different story. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, over 26.4 million people were displaced by climate-related disasters in 2023 alone – far outpacing conflict-driven displacement.¹

The question is: why are these people not recognised, and what does that say about the global migration order?

In recent years, global migration policy has hardened. The European Union’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum prioritises deterrence over protection. The United States has tightened its asylum eligibility and expanded deportations. Even countries like Kenya and Bangladesh are reconsidering their long-standing hospitality to displaced populations.

These shifts do not occur in a vacuum. They mirror a global retreat from humanitarianism – aid budgets slashed, resettlement quotas reduced and climate finance pledges

1 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2024) [2024 Global Report on Internal Displacement](#).

unfulfilled. The burden of hosting displaced populations falls disproportionately on countries least responsible for global crises and least equipped to handle them.

In my travels and collaborations with youth movements across South Asia and the MENA region, I've met displaced families in informal settlements who fled lands swallowed by rising waters or destroyed by cross-border shelling. Their stories rarely make headlines, but they represent a growing underclass of the forcibly immobile and the forcibly ignored.

“I've met displaced families in informal settlements who fled lands swallowed by rising waters or destroyed by cross-border shelling. Their stories rarely make headlines, but they represent a growing underclass of the forcibly immobile and the forcibly ignored.”

Worse still, the securitisation of borders has criminalised movement. Deportations and forced returns have become tools of diplomacy, often with devastating human costs. One Afghan friend – an environmental law student like myself – was denied entry into a climate conference in Europe despite a valid visa, due to rising political hostility against migrants.

These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a broken system.

As state systems become increasingly protectionist, global structures like the UNHCR and IOM face shrinking space and funds to respond. Climate migrants and displaced people from fragile states end up being abandoned – not just by borders, but by international law itself.

The global migration discourse needs a radical shift – from control to compassion, from militarisation to mobilisation. And that begins by recognising migration as a right in the context of climate injustice.

A climate justice framework acknowledges that those forced to move are often those least responsible for the emissions causing climate collapse. It understands that historical polluters have a duty not just to reduce emissions but to provide pathways for displaced communities to live in dignity – whether through resettlement, adaptation funding or regional cooperation.

Policy innovation must begin at the grassroots. In Pakistan, youth-led collectives have launched community resilience hubs which serve both as climate education centres and safe spaces for displaced families. In Kenya,

activists are proposing 'climate passports' which would grant legal mobility to people affected by droughts and land degradation. These may be small-scale initiatives, but they are deeply rooted in justice and dignity.

Moreover, international bodies must expand the legal definitions of forced displacement to include climate-induced slow-onset disasters. This would provide legal recognition, access to support and protection for millions currently left in limbo.

Legal innovation is essential, but so is narrative reform. We must stop treating migration as a crisis and start treating it as a form of adaptation – one that can be safe, legal and dignified. People move because they must, and punishing them for doing so only deepens the cycles of inequality.

Youth leaders from climate-affected regions are already building new models. We need the courage to listen.

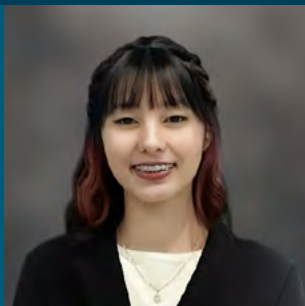
When I walk through the forests of my childhood, I no longer hear the sounds I grew up with. The birds have gone. The trees are fewer. My community is smaller.

But I write not out of despair – but determination.

“The stories of climate and conflict-driven migration deserve more than sympathy – they deserve structure, support and space in global policy.”

The stories of climate and conflict-driven migration deserve more than sympathy – they deserve structure, support and space in global policy. The youth of the Global South, especially those from regions like mine, must not only be seen but heard. We are not the future – we are the present. And we carry solutions born from survival, resistance and hope.

If migration is the defining issue of our time, then it must also be a defining measure of our humanity. The borders we defend must not become the values we lose. It's time to widen the lens, rewrite the definitions and recognise the crossings that matter most – the ones that begin at home, in silence and without a name.



Amid shifting tides: Filipino migrants in a world divided by power

Hyacinth Flores

Hyacinth Flores is a Filipino youth leader and sustainability advocate working across migration, environmental policy and grassroots innovation. She leads initiatives that amplify youth voices and promote sustainable futures in Southeast Asia.

Maria wakes before dawn in Hong Kong, quietly preparing for another long day as a domestic worker. Back home in the Philippines, she was once celebrated as a *bagong bayani* – a modern-day hero whose sacrifices kept her family afloat. Yet here, under tightening labour laws and a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment, her future feels uncertain. Her story is not just about personal hardship; it reflects a deeper truth about Filipino migrants caught in a world that changes around them, often without warning, where lives are shaped by forces they can't control. For decades, the Philippines has depended on sending its people abroad to work. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) – nurses, helpers, engineers, teachers, seafarers – remit billions of pesos each year, keeping families alive and the economy moving. OFWs are the pride of many towns, but behind the praise and the statistics is a troubling reality: the government still treats labour export as a solution, not a symptom. Migration is supposed to be a choice, not a necessity. And yet, for most Filipinos, it has become the only viable option. Some families are so used to goodbyes they no longer cry at the airport. A mother leaving for Kuwait kisses her sleeping baby's forehead and quietly steps out the door. A son going to Dubai assures his father he'll be back for Christmas, even if they both know he won't. In these quiet exchanges, what's sacrificed is often far more than time. It's stability, connection and, sometimes, safety.

The risks are not abstract. In the West Philippine Sea, Filipino seafarers now navigate waters that are no longer just routes for trade or fishing. They've become contested zones of power. Recently, Chinese vessels fired water cannons at Philippine patrol boats. While seafarers aren't soldiers, they find themselves in the middle of a conflict they didn't start. For families who rely on fishing or maritime jobs, these tensions turn daily work into a gamble. Will they return safely? Will they be allowed to work there tomorrow? Or will political drama, somewhere in Beijing or Washington, close off another source of income? On land, things aren't much easier. In China, where thousands of Filipinos work in domestic service, education and hospitality, migrants report stricter rules and heightened suspicion. When relations

between Manila and Beijing sour, workers feel it. Some have faced detentions for paperwork issues that were overlooked before. Others live in fear of deportation, even after years of stable employment. In cities like Shanghai or Guangzhou, Filipino community groups have become informal safety nets offering legal advice, shelter and comfort to workers who suddenly find themselves on the edge of losing everything. Even employers use the tense political climate to their advantage, threatening to report their workers if they speak up or ask for better pay. The unspoken message is clear: you are needed, but not wanted.

“For families who rely on fishing or maritime jobs, these tensions turn daily work into a gamble. Will they return safely? Will they be allowed to work there tomorrow? Or will political drama, somewhere in Beijing or Washington, close off another source of income?”

This emotional whiplash is felt across continents. In the United States, Filipinos remain essential to sectors like health care. Nurses, caregivers and medical aides kept hospitals running during the worst of Covid-19. They were called heroes, but now many face stalled visa applications, tighter immigration rules and rising anti-immigrant rhetoric. Ana, a nurse in California, says the hardest part isn't the 12-hour shifts or the emotional toll of the job – it's the constant waiting. “We wait for papers. We wait for answers. We wait for the next change that might take it all away,” she says. For her, and thousands like her, the American Dream feels increasingly conditional. Some are denied reunification with their children over paperwork delays. Others live with the fear that one policy update will make their entire life illegal. Meanwhile, politicians debate their fate as if it were a technical issue, forgetting that behind every application is someone who feeds, heals or educates others.

When the missiles started flying, Filipinos in Qatar were left with an impossible choice. If they stayed, they risked becoming casualties in a conflict they had no part in. If they left, they risked losing their jobs, their income and everything they had built. It was a choice between danger and destitution. A deployment ban followed, perhaps necessary, but devastating for those who had built their lives around their work and now had nowhere to return to but uncertainty. Even in Saudi Arabia, migrants speak of delayed wages, increased surveillance and sudden changes to rules. Healthcare workers now face stricter licensing processes, and domestic helpers often endure isolation with no real recourse. Still, many choose to stay not because they feel safe but because the job market in the Philippines hasn't given them better options.

“Migration is presented as an opportunity, but often it's a last resort. It's a form of economic exile. We call our workers heroes, but then we design systems that forget them the moment they land in another country.”

This is the part that's hardest to talk about: how we've normalised the idea that Filipinos must leave to survive. Migration is presented as an opportunity, but often, it's a last resort. It's a form of economic exile. We call our workers heroes, but then we design systems that forget them the moment they land in another country. In the Philippines, reintegration programs are limited and often short-sighted. Those returning home are given small grants, a list of training courses and nothing else. There is no nationwide plan to offer stable jobs that match their skills or acknowledge their sacrifices. Worse, there's almost no mental health support, even for those who return from war zones, abusive households or personal loss. Instead, many are told to start over and many do – by leaving again.

What we need is not another Band-Aid. We need a change in mindset. Migration policy should start with dignity, not just diplomacy. Filipino workers are not cargo to be shipped and received. They are human beings who deserve more than temporary contracts and applause. Host countries must do better, too. There must be clear, enforceable legal protections for all migrants, especially those in domestic or informal sectors. People should be able to report abuse without risking deportation. Immigration systems must offer fair and humane options like permanent residency for long-term workers, clear paths to family reunification and support when crises break out. In return, they get workers who are not just willing, but safe, motivated and integrated.

We should also stop treating migration as a one-way ticket. The Philippines must reinvest in its own people – create jobs, fix public services, improve wages and build industries so that migration becomes a choice, not a necessity. Filipinos should be able to stay if they want to – and go with dignity if they don't. Legal protections alone aren't enough. What's needed is a bolder, more compassionate approach, one that recognises how vulnerable migrants are when the world suddenly shifts beneath them. Imagine an international safety net supported by both labour-sending and receiving countries, global organisations and migrant communities themselves. This could provide urgent assistance – emergency cash aid, shelter, legal help and mental health support when crises like conflict, disasters or abrupt policy changes leave migrants stranded. Importantly, migrants wouldn't just be beneficiaries, they'd have a real say in how the fund is run. After all, who's better equipped to shape solutions than those who've lived through the problems?

Maria, Ana and the countless others working abroad deserve more than praise. Their lives, labour and pain are not just statistics. They are reminders that migration is not just about moving across borders, it's about navigating uncertainty, risking safety and rebuilding dignity again and again. It is time we stop glorifying sacrifice and start fostering conditions where it's no longer necessary. Migration should not be the price of survival. It should be a choice grounded in fairness, care and humanity. If we can build systems that truly protect and empower those who seek opportunities abroad, we might finally become a country where staying becomes just as honourable as leaving.

“Maria, Ana and the countless others working abroad deserve more than praise. Their lives, labour and pain are not just statistics. They are reminders that migration is not just about moving across borders, it's about navigating uncertainty, risking safety and rebuilding dignity again and again.”



Moving maps: Morocco between desert wall and Atlantic door

Zakariae Benchrif

Zakariae is a PhD student from Morocco specializing in collective intelligence at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University in Rabat.

I find myself in good company with my friends Issa, 27, and Amadou, 29, both from Mali. Suddenly, my phone lights up: “King Mohammed VI receives Sahel Alliance foreign ministers at Royal Palace.” The thumbnail shows the monarch flanked by Burkina Faso’s Karamoko Traoré, Mali’s Abdoulaye Diop and Niger’s Bakary Sangaré, all grinning beneath chandeliers in Rabat.

Me (raising an eyebrow): “So Rabat just rolled out the red carpet for your ministers.”

Amadou (half-smile): “Kings have always fancied new kingdoms. Now he’s courting three at once.”

Issa (tapping the screen): “Or three land-locked headaches that need an Atlantic door.”

Issa scrolls further: the communiqué praises Morocco’s Royal Atlantic Initiative, promising road-rail links from Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey to a deep-water port at Dakhla. “No more begging Algiers for a corridor,” he murmurs, a sense of liberation lacing his words.

Me: “If Morocco becomes the new Sahel’s ocean outlet, it’s no longer just a hallway to Europe, it’s the room itself.”

Amadou (snorts): “Rooms cost rent. The king will send the bill to Brussels.”

“Amadou flicks back a few months on his timeline. Each headline is a striking reminder of recent upheavals: Bamako (2020), Ouagadougou (2022), Niamey (2023). Each flicker of news signifies a coup that not only unseated an elected president but also deepened the chill in relations with Paris.”

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Amadou shares, “Mutual-defence pact, Liptako-Gourma Charter, Article 6: Any attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more Contracting Parties shall be considered as aggression against the other Parties.” He reflects, “Any attack on one is an attack on all.” As he takes a sip, he continues, “France packed up... and the UN left... so we decided to write our insurance policy.”

Me: “Washington pulled the plug... US issues 90-day stop-work order on all foreign aid... However, stepping away from West Africa’s trade bloc was a move towards freedom or a path to isolation?”

Issa whistles. “That’s bigger than ECOWAS sanctions. In Niger alone, the coup label already suspended hundreds of millions in military and development funds last year. Now the faucet’s dry for the whole region.”

Me: “That vacuum won’t stay empty. Moscow offers drones, Beijing offers loans... and you know who gives... paperwork.”

Amadou drains his tea. “Morocco will add the invoice to the port bill,” he said, his tone serious. “Somebody has to plug the hole.”

He taps the screen a final time. “When donors slam the cashbox, migrants feel it first... no school, no clinic, no choice but sand or sea.”

He thumbs a grainy clip of Russian Africa Corps troops unloading in Ouagadougou, Kalashnikovs glinting.

Amadou: “Those guys prioritise guarding the palace over the frontlines, yet Moscow provides us with drones and continues to exercise its veto.”

Then, he shows us a sharper video on X (previously called Twitter): an Algerian missile arcs skyward, shredding a Malian Bayraktar near Tinzaouaten; the caption reads “Airspace closed, April 2025.”

Issa scrolls through a rights-group bulletin on his phone and winces. “Algeria bussed 1,845 people to ‘Point Zero’ on 19 April 2025,” he reads, tapping the inset map that shows Point Zero, a thin red arrow running the fifteen kilometres of sand separating the dump site from Niger’s Assamaka post. He shakes his head. “Algiers calls it border security; it’s a pressure valve.” The convoy rolled barely a week after Algerian air defence crews downed a Malian Bayraktar near Tinzaouaten and sealed the airspace between the two countries, a one-two reminder of who controls every lane north of the Sahel. Flicking past photos of cracked heels and blown-out sandals, Issa mutters, “Diplomacy, one blister at a time,” before setting the phone face down on the table.

I lean back, tracing an invisible triangle, Niamey-Gao-Rabat, on the tabletop. The AES’s rupture with ECOWAS, Algeria’s hardening border, and Russia’s security umbrella have together spun the Sahel’s compass westward. Trade trucks, aid convoys and human journeys now head towards Morocco’s Atlantic promise, but they must first avoid the desert purgatory.

Their banter hints at a new geometry: Moroccan diplomacy, Sahel military realignment and European border outsourcing are merging into one migration equation.

Me: “Three fresh flags wave in the distance, yet a long detour lies ahead. Each time someone hits ‘refresh’, the map transforms, keeping us on our toes!”

Amadou raises his glass with a grin, declaring, “Here’s to moving maps... may ours always find the water’s surface, never sink beneath it!” The café window, shrouded in mint-tea fog, yet with every sip, the drink carries a hint of salt, a reminder of the ocean’s breath.

“Issa traces the map with his fingertip. “Algiers is closing in from the north, the EU tightens its grip and our countries are left to manage the overflow,” he murmurs. “It’s all remote control, but the batteries are in Brussels.” Our tea cools as the relentless heat of the desert blazes on his screen.”

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I search my browser for Frontex’s year-end briefing, which I saw months before. The Western African route surged to almost 47,000 arrivals in Spain’s Canary Islands in 2024, marking an 18 percent jump and the highest number since records began in 2009.

Amadou shakes his head. “Longer boats, riskier waves, yet people pay double for that seat.”

He continues, “Risk has not just shifted; it has intensified.” The Guardian reports that nearly 1,700 lives have been lost in the Central Mediterranean this year, contributing to an annual toll that often exceeds 2,000.

Issa scrolls through haunting images of abandoned life jackets washed up on the Libyan shores. “We called the sea *al-mawt al-azraq*, the blue death,” he reflects. Yet, despite the dangers, many still choose the waves over the dunes. The call of the sea remains irresistible. The pattern is clear even if the routes are not: every time a desert gate slams shut, a maritime door creaks open farther west, stretching the journey, the smuggler’s fee and the odds of never arriving.

Our waiter has barely finished topping up the mint tea when the café television cuts to live stand-up outside Rabat’s police headquarters. The reporter waves a print-out of the DGSN’s 2024 report, adding: “Statistics published this week by Maghreb Arabe Presse show the service issued more than 50,000 residence cards to foreign nationals.”

Issa grins. “That MAP dispatch is for Moussa,” he says; his cousin who swapped a street stall for a private school classroom after getting one of those green residency cards. “If Rabat can handle this, maybe his next one will be a click instead of a sleeping-bag vigil on the pavement.”

Minutes later, the screen flips to architectural renderings of the Dakhla Atlantic Port, keystone of the Royal Atlantic Initiative that King Mohammed VI just pitched to the Sahel ministers. The deep-water harbour, budgeted at approximately USD 1.2 billion, is expected to funnel cargo from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger directly onto blue-water shipping lanes by 2029.

Amadou pushes his empty glass aside. “Maps move,” he says, “but migrants move first.” He dots Niamey, Gao and Dakhla inside the damp ring the glass left on the table, then flicks his finger west. “That line used to stop at Tangier. Now it stops at a landlord in Casablanca.”

Issa sprinkles sugar across the map. “Close the dune gate,” he mutters, “and the water door yawns wider. Every corridor we lose in the Sahara pops open a rental in the medina.”

I thumb through residency stats: more than 50,000 new cards issued last year. I scribble numbers on a napkin, squint and shrug. "At this pace, strictly my maths, we could be talking 800,000, maybe a million Sub-Saharan neighbours by the 2030 kick-off. That's not transit traffic," I say, turning the screen toward them. "That's a neighbourhood."

“ Amadou nods. ‘Morocco’s gone from hallway to hostel. The king builds a port, the cities build classrooms and now FIFA builds grandstands.’ He thumbs a photo thread: Bambara menus in Agadir, a Malian brass band at a Fes wedding, scaffolders in neon vests bolting tiers around Casablanca’s future World Cup bowl. ‘By kick-off in 2030, half the crew wiring the floodlights will be newcomers off those migration routes.’ ”

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Issa watches the Atlantic, pewter under the lamps. "Host country or holding pen?"

"Depends on the rent," Amadou shrugs, "and whether the cranes at Dakhla finish before the ticket gates at the Grand Stade light up."

Me: "Every new road or rail line tugs AES and Morocco closer, trucks roll north, money rolls south."

We rise as the waiter gathers the glasses. A lick of salt rides the night breeze inland, an ocean reminding the desert which way is forward. Maps will keep sliding, but the footprints are already set in Moroccan pavement; by the time the first whistle blows in 2030, the migrant story will be wearing a home jersey.

"To moving maps," I toast, "and to a kingdom pricing the room, not just the door."

Section 3

Migration in the context of geopolitical turmoil

Through essays, expert interviews, *Thematic snapshots* and 4Mi data analysis, this section explores the impact of current geopolitical turmoil on mixed migration. Six feature essays examine the ways in which turbulent geopolitics are driving mixed migration dynamics. Topics include: a follow-up to the MMR 2024 theme on the impact of the 'year of elections' – specifically, how and if political rhetoric has turned into practice; the shifting boundaries of acceptable migration policies and the normalisation of once unthinkable practices; the paradox of workforce shortages and aging populations alongside tightened immigration measures; the rise of the border industrial complex and the double-edged sword of technology in migration; the consequences of aid cuts on mixed migration dynamics and the decline of multilateralism amid the shift towards unilateral, hardline migration diplomacy.

These essays are complemented by interviews with leading migration thinkers and *Thematic snapshots*, including an exploration of how offshore processing has gone global. Drawing on over 6,000 interviews conducted through MMC's 4Mi programme in 2025, the section also presents stark evidence of how the Trump administration's recent policy changes are impacting migrants' daily lives and futures.

The far-right and migration politics in the aftermath of the 2024 ‘year of elections’

Prof. Daphne Halikiopoulou¹

Building on the 2024 Mixed Migration Review’s theme of migration politics, migration narratives and public opinion, this feature essay analyses the lasting impact of 2024’s ‘year of elections’. One year on, it examines the flow-on effects of 2024, including the continued systemic entrenchment of the far right across the globe and its impact on anti-migration rhetoric and policy.

The ‘year of elections’, 2024, saw pivotal votes across multiple countries with the migration issue high on the agenda. Far-right or ‘nation-first’ parties made significant electoral gains with varying access to policymaking in Europe, the Americas and beyond. These parties and leaders emphasise sovereignty and seek to prioritise in-groups over out-groups in every policy area. They not only politicise migration as a cultural issue, but also link it with other issues that constitute important priorities to voters, including crime, the economy, access to jobs and public services, health and housing. Much of this rhetoric has, and continues to be, translated into policy: for example, Donald Trump’s campaign in the US against irregular immigration culminating in often indiscriminate arrests and deportations, but also a series of European initiatives allowing for outsourcing of asylum processing or the creation of ‘return centres’ in third countries, including Italy’s agreement with Albania and the UK’s now cancelled Rwanda plan.²

While the far-right became emboldened in 2024, its rise is not new, but rather the culmination of a more than decade-long development which is now, in many ways, becoming a global phenomenon. The further consolidation of this trend in a series of elections taking place in 2025 suggests the systemic entrenchment of the far right and a subsequent strengthening of the vicious circle between anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy. Few developments that have taken place in 2025 could suggest some possible stalling or reversal of this trend, for example election results in Australia and Canada. The broad trend, nonetheless, remains: the far right’s politicisation of migration as a threat to the cultural, economic and social fabric of our societies continues to fuel anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies across the globe.

This essay discusses the consequences of the rise and systemic entrenchment of the far right in the aftermath of 2024. Its aim is threefold: to offer an overview of why and how the far right politicises immigration; to discuss the extent to which anti-immigrant attitudes drive the success of these parties; and to assess the extent to which far-right election platforms have transformed into action.

Overview of the 2024 and 2025 election outcomes

During the many elections that took place around the globe in 2024, far-right parties made significant electoral gains at the local, national and European levels, increasing their support across many – if not most – member states in the June 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections. In July, UK’s Reform party achieved 14.3 percent of the vote,³ while France’s Rassemblement National (RN) gained a whopping 33.1 percent during the first round of France’s snap parliamentary election.⁴ In September, Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ) emerged first with 28.8 percent of the vote and, in November, Donald Trump regained the presidency of the United States defying some poll predictions and defeating Kamala Harris’s campaign which focused on safeguarding democracy.⁵ Elsewhere in the Americas, voters in El Salvador had elected Nayib Bukele to the presidency for the second time a few months earlier, while Javier Milei was elected president in Argentina at the end of 2023. This trend was followed in some elections that have taken place during 2025 so far: in February 2025, Germany’s AfD obtained 20.8 percent of the overall vote share and 152 seats in the German parliament, continuing a rising trend observed in regional elections, for example in Thuringia and Saxony,

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2 Burtin, A. (2025) [In Europe just as in Trump’s America, the creeping criminalisation of migration and solidarity](#). VoxEurop.

3 UK Parliament. (2024) [2024 general election: Performance of Reform and the Greens](#).

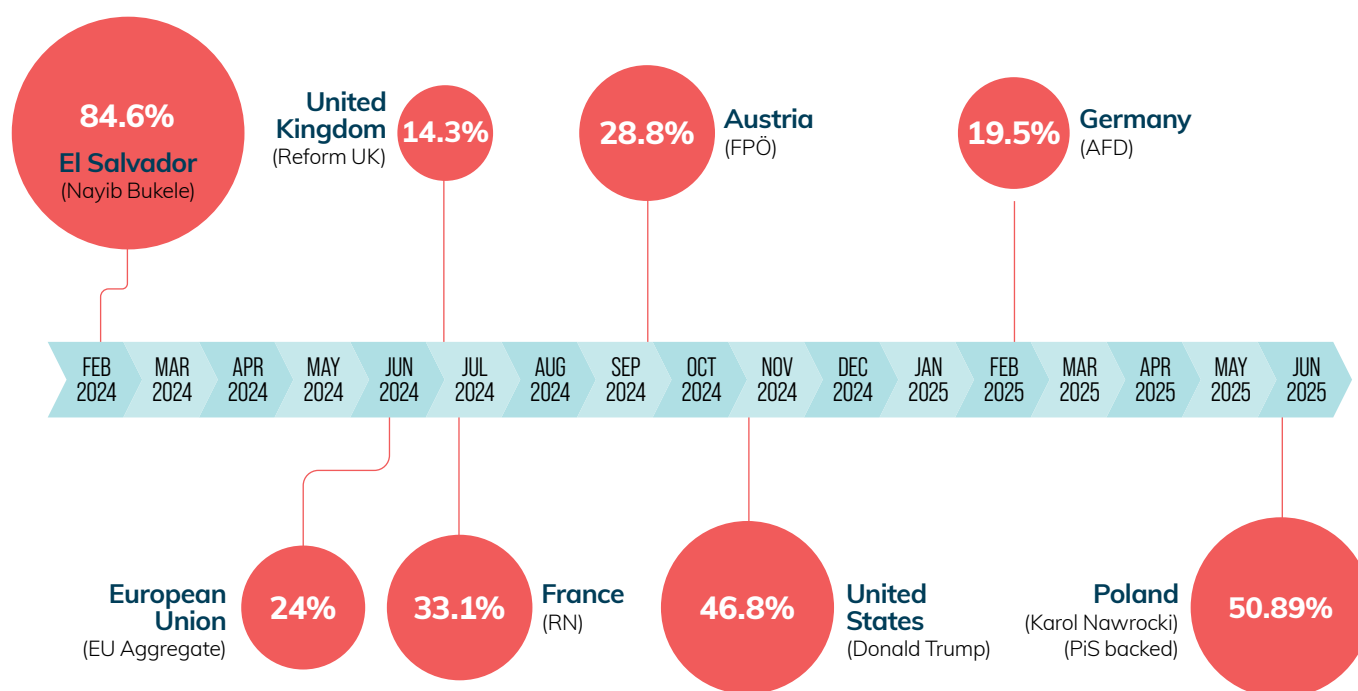
4 Henley, J. (2024) [French elections: far right wins first-round victory. What happens now?](#) The Guardian.

5 Kirby, P. and Bell, B. (2024) [Far right in Austria ‘opens new era’ with election victory](#). BBC.

a few months earlier.⁶ In Poland, supported by the Law and Justice Party (PiS), Karol Nawrocki won the Polish presidency with a narrow majority of 50.89 percent of the overall votes.⁷ In sum, far-right parties and leaders

who vilify immigrants are becoming the norm. In Europe, one struggles to find a country with no far right. In Asia, far-right gains in countries such as India and Japan suggest this is fast becoming a global phenomenon.

Graphic 1. Far-right vote share in selected countries/elections in 2024 and 2025



Source: author's own timeline visualisation of selected elections in 2024 and 2025

The normalisation of far-right ideologies and contagion to the centre

The issue is not just the vote share these parties and leaders receive, which fluctuates across country and across time, but rather their entrenchment in the system, their influence on other political parties even when not in power and their access to office. Parties such as Italy's Lega and Brothers of Italy (FdiI), the Austrian Party for Freedom (FPÖ), Orban's Fidesz, the Finns Party (PS) and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS), as well as leaders such as Trump, Bukele, Milei and Mohdi have either held in the past, or continue to hold, government positions. This emboldens them and makes them increasingly politically relevant, as they can implement their anti-migrant policies and influence the programmatic agendas of other parties. The proliferation of affective and toxic anti-immigrant narratives is often followed by

the implementation of practices that indiscriminately target migrants. A good example is Donald Trump's second term, which has seen him act more emboldened and extreme than during his first.

While the results of the Canadian and Australian 2025 elections suggest a possible swing away from the far-right in some instances – with some attributing this, at least in part, to the “Trump effect” – the main political trend is against migration; and while strict anti-migrant rhetoric and policies originate predominantly from the far right, mainstream parties seeking to compete electorally with them increasingly also engage in anti-migrant politics.⁸ The British Conservative party's obsession with sending migrants to Rwanda, for example, as well as Greece's systematic engagement in arbitrary practices which include illegal arrests and forcible deportations are just two cases suggesting that centre-right and far-right politics may converge, often based on the flawed assumption that tough immigration measures will ‘win back’ support from the far right.⁹

6 Kirby, P. (2025) [Five key takeaways from the German election](#). BBC.

7 Easton, A. (2025) [Conservative historian wins Polish presidential vote](#). BBC.

8 Frouws, B. (2025) [How Trump both fuels and dims Europe's anti-migration populism](#). Euobserver.

9 Burtin, A. (2025) [In Europe just as in Trump's America, the creeping criminalisation of migration and solidarity](#). VoxEurop; Also Refugee Support Aegean (2025) [Administrative Detention Statistics 2024: Systematic Imposition of Deportation and Detention Against Refugees](#); Also Mudde, C. (2022) [The Far-Right Threat in the United States: A European Perspective](#). The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 699(1), 101-115.

Why and how does the far right politicise immigration?

Given their commitment to nationalist principles, far-right parties draw on a purported distinction between an in-group and out-group and emphasise the need for a non-negotiable prioritisation of the in-group in all aspects of society. This suggests they are ideologically aligned to immigration scepticism: the exclusion of immigrants, who they frame as a threat to the various dimensions of national homogeneity and cohesion, is their signature argument.¹⁰ Competing in a political climate that emphasises 'new' issues such as migration, which far-right parties 'own', given their ideological affinity to nationalism and association with immigration-related issues over time, benefits them electorally.

The evolving definition of immigration in far-right narratives

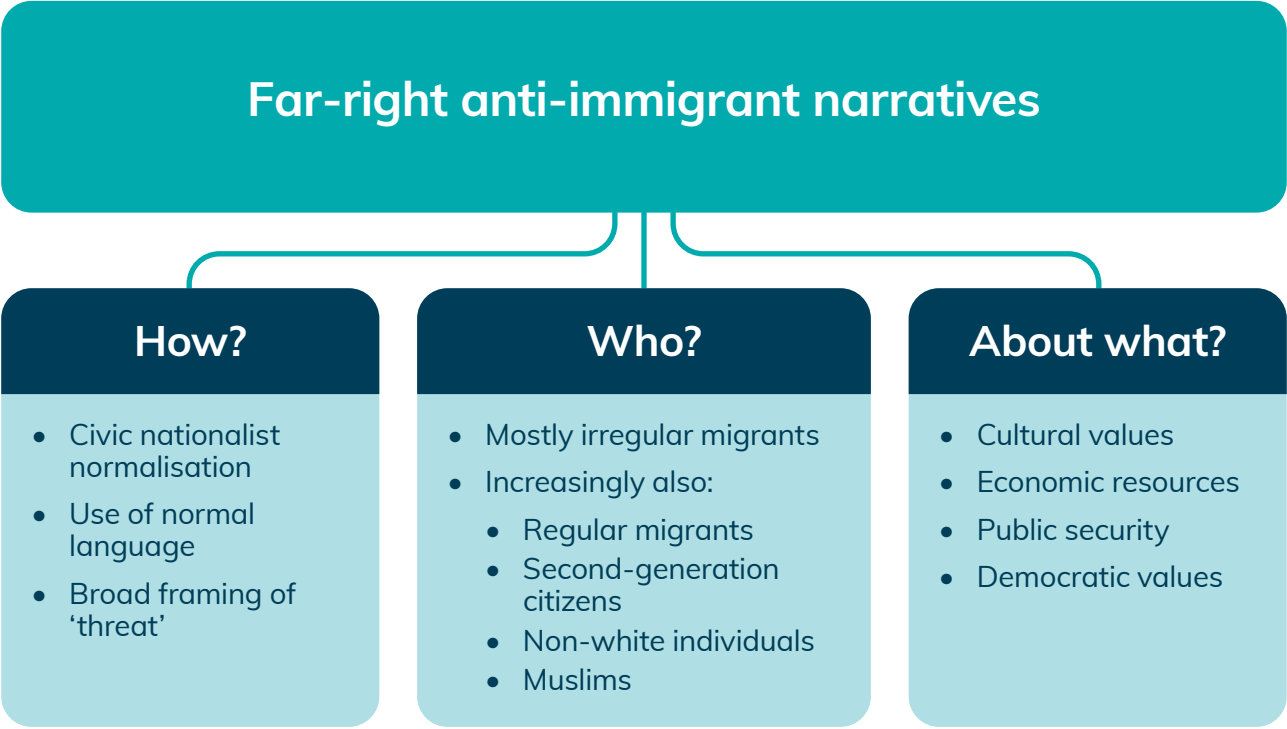
Far-right parties increasingly frame their anti-immigrant narratives in more palatable or 'normalised' language, utilising seemingly inclusive or 'civic' forms of nationalism.¹¹ For example, instead of framing exclusion in racialised terms, these parties often present immigrants as ideologically opposed to liberal democratic values. This mostly applies to far-right parties in Western Europe, where migration is a highly salient issue and the far right tends to justify the distinction between natives and immigrants on ideological rather than biological criteria of national belonging. The French RN, for example, rejects immigrants through a narrative that places them within the framework of a broader value conflict: as enemies of liberty, democracy and European values. At the

core of this 'normalisation' strategy lies a purported rejection of Islam along secular lines. Similarly, in The Netherlands, Geert Wilders's Freedom Party (PVV) also builds its exclusionary Islamophobic agenda using purportedly inclusive narratives that centre on liberal democratic values. Beyond Western Europe, the picture is more complicated. In Central-Eastern Europe, where migration levels are generally lower, far-right parties adopt predominantly ethnic nationalist strategies and attempt to mobilise voters against internal minorities such as refugees and the Roma community. In Latin American countries, which face significant emigration and where immigration is not (yet) a highly salient issue, far-right parties place less focus specifically on immigrant exclusion.¹² This, however, is gradually changing. Chile's far-right candidate José Antonio Kast, for instance, already framed his 2021 presidential campaign around the need to contain irregular immigration, proposing the construction of a ditch to keep undocumented migrants out.¹³

Furthermore, as far-right parties become increasingly entrenched, their anti-migrant narratives also become bolder and often indiscriminate. Immigration becomes progressively used as a catch-all term that defines the in-group so narrowly as to exclude a broad range of individuals such as those with country citizenship if born by immigrant parents, born abroad or who are not white. Examples include the UK Reform party's claims that the "foreign born" take away housing or RN's narratives during terrorist attacks in France framed against native-born citizens. These types of narratives target both regular and irregular migrants; while many of the policies they advocate relate specifically to irregular migration, their narratives often don't specify, using the term to exclude as broadly as possible instead.

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- 10 Borges, A. and Zanotti, L. (2024) [Authoritarian, But Not Nativist: Classifying Far-Right Parties in Latin America](#). Political Studies, 0(0); Also Vasilopoulou, S. and Halikiopoulou, D. (2015) [The Golden Dawn's nationalist Solution: Explaining the Rise of the Far Right in Greece](#). New York: Palgrave.
- 11 Halikiopoulou, D. and Vlandas, T. (2022) [Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it](#), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe, Vienna; Also Turnbull-Dugarte, S.J., López Ortega A. and Hunklinger, M. (2025) [Do Citizens Stereotype Muslims as an Illiberal Bogeyman? Evidence from a Double-List Experiment](#), British Journal of Political Science, 55.
- 12 Borges, A. and Zanotti, L. (2024) [Authoritarian, But Not Nativist: Classifying Far-Right Parties in Latin America](#). Political Studies, 0(0).
- 13 Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Zanotti, L. (2023) [The populist radical right beyond Europe](#). Journal of Language & Politics, 22(3), 285–305.

Graphic 2. Far-right anti-immigrant narratives



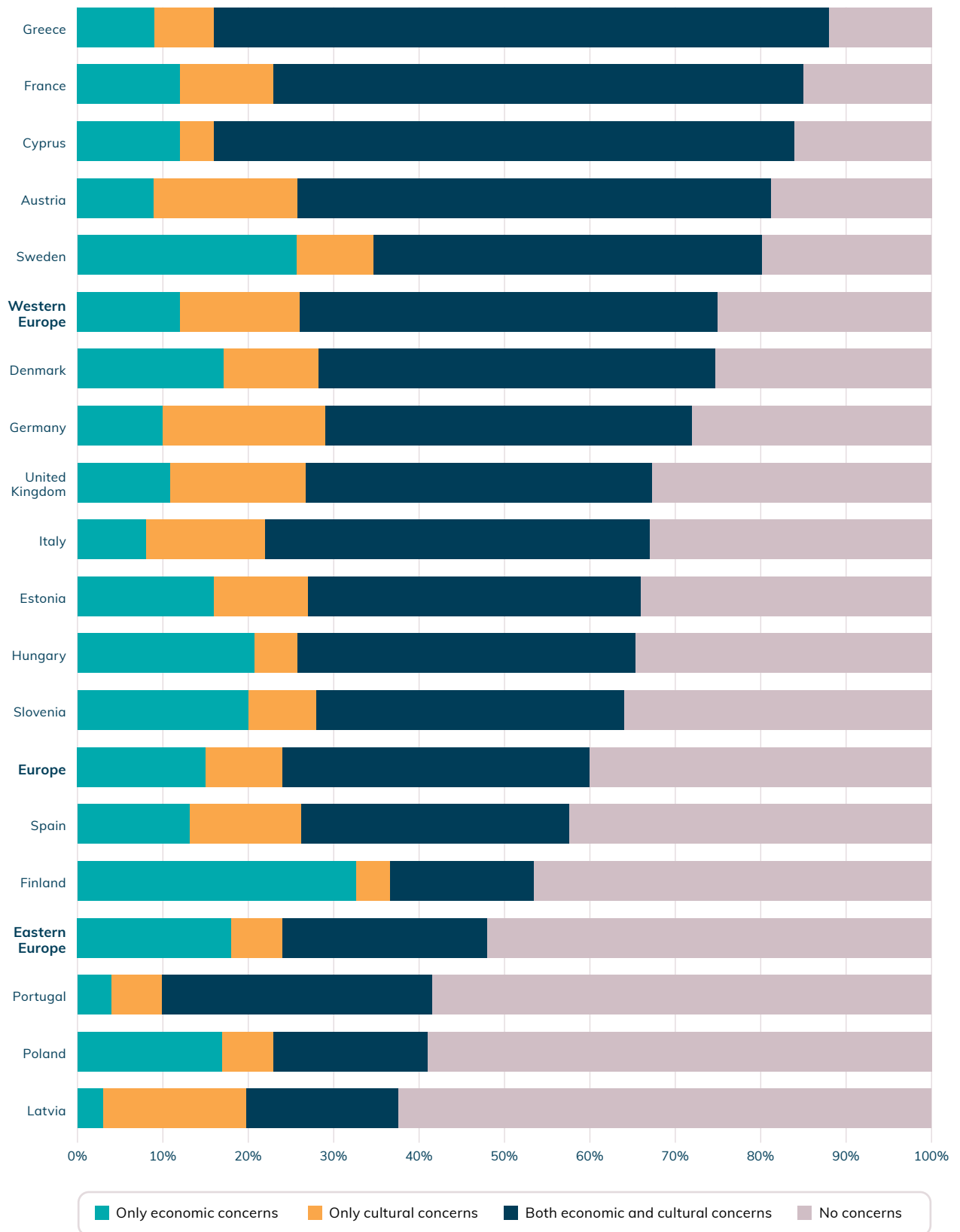
Source: author's own conceptualisation

Anti-immigration attitudes and the many types of far-right voter

The increasing salience of immigration on the one hand and far-right party normalisation strategies on the other make these parties more broadly appealing to voters. However, it is worth noting that immigration is only one part of a more complex story of electoral success. First, anti-immigration attitudes are neither the only nor the predominant driver of far-right support. Second, immigration itself is a multi-faceted concept: while some voters may oppose immigration for cultural reasons, others are driven by economic concerns, fearing immigrants as competitors in the labour market.

This suggests that people vote for the far right for many reasons. Indeed, the far-right voter base is much more diverse than we might initially assume. Some far-right voters display strong cultural concerns over immigration and others with the economy, while others yet do not report significant immigration concerns at all but vote for the far right as protest for social-, economic- and status-related reasons. This means that the cultural grievance story captures the motives behind some, but not all (or even most), supporters of far-right parties.

Graphic 3. Distribution of immigration concerns
As a percentage of far-right electorates



Source: Adapted from Halikiopoulou, D. and Vlandas, T. (2023).

Two kinds of voters: 'nationalists' ideologically opposed to immigration, and opportunists expressing their discontent with the establishment

To visualise the breadth of the far-right electorate, suppose two broad types of voters. First, those driven by ideology, who oppose immigration on principle. These 'nationalist' voters are likely to identify more fully with the far-right platform and are mainly driven by a principle ethno-cultural opposition to immigration. They are the far right's core voters. Second are the protest or peripheral voters who tend to support the far right as a way of expressing their discontent and punishing the establishment. Their opposition to immigration may be contingent as they are primarily concerned with its economic impact; or immigration may not be a salient issue for them. Peripheral voters are more often opportunistic rather than ideological and are less loyal to the far-right.¹⁴ European peripheral far-right voter groups include voters who are likely to support the prioritisation of the in-group on economic grounds, but who do not necessarily identify with the other nationalist elements of far-right party agendas; voters who are exposed to high social or economic risks and are in need of welfare provision; voters who have experienced downward class mobility; voters who are discontent with the democratic process; and/or those who reside in rural or peripheral areas which are economically dependent on old industries and/or have incurred actual or perceived losses from climate change measures.¹⁵

Voters with strong cultural concerns – the far right's core ideological voters – are a relatively small group numerically. The largest group of far-right voters are protesters – peripheral voters driven by discontent. What these parties have managed to do, quite successfully, is to forge electoral coalitions between these voters. The important distinction between galvanising the core constituency and mobilising a broader public explains why individuals with different preferences may vote for the same party. As successful political parties often obtain electoral support from a broad range of voters, major far-right electoral potential is associated with a mobilisational capacity beyond these parties' core voting groups. By directly associating a range of citizens' concerns with immigration, these parties increasingly propose broad-ranging solutions which have allowed

them to extend their appeal beyond their secure voting base to a range of insecure groups, including both working-class individuals and individuals who can suffer from relative deprivation.¹⁶

Election platforms in the aftermath of 2024

The rise of the far right is not new. We may recall instances of far-right party electoral successes in the 1990s and early 2000s, for example the Austrian FPÖ, the then French Front National (FN) and the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS). This phenomenon, however, has intensified since the mid-2010s. What is new within this latest far-right wave is the breakdown of the *cordon sanitaire*, i.e. the policy of marginalising far-right parties, and the level of entrenchment of these parties in their respective systems as many of them are now in positions to make and implement long-lasting policies. Also new is the global reach of the far right. While immigration is not a salient issue in many societies now experiencing the rise of far-right parties such as Latin America, India and Japan, the salience of the immigration issue is rising. Similarly, the tightening of immigration policies is a long-standing political issue which has intensified in recent years. In the aftermath of 2024, much of the toxic, indiscriminately anti-immigrant rhetoric of the far right continues to be translated into policy, as we are witnessing a further shift towards, and consolidation of, the acceptance of systematic illiberal migration practices in the European Union and beyond.¹⁷

Far-right election platforms result in overall more hardline stances on immigration for two reasons: first, because so many far-right actors are in positions where they can make and implement policies themselves; and second, because they drive, to a great extent, the actions and policies of their competitors. As a result, in the aftermath of 2024, the main features of migration policies and practices have included the continuation and systematisation of hardline positions on border controls, calls for reduction of the number of migrants, the prioritisation of natives in welfare provisions and the overall questioning of the integration of migrants. Many restrictive policies adopted and implemented in the US and Europe tend to be specifically targeted towards irregular migration, such as the 'stop the boats' movement and the securitisation of borders from undocumented migrant entry. In practice,

14 Vasilopoulou, S. and Halikiopoulou, D. (2023). [Democracy and discontent: institutional trust and evaluations of system performance among core and peripheral far right voters](#). *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(9), 2397–2421.

15 Halikiopoulou, D. and Vlandas, T. (2020). [When economic and cultural interests align: the anti-immigration voter coalitions driving far right party success in Europe](#). *European Political Science Review*, 12(4), 427–448; Also Vlandas, T. and Halikiopoulou, D. (2021) [Welfare state policies and far right party support: moderating 'insecurity effects' among different social groups](#). *West European Politics*, 45(1), 24–49; Also Gugushvili, A., Halikiopoulou, D. and Vlandas, T. (2025) [Downward Class Mobility and Far-Right Party Support in Western Europe](#). *Polit Behav*; Also Vasilopoulou, S. and Halikiopoulou, D. (2023) [Democracy and discontent: institutional trust and evaluations of system performance among core and peripheral far right voters](#). Also Arndt, C., Halikiopoulou, D. and Vrakopoulos, C. (2022) [The centre-periphery divide and attitudes towards climate change measures among Western Europeans](#). *Environmental Politics*, 32(3), 381–406.

16 Kaya, A. (2024) [The instrumentalisation of migration in the populist era](#). The Mixed Migration Centre.

17 Wolff, S. C. A. (2024) [The new pact on migration: embedded illiberalism?](#) *Journal Of Common Market Studies*, 62(S1), 113–123.

however, these measures are often implemented with a disregard for economic, humanitarian and international obligations, undermining the rule of law and resulting in indiscriminate arrests, deportations and the placement of migrants and refugees in pre-removal detention centres with questionable legality. In the aftermath of 2024, such practices have become increasingly mainstreamed and accepted. In addition, there is also an increased focus on policies aimed at further curbing regular migration, for example by limiting work visa pathways and raising skills and salary thresholds. While these can be more balanced and comprehensive, the underlying theme is often the same: immigration is bad and needs to be contained.

Examples abound. In the US, Donald Trump has supported and introduced substantive restrictions on entry and on the rights of 'aliens' residing on US territory and has embarked on a massive campaign against irregular immigration characterised by tighter restrictions on asylum and refugee resettlement and aggressive detention and removal practices.¹⁸ These measures serve as a continuation of his first administration hardline measures, for example the 'Muslim ban', which restricted US entry to individuals from many Muslim-majority countries and the 'family separation' policy, which resulted in the separation of a large number of migrant children from their families.¹⁹

In Europe, too, we have observed an increasingly restrictive environment both at the EU and national levels, largely because of pressures exerted by the increasingly popular far right. The EU's New Pact on Migration, which encompasses a set of rules managing migration and asylum, highlights "securing external borders" as its first pillar.²⁰ In May 2024, 15 EU member states called for a strengthening of the implementation of the pact and measures dealing with irregular migration in Europe.²¹ In June 2025, nine European Union member states signed an open letter calling for a reinterpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights to facilitate the expulsion of 'foreign national criminals'.²² Many member states have followed suit in their domestic policies: in Sweden, several measures have further restricted the rights to residency and citizenship and the minimum salary requirement was doubled in October 2024; in France, a new law adopted in January 2024 simplifies the procedures for expelling delinquent foreigners.²³ Denmark, too, has moved to a stricter policy structure, with support for restrictions coming from across the

political spectrum, while in Germany the implementation of stricter border controls has meant turning away some asylum seekers at the border, potentially breaching the country's legal obligations.²⁴ In the Netherlands, tough asylum policy changes are likely to continue to go through despite the collapse of the Dutch coalition government in June 2025, suggesting the dispute over asylum policy initiated by Geert Wilders may have been less about policy and more about procedure.²⁵

In the UK, the Labour government is pressured to address immigration, significantly squeezed both by the electoral rise of the far-right Reform party, as well as perceptions that the public wants the immigration question addressed. The new 'one in, one out' deal between UK and France, which remains a salient and polemical political subject for the UK, can be interpreted as an attempt by the Labour government to 'stop the boats' and limit migration effectively in ways that the Conservatives failed to do. Indeed, the government is introducing a series of immigration reforms aimed at controlling Britain's borders, focusing not only on tighter controls for irregular migrants, but also lowering entry numbers of regular migrants by increasing skills thresholds. New rules rolled out from a white paper published in May 2025 include a rise in the threshold of skills and salaries as well as a limiting of the list of occupations which grant access to the immigration system.²⁶ These reforms are designed to support high-skilled migration and occupations that may be considered as key to Britain's industrial strategy and infrastructure and to limit the UK's reliance on overseas lower-skilled recruitment.

Conclusion: what does the future hold?

The systemic entrenchment of the far-right, and the continued normalisation of its rhetoric in mainstream politics contribute to the protraction and embeddedness of hardline stances on immigration. Restrictive environments, arbitrary removal practices and worthiness debates that extend beyond irregular migration and asylum to include skilled workers and the integration of regular migrants dominate political debates in Europe and beyond.

18 Burtin, A. (2025) [In Europe just as in Trump's America, the creeping criminalisation of migration and solidarity](#). VoxEurop.

19 Nagel, C. (2025) [Immigration policy in the second Trump administration: Restriction, removal, and the limits of MAGA nativism](#). The Geographical Journal, 00, e70015.

20 European Commission. (2025) [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#).

21 Wolff, S. C. A. (2024) [The new pact on migration: embedded illiberalism?](#) Journal Of Common Market Studies, 62(S1), 113-123.

22 Birchard, R. (2025) [9 EU states urge migration law rethink at Europe's top court](#). Deutsche Welle.

23 Wolff, S. C. A. (2024) [The new pact on migration: embedded illiberalism?](#) Journal Of Common Market Studies, 62(S1), 113-123.

24 Sanberg, M. (2025) [Denmark's Turn to Temporary Protection Has Made It a Pioneer in Restrictive Immigration Policies](#). Migration Policy Institute.

25 Kruijdt, M. and de Vries, F. (2025) [OP-ED The fall of the Dutch government – that took longer than expected](#). European Council on Refugees and Exiles.

26 UK Home Office (2025) [Restoring control over the immigration system](#).

Following a series of electoral victories in 2024 and 2025, far-right parties are emboldened. Many are now in power, while others compete as credible contenders for power, exerting significant pressures on their political competitors. They often also copy each other and are increasingly making systematic efforts to create transnational links. As far-right influence increases, these parties continue to weaponise migration for political gain, in conjunction with other issues, such as the economy, housing, the quality of public services and access to jobs, which allows them to extend their electoral base beyond their traditional constituencies.

Given this climate, we are likely to continue to see the far right's impact on a broad range of restrictive migration policies and practices. However, this trend is not without its limits. First, we are seeing voters in some countries, for example Canada and Australia, draw away from the far right towards more centrist or liberal parties. While this could be important in stalling or reversing the far-right trend towards democratic backsliding, as noted above, centrist parties, in some instances, also implement restrictive migration policies or, at least, do not offer strong leadership in terms of positive migration policies. Although resisting the far-right trend is important and counter movements may be emerging, we need strong positive narratives which posit solutions to the multiple challenges facing voters. Such narratives should offer a balanced account on migration which also focuses on its positive consequences while addressing the challenges and various valid concerns around migration and, in particular, irregular migration, in a rational and humane manner. Mainstream parties should not cave into far-right pressures on the flawed assumption that this will sway voters towards them and away from the far right. Research is clear on this: copying the far right is rarely a successful strategy.²⁷ It can be costly for mainstream parties, who may attract some far-right voters by accommodating restrictive immigration policies but will likely end up alienating many of their own voters.²⁸ In addition, 'copycat' strategies will likely increase the salience of migration as a negative issue, thus further

inflating far-right party support as, ultimately, voters always prefer the original to the copy. Even in Denmark, which is sometimes referred to as a successful case of a copycat strategy, new research shows that the Social Democrats (SD) could have won policy support for a pro-immigrant platform by framing their messaging in moral terms, illustrating the role powerful moral language can play.²⁹

Second, powerful demands for foreign labour and debates over skilled immigration can divide far-right movements. There is already some disagreement within Trump's administration about skilled visas, for example.³⁰ In addition, many of the strict measures that are being implemented have not necessarily proven effective: smuggling networks remain active; English Channel crossings are persistent; and some routes, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, have actually seen an increase in irregular arrivals.³¹ In early July 2025, for example, Greece reported a record number of arrivals from Libya to Crete.³² These developments suggest that tough measures may require a re-think, and highlight the need for a comprehensive, balanced strategy that also focuses on the positive dimension of migration and emphasises legal pathways.

Third, the geopolitical environment is volatile. Trump's foreign policy decisions and his tariff regime have amplified Europe's geopolitical vulnerability. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it could strengthen the Eurosceptic narratives that far-right parties thrive on and embolden the far right even more. Any formal EU-US deal will have to be supported by all member states, each of which has differing interests and levels of reliance on US exports. As a result, dissent could further divide the EU and hamper member state solidarity. On the other hand, Trump's aggressive tactics could make EU membership more appealing and trigger a divergence between Europe and the US.³³ Either way, the political climate is one that disfavors immigration. The trend towards far-right politics is strong and there are critical elections to come.

27 Halikiopoulou, D. and Vlandas, T. (2022) [Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it](#), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe, Vienna.

28 Chou, W., Dancygier, R., Egami, N. and Jamal, A.A. (2021) [Competing for Loyalists? How Party Positioning Affects Populist Radical Right Voting](#), *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(12), 2226–2260.

29 Simonsen, K.B. (2025) [Are pro-immigrant messages ineffective? Moralization as a rhetorical strategy for mainstream parties](#), *Political Science Research and Methods*, 13(3), 765–771.

30 Nagel, C. (2025) [Immigration policy in the second Trump administration: Restriction, removal, and the limits of MAGA nativism](#), *The Geographical Journal*, 00, e70015.

31 Forin, R. (2025) [A breakdown of how the EU migration crackdown isn't working](#), Euobserver.

32 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B. (2025) [Are Crete and the Balearics Revealing Cracks in the EU Migration Deterrence? The need for a fresh approach to migration to Europe](#), Mixed Migration Centre

33 Frouws, B. (2025) [How Trump both fuels and dims Europe's anti-migration populism](#), Euobserver.

Interview



What is the future of the human rights movement in an era of conflict, populism and climate change?

Around the globe, new and historic conflicts, far-right policies and the devastating effects of climate change are all generating a range of complex mixed migration dynamics that put the basic rights of people on the move at stake. How can human rights advocates and organisations support the most vulnerable?

Kenneth Roth, former executive director of Human Rights Watch, offers his thoughts.

Kenneth Roth is an American attorney, human rights activist and writer. He was the executive director of Human Rights Watch from 1993 to 2022. Currently, he is a visiting professor at Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs.

After three decades running Human Rights Watch, how have you found stepping back?

Well, it's been a lot more fun than I thought. Before, I was worried about not having this steady network of information about issues around the world and not having the colleagues, but I have to say, I haven't missed the fundraising, I haven't missed the management, and I've been able to continue doing the fun part of the job, which is to write and speak about the most important human rights issues. I've published a book [Righting Wrongs, 2025] and so it's been a good three years.

And has Human Rights Watch taken a new course since you've left it?

I think it is largely continuing as it was. The essence of the organisation, which is careful research and documentation to support principled human rights

positions, is what it does. It continues to have the ability to secure very significant media coverage and influence in key capitals to maximise pressure on abusive governments. All of that is still very much continuing.

What motivates you?

I started in the human rights field, in part, driven by the experience of my father. He grew up in Nazi Germany and fled as a 12-year-old boy in July 1938 for New York. I grew up listening to stories about Hitler, hearing what it was like to be a young boy worried about the brown shirts beating you up in the playground, or worried about the Nazis arresting my grandfather. I became very aware of the evil that governments could do, and that was a big factor in pushing me to want to try to prevent atrocities of that sort. I went to law school hoping to do public service of some sort. Human rights were the new frontier and I was very excited by

it. It was not a wise career move at the time, because there were no jobs. But it worked out for me in the end. I volunteered for six years until a job opened up. I was mainly practising as a lawyer during that time. So, that's what got me started, but what kept me going is that it's incredibly fulfilling to be able to make a difference in people's lives. Even though the obstacles are substantial, I found that, over and over, if you figure out the right angle, you can force governments to behave better. And my new book is about that. It is filled with examples of how we were able to twist governments' arms. We were able to change the cost-benefit analysis of repression, to force them to treat people better.

“The first priority of the human rights movement should be the right to seek asylum. That's the legally enshrined right. If governments are denying that by arbitrarily pushing back immigrants and not giving them fair hearings, that is something that's worth really fighting to preserve.”

There are a few in the humanitarian world and advocacy world who have not depended on and applauded the prolific investigative output of Human Rights Watch over the 30 years. But there are also opponents, not just of Human Rights Watch, but also of you personally as its executive director. What was their main concern and what was their main critique?

First of all, I wouldn't be doing my job if people didn't consider me their enemy. So that's just a hazard of the trade. To me, the fact that I've been personally sanctioned by the Chinese and the Russian governments and lambasted by a broad variety of abusive governments is basically a badge of honour. One of the classic responses of governments that receive a critical Human Rights Watch report is to say that we're biased, we misunderstood, we were deceived. But that doesn't work, because Human Rights Watch is incredibly careful with the investigations that we do, and by the time we publish, we're right, so we welcome those debates over the facts. What governments ultimately recognise is we're able to bring roughly 1,000 media mentions a day when we publish. Also, there has never been a major finding that has been proven wrong. Governments recognise that they're not going to get rid of the bad press without changing the bad conduct. And that's how we make progress. Their spin, denial and false accusations are going to get them nowhere, because we're right on the facts. So I welcome those attacks because they're so futile. Ultimately, governments recognise that they are not an effective

way to get us to stop our reporting, that the only thing that'll work is to change the abusive conduct that they're engaged in.

What's it like living in Trump's America at the moment? What impact do you think his directives and policies are having on what other governments consider possible? Are you seeing people leaning towards tougher leaders and autocracies?

There's a lot behind that question. Let me divide it into three parts. First, domestically, Trump is obviously causing a lot of harm. He's pursuing the classic autocrats' playbook. He's attacking various checks and balances on executive power, and has focused foremost so far on universities, law firms and media outlets. But he's also attacked judges. He's neutralised Republicans in Congress. He's contemplating attacks on civil society. I think the good news is that, after the initial near-paralysis, because of the flurry of Trump's executive orders, people have recognised that trying to appease him never works. He smells blood and seeks more. The best response is a unified, aggressive response. And we're now seeing that from universities, law firms and media outlets. So I think there's been a very significant resurgence in the resistance that is slowing Trump down considerably. There have been more than 200 judicial orders against his executive orders, and he's running out of things to do without encountering major pushback. And we see signs of significant overreach.

Trump's initial inclination is to utterly ignore human rights. He cosies up to autocrats. He admires their ability to operate unconstrained in the way he wishes he could. But even there he's encountering the obstacle of public opinion. For example, his inclination was to give away Ukraine's democracy to Putin, but people are outraged by that, and he's being forced against his will to allow the continued defensive arming of Ukraine to repulse Putin. To some extent, at least verbally, he's being forced to make concessions in the case of Gaza. He has abandoned his idea of massive ethnic cleansing of Gaza. He's beginning to push Netanyahu for some kind of ceasefire. So I think that political reality has caught up with him, and while he still is doing a lot of harm, it's being mitigated to some extent. Trump's foremost concern is himself. If he sees that his inclinations to defer to abusive leaders are running into significant public opposition, he will change course. This is not a principled guy. He just does what he needs to promote himself.

In terms of your broader point, is this emboldening autocrats? It's actually a bit more complicated than that. I know that the common wisdom is that autocracy is on the rise and democracy is in decline. I think that's a fair characterisation of the established democracies in the West, where there has been a failure to deliver to working class society and others who feel that they're economically stagnating and are not being served

or even heard or respected by governments and are, therefore, more likely to respond to the autocrat's appeal. That's how Trump got elected. That's Marine Le Pen in France, the AfD in Germany, Nigel Farage in the UK. If you look more globally, though, it's a more complicated picture.

What we've seen in recent years is mass protests in country after country against autocracy and in favour of democracy. Sometimes they've worked. Sheik Hasina was ousted in Bangladesh, the Rajapaksa clan was ousted in Sri Lanka, Bolsonaro was voted out of office in Brazil, the Law and Justice Party lost in Poland and a constitutional coup was prevented in South Korea. So these are examples of popular uprising prevailing. It's true that elsewhere, where the autocrats are just too ruthless – in places like Iran, Russia, Belarus, Nicaragua and Uganda – they suppress popular uprisings. But even there, the popular preference for accountable government is absolutely clear. And what we have are these autocrats who increasingly won't even risk a managed election. They just hold electoral charades under the barrel of a gun. And as Bashar Al Assad of Syria showed us, it's dangerous to do that, because when there is a challenge, nobody stands up for you. That's a very risky way to proceed, which is why these autocrats are terrified of their own people. Their nightmare is a revolution, a popular uprising that ousts them.

The Mixed Migration Centre has been documenting the normalising of the extreme when it comes to migration policy and border enforcement. The whole issue about 'naming and shaming' is using a currency where states care enough about how they are seen. But have we entered a time where states no longer care?

I think that's an overstatement in the sense that every government still pretends to respect human rights, because that's become a key aspect of legitimacy. It's a way of their saying that they serve the people, not just themselves. And so, when Human Rights Watch is able to document the discrepancy between this haughty pretence and the ugly reality, it is embarrassing. It's delegitimising. It's shameful. So that remains a powerful force. I think what you're noting is that in the realm of migration, it has become popular to stop immigrants, and that does pose a challenge. Globally, I think there has been a sense that there is too much migration, and so various governments, not just the far right, have found it politically profitable, or at least necessary, to take an anti-migration position. Now, I think that is forcing the human rights community to refine its message, and here it's a matter of focusing on priorities. In my view, the first priority of the human rights movement should be the right to seek asylum. That's the legally enshrined right. If governments are denying that by arbitrarily pushing back immigrants and not giving them fair hearings, that is something that's worth really

fighting to preserve. On the other hand, I don't think the human rights movement should be advocating for open borders. There's no right enshrining that. The more that we are seen as endorsing open borders, the more we discredit ourselves at this moment.

You mean the human rights movement should be more specific in its objections and endorsements?

Yes, exactly. The US illustrates this well, when you consider that there clearly was a mandate given to Trump to enforce the border with Mexico, and there's quite a bit of popularity for his moves to stop what was seen as a pretty free flow of irregular immigrants into the United States from Mexico. He's done that at the expense of the right to seek asylum, which is a problem. But overall there is considerable support for that. What we've seen, however, is that there is not support for immigration raids into certain neighbourhoods or workplaces that are assumed to have a large number of undocumented immigrants. And there, what the public is responding to is the fact that many of these immigrants are essentially settled. They have jobs, they pay taxes, they have families that often have US citizens in them. These people have become Americans in all but legal status. I think that there's pretty strong public support for them staying in the United States. In an ideal world where Congress was functional, there would be some sort of effort to provide them with a path towards legal status. That's not where Washington is right now, but there is, I think, public support for, in effect, a statute of limitations on deportation. There's a sense that after a certain point, you don't resurrect the past. We don't have a law allowing effective amnesty in the case of immigration. But there should be, and I think it's time to start thinking about a de facto statute of limitations for immigration for these cases.

“ UNHCR has become a massive humanitarian assistance organisation. That's where the big money has been, and once it's in that business, it's more reluctant to challenge governments who may be undermining the right to asylum or disrespecting the rights of refugees.”

I think that's behind the idea of sanctuary cities. That's why we have seen these large protests once the ICE officials started doing neighbourhood or workplace raids in the United States. There have been no protests over border enforcement. But once ICE starts going wild in cities, and people's neighbours are picked up – people who are really integrated members of the community – there is outrage, as there should be.

Do you think UNHCR is losing its relevance in terms of asserting its authority and persuading countries to adhere to the Refugee Convention? And if so, what could it do better?

I do think UNHCR has lost its way somewhat by chasing the money. This began when Antonio Guterres was high commissioner for refugees. The core function of UNHCR is protection: to ensure that refugees find a safe place and are allowed to seek asylum. But UNHCR has become a massive humanitarian assistance organisation. That's where the big money has been, and once it's in that business, it's more reluctant to challenge governments who may be undermining the right to asylum or disrespecting the rights of refugees. Obviously UNHCR, like every UN agency, is facing a financial crisis today, and there may be an opportunity in that crisis, if it does return to its core protection mandate.

“The fact that something is written is not enough. You need to build public support for it, so that when governments fall short, they do feel shamed. The Global Compacts are not actively cited. I don't know that they really move governments the way that refugee law and asylum law do.”

I think the idea that when one arrives at a border, one can seek asylum remains an important right and is worth enforcing. The difficulty has been, first of all, that countries are not investing enough in asylum adjudication, so you get these large backlogs. And if the mere filing of an asylum claim is seen as allowing de facto forever entrance into a country, that's not good. That undermines the right to seek asylum. I would be happier to see some greater investment in asylum adjudication instead of simply more and more border enforcement. The other factor in this is that when an asylum claim is fairly heard and is rejected, people have to be returned. That's not something that human rights defenders like to say, but it's actually essential if you're going to preserve the right to asylum, because it does have to be something for people who are genuinely fleeing persecution or war.

What about the Global Compacts for migration and on refugees? They've been operating for about seven years – do you think they've achieved any of their objectives? How useful do you think it is to have a moral or ethical consensus that's never really manifest or enforceable in policy?

Is there real consensus behind them? I mean, does this represent a moral standard that the public wants to uphold? That's the test for any international treaty. Now, the fact that something is written is not enough. You need to build public support for it, so that when governments fall short, they do feel shamed. The Global Compacts are not actively cited. I don't know that they really move governments the way that refugee law and asylum law do.

What about Gaza and the global response to it? Is it indicative of a failure of multilateralism? Is it a systematic collapse in the international commitment to uphold human rights? Does it have implications for migration?

On the narrow question of migration, Trump's proposal to ethnically cleanse 2 million Palestinians from Gaza would be a massive crime against humanity. Fortunately, that has gone nowhere. I mean, even the Egyptian and Jordanian governments, despite their huge dependence on US military assistance, have said they're going to have nothing to do with another Nakba. So, this proposal is dead in the water. It has legitimised the far-right Israeli dream of solving the Israeli-Palestinian problem by getting rid of the Palestinians, but no one else is buying into that. I do think that that is the real motive behind the Israeli genocide in Gaza today. It's not to kill every single Palestinian, obviously, but it's to create conditions of life that are so miserable, that are so unsuitable to life that, as the far right puts it, 2 million Palestinians would, so to speak, 'voluntarily depart'. Now, that is genocide. I don't think it's going to work in terms of the goals. What we're seeing is more akin to what Myanmar did with the Rohingya, killing 30,000 to send 730,000 fleeing to Bangladesh. That's still genocide and I think the world has to come to terms with the fact that genocide can be not just an end, it can also be a means to a very different end.

Is this an indictment of international systems or institutions? No, that's not the problem. If you look at what international institutions have done, they've responded quite strongly. Obviously, the UN Security Council has been stymied by the US veto, but the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council have both spoken out repeatedly and forcefully. The International Criminal Court has charged Netanyahu and former minister of defense Yoav Gallant for their part in the food deprivation strategy. The International Court of Justice has issued several provisional orders to prevent genocide. So, the big international institutions have done their job. The problem is that the Netanyahu government is essentially looking to a constituency of one, which is the US president. Biden said the right things. He said, don't bomb Palestinian civilians. Don't starve them. But he continued the arms sales and military aid with the exception of the 2,000-pound bombs and essentially gave a green light to Netanyahu. So far Trump has done largely the same thing. But,

ironically, I think Trump is in the best position of any US president to really twist Netanyahu's arm to stop, because somebody like Biden or Obama were always worried about attacks from the right if they pressured Israel too hard. Now there's nobody to the right of Trump. Trump owns the far right in the United States, so he has the political manoeuvrability to squeeze Netanyahu, and we've already seen how he has differed with Netanyahu on a variety of issues. As we speak, there is a renewed effort along those lines. I have not given up on Trump to do the right thing for the wrong reason here. We know that for Trump, his regard for Israel is not a principled one; this is a guy who stands primarily for himself. He would love a Nobel Peace Prize, so if he feels that Netanyahu is an obstacle, that he stands in the way, he's going to start pressuring Netanyahu. Overall, therefore, this is largely a failure of the US government. So far the US government has been aiding and abetting genocide and war crimes. Might that stop? Maybe. I think, in an odd way, despite Trump's horrors, Trump is our best bet in a while to really squeeze Israel to stop the atrocities.

Why do you think there are certain places and people, like Sudan and Myanmar and the crisis with the Rohingya, that just fall off the news headlines completely?

Well, in Myanmar, obviously, the treatment of Rohingya has been overshadowed by the military junta's treatment of the entire Burmese population since the coup. So I think that's part of what's going on there. But the disaster that is actually worse than Gaza, in many respects, is Sudan. And there, you're absolutely right that it gets just a tiny fraction of the attention that Gaza gets, even though the United Arab Emirates has been arming the Rapid Support Forces, the militia that has been responsible for a lot of the atrocities. That's hugely unfortunate. Why does Eastern Congo get so little attention when Rwanda has invaded? What Rwanda did in Eastern Congo is the exact same thing that Putin did in Ukraine, but Ukraine gets much more attention than Eastern Congo. So, part of this is just the African discount. You have to add several zeros before people notice Africa, which is just racism. Part of it, I think, in the case of Gaza, is the fact that Israel was a sophisticated Western military fighting without significant opposition. And then, to make matters worse, the Israeli military is completely funded, armed and supported by the US government. So this is, essentially, a major Western war against a largely defenseless people. I think that's behind a lot of the outrage as well. It's one thing to be upset about a distant war. It's another thing to observe a war that is made possible through the actions of one's own government.

How would you unpack the apparent contradiction where so many OECD countries and other states badly need migrants and refugees for their economy, yet they're increasingly making it harder for people to seek asylum?

Obviously, the far right has found it profitable to demonise immigration and to say that there's too much immigration, and the centrist parties are preemptively adopting the same policy and end up legitimising it. So this is a broad problem throughout the West. I think there are some lessons to be learned from it. One is that the human rights movement probably was not sufficiently attentive to the rate of immigration, and there may be a limit to how many people within a society can effectively integrate, and that rate may have been exceeded. You generate opposition that way. Some of it is just racism or Islamophobia, people who come in who are just different, and part of it also is the way that integration happens. People clearly panic if they feel that a country has lost control of its borders. They're much less concerned with immigration that comes in lawfully through an airport or a sea terminal. Still, I think the rate issue has become paramount.

“ Immigration, per se, ... isn't a human rights issue ... We have to recognise that there is no right to immigration, and that governments have got to manage it in a way so that immigrants are welcome for very practical reasons – they provide a workforce, they help to address demographic decline – but it has to be done at a speed that society is comfortable with and is able to integrate. Otherwise, you get far-right opposition.”

But immigration, per se, actually isn't a human rights issue. I do think we have to recognise that there is no right to immigration, and that governments have got to manage it in a way so that immigrants are welcome for very practical reasons – they provide a workforce, they help to address demographic decline – but it has to be done at a speed that society is comfortable with and is able to integrate. Otherwise, you get far-right opposition.

Do you think climate change is going to be a real game changer in terms of a threat multiplier and, specifically, what do you think is going to happen when significant parts of the world are unliveable?

Climate change is going to significantly drive migration. How much of that migration aims to the north versus just other places nearby is an open question. Some

“ Climate-induced migration should be understood as one aspect of adaptation, and whether that’s paid through money or through the admittance of people is an open question. It’s something that should very much be negotiated.”

climate migrants clearly will try to get to the north, to the West. I do think that there is some responsibility there, given that, historically, greenhouse emissions have largely been caused by the West, and that therefore there is a duty on the part of the West to do something about that. Part of that answer is migration. Obviously, other parts of it involve mitigation or adaptation. But in terms of offering climate-induced migrants a legal right or status to migrate, that’s another thing. I’m not sure it would be useful, because if you try to broaden the right to asylum to include people fleeing climate change, you would just destroy the right to asylum. There’d be too many people, and you would destroy the possibility of people fleeing persecution or war to still get preferential treatment.

Do you not think there should be a separate code for climate-induced mobility?

I think that through the whole COP process, this is something that should be addressed. So far the focus is much more on the financial aspect. How do you pay for mitigation efforts? How do you pay for adaptation? But I think that climate-induced migration should be understood as one aspect of adaptation, and whether that’s paid through money or through the admittance of people is an open question. It’s something that should very much be negotiated.

When you look at the contemporary geopolitical turmoil, do you think it’s a clear case that international migration is bound to increase or do you think certain countries are going to find ways to fully close the doors?

Well, clearly the push factors are strong. Between armed conflict and climate change, there are significant factors pushing people to migrate. At the same time, the resistance to migration is the strongest I’ve seen in a long time. So it’s not clear how many doors are going to be open. Necessity, particularly in agriculture, construction, nursing, home and health care, is going to drive a need for immigration which is briefly being ignored but can’t be ignored for the long term without real consequences for the existing members of society in the West.

Attacking immigrants, like attacking LGBTQIA+ people, is a classic far-right thing to do to divert attention from the fact that these parties don’t have much of a governing policy for their working-class base and, once they gain power, do they really want to completely undermine the workforce by enforcing immigration law so severely? Even Trump now is starting to make exceptions and saying he’s not going to cut into hospitality services or agriculture. They need workers. That list will expand over time, so I wouldn’t be surprised if Trump is reduced to strong border enforcement combined with high-visibility but token raids that actually do nothing to significantly curtail the immigrant population in the United States.

“ Attacking immigrants, like attacking LGBTQIA+ people, is a classic far-right thing to do to divert attention from the fact that these parties don’t have much of a governing policy for their working-class base and, once they gain power, do they really want to completely undermine the workforce by enforcing immigration law so severely?”

When the extreme is normalised: shifting boundaries in ‘acceptable’ migration policy

Chris Horwood¹ and Bram Frouws²

Although increasingly part of the de facto practice of migration management, what was unimaginable five or ten years ago has now shifted into the realm of political acceptability, reflecting a broader transformation of the Overton Window and a major social, cultural and political shift: the “normalisation of the extreme”.³

Across the globe, previously fringe migration policies traditionally associated with the far right have been pushed into mainstream politics, reshaping migration governance and public discourse.⁴ From arbitrary detention, breach of the *refoulement* principle, use of excessive force, pushbacks, pullbacks, beatings, expulsions, forced deportations, warehousing and dumping asylum seekers, to militarised border enforcement, the use of AI for surveillance, and the overall disregard for national and international law, measures once considered extreme or outliers have increasingly become the norm. While this disregard has worsened in recent years, the outcomes of an unprecedented number of elections in 2024 and early 2025 – and, in particular, the election of President Donald Trump in the US – gives a sense of the overall situation having gone over a tipping point. There is a sense that it has never been this concerning, but various factors driving this downward spiral appear like a gathering storm and suggest that the worse is yet to come.

This essay examines how harsher and more restrictive migration policies often associated with the far right have proliferated, evolved and reshaped global governance, exploring how today’s politics- and media-driven climate and narratives are creating a new normal of discriminatory and excluding standards, redefining what societies consider acceptable. In the process, they often breach international agreements and conventions, ignoring critics, United Nations reprimands or human rights groups’ condemnation, while undermining the international rules-based and multilateral consensus.

In parallel, this essay also questions to what extent the scale and scope or character of extreme migration policies and actions have become worse over the years, or whether it is more about the acceptance and normalisation – and even mainstreaming – of extreme policies that is striking.

Historical context: migration policy before the shift

In the aftermath of the Second World War, governments around the world understood that a concerted effort was required to prevent such a global-scale conflict from unfolding again. This was due not only to the extraordinary numbers of combatant and civilian deaths, but also to the brutality of the fighting, the absence of a protective code of human rights and the appalling results of genocide deliberately implemented. In 1945, under the shadow of these events and full of the optimism of what a new multilateralism could achieve, the United Nations was established.

Three years later, a groundbreaking document was created: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Outlining a total of 30 freedoms that belong to everyone, the UDHR went on to serve as the basis for international human rights law. As Amnesty International states, the UDHR “marked an important shift by daring to say that all human beings are free and equal, regardless of colour, creed or religion. For the first time, a global agreement put human beings, not power politics, at the heart of its agenda.”⁵ While not a legally binding document, the content of the UDHR has been added to the national constitutions and legal frameworks of many states around the world, in an effort to recognise and protect the human rights of every person.⁶

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3 The Overton Window is a concept from political theory describing the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time. Ideas outside the window are seen as ‘unthinkable’; those within are ‘acceptable’, ‘sensible’ or ‘popular’. As political discourse changes, the window shifts – allowing previously unacceptable ideas to gain legitimacy.

4 Migration policies refer to the laws and administrative measures that states leverage to manage the movement of people across borders. Such measures include, but are not limited to, border controls, visa regimes, detention systems, asylum seeking processes and integration programmes.

5 Amnesty International (2025) [What is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?](#)

6 Amnesty International (2025) [What is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?](#)

In 1951, the Refugee Convention took a further step, defining for the first time the term “refugee”, while establishing refugee rights as well as the international standards needed to secure their protection. In 1967, a protocol was added to the convention, further removing geographic and chronological limits and reinforcing refugee protection as a universal norm.⁷ Unlike the UDHR, the Refugee Convention is legally binding to all its signatories, but evidently not enforceable in practice.

In 1952, in the early days of the Cold War, the US passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, establishing a maximum yearly quota of immigrants in order to “preserve the sociological and cultural balance of the United States”.⁸ Overall immigration from the “Asiatic barred zone” was capped at 2,000 people annually, but it did allow for people of Asian descent to immigrate and to become citizens, which had been previously banned by laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924. Priority was also offered to European immigrants, while anyone with specific political beliefs – including, but not limited to, communism – was denied entry in the country (a policy that was not reversed until 1988).⁹ The act is illustrative of how immigration can be a contested space where discrimination, politics and need for migrant labour characterise legislation and policy.

Between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, more overt positions that depicted immigration as a national problem began to surface. Arrivals from the Global South started to increase rapidly due to local conflicts, poverty, famine, post-colonial migrations and other reasons (including direct invitations for migrant labour). Countries – specifically in Europe and North America – started to view the newcomers as culturally incompatible and burdensome (while still, nonetheless, needing their labour). In a 1978 televised interview, Margaret Thatcher, then leader of the UK’s opposition and soon to become prime minister, stated that, “People [in the United Kingdom] are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture.”¹⁰ By the 1980s, France saw a rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s far-right National Front party, which turned immigration into a highly politicised ‘hot potato’, or *cause célèbre*. The right quickly realised that immigration was a reliable way to gain media attention and drive support from the electorate – a dynamic that continues today.

Arguably, these widely shared views paved the way for the securitisation and politicisation of migration in the 1990s, apparent in a range of policies such as the US Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold the Line, which were launched to control and militarise the US-Mexico border through the enhanced deployment of patrolling agents as well as the erection of physical walls and the use of surveillance technology to deter crossings.¹¹ Meanwhile, the introduction of the Schengen area in Europe in 1995 (signed in 1985), while establishing an area of free movement within Europe, introduced the need for visas for some non-Europeans – notably, people from Africa. Analysts see these new restrictions as a critical step towards ‘Fortress Europe’ because the abolition of internal borders created a need to offset security risks with stronger external borders, presenting an inevitable barrier to migration.¹²

Mechanisms of normalisation

The mainstreaming of the extreme anti-migration policies that are being witnessed in 2025 stems from political debates and media narratives that have shaped this topic for the past few decades. From a political discourse that widely depicts migration as a ‘crisis’ that must be solved by militarising and securitising borders, to print and digital media that routinely push sensationalised coverage of migration-related events, the shift from the post-Second World War liberal norms is significant and ubiquitous.

The ‘threat’ and ‘crisis’ narratives

One of the ways in which the normalisation of extreme migration policies has occurred is through the framing of migration first as a ‘threat’, then as a ‘crisis’. The ‘threat’ narrative took root in the early 2000s, when several Western cities – including New York, Madrid and London – suffered major terror attacks perpetrated by extremist Islamic factions, with multiple research studies finding that, “Concern over terrorism and negative attitudes toward unauthorized immigration became stronger in the decade following the 9/11 attacks.”¹³

7 UNHCR (n.d.) [The 1951 Refugee Convention](#).

8 Baxter, A. M. and Nowrasteh, A. (2021) [A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present Day](#). CATO Institute.

9 Anderson, B. (2025) [What is the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act used for US deportations?](#) The New Arab.

10 Trilling, D. (2013) [Thatcher: the PM who brought racism in from the cold](#). Verso.

11 Davis, K. (2019) [Operation Gatekeeper at 25: Look back at the turning point that transformed the border](#). Los Angeles Times; Also Bornemeier, J. (1994) [El Paso Plan Deters Illegal Immigrants: Border: A federal study finds Operation Hold-the-Line effective. But researchers say it causes staffing and morale problems for agents](#). Los Angeles Times.

12 Widom, H. (2022) [The EU’s colonial-era external borders: Spain & Morocco](#), American University.

13 Rosenberger, J. S. and Steiner, M. (2019) [Attitudes toward Unauthorized Immigration in the Post-9/11 Era](#). Sociological Focus, 52(4), 292-308; Also Schüller, S. (2012) [The Effects of 9/11 on Attitudes Toward Immigration and the Moderating Role of Education](#), IZA Discussion Paper, 7052; Also Nussio, E., Bove, V. and Steele, B. (2019) [The consequences of terrorism on migration attitudes across Europe](#), Political Geography, 75.

With some echoes of an earlier anxiety and prejudice against communism, it was during this time that certain categories of migrants began to be viewed as ‘undesired’, when not explicitly labelled as ‘dangerous’ and ‘criminal’. People with a Muslim background or coming from Muslim-prevalent countries, in particular, were targeted by the media, while Western governments around the world joined the US in its proclaimed “war on terror”.¹⁴ After the 9/11 New York attack, specifically, the linking of terror and migration – especially Muslim immigration – became well entrenched.¹⁵

In another development, one of the most infamous examples of harsh migration policies from this era is the 2005 Operation Streamline – a US programme that criminalised irregular border crossings by defining them as ‘misdemeanours’ and started limiting access to asylum. Although criticised and challenged by courts and human rights organisations, the programme is still in effect in some sectors of the border and has resulted in thousands of migrants convicted and incarcerated since its launch.¹⁶

The ‘threat’ discourse around immigrants acquired another layer in the mid-2010s and developed into a fully formed ‘crisis’. In 2015, more than 1 million people fled war-torn Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, in an event that was quickly dubbed by many global mainstream media as a refugee ‘crisis’, with numerous commentators, including politicians, using terms such as ‘invasion’, ‘flood’, ‘wave’ and ‘swarms’ when referring to people on the move and new arrivals. As “one of the most heavily mediated world events” of the past 20 years, this unprecedented influx of people seeking refuge in Europe spurred a global media frenzy that, by and large, veered towards presenting these new arrivals as a problem that needed to be solved by any possible means – a fully-fledged ‘crisis’.¹⁷ For many in government, not coming up with a response was seen as political suicide in the face of sustained right-wing and nationalist challenges demanding action. In this context, the linking of public anxiety about large groups of irregular migrants or refugees with the fact that the majority were Muslim was promoted by certain commentators and right-wing politicians or movements – often capitalising on the post-9/11 association of Muslims with terrorism, even when facts rarely, if ever, supported such claims.¹⁸

Additionally, the opinions and attitudes of many political leaders across Europe echoed widespread media narratives, with notable examples being Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán and former Polish president Lech Kaczyński calling refugees “Muslim invaders”.¹⁹ In Poland’s case, the concept of ‘Muslim invasion’ was also further reinforced in the media through the infamous publication of a magazine cover that showed a half-naked white woman wrapped in an EU flag while trying to defend herself from dark-skinned male hands, with a caption that read: “Islamic rape of Europe”.²⁰

But many were also still generally sympathetic to the needs of people on the move however they arrived. Media outlets varied in their depiction and editorial on the implications of the increase in refugee and migrant arrivals with an evident split between the liberal, mainstream and more reflective press and the tabloid intentionally ‘shouty’ headlines. However, the media as a whole (including press, online and televised news) directly or indirectly promoted right-wing talking points and made sure migration and asylum issues remained the hottest political topic by sensationalising and repeatedly headlining them.²¹

The 2015 anti-refugee sentiment, however, was not felt in Europe alone. In the US, for instance, while the country did not receive unmanageable numbers of asylum seekers (the US accepted around 70,000 asylum seekers as refugees in 2015 and 85,000 in 2016, compared to more than a million reaching Europe in 2016 alone), Americans’ perception of immigration shifted further to the right.²² This was also stoked by Republican politicians and in reaction to the irregular arrival of hundreds of thousands of people from Central and South America into the US from Mexico each year.²³

Linking South and Central American migrants with tired characterisations of crime and violence combined with the additional characterisations of Islam and terrorism became powerful narratives and lenses through which migration-related issues were viewed: through it all, migration itself became a core talking point in nationalist and populist politics. In 2015 and 2016, the US Congress tried to pass – with bipartisan support – several bills to block Syrian and Iraqi refugees unless they passed

14 Al Jazeera (2022) [Decades after 9/11, Muslims battle Islamophobia in US](#).

15 De Haas, H. and Natter, K. (2015) [The determinates of migration policy](#). IMI Oxford.

16 American Immigration Council (2021) [Prosecuting People for Coming to the United States](#).

17 Trilling, D. (2019) [How the media contributed to the migrant crisis](#). The Guardian.

18 Friedman, U. (2017) [Where America's Terrorists Actually Come From](#). The Atlantic.

19 Agerholm, H. (2018) [Refugees are 'Muslim invaders' not running for their lives, says Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán](#). Independent; Also Wigura, K. (2016) [Poland's Islamophobia](#). Carnegie Endowment.

20 Agerholm, H. (2018) [Refugees are 'Muslim invaders' not running for their lives, says Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán](#). Independent; Also Wigura, K. (2016) [Poland's Islamophobia](#). Carnegie Endowment.

21 Petley, J. (2024) [How a 'Populist' Media Has Mainstreamed the Far Right](#). Byline Times; Also Völker, T. and Saldivia Gonzatti, D. (2024) [Discourse Networks of the Far Right: How Far-Right Actors Become Mainstream in Public Debate](#). Political Communication, 41(3), 353-372.

22 USA Facts (2024) [How many refugees are entering the US?](#); Also Pew Research Centre (2016) [Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015](#).

23 Zong, J. and Batalova, J. (2017) [Syrian Refugees in the United States](#). Migration Policy Institute.

specific 'national security' screenings, but these were blocked in the Senate.²⁴

During Donald Trump's first presidential campaign, 'fixing' the 'refugee crisis' was leveraged as a crucial focus of the new administration's efforts to "make America great again" – and a key contributing factor to his 2016 election victory. Once in power, Trump slashed refugee admissions to 18,000 in 2020 – down from 110,000 under Obama – the lowest figure in modern US history.²⁵

The belief that refugees were, first and foremost, a national security threat was reinforced through a series of Trump-mandated executive orders (such as the infamous 'Muslim travel ban') which began popularising – and normalising – ideas such as the extreme vetting of refugees and the intense militarisation and protection of borders.²⁶

Gradual policy shifts: the 'boiling frog'

The metaphor of the boiling frog can usefully identify how the gradual incorporation of individual, one-off and strict anti-migration measures becomes incrementally accepted over time and, as a result, begins to be perceived as pragmatic (when not necessary), ultimately making the next extreme measure more palatable and normalised.

A prime example is the EU externalisation of borders – ramping up in 2016 via a series of agreements between the EU and Türkiye, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania. However, some deals have a far longer history, with Spain signing agreements with Morocco in 1992 and with Senegal in 2006. Italy, too, started making deals with Libya as early as 2000, in an agreement between the governments of Giuliano Amato and Muammar Gaddafi.²⁷ Justified as ways to temporarily manage the refugee 'crisis', the more recent deals have ended up becoming a core part of today's EU migration policy, and conditionality of cooperation with the EU on

migration has increasingly been built into development cooperation/assistance.²⁸ Behind seemingly dry bilateral or multilateral cooperation deals lie effective permission and sanction for severe human rights abuses. At best, the EU (or the relevant member state) turns a blind eye to shameful outcomes; at worst, the countries involved in these deals directly collude, knowing what the brutal impacts may be for people on the move. A most egregious case is that of Libya and the EU's direct involvement in crimes against humanity – the subject of condemnation in multiple international reports and an alarming example of continual normalisation of extreme treatment of already vulnerable people.²⁹

Populism and electoral strategy

Over time, migration has become a potent tool for far-right, nationalist and nativist political parties. Leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán have consistently employed extreme anti-immigration rhetoric to build large and successful electoral platforms that promote hardline policies under the guise of 'defending' national identity, culture, security and sovereignty.³⁰ The results of the EU parliamentary elections in 2024 exposed strong and widespread support for right-of-centre and far-right and/or populist parties, all of whom had strong anti-migration agendas. In a bid to win over more voters and defeat the rightist/populist trends, mainstream parties have typically attempted to impress constituents by announcing that they, too, intend to be tough on migration.

For example, after its sweeping victory at the 2025 German elections, the centre-right CDU/CSU has, on multiple occasions, positioned itself closer to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in terms of tough anti-migration policies. Through allying themselves with AfD, they also dismantled Germany's longstanding 'firewall' – the country's 'unwritten rule' that prevents mainstream parties from forming alliances with far-right groups.³¹

24 CBS News (2015) [House Passes Bill Co-Sponsored By Corona Lawmaker To Halt Syrian Refugees](#); Also McClure, K. (2016) [This Week in Congress – January 19, 2016](#). Covington.

25 Giovagnoli, M. (2019) [Refugee Admissions to Hit 40-Year Low Under Trump](#). American Immigration Council.

26 Amnesty International (2025) [A licence to discriminate: Trump's Muslim & refugee ban](#).

27 Michalska, K. and Pawłowski, M. (2020) [Libya Agreement's Impact on Italy's Migration Policy](#). PISM.

28 Kohlenberger, J. (2024) [Migration Policy: European Union Increasingly Outsources Responsibility for Asylum](#). Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

29 Human Rights Council (2023) [Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya](#); Also ICJ (2025) [Libya: Immediately halt collective expulsions, arrests, violence and hate speech against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers](#).

30 Kaya, A. (2025) [The instrumentalisation of migration in the populist era](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

31 Al Mayadeen (2025) [Merkel slams CDU/CSU head for relying on AfD in migration policy vote](#).

Normalised extremes around the world

Normalising the extreme is a significant piece of research and documentation published in every Mixed Migration Review (MMR).³² Since its first edition in 2019, the MMR has been tracking egregious cases of extreme anti-migration policies, as well as other actions that lead to abuse, violence and seemingly deliberate negligence targeting people in mixed migration flows in and from every region of the world.

A temporal review of these reports as a collection is instructive not because policies or interventions (or neglect) have necessarily become more harmful or shocking, but because they have become more salient, more ordinary and more mainstreamed politically – almost expected now as part of modern migration ‘management’. Equally, they have become less shocking and have fallen off many news headlines, pointing to an overall sense of inevitability.

Looking back across the seven years since MMC first introduced the concept of a “normalisation of the extreme”, the trajectory is unmistakable. Many of the examples highlighted in the 2019 edition, for example, would not even make it into the 2025 edition. What was considered shocking at the time has since either hardened into law, become routinised practice or escalated into even more direct forms of harm.

Pushbacks are a clear case. In 2019, they were still treated as exceptional violations of international law, provoking outrage and litigation.³³ Today, pushbacks are carried out systematically along multiple European borders, with the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum containing provisions – such as the “instrumentalisation” clause – that risk further legitimising them.³⁴

The same dynamic is visible in relation to deaths at sea. The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck and the widely circulated 2015 image of the lifeless body of two-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi once shook the conscience of Europe.³⁵ By contrast, record-high Mediterranean fatalities in 2023 and 2024 barely registered on front pages. Worse, state actions – such as delayed rescues and systematic restrictions on NGO search-and-rescue operations – now actively contribute to this loss of life.³⁶

Elsewhere, the progression has moved from indirect to direct state violence. Where once policy forced people into dangerous routes, some states now directly target migrants. In 2023, investigations by Human Rights Watch³⁷ and MMC³⁸ documented mass killings of Ethiopian migrants by Saudi border guards – a shocking development that has drawn remarkably little international response or consequence.

Even the protective architecture of human rights law has come under direct challenge. In May 2025, nine EU states signed an open letter urging the European Court of Human Rights to reinterpret key migration protections – an extreme interference in judicial independence that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.³⁹

Proposals once seen as radical – such as offshoring asylum seekers or returning rejected claimants to countries with which they have no connection – have moved from the margins to the centre of EU debates. Israel’s transfers of asylum seekers to Uganda, for example, once drew outrage as an extreme aberration;⁴⁰ yet, in 2024-25, EU institutions and even UNHCR have entertained variants on ‘return hubs’ and third-country processing.⁴¹

Finally, the leaked Gaza Reconstitution, Economic Acceleration and Transformation Trust (GREAT) plan is an extremely disturbing example of how far migration governance has moved toward normalising extreme measures. Reportedly considered by US and Israeli officials, with involvement from private sector and institutional actors, the proposal calls for the ‘temporary relocation’ of Gaza’s more than 2 million residents, while indefinitely confining those who remain to a fraction of the territory.⁴² Even if dismissed as unrealistic or ‘insane’, its very conception and discussion at high levels show how ideas once seen as blatant violations of international law can now be entertained. The GREAT plan signals a sharp escalation in the willingness of powerful states to explore, legitimise and operationalise forms of extreme forced migration management once considered completely unacceptable.

Taken together, these developments confirm MMC’s initial hypothesis: practices that were labelled ‘extreme’ in 2019 have today become so entrenched that they would scarcely be remarkable enough to feature in this year’s review. In their place, new extremes emerge at the edges of debates, poised to be normalised next. The

32 Mixed Migration Centre (n.d.) [Mixed Migration Review](#).

33 Grant, P. (2019) Normalisation of the Extreme, in Horwood, C., Frouws, B. and Forin, R. (Eds.) [Mixed Migration Review 2019](#), Mixed Migration Centre.

34 European Council (2024) [Pact on Migration and Asylum: a common EU system to manage migration](#).

35 BBC (2015) [Migrant crisis: Photo of drowned boy sparks outcry](#).

36 SOS Humanity (2025) [The obstruction of search and rescue vessels causes hundreds of deaths at sea](#).

37 Human Rights Watch (2023) [“They Fired on Us Like Rain: Saudi Arabian Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border”](#).

38 Frouws, B. and Horwood, C. (2023) [Murderous border controls](#), Mixed Migration Centre.

39 Birchard, R. (2025) [9 EU states urge migration law rethink at Europe’s top court](#), DW.

40 Amnesty International (2018) [Israel: African asylum-seeker deportations and “voluntary” transfers are forced and illegal](#).

41 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2025) [Planned return hubs in third countries: EU fundamental rights law issues](#).

42 Beaumont, P. and Speri, A. (2025) [Leaked ‘Gaza Riviera’ plan dismissed as ‘insane’ attempt to cover ethnic cleansing](#), The Guardian.

Overton Window has not only shifted – it has shifted precisely in the direction that *Normalising the extreme* sought to warn against.

Erosion of norms and legal protections

The effects of the normalisation of extreme migration-related events and policies such as those described in seven publications of *Normalising the extreme* are complex, multi-layered and far-reaching. One of the main consequences of this mainstreaming is the erosion of humanitarian norms and international legal protection frameworks, such as those enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention or in The International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention). In many cases, often highlighted annually in past MMR reports, governments simply continue actions that domestic courts have banned, or which international agreements stipulate against.

Once hailed as groundbreaking, the Refugee Convention is now consistently and deliberately weakened by state actors globally, which, in line with migration agendas that focus on deterrence and expulsion as opposed to access and integration, neglect, ignore or manipulate its content.⁴³ In itself, the convention is considered by some outdated, and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees is often viewed as a tool that “makes very little provision for refugees’ rights and interests, instead focusing on the rights and interests of states”.⁴⁴ As a result, countries feel increasingly disconnected from these agreements, opting instead for pursuing their own objectives in matters of migration policy. In November 2023, South Africa’s home affairs minister proposed that the country should temporarily exit the UN Refugee Convention and later rejoin with selective reservations – arguing that South Africa lacks the resources to fulfil socio-economic obligations and that the original accession was made without state-friendly exceptions.⁴⁵ Other countries, including Poland, The Netherlands and the UK, have at various times recently threatened to withdraw from the convention if it is not reformed or modernised.

Although the convention is meant to be binding, it remains unenforceable and its mandate-holder – the UNHCR – needs to deploy its condemnation and reprimanding critique sparingly or else risks becoming only background noise with little impact on misbehaving states. In recent years, in fact, the breaches of the convention have been rising and condemnation by the UNHCR and other human rights organisations appears to be falling on deaf ears. In other cases, it has attracted criticism for its “unconscionable silence” or apparent muted condemnation – possibly compromised due to increasing dependency on states’ funding, often from the very states they are seeking to publicly reprimand.⁴⁶ This may only increase from 2025 onwards, as seismic changes in funding for humanitarian and development aid are occurring after significant cuts by the US, the closure of USAID and other countries’ steady reduction in aid allocations.⁴⁷

Another grave consequence of normalising hardline anti-migration stances is that the role of NGOs and humanitarian aid is effectively turned on its head, with governments deeming it more a direct threat and an obstacle than a way to provide tangible help, support and assistance to people on the move.

This worrying shift is exemplified in a range of moves by various states, such as the Italian Piantadosi Decree from 2023, which requires rescue ships to sail straight to their designated port without performing multiple rescues. Other, perhaps more damning, examples are the criminalisation of NGOs Sea-Watch and Open Arms for simply carrying out rescue operations, the arrest of several Greek aid workers for “facilitating illegal entry” of migrants and Hungary going as far as to pass a law that criminalises NGOs that “support illegal migration”.⁴⁸ Even individual people faced prosecution a number of times, as in the famous case of French humanitarian farmer Cédric Herrou, who assisted migrants at the French-Italian border.⁴⁹

The increasing criminalisation of solidarity shown in these examples, and particularly prevalent in the Global North, illustrates how governments around the world systematically misuse and exploit the legal system as a way to both deter migration and punish people and organisations supporting migrants. The

43 Oberman, K. (2025) [Is the UN Refugee Convention still fit for purpose?](#) LSE.

44 Kirişci, K. (2021) [The 1951 Refugee Convention is falling short of its mission. Could the Global Compact on Refugees help?](#) Brookings; Also Arnold-Fernández, E. (2023) [The Global Compact on Refugees: inadequate substitute or useful complement?](#) Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

45 Merten, M. (2023) [South Africa: Motsoaledi Proposes Temporary Exit From UN Refugee Convention and Overhaul of Immigration Regimen](#). All Africa.

46 Nillufary, A. (2025) [UNHCR’s Unconscionable Silence: A Public Indictment Demanding Justice for a Decade of State-Sanctioned Barbarity](#). Medium.

47 The United Nations Office at Geneva (2025) [UNHCR forced to make deep cuts, despite rising needs worldwide](#).

48 SOS Mediterranée (2023) [Piantadosi Decree: the price of disregard for maritime law](#); Also European Parliament (2024) [Responsibility for search and rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean](#); Also PICUM (2025) [Criminalisation of migration and solidarity in the EU 2024 report](#); Also MacGregor, M. (2024) [Greece drops charges against 35 aid workers](#). Infomigrants; Also De La Baume, M. (2021) [Hungarian law criminalizing asylum seeker help breaches EU law, top court rules](#). Politico.

49 Quioc, M. (2017) [French farmer convicted for helping migrants](#). AP News.

new EU anti-smuggling Facilitation Directive, while an improvement in some ways, could potentially still lead to prosecution of human rights defenders and those providing support to migrants and asylum seekers.⁵⁰

Public tolerance and desensitisation

The constant exposure to extreme migration policies, actions and behaviours has powerful ripples across society at large. The public is seemingly more and more accepting of tougher measures – even when they undermine the rights of migrants and refugees. This increased tolerance and *laissez-faire* attitude stem mainly from two elements.

On the one hand, mainstream media (including social media) as well as right, far-right and populist parties are consistently bombarding people with often amplified, sensationalised and fear-driven narratives around migration.⁵¹ From linking migration with crime and terrorism to describing refugees and asylum seekers as a ‘flood’, ‘swarm’, ‘wave’, ‘surge’ or ‘invasion’ of people determined to “steal jobs” and wreak havoc on national identities and cultures, media outlets and their crisis-based language create the impression that migration equals chaos and violence.⁵² As a result, people become more open to the extreme anti-migration acts of governments, which they come to see as necessary ways or emergency measures to ensure peace and retain border control and protection.

The second element can be defined as ‘empathy fatigue’ which refers to an increasing numbness and reduction in compassion that the public displays when faced with prolonged exposure to images and news stories about capsized boats, detained and deported migrants, poverty-stricken refugee camps and border violence.⁵³ Instead of causing shock and a willingness to act and help, this continued exposure turns those images and news stories into common, everyday occurrences, stripping them of their meaning and importance and, ultimately, paving the way for the tacit consensus and approval of hardline policies.

In a 2024 research paper, the Migration Policy Institute found that “while compassion is extremely powerful, it is also highly vulnerable to fatigue”.⁵⁴ This compassion fatigue is particularly evident in the stark U-turn that

Germany has taken at the 2025 federal elections. After years of promoting a *Willkommenskultur* (“welcome culture”) towards migrants and refugees, German voters elected the centre-right CDU/CSU, which has progressively aligned itself with the hardline anti-migration measures proposed by far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).⁵⁵

A more lethal and visceral example of this fatigue is the increased tolerance and general acceptance of deaths in sea crossings globally, and particularly in the Mediterranean. In the past, stories and images such as the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy with more than 300 deaths and the drowning of Alan Kurdi stirred hearts and consciences, but today stories of migrants’ deaths are far less prominent in the media – and less likely to incite empathy and compassion from audiences.

Since March 2025, Iran has deported nearly 800,000 Afghan nationals, often with violence and summarily. This mass expulsion followed the 12-day conflict with Israel and was driven by supposed security concerns, including allegations that some Afghans were acting as spies for Israel. The whole event has been virtually ignored by the international community. Another example of changes in sensitisation is the response to the Reform UK party’s promise, in late August 2025, to deport the 600,000 migrants recently arrived on small boats if it came to power. To date, the criticism has been around the legal and practical feasibility of the claim, rather than the ethical or treaty-busting aspects of it, including the fact that, in order to put this into practice, the UK government would need agreements and collaboration with, *inter alia*, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the ruling regime in Eritrea.

Resistance and counter-narratives

While many mainstream parties, fringe political groups and media outlets globally are ever keen to keep pushing a crisis- and fear-led narrative around migration in order to continue implementing harsher measures, this does not happen without these measures (and their respective promoters) being consistently opposed, resisted and, in some cases, brought to court by human rights organisations, grassroots groups, activists and civil society leaders. Some of these have been captured in MMR publications in the *Resisting the extreme* reports

50 PICUM (2024) [How the New EU Facilitation Directive Furthers the Criminalisation of Migrants and Human Rights Defenders](#).

51 Mortimer, J. (2025) [How Negative Media Headlines About Small Boat Crossings Are Turning Brits Against All Migrants](#). Byline Times.

52 Electronic Immigration Network (2025) [Academic report explores role of media and politics in shaping public perception of irregular migration](#); Also Clayton, D. (2022) [‘Swamping’, ‘Cockroaches’, ‘Invasion’: How Language Shapes our View of Migration](#). Byline Times; Also McKann, K., Sienkiewicz, M. and Zard, M. (2023) [The role of media narratives in shaping public opinion toward refugees: A comparative analysis](#). IOM.

53 Famulari, U. and Hatley Major, L. (2024) [The influence of visual and textual frames on people’s perception of migrants](#), *Communication and the Public*, 10(1), 25-39.

54 Banulescu-Bogdan, N., Murat Erdoğan, M. and Salgado, L. (2024) [Confronting Compassion Fatigue](#). Migration Policy Institute.

55 Guzzardi, J. (2023) [European Migration ‘Compassion Fatigue’](#). Institute for Sound Public Policy.

since 2021 – a surprisingly difficult and often sparse compilation. Not all events or policies reported on are acts of resistance to extreme and harmful processes: some are simply migration policies that expand the space and opportunity for asylum or reduce exclusion of migrants.⁵⁶

During Donald Trump's first presidential mandate, for example, several of his migration-related bans and policies were repeatedly blocked by federal courts – including elements of his travel bans, his 'Remain in Mexico' policy and his family separation policy. The courts were pivotal in forcing the government to reunite thousands of families that had been previously separated at the US-Mexico border.⁵⁷

Despite mounting opposition and criminalisation, NGOs like Sea-Watch and Open Arms continue to operate sea rescues in the Mediterranean, providing shelter, medical care and legal assistance to migrants. In 2024, Greece dropped charges against 24 aid workers previously accused of 'smuggling' migrants, whereas in Italy, in 2024, members of Sea-Watch, MSF, Save the Children and Jugend Rettet were acquitted of charges of aiding and abetting illegal immigration, with the court concluding that these organisations only acted in order to save lives.⁵⁸

Aside from NGOs and grassroots movements, some cities, counties and states have also embraced an openly resistant stance against national and international anti-migration policies by declaring themselves 'sanctuary jurisdictions'.⁵⁹ Hundreds of these exist around the world, including New York, Chicago and San Francisco in the US, and Amsterdam, Barcelona and Palermo in Europe. These 'refuge cities' showcase their support and openness towards migrants by prohibiting local law enforcement from cooperating with immigration authorities as well as by welcoming refugees and supporting more humane and inclusive policies.⁶⁰ Although it is not a typical example, the case of Ukrainian refugees in Europe and beyond shows that, with political will and public compassion, millions of people (6 million, in this instance) can relatively easily – and without political crisis – be absorbed, protected and provided for. Surely this constitutes an emblematic example of what could be possible and a story of resisting the extreme, even if the same governments who accept Ukrainians are some of the most active in denying access to other refugees.

An endless normalisation of extreme migration policies?

The mainstreaming of extreme anti-migration narratives, attitudes and policies does not happen in a vacuum, nor does it take place overnight. It is the result of incremental changes that are often presented by governments and authorities as 'temporary', 'exceptional' or 'necessary' and that, once accepted by societies, gradually pave the way for other, increasingly harsher measures. But it also takes place in the context of rising irregular immigration, a reduction of asylum space and where governments – especially in democratic, liberal societies – are hamstrung to know how to deter people on the move. These tensions, combined with public pressure to 'do something', result in the distortions and excesses that are becoming normalised.

The outcome of this is a generalised *normalisation of the extreme* which, in turn, generates a numbness towards acts that would have been deemed unacceptable only a few years earlier and risk eroding human rights regulations and frameworks. Accompanying and reinforcing this phenomenon is a sense of 'othering' migrants and asylum seekers with deliberate or unconscious biases that lead to selective compassion and assistance. As mentioned, clear examples are noted in the more favourable treatment of Ukrainian refugees versus Syrians or other refugees from equally war-affected countries, or in the US prioritising Christian refugees over others.⁶¹

While rights-based organisations, activists and civil society representatives have continually spoken up against these extremisms, the drift away from foundational human rights and solidarity norms by governments is marked and appears to be advancing negatively.

In the current and expected future, anticipating the impact of deepening climate change, factors that might force or trigger a resistance or counterreaction to the normalisation of the extreme seem few and far between. The possibility of shifting back the Overton Window appears massively reduced, not least since the drivers that lead people to migrate remain persistent. More alarmingly, these trends are occurring in a world where societies have never been more progressive or rights-focused, and where minority inclusion and ending

56 See any of the [MMR publications](#) between 2021 and 2025 inclusive.

57 Boghani, P. (2019) [A Guide to Some Major Trump Administration Immigration Policies](#). PBS; Also Gerstein, J. and Hesson, T. (2018) [Federal judge orders Trump administration to reunite migrant families](#). Politico.

58 Al Jazeera (2023) [Greek court rejects charges against aid workers](#).

59 Global Refuge (2021) [What are Sanctuary Cities?](#)

60 Vaughan, J. M. and Griffith, B. (2025) [Map: Sanctuary Cities, Counties, and States](#). Center for Immigration Studies.

61 Gonzales, R. (2017) [Trump's Refugee Plan Will Prioritize Christians Suffering Religious Persecution](#), NPR.

discrimination for many governments is now the norm. And yet, in the midst of recent and progressive behavioural and attitudinal societal shifts, the grim spectre of certain harsh migration policies stands out in sharp contrast.

Shifting back the Overton Window in the context of migration policies and actions means challenging the creeping normalisation of extreme policies and practices. The question is whether what has become 'ordinary' can once again be recognised as unacceptable. History shows it can. Slavery and colonial exploitation were once considered legitimate, until moral arguments and collective mobilisation rendered them indefensible. In the US and elsewhere segregation in schools and public life was long upheld in law, before civil rights movements reframed exclusion as a violation of equality. More recently, once criminalised or pathologised same-sex relationships are legally recognised and even celebrated in many societies. Norms are never fixed; societal attitudes can shift and the direction of these shifts is never set in stone. With sustained advocacy, evidence-based alternatives, and the reframing of public discourse around dignity, rights, and human security, societies can redraw the boundaries of what is tolerated. By amplifying narratives that highlight the humanity and contributions of people on the move – also in light of increasing demand for and global competition over migration labour – while holding states accountable to international standards, we can begin to reverse the slide towards ever more extreme measures. What feels 'normal' today can once again be seen for what it is: extreme, harmful and unacceptable.

That said, the evidence of recent years – and, especially, states' positions amid the geopolitical turmoil and global uncertainties in 2025 – suggests conditions for those on the move will get yet tougher, as extreme measures and inhumane responses to migrants and asylum seekers become even further normalised.

Photo credit: Zevlan / Shutterstock

Since 2001, Australia has been engaging in offshore asylum processing and currently has arrangements to detain and process small numbers of asylum seekers on Nauru, despite the closure of Manus Island facilities in 2017 and the removal of most people from Nauru by 2023. Increasingly, more countries around the world are attempting to replicate this so-called Australian model. (See Thematic snapshot *How offshore asylum and migration management went global in 2025*, [p. 229](#)).



A photograph of Volker Türk, the current United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, speaking at a press conference. He is a middle-aged man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking slightly to his right. The background features the United Nations logo and the text 'UNITED NATIONS GENEVA' and 'NATIONS UNIES GENEVE'.

Interview

Embracing human mobility as an issue to tackle, not a crisis to solve

In a global context of rising racism, anti-migrant narratives and alarmist discourses, the role of rights-based organisations and non-binding treaties is often questioned. Nevertheless, there remain reasons for optimism, says **Volker Türk**.

Volker Türk is the current United Nations high commissioner for human rights. He has previously held senior positions at the United Nations in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, both at its headquarters in Geneva and in field offices around the world.

How concerned are you about the rise of the xenophobic rhetoric and the anti-migrant sentiment in current political discourse globally, and what role can the UN play in challenging those narratives?

One of the big issues of our time is the divisive and polarised rhetoric and narratives that we see more generally. It has become very clear that migrants and refugees have become one of the prime targets and scapegoats for polarisation and division, and I think we see it, unfortunately, all over the world, but particularly in discussions in the US and in many Western European countries, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. It is part of what I call 'politics of distraction'. Rather than addressing legitimate grievances that are mainly about living standards and other economic and social rights, which should be addressed by the political economic élites, concerns and grievances are projected onto migrants, who are made the object of hatred and division. And I think that's what we see, and we have seen this over many years now. It's the old trick of populist politics.

You have an extensive background with UNHCR: how has that experience shaped your approach to human rights leadership today?

My life with UNHCR was one where I was constantly interacting with refugees and asylum seekers, hearing their stories, listening to their experience. Refugees are, of course, victims of human rights violations – that is why they flee in the first place. If you look at any refugee history, it is a history of massive human rights persecution, but then they also often end up in situations where their rights as refugees or as asylum seekers are violated again, such as detention, border pushbacks or unfair processes. That was one of the very strong motivating factors that led me to become high commissioner for human rights. Throughout my 30 years at UNHCR, I dealt with the consequences of human rights violations, but I wanted to address human rights violations at their core, so that people are not compelled to flee, give up their lives and uproot themselves to evade conflict. There is a very strong connection between my former work and my current work.

“ One of the big issues of our time is the divisive and polarised rhetoric and narratives that we see more generally. It has become very clear that migrants and refugees have become one of the prime targets and scapegoats for polarisation and division, and I think we see it, unfortunately, all over the world, but particularly in discussions in the US and in many Western European countries, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. ”

In recent months, you've criticised a wide range of countries – including Libya, Tunisia, Malaysia, the US, the UK and the Dominican Republic – for their treatment of refugees and migrants. Would you say these vulnerable groups face unprecedented levels of abuse in today's world compared to the past?

Refugee and migrant issues have never been easy, but I think we have never had a period like the present. Previously, the institution of asylum was never questioned in the way that it is done now. Today, there was an article in an international magazine asking if asylum is still survivable or viable. I was a little bit taken aback because – let us not forget – asylum and providing sanctuary to people who flee and are in need of protection is an ancient tradition. And that tradition is still a sacrosanct one today, but I am not so sure it is as sacrosanct as it was a couple of years ago. I think that is where the change lies in respect to migration. One thing that struck me when I was living in New York during Covid-19 was that, every day, I was so deeply grateful for the migrants, some of them probably in an irregular situation, who kept us alive because they made sure that we got food into this big city. They made sure that our garbage was collected. They made sure that the health clinics and the hospitals were cleaned. I think we forget this incredible contribution – this unseen contribution – that migrant workers made during the pandemic. There was no question whether they were regular or irregular. Essentially, they kept us alive, and I am sure it was similar in Europe. I thought to myself, my goodness, we should be so grateful to the people who keep us alive.

More generally, do you think the issue of irregular migration has undermined the sacrosanct-ness of the concept of asylum?

Part of the complexity of migration governance and refugee issues is precisely that we have a bit of confusion around irregular migration, regular migration and refugee issues. It is also true that, in Europe, the numbers of asylum seekers have gone down and

that the largest refugee-producing countries are usually either in conflict or have serious human rights violations. Other countries don't have those problems, so the issue is more about migratory pressures.

The overarching problem for politicians is how to deal with a complex issue, and migration is a complex issue. Often, communities that have never seen a migrant or refugee are the ones who are most fearful of them. Communities where locals interact with migrant workers and refugees usually have no issues, except perhaps initially, if arrivals happen too fast and the change is too sudden. For example, when a million Syrians arrived in Germany and other European countries, the issue was the rate and the speed of those arrivals. Then there are those situations in which someone may commit a serious crime. Even a single case can trigger very strong emotional reactions, and other foreigners are seen as guilty by association. Of course, we do not hear enough in the media about the good stories.

“ Refugee and migrant issues have never been easy, but I think we have never had a period like the present. Previously, the institution of asylum was never questioned in the way that it is done now. ”

Do you think the current international legal framework is adequate to protect people on the move? Are the Global Compacts working?

Well, I think they are. I was heavily involved in their development, and particularly in the negotiations around the Global Compact on Refugees. That compact addressed an issue that we had not been able to deal with in the past on the refugee front, which is essentially burden- and responsibility-sharing between states, with some very creative ideas. It also sought to bring development and humanitarian action closer together and to resolve the so-called 'development-humanitarian nexus' issue in refugee affairs. Otherwise, you have situations where humanitarians provide education for refugees but ignore the host communities. The Global Compact tried to deal with the issue of early integration of refugees into development programs that benefit the host communities at the same time. And with this, particularly with the international financial institutions, we have seen quite a lot of progress.

I do think the issue is implementation. We have an adopted outcome document which is there to be used and seen as a blueprint for action by the international community. I think it is the same situation with the migration compact. Before the migration compact was agreed on, migration in the UN was not necessarily a central topic between states at the multilateral level. It was handled within the IOM and to some extent UNHCR. To make migration a governance and negotiation issue, putting all the different interests of countries around the table and defining what this would mean was a first. The problem is such documents take a long time to negotiate, but then they are not really used in the way that they should be. Some aspects of the compacts have advanced – for example, there is more discussion about regular pathways today than we had in the past. But they always require political will to implement, and I think that is what we are missing. I wish that those who come into political leadership positions today actually read these documents and felt inspired by them, because a lot of thought went into them and the negotiations with and between governments were extensive, so the compacts should be used and not just forgotten.

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Sometimes I feel the period when the compacts were developed was a great period of aspiration. And yet, with Covid-19 immediately following their adoption, and with the geopolitical turmoil and great uncertainty we are facing now, it almost feels as though governments are treating the compacts as a luxury. I know neither compact was binding, but I wish governments would treat them as if they were.

There's criticism from civil society that your office is not doing enough to hold governments to account when they perpetrate violations against people on the move. How would you respond to that?

First of all, we are the most underfunded part of the UN. We have three people working on migration in the global team, which gives you an indication of how underfunded we are. The prediction for this year is that we are losing probably a quarter of our funding for various reasons. But we have the Stand Up for Migrants campaign. I think with these campaigns, especially in Southeast Asia, we have seen some interesting results. The other area is, of course, the monitoring of certain

situations where we have some presence. We have engaged in border monitoring. For example, we are looking at AI tools which are being used at the border and the human rights impact of such tools. These tools are increasingly used, but if there is no oversight or proper risk assessment, they can be used for profiling purposes or can result in automated systems deciding on things that require human oversight and intervention.

“We have engaged in border monitoring. For example, we are looking at AI tools which are being used at the border and the human rights impact of such tools. These tools are increasingly used, but if there is no oversight or proper risk assessment, they can be used for profiling purposes or can result in automated systems deciding on things that require human oversight and intervention.”

My office has also increasingly become involved in legislative issues when we see that deportations are carried out in a way that is violating due process and fair trial rights. We also intervene directly in some cases, both bilaterally and publicly. I was very clear in the context of the Dominican Republic. We have issued strong press releases on deportations from the US and a number of European countries, including the UK. The issues around migration and asylum are part of a much bigger human rights story, but we are active. Today I have just issued a press release on deportations to Afghanistan, not only from Iran and Pakistan but also from other countries.

Migration and asylum issues can reflect the tip of the iceberg of other human rights issues within a society. I mean, the way you deal with the 'other' is a good indication of how you are going to deal with your own citizens, to some degree. So, for me, it is a slippery slope – and that's an important human rights message. If you exclude minorities within your country, if you identify foreigners – be it refugees, migrants or other foreigners – as a group to be excluded or marginalised, you may end up doing the same to parts of your own citizenry. Look at the whole debate around minority groups, such as LGBTQI+ communities and poor people.

How to respond to the situation in Gaza must be a big concern for you at this time, right?

Yes, the situation in Gaza is absolutely horrific. It is also very bad in the West Bank, even though we do not hear enough about what's happening, including on the displacement front. We issued our latest press release and update on the West Bank this week. Coming back

to Gaza, I have rarely seen a situation where multiple forms of displacement occur with such speed and at such a magnitude. I remember Kosovo, of course, where there was massive displacement, but it was not a situation where you had people fleeing from one village to another and then to another, then being ordered to leave again and then asked to essentially be confined to one part as we are seeing in Gaza. I know this from my own staff there – some of them have been displaced ten times, not knowing where to find safety. And yes, it is heartbreaking to see how this population is suffering under these circumstances, and the displacement angle is a horrific one. We are also seeing the risk of ethnic cleansing right in front of our eyes. I think the displacement side to this unbearable suffering is a huge component of what is happening.

“When I was living in New York during Covid-19 ... I was so deeply grateful for the migrants, some of them probably in an irregular situation, who kept us alive because they made sure that we got food into this big city. They made sure that our garbage was collected. They made sure that the health clinics and the hospitals were cleaned. I think we forget this incredible contribution – this unseen contribution.”

This is also a big indictment of the state of the multilateral systems we have at the moment.

There is one organisation that was specifically created to deal with the situation of Palestinian refugees, UNRWA. The vilification that I see of UNRWA is shocking. My own office also receives such criticism. When entities try to do their job, mandated by the United Nations, there is an attempt to denigrate, to delegitimise what we do. It is a very worrying trend.

Having said that, if I was not getting criticism, I am pretty sure I would not be doing my job effectively. My job is to call governments to account. So, criticism is one thing. To actually pass laws, as we saw when Israel effectively outlawed UNRWA, is an entirely different level.

You've spoken previously about the growing threat of climate change and climate-induced displacement. What steps do you think must be taken to ensure people displaced by climate change receive adequate protection under international law? And do you think it's time to formally recognise climate refugees?

I was involved in this issue through the Nansen agenda some years ago. In some cases, the 1951

Refugee Convention would recognise people who flee circumstances that are related to climate change, for example, if a sudden-onset disaster occurred and there was a lack or an absence of government response. Myanmar is a good example. You may have an earthquake, or you may have flooding, and if the government is excluding people from assistance and people then flee, the circumstances amount to persecution. So, you could use the 1951 Refugee Convention for certain groups of people who flee climate-related events.

“Often, communities that have never seen a migrant or refugee are the ones who are most fearful of them. Communities where locals interact with migrant workers and refugees usually have no issues, except perhaps initially, if arrivals happen too fast and the change is too sudden.”

I think in the broadest sense, though, the biggest issue is not so much one of external, cross-border displacement, it is more about internal displacement. Most displacement happening because of climate-related issues or environmental degradation is internal, and that is a challenge for governments – there is a need to actually do the strategic foresight and the preparations for what would it mean if, suddenly, people can no longer have their livelihoods met in certain parts of the country. In Central America, just to give you an example, climate projections suggest there will be what they are calling a “drought corridor”. If you look ahead ten years, they say that this drought corridor will become bigger and bigger, which means that this area becomes unliveable. The same for Somalia, if one looks at climate models there. So how does a short-term governance model deal with long-term issues? I think that is the big problem, because, of course, if you are caught up in electoral cycles, how do you deal with these long-term issues? This is one of the biggest challenges, and it also impacts and must include issues of migration.

“If you exclude minorities within your country, if you identify foreigners – be it refugees, migrants or other foreigners – as a group to be excluded or marginalised, you may end up doing the same to parts of your own citizenry. Look at the whole debate around minority groups, such as LGBTQI+ communities and poor people.”

How do you account for such discrepancy in terms of international interest in situations such as Gaza and Ukraine on one side, and then neglected situations such as Sudan, Myanmar or Haiti on the other?

We are in a situation where we have the highest number of conflicts ever since the end of the Second World War. The ICRC just said there are 120 conflicts in about 60 countries – because in some countries you have more than one conflict. So it is significant. And I can understand that it is very difficult for the public to focus on more than one or two conflicts, because it is also emotionally draining. But this does not take away the responsibility of political leadership in countries to address these situations, and I think that is what is missing today. We are moving into a multipolar world, but it seems quite chaotic and not yet settled in terms of the types of rules that this new situation needs. It is quite urgent that the rules are established or else we run the risk of having situations which are more chaotic and anarchic. We are in this strange in-between period.

“ I think we need to rekindle a global consciousness. People of my generation grew up with a global consciousness, but now I feel that, with all the challenges and with social media, many people have retreated into isolationism – a sort of ‘me first and my nation first’ mentality.”

I think we need to rekindle a global consciousness. People of my generation grew up with a global consciousness, but now I feel that, with all the challenges and with social media, many people have retreated into isolationism – a sort of ‘me first and my nation first’ mentality.

What’s the future going to look like for migration? As movements of people grow larger, are we going to see more countries closing down their borders and adopting a fortress mentality? Or are they going to open up because they need migrants for labour?

You know, when you are in the midst of turmoil, it is very difficult to see where you are – it’s almost as though there was a kind of fog all around. But I do believe that, at the end of the day – and we see this also through research with the so called ‘persuadable middle’ or the ‘silent majority’ – people are not voting for cruelty. They are not voting for harsh measures, they are not voting for things that take us back in time, in terms of treating people badly. And that gives me hope that even on this complex issue of migration, which is going to be a big political issue in the future, we will find the resolve and the creativity to not only disentangle the complexities, but also to find solutions that work for everyone. If politics embraces human mobility as an issue to be tackled and to be worked through, we can find solutions that are workable for everyone.

“ If politics embraces human mobility as an issue to be tackled and to be worked through, we can find solutions that are workable for everyone.”

Trump targets the Refugee Convention: a fundamental shift in asylum norms

At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2025, Donald Trump launched his most direct attack yet on the global asylum system, accusing the UN's assistance of asylum seekers as "funding an assault on Western countries".¹ Also at the UNGA, during a US-organised side event *The Global Refugee and Asylum System: What Went Wrong and How to Fix It*, US secretary of state Christopher Landau outlined the administration's vision for urgent reforms to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The US administration's message was unambiguous: the current system is outdated, broken and being used as a 'backdoor method to circumvent immigration law'.² The solution, according to the US was to strengthen state sovereignty, for asylum to be temporary rather than permanent, and for a universal 'first safe country' rule - preventing onward movement of asylum seekers to 'preferred' destinations.

These announcements have understandably shocked refugee actors. They also relate to two aspects that are commonly associated with the phenomenon of mixed migration. Firstly, the issue of onward movement of refugees from first 'safe' countries of asylum to another destination country, and secondly, the so called 'abuse' of the asylum system by people who, in the absence of other alternatives, use asylum channels, despite ultimately not being eligible for refugee protection and primarily moving for other reasons, such as employment of family reunification.

A direct challenge to multilateralism

This marks a continuation of Trump's wider assault on multilateral cooperation (see *The erosion of migration multilateralism and the 'new world order'* p. 252) and push to shrink asylum and humanitarian spaces. Since taking office in January 2025, his administration has

made clear its intention to review its engagement with UNHCR and has denounced the Global Compacts on Refugees and for Migration as a "failed approach" that undermines national sovereignty. They have also made clear that the administration believes the compacts to be in opposition to a "common-sense duty to combat, rather than facilitate, the inherently destabilising phenomenon of mass migration".³

However, this push is not unique to the US, albeit they are offering the most extreme version of this critique. In particular, as the EU revises its Pact on Migration and Asylum, the criteria for designating 'safe' countries are being relaxed. Many member states are advocating a model that would make it easier to label countries as safe, whereby transit through a country before entering Europe could be grounds for denying asylum in the EU. Critics warn this would mean offloading responsibility to non-EU states, undermining the EU asylum system and global protection regime.⁴

UNHCR's response

Responding at UNGA, UN high commissioner for refugees Filippo Grandi urged the US not to dismantle the right to asylum. He acknowledged the real challenges states face in managing mixed population movements but underlined that state sovereignty and the right to asylum are not incompatible: governments retain the right to control their borders, but also the responsibility to protect those fleeing for their lives. He reminded delegates that 70% of the world's refugees remain in neighbouring countries rather than moving onward, for example to the US or EU. While acknowledging that asylum is not a licence for unrestricted movement, Grandi stressed it remains a vital safeguard and warned against undermining the convention's core purpose. He also reiterated that the convention enforces, rather than erodes, state sovereignty.⁵

1 Comerford, R. and Debusmann Jnr., B. (2025) [Trump criticises countries' migration and climate policies in scathing UN speech](#). BBC.

2 U.S. Department of State (2025) [Deputy Secretary Landau Leads UNGA Event on Migration Reform – Media Note](#).

3 U.S. Mission to International Organisations in Geneva (2025) [U.S. statement on sustainable responses at the 93rd meeting of UNHCR standing committee](#).

4 Amnesty International Joint Statement (2025) [EU 'safe country' and return proposals would seriously undermine protection and human dignity](#).

5 AT World News (2025) [Global Refugee Asylum Debate: Landau's Bold Fix at UNGA 2025](#).

Mending, not ending the Refugee Convention

While there has been concern voiced by multiple refugee and protection actors in response to the US's UNGA announcements,⁶ some have taken a more pragmatic approach. Days before the UNGA, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) published an article acknowledging reform is needed. However, rather than a reevaluation of the convention, they argue, a new protocol is needed to modernise the global asylum system. In the article, the authors acknowledge the strain on the current system, stating that “asylum systems have become an outlet for the mobility pressures created by demographic change and economic inequality – making it hard to distinguish the deserving from the chancers”.⁷ This has, in effect, they argue, resulted in a tension between a state's protection responsibilities and its ability to maintain security and order at borders.⁸

Crucially for implications in relation to mixed migration, MPI suggests reforms supporting ‘first safe country of asylum’ principles, in line with calls from the US, in order to prevent onward irregular movements, disincentivise irregular migration and smuggling, reduce harm and ensure protection for those genuinely in need. Its proposed protocol also calls for the expansion of solidarity and responsibility-sharing mechanisms to ease the burden on major refugee-hosting states. As MPI puts it, the real challenge is to adapt asylum norms to modern realities “without undermining their moral force”.⁹

What's at stake

When combined with the Trump administration's cuts to foreign aid, including for support to refugees in camps and in regions (see *The end of development aid? How aid cuts may reshape migration* p. 233), and its suspension of refugee resettlement, efforts to reform the Refugee Convention in ways that weaken protections could be seen as a triple assault on international solidarity.

In today's climate of geopolitical turmoil – where far-right political parties are gaining ground (see *The far right and migration politics in the aftermath of the 2024 'year of elections'* p. 178) and extreme refugee and migration management policies are increasingly normalised (see *When the extreme is normalised: shifting boundaries in acceptable migration policy* p. 192), re-opening the Refugee Convention risks accelerating a downward spiral in protection standards.

At this stage, the outcome remains uncertain as actors work out which approach to take in response. At the European Political Community Summit in Copenhagen after the UNGA in early October, a group of 17 European states issued a joint statement, calling for European legislative frameworks and asylum systems to be robust. They stated it should protect against exploitation, deter those trying to undermine asylum systems, and ensure international frameworks, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the Refugee Convention, are implemented in a way that safeguards against abuse.¹⁰ While clearly not going as far as the United States, it might add to the pressure.

What is clear is that this moment marks a potential turning point, the result of which could be a fundamental reshaping of asylum norms with profound consequences for mixed migration and people on the move.

6 International Service for Human Rights (2025) [UNGA80: Over 270 civil society groups urge States to defend human rights, refugee protections](#).

7 Fratzke, S. and Benton, M. (2025) [Mending, Not Ending, the Refugee Convention Could Save the Protection System and Restore Public Trust](#). Migration Policy Institute.

8 Fratzke, S. and Benton, M. (2025) [Mending, Not Ending, the Refugee Convention Could Save the Protection System and Restore Public Trust](#). Migration Policy Institute.

9 Fratzke, S. and Benton, M. (2025) [Mending, Not Ending, the Refugee Convention Could Save the Protection System and Restore Public Trust](#). Migration Policy Institute.

10 Government of the United Kingdom (2025) [Joint migration statement: 02 October 2025](#).

On a collision course? Labour shortages and anti-immigration stances

Kate Hooper¹

In a growing number of countries globally, governments are walking a tightrope between rising demand for immigrant workers and public demands for greater controls on migration. As of 2023, nearly four in five small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Europe reported difficulties finding workers with the right skills, with about half of SMEs surveyed calling for easier procedures to hire workers from outside the European Union.² Yet more mainstream political parties are adopting or calling for more restrictive admission or enforcement policies in response to a series of political victories for populist or far-right parties running on anti-migration platforms in countries across Europe and growing public anxiety about irregular migration. For example, Germany's government introduced more restrictive border and asylum policies in the summer of 2025, in an effort to reduce irregular entries and sap support for the far-right AfD.³ (see also Thematic snapshot *The far-right and migration politics in the aftermath of the 2024 'year of elections'*, [p. 178](#))

This balancing act can also be observed in the United States, where the Trump administration is navigating the effects of its mass deportation campaigns and efforts to reduce legal immigration in sectors such as agriculture and hospitality that rely on immigrant workers (including many without legal status, see also Thematic snapshot *ICE wars*, [p. 98](#)). For example, many frontline workers in agriculture lack legal status and have been caught up in recent enforcement, while recruitment in the meatpacking industry has included workers whose temporary right to work and protection from deportation has subsequently been revoked.⁴ In June 2025, Donald Trump publicly weighed up workarounds for employers in agriculture and hospitality who employ unauthorised migrants but, since then, the administration has made clear that enforcement in these sectors continues.⁵ Meanwhile, efforts to reshore manufacturing through tariff policies will also need to

navigate the growing reliance on foreign-born workers in some manufacturing-related occupations.⁶

This episode speaks to the competing priorities that governments now face as they tackle highly politicised migration issues. While the current push for more restrictive migration policies can ease political pressures, it may also imperil economic growth. Curbing legal pathways and/or clamping down on irregular migrants who may form an important part of local workforces can cut against other policy priorities, such as tackling labour shortages in priority sectors or sustaining workforces amid accelerating demographic decline. Public support for more restrictive migration policies may shift if these restrictions translate into higher prices for goods and services, illustrating the challenge for governments. Even populist governments, such as Hungary and Italy, that adopted anti-migration platforms have sought to thread this needle while in office, accompanying high-profile policies to curb irregular migration and facilitate more deportations with quieter efforts to expand international recruitment to address labour shortages. The question for governments is how to navigate the fast-changing politics around immigration without overlooking the vital role that immigrants play in their economies.

A growing reliance on immigrant labour

Economies around the world are increasingly reliant on immigrant workers. Across OECD countries, for example, immigrants comprised about 15 percent of the workforce as of 2022 on average.⁷ However, this figure obscures much higher shares in select members, such as Luxembourg and Australia. Migrant workers also make

1 Kate Hooper is a senior policy analyst with MPI's International Program, where she leads MPI's global work on labour migration. Ms. Hooper has advised governments and intergovernmental organisations on legal migration pathways and opportunities to adapt immigration and immigrant integration policies to respond to emerging labour market trends. Her areas of research include legal migration pathways, fair and ethical recruitment, the implications of remote work and other non-traditional working arrangements for immigrant selection systems, labour market integration and complementary pathways for displaced populations.

2 European Commission (2023) [European Year of Skills - Skills shortages, recruitment and retention strategies in small and medium-sized enterprises](#).

3 Jones, T. (2025) [German Cabinet approves stricter asylum measures](#), DW.

4 U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2025) [Farm Labor](#); Also Visa Verge (2025) [Hundreds of Iowa Meatpacking Workers Face Visa Revocations](#).

5 Bustillo, X. (2025) [After early reprieve from immigration enforcement, farming industry reckons with raids](#), NPR; Hesson, T. and Douglas, L. (2025) [ICE walks back limits on raids targeting farms, restaurants and hotels](#), Reuters.

6 The White House (2025) [Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase our Competitive Edge, Protect our Sovereignty, and Strengthen our National and Economic Security](#); Also US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025) [Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics - 2024](#). In 2024, foreign-born workers were more likely to be employed in production, transportation and material moving occupations (which includes many manufacturing roles) than their native-born peers (15.5%, compared with 11.6%).

7 OECD (2025) [Economic impact of migration](#).

up a growing share of workforces in emerging economies, such as Malaysia, South Africa and Thailand.⁸

While some of these workers may have entered through labour pathways, many others come through alternative channels, such as family, study and humanitarian routes, free movement arrangements or, in some cases, irregularly or overstaying a visa. This is especially likely for workers in less-skilled or lower-wage jobs given that, outside seasonal work, labour pathways often focus on admitting workers with advanced degrees. As a result, a wide array of migration policy reforms can end up impacting migrant workforces and labour markets writ large.

Immigrants' contributions can be felt across economies, ranging from highly specialised, high-wage roles (for example, a quarter of all science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workers in the United States are foreign born) to low-wage yet essential roles in caregiving or agriculture.⁹ Migration Policy Institute (MPI) research during the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, found that immigrants in the United States were overrepresented in frontline occupations in health care, food production, retail and manufacturing – a picture that was also borne out in Europe.¹⁰ As well as bringing specialist skills to these roles, immigrants often work in jobs that locals are unwilling to take. The reasons why these jobs are hard to fill, however, remains hotly debated, with sceptics arguing that employers have not done enough to raise wages or improve working conditions to encourage local workers to take these jobs.

As populations age and workforces shrink in many countries, this reliance on immigrant workers may become more pronounced. Birth rates are falling even more rapidly than predicted, including in middle-income countries, posing huge challenges for governments as they navigate smaller workforces, shrinking outputs and a growing number of retirees to support with a diminishing tax base.¹¹ For some advanced economies, such as Canada, Germany, Italy and the United States, immigration is already sustaining population growth, as fertility rates fall.¹² Meanwhile, intense demographic pressures and labour shortages have led Japan and South Korea – both historically closed to migration – to

open the door to more immigrants and gradually expand options for long-term residency.¹³

Migration restrictions squeezing labour markets

The current shift towards more restrictive immigration policies, nonetheless, calls into question the future of a more diverse workforce comprised of growing numbers of foreign-born workers. While some countries, such as Spain, are maintaining fairly liberal immigration policies for now, the tide is starting to turn elsewhere. Several countries, such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, are taking steps to reduce net migration numbers, citing concerns about the impacts on local communities, services, housing and infrastructure. However, this requires navigating the uneven regional distribution of immigration. For example, a recent MPI study found that, while a more restrictive immigration scenario in Canada would help larger cities cope with population growth by easing pressures on housing and infrastructure, it would have a devastating impact on rural economies where depopulation is happening much faster.¹⁴ Moving towards a greater focus on high-skilled immigration will need careful coordination with partner countries and investments in training pipelines to grow the talent pool and avoid brain drain.

These efforts to introduce more restrictive immigration policies come with clear risks to overall economic growth. For example, Malaysia has sought to reduce recruitment of foreign workers, citing concerns about productivity, exploitation and wage distortion, but employers have expressed scepticism about government claims that AI could fill some of these jobs and warned about potential impacts on operating costs and consumer prices.¹⁵ While developments in AI, automation and mechanisation may enable governments to transition away from a reliance on immigrant workers in some areas, this move can be challenging to implement and comes with significant short-term costs. For example, the US agricultural secretary Brooke Rollins has called for efforts to work towards a more automated and “100% American” workforce in agriculture staffed by recipients of Medicaid (a US government programme providing health insurance

8 IOM (2025) [Malaysia](#); Also IOM (2025) [Migration context](#); Statistics South Africa (2024) [Most migrants to South Africa come from the SADC region for employment](#).

9 American Immigration Council (2022) [“Foreign-born STEM Workers in the United States”](#).

10 Gelatt, J. (2020) [Immigrant Workers: Vital to the U.S. COVID-19 Response, Disproportionately Vulnerable](#). Migration Policy Institute; Also, Fasani, F. and Mazza, J. (2025) [Immigrant key workers: their contribution to Europe’s COVID-19 response](#). The Journal of Economic Inequality.

11 Fernández-Villaverde, J. (2025) [The Demographic Future of Humanity: Facts and Consequences](#). Penn Initiative for the Study of Markets.

12 Statistics Canada (2024) [Population growth: Migratory increase overtakes natural increase](#); Also Kramer, S. (2024) [In some countries, immigration accounted for all population growth between 2000 and 2020](#). Pew Research Center; Also Gokhale, J. (2024) [U.S. Demographic Projections: With and Without Immigration](#). University of Pennsylvania Wharton.

13 Aeran Chung, E. and Tian, Y. (2025) [Immigration Systems in Labor-Needy Japan and South Korea Have Evolved—but Remain Restrictive](#). Migration Policy Institute.

14 Hiebert, D. (2025) [Understanding the Impact of Immigration on Demography: A Canadian Case Study](#). Migration Policy Institute.

15 Azmi, H. (2025) [Malaysian employers warn cutting number of foreign workers may backfire](#). South China Morning Post.

to some low-income and other qualifying adults and children).¹⁶ But Covid-era efforts to recruit locally for agricultural jobs, such as the UK's Pick for Britain campaign, yielded disappointing results.¹⁷ Employers may need to offer more competitive wages and working conditions to attract local workers, as well as specialist training to perform these jobs, which together with short-term labour shortages could result in higher food prices for consumers, further driving up the cost of living, which is already a source of strong public concern and discontent in many immigrant destination countries and is connected to support for (often anti-immigration) populist parties.¹⁸

Additionally, while the shift towards more temporary admissions can reduce the fiscal costs of immigration (as fewer access public benefits or retire in destination countries), it can result in worse labour market outcomes for immigrant workers and their peers. Most people holding temporary work visas are sponsored by a specific employer and have limited options for switching employers without losing their visa. The result is that workers have to accept whatever wages and working conditions their sponsoring employer offers and are therefore unable to leave a bad job or seek out better employment opportunities. The effects of this reduced bargaining power can be felt more broadly in the downward pressure on wages and working conditions for the local workforce.

The focus on more temporary admissions also comes with ramifications for countries of origin, who may rely on remittances from their overseas diaspora. In 2024, remittances to low- and middle-income countries outstripped foreign direct investment and overseas development assistance combined – and, as foreign aid cuts take hold, this reliance on remittances is likely to grow.¹⁹ As a result, governments will need to consider ways to support the labour market (re)integration of their returning nationals.

In addition, restrictions around temporary migrants (as well as irregular migrants) accessing social protections can have long-term consequences for their lifetime earnings and, in turn, their savings at retirement age. These effects are playing out in the United States, where more irregular migrants are reaching retirement age without any savings or access to benefits (despite often paying taxes) and facing hard decisions about how and

where to navigate this financial insecurity.²⁰ As migrant workforces age, questions about eligibility for social protections and portability of accrued social benefits between countries will only gain in importance – and risk clashing with this push for more temporary admissions and fewer associated rights and benefits.

Finally, restrictive policies can make certain countries less appealing destinations to immigrants at a time where competition for talent is heating up. Immigration policies across OECD countries include features such as access to permanent residence and citizenship or the ability to bring family members with them in order to attract talent. This is often restricted for lower-wage or seasonal workers.²¹ Introducing more restrictive policies could make it harder to attract immigrants with sought-after skills going forward.

Governments at a crossroads

This tension between short-term political priorities that may favour greater restrictions on migration and long-term economic needs and trends that favour more permissive or flexible admission policies presents a significant challenge for governments, especially those that came into power partly due to campaign promises to restrict immigration and, simultaneously, boost the economy. Gaining an edge in the global competition for talent will require decisive action, yet many governments lack the political space to pursue more ambitious economic immigration policies. As public concerns about irregular migration persist, aided in part by the growing weaponisation of migration flows from Libya, Belarus and elsewhere, there is little sign that the political heat around immigration will cool.²²

It also speaks to a genuine debate about the role that immigration could and should play in economies going forward, especially regarding low-wage jobs that struggle to attract and retain local workers. While immigrants in low-paying jobs may represent an overall fiscal cost, due to lower tax contributions and (where eligible) a greater reliance on public services and benefits, their workforce contributions prop up the status quo of low-cost labour and lower prices in these sectors.

Governments pledging to reduce low-skilled immigration will need to be clear-eyed about how to replace this

16 Gedeon, J. (2025) [US agriculture secretary says Medicaid recipients can replace deported farm workers](#). The Guardian.

17 Sandercock, H. (2021) [Pick for Britain scheme for UK-based farm workers scrapped](#). The Grocer.

18 See, for example: Held, A., and Patana, P. (2023) [Rents, refugees, and the populist radical right](#) Research & Politics. 10:2; and Gozgor, G. (2024) [Economic uncertainty breeds support for populist parties](#) LSE blogpost.

19 Ratha, D., Plaza, S. and Kim E. (2024) [In 2024, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to reach \\$685 billion, larger than FDI and ODA combined](#). World Bank Blogs.

20 Flores, A. and Campo-Flores, A. (2024) [Many Aging Migrants Pay Taxes. They Stare Down a Retirement With No Benefits](#). The Wall Street Journal.

21 Andersson, L. (2025) [Measuring and assessing talent attractiveness in OECD countries, second edition: Methodology paper](#). OECD Social, Employment, and Migration Working Papers no. 318.

22 Nöstlinger, N. (2025) [We must work with Libyans to stop Putin weaponizing migrants, top EU official says](#). Politico; Also AP News (2024) [EU says asylum rights can be suspended for migrants 'weaponized' by Russia and Belarus](#).

workforce and what measures can ease this challenging adjustment period. In July 2025, the UK government announced it would close its social care visa following repeated reports of misuse and abuse by unscrupulous employers and recruiters.²³ Clearly, the visa as designed was unfit for purpose. Yet, at the time of writing, it is not clear how the UK government plans to replace the large number of immigrant workers in this industry – for example, through additional training places, local recruitment drives and/or higher pay to encourage retention of workers – and how it plans to manage worker shortfalls as new recruitment and retention strategies come online.

The economic costs of lower immigration may be significant, especially in the short run. In turn, there are potential opportunity costs associated with closing the door to immigration, such as impacts for innovation and economic growth. For example, in the United States, a 2022 study found that, between 1990 and 2016, immigrants accounted for 16 percent of all US-based inventors but produced 23 percent of all patents.²⁴

Governments will need to assess how much more they and their electorates are willing to pay for goods and services. Labour shortages in the construction sector, for example, not only impede housebuilding targets but also result in delays and higher costs on projects, while shortages in the food supply chain drive up food prices. Governments, therefore, will need to ensure that closing the door to international recruitment does not simply open the window for irregular entries and more informal employment practices in the grey economy. This shift into the shadows comes with major implications, both for the wellbeing of workers and the quality of services provided.

Managing this transition will likely come with an enormous price tag. Investments in productivity that could reduce reliance on foreign workers, such as expanded use of robotics, automation and AI, will take time and significant resources to roll out. These productivity gains may also prove harder to introduce in sectors with lower profit margins – such as agriculture – or in those that rely on human interaction, such as care for older people. Despite Japan investing hundreds of millions into research and development for care robots, for example, there has been limited uptake by old people's care facilities.²⁵

Substituting international recruitment for local hiring will require destination-country governments to not only expand the domestic training pipeline, but also work with the private sector to tackle the factors that make

it hard for employers to attract and retain local workers. Ultimately, this might translate into paying higher prices. For example, transitioning to a local care workforce would likely require higher pay, which would benefit workers but likely require significant subsidies from governments in order to keep care services affordable for their fast-ageing populations. In an era where tax bases are projected to shrink as more workers retire and where NATO member governments have committed to spend 5 percent of their GDP on defence and security by 2035, many countries may not be able to assume such massive additional financial commitments.²⁶

What does the future hold?

The political pendulum is swinging towards greater restrictions on immigration. In some countries, this shift is powered by populists running and winning on anti-immigration platforms – or winning sufficient support to prompt mainstream parties to reposition themselves on immigration issues. In other countries, this shift is driven more directly by economic concerns about boosting productivity and a desire to prioritise fewer and higher-wage migrants over low-wage migration and/or concerns about curbing exploitation and misuse in some pathways.

Recent experiences, however, point to the need for whole-of-government planning on immigration that can anticipate the effects of restrictive immigration policies on labour markets and training systems, as well as the effects for other sectors of the economy. There are worrying signs that some governments have not fully accounted for these potential economic impacts, nor how they might intersect with other geopolitical developments such as deteriorating trade relations. This planning should focus on three areas: population change (including the impacts of demographic change on services, housing and infrastructure), productivity (and how these investments can compensate for shrinking workforces) and predictability (including increasing transparency over and inputs into decision-making and exploring the case for multiyear-level planning).²⁷ As part of this work, governments will need to explore different scenarios for the disruptions wrought by AI on workforces and the implications for future selection priorities.

Whole-of-government planning can also take into account more fundamental policy questions that lie far outside the purview of immigration policy. These include how to deliver more and cheaper housing, how

23 Das, S. (2025) [Flawed UK visa scheme led to 'horrific' care worker abuse, says watchdog](#). The Guardian.

24 Bernstein, S. et al. (2022) [The Contribution of High-Skilled Immigrants to Innovation in the United States](#). National Bureau of Economic Research.

25 Wright, J. (2023) [Inside Japan's long experiment in automating elder care](#). MIT Technology Review.

26 Tian, N., Scarazatto, L. and Guibertau Richard, J. (2025) [NATO's new spending target: challenges and risks associated with a political signal](#). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

27 Benton, M., Banulescu-Bogdan, N. and Hooper, K. (2025) [Migration Governance in Unsettled Times: How Policymakers Can Plan for Population Change](#). Migration Policy Institute.

to fund higher education in the absence of large numbers of international students, how to tackle the cost-of-living crisis unfolding in many countries and how much governments are willing to pay for state-subsidised health and caregiving services.

There is a risk governments will look to square the circle of net fiscal costs and a dire need for immigrant workers by encouraging admissions, but making them strictly temporary and with no route to permanent residence. For destination-country governments, this option can offer a tempting way to plug labour gaps without adding to pressures on already-strained welfare systems. It also offers flexibility at a time where projections vary widely about how labour market needs may evolve in a new era of AI and automation. Hiring trends in the tech sector illustrate this flux, with signs that AI is replacing entry-level positions in software development that were previously experiencing a hiring boom.²⁸

Yet shifting to time-limited admissions comes with clear risks for migrants and countries of destination and origin alike. For example, the inability to change jobs is associated with a higher risk of exploitation, while the restrictive terms of temporary work visas that may include limits on family reunification raise questions about fairness, especially if people live, work and contribute to host-country societies for a number of years.

In this scenario, it is also important to consider how these developments shape the potential costs and benefits for countries of origin. Immigration restrictions will impact remittance receipts at a time where official development assistance (ODA) is falling precipitously (for more see *The end of development aid? How aid cuts may shape migration*, p. 233). And while brain drain remains a real concern, especially in sectors like clean energy where demand is also growing quickly in origin-country economies, another effect of closing off access to permanent residence and, with it, social protection systems is that more nationals may return at retirement age and require support.

Finally, this scenario assumes that destination countries will continue to be able to pick and choose among workers. There are, nonetheless, signs that this status quo is starting to change. The stagnating cost of living in Europe, for example, makes recruitment less appealing, especially if prospective migrants are eyeing restrictions on permanent status and family reunification. Emerging economies such as Brazil and Dubai are now offering more generous immigration packages that may change the calculus for some prospective migrants. As workforces shrink in many advanced economies, countries of origin with sought-after workers may find they have much more leverage in migration diplomacy. In turn, demographic transitions may drive more sending countries to rethink their stance on emigration. Colombia, for example, has a total fertility rate of 1.06 – far below the replacement rate (at 2.1) and far below the rate of richer countries such as the United States, which have more resources to navigate the impacts of fast-aging populations.²⁹ With one of the fastest-ageing populations in the world, China may also shift its stance on the emigration of its skilled nationals in particular. Traditional immigrant destinations cannot assume that it will remain a buyer's market forever.

28 Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B. and Chen, R. (2025) [Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence](#). Stanford Digital Economy Lab paper.

29 Fernández-Villaverde, J. (2025) [The Demographic Future of Humanity: Facts and Consequences](#). Penn Institute for the Study of Markets.

A portrait of Charlotte Slente, a woman with short grey hair, wearing a dark blue blazer over a light blue top. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred world map, showing continents in light green and oceans in light blue.

Interview

Funding cuts, fewer protections and a growing number of global crises to tackle: the struggles – and hopes – of humanitarian NGOs

Charlotte Slente discusses how, despite funding issues and other big hurdles, humanitarian NGOs like the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) still play a crucial role at a time when local solutions, short-term planning and siloed interventions are no longer enough to deal with a multitude of complex global crises. Rethinking priorities and working together to anticipate future threats to vulnerable countries and populations is paramount.

Charlotte Slente was appointed secretary general of the Danish Refugee Council in 2019, where she leads the organisation's humanitarian efforts in response to emerging and protracted crises worldwide. Prior to this, she had a distinguished career with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, serving as state secretary for development policy, directing DANIDA and as under-secretary of state for global politics and security, overseeing foreign policy for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. She also served as ambassador for fragile states, under-secretary of state for consular affairs and in senior embassy roles across Latin America and the Middle East, including ambassadorial postings.

You've been running DRC now for some years but, before that, you were involved in international diplomacy for the Danish government. How have you found the transition between those two different roles?

In some ways, the roles are comparable. I worked for a long time in the ministry on development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, so I was familiar with

the sector, its ways of operating and its key players. But what struck me most when I moved into the NGO sector was the sheer amount of time and effort we spend securing funding for our programmes. Ensuring that funding is sufficient, flexible and comprehensive enough to meet people's needs is a constant focus when responding to an increasing number of crises. This is especially key for the forgotten and protracted crises where funding gaps are the most significant. That's very

different from being in the ministry where, at the start of the year, you already know your total development cooperation budget and can dedicate resources directly to programmes instead of mobilising funding.

Another big difference is access to the people and communities who need our assistance. As a state actor or diplomat, you have certain channels and guarantees that both local and international NGOs often don't. Over the past five and a half years leading DRC, I've seen it become increasingly difficult for NGOs to gain access, either through temporary relief corridors, days/zones of tranquillity and other means. The principled, neutral, independent approach we take is being challenged and highly politicised. This is happening not just around access, but also through the disregard for international humanitarian law in general. In short, the operating environment for NGOs today is far less protected than it should be, and the legal and normative safeguards we rely on are under growing pressure. Unfortunately, this is also reflected in the record number of humanitarian deaths and the direct targeting of civilians.

“ The operating environment for NGOs today is far less protected than it should be, and the legal and normative safeguards we rely on are under growing pressure. ”

In March this year, after the big funding cuts in the aid sector, there was a call to action to the humanitarian community from the UN emergency relief coordinator, Tom Fletcher. It was a call for an agenda reset in the humanitarian sector. Do you agree with that?

Yes. Given the situation in the humanitarian sector, a reset in how we work is urgently needed. Funding is shrinking, and not just because of cuts from the US. Several major European donors are also decreasing their international cooperation budgets. The resources available for people in extremely fragile situations, including those displaced, are declining rapidly. At the same time, the number of crises continue to grow, due to a growing number of conflicts and the effects of climate change. Even before this crisis, UN humanitarian response plans were chronically underfunded, typically reaching only about 40 percent of their required budgets. If the current cuts go ahead, that could drop to around 20 percent.

We were already in a position where we could not reach everyone and had to prioritise only the most severely affected. A humanitarian reset must address this reality. It must not be a UN-only reset. It should involve the entire humanitarian ecosystem: donors, governments, international and local NGOs and community-based organisations. The challenges we face are

interconnected, and no single actor, whether the UN, a government or an NGO, can address them alone.

“ The resources available for people in extremely fragile situations, including those displaced, are declining rapidly. At the same time, the number of crises continue to grow, due to a growing number of conflicts and the effects of climate change. ”

We need to rethink priorities: improve coordination while working with fewer resources and change how we deliver assistance. Anticipatory action and disaster prevention have been discussed for years, but governments often struggle to fund something that hasn't yet happened. This is short-sighted.

Responding to an emergency costs roughly six times more than preventing it. By acting early, we can save lives, reduce displacement and plan responses more effectively. As is often the case, prevention is better than cure.

At the same time, we must think beyond immediate relief. In every crisis I visit, once people have shelter, water and food, the next question is: 'Can I work? Can I integrate into this society?' Long-term solutions (livelihoods, integration and self-reliance) should be part of the response strategy from the start, especially given that many crises today are protracted and displacement is no longer a temporary phenomenon: it lasts on average 20 years for refugees and more than 10 years for 90 percent of internally displaced people. Unfortunately, there is less momentum for peace negotiations, community-led peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and the global landscape is becoming more fragmented. Without stronger, united efforts to end and prevent conflicts, the suffering of civilians will only grow.

There are knock-on effects as well, aren't there? As the mass of displaced people in the world and asylum seekers grows, attitudes harden and tolerance shrinks.

Yes, I think that's right. I think there is a political discourse in this part of the world, in Europe, but also in the US and many of the wealthier countries in the world, that these countries are absorbing the majority of the refugees of the world. We have to remember that around 75 percent of displaced people are actually hosted by either the conflict countries themselves or neighbouring countries that are mostly poor or low-middle income countries which might not have the resources to support the people they generously host. Some of the biggest refugee hosts include Iran, Jordan and Uganda. We need to continue supporting these countries because I think there's an unwritten contract here between high-income and low-income countries,

saying that, yes, 'We can host and, as neighbouring countries to conflict, we feel there's a solidarity we need to provide for people needing shelter and support for a period of time, but we need the wealthier countries to help us finance this emergency response'. And if that contract is broken, if the high-income countries withdraw humanitarian assistance and development assistance to a high degree, then many of these countries will say, 'Hey, why are we bearing this task on our shoulders, if the Global North is not willing to support us economically?'

I think there's a very delicate balance here between the Global North and the Global South. It's also politically sensitive in many of the countries that are large refugee-hosting countries in the Global South – it's as politically sensitive for them as it is for us in the Global North. If you look at countries like Lebanon, where one in five is a refugee from Syria or Palestine, then that is a very big task to take on. Similarly, 1.3 million Sudanese people are fleeing war and crisis and seeking protection in Chad, one of the poorest countries in this world.

“High-income countries cannot close the doors to asylum seekers. We need to find and build well-functioning national asylum systems. It's not about delegating that responsibility out to third countries. Because, not only do we risk not protecting the people who need protection, there are also issues related to human rights violations.”

So we need to look at these balances. High-income countries cannot close the doors to asylum seekers. We need to find and build well-functioning national asylum systems. It's not about delegating that responsibility out to third countries. Because, not only do we risk not protecting the people who need protection, there are also issues related to human rights violations.

Meanwhile, Denmark itself only accepts an absolute minimum number of refugees, doesn't it?

At the moment, very few asylum seekers reach Denmark's borders, and that's been the case for several years. Denmark does participate in resettlement programmes, but at a much lower level than expected. UNHCR's quota for Denmark is around 200 people per year, which is still a very low number, even though the finance bill allows for up to 500. At the very least, we should be meeting that figure.

When the asylum system is broken or not functioning properly, should we expect to see more irregular migration as a response?

That's exactly what we're seeing. A poorly functioning asylum system doesn't stop people from seeking safety at Europe's borders or those of other wealthy countries. When people are forced to flee conflict, war, climate impacts or extreme poverty, families often pool all their resources to send someone to find protection elsewhere. For many, returning home simply isn't an option. That's why closing borders will not make the situation disappear, it will only push people towards more dangerous, irregular routes.

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Irregular migration, even though it's often a fraction of regular migration numbers, is politically quite highly charged, isn't it?

That's why, looking at the situation in Europe, the US and elsewhere, we need to ensure strong support for refugee-hosting countries in crisis regions. We can't say we don't want asylum seekers in our own countries while also refusing to support the countries that host the vast majority of them. Even if displaced people come from far away, they still need protection, and we must be part of that response, whether by receiving them ourselves or by meaningfully supporting the countries that do.

What do you think about anti-migrant sentiment in political discourse, both globally and, more specifically, in Denmark where your government is adopting quite tough policy positions on migration and asylum?

It has become an issue that can win or lose elections – in Denmark and everywhere. In some European countries, even centrist or left-leaning parties have adopted policies and rhetoric that once belonged to the far right as part of their path to power. But to a large degree, I see this as a political construct – there is another way to talk about asylum. Politicians could choose to educate the public about why Europe must take responsibility for hosting and supporting people displaced by conflict and war. Their contribution to our economies and society. Why we should engage politically and diplomatically to build peace globally. Fewer people would be forced

into making dangerous journeys if more was done to address the root causes of displacement.

Name the three top hotspots of displacement that you or DRC is most concerned about in the world at the moment.

Unfortunately, there are far too many displacement crises right now, and many receive little or no media coverage. Sudan is a major one. After two and a half years of civil war, around 12 million people are displaced, with countless lives lost. Neighbouring countries such as Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt are hosting large numbers of refugees, while Sudan itself has millions of internally displaced people. Funding for the humanitarian response is extremely low, access for aid agencies is severely restricted and famine has been declared in parts of the country. Yet Sudan barely features in international discussions, partly due to access challenges for the media and partly because attention is spread across so many crises.

Another is Gaza. The humanitarian situation there is beyond words: a trapped population of over 2 million people, pushed from place to place within a tiny territory, facing starvation, death and daily struggle for survival. Humanitarian access is severely constrained, not because aid is unavailable, but because it cannot enter or be distributed at the required scale. The distribution system imposed by the Israeli authorities is inconsistent with humanitarian principles, and many people are now too weak to reach aid points or risk their lives trying. People are being killed while seeking aid at militarised distribution sites.

“ Long-term solutions ... should be part of the response strategy from the start, especially given that many crises today are protracted and displacement is no longer a temporary phenomenon: it lasts on average 20 years for refugees and more than 10 years for 90 percent of internally displaced people. ”

The third is Afghanistan, which is largely absent from global headlines but facing what could be called a perfect storm of hardship. Years of conflict, crippling poverty, the withdrawal of long-term development assistance, mass returns from Iran and Pakistan and severe climate impacts have left 22 million people in desperate need of aid. One in five Afghans is hungry, and over 3.5 million children suffer from acute malnutrition. While some governments find engagement with the current regime difficult, that cannot justify abandoning the Afghan people. We must find ways – through NGOs, local authorities or other mechanisms – to ensure humanitarian assistance reaches those in

need. Women and girls, in particular, continue to face extreme restrictions on their education, employment and basic rights, making their vulnerability in Afghanistan even more severe.

As a possible response to human-made crises like these, has it become unfashionable or is it impractical to talk of UN peacekeepers anymore?

Large UN peacekeeping operations were common a few decades ago, but today both the funding and political backing for such missions have declined. The current configuration of the UN Security Council and the lack of international consensus mean these operations are now less proactive and less effective than they once were. We also see a number of contexts where there have been different iterations of peacekeeping missions for decades but still have deteriorating security conditions and escalating protection risks.

That said, there are other positive interventions we can and should pursue. Syria is a good example. After years of devastating conflict, the country is now in an extremely fragile and fragmented state, with a new leadership that has limited experience in governance. Yet this also presents a narrow window of opportunity. Syria has been the largest source of refugees for over a decade, and its economy, governance structures and social fabric all need to be rebuilt from the ground up. If the international community fails to support reconstruction now, we risk another disaster.

This is a moment when optimism is possible. Rebuilding Syria's economy and society will not only create a better future for its civilians but also pave the way for refugees to return and contribute to the country's recovery. Many Syrians in Denmark and across Europe want to see how they can help rebuild their homeland. That process must remain voluntary – security concerns remain for many – but we should support Syrians in exploring safe, dignified returns while investing in the country's reconstruction.

What is DRC's position on people displaced by climate change? Does DRC expect climate change to generate large volumes of displacement going forward – and, if so, how is it preparing for that?

Climate change is already a major driver of displacement. Often, it initially triggers local migration, as people move within their own countries to survive droughts, floods or other extreme weather events. But climate change also has indirect effects: scarcity of water, grazing land or other natural resources can lead to conflict, which in turn drives further displacement. In many ways, climate, conflict and displacement are forming a dangerous triangle.

This trend will only intensify in the coming decades. Large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, especially

the most fragile regions, are becoming increasingly uninhabitable, and the populations in these areas are least equipped to cope. We can, therefore, expect significant volumes of displacement, both directly and indirectly caused by climate change.

DRC operates in nearly all of the countries that are most vulnerable to climate change. Our climate adaptation programming seeks to strengthen the resilience of displacement-affected communities to the impact of climate change and environmental degradation.

“We need to rethink priorities: improve coordination while working with fewer resources and change how we deliver assistance. Anticipatory action and disaster prevention have been discussed for years, but governments often struggle to fund something that hasn’t yet happened. This is short-sighted.”

Currently, our international legal frameworks do not adequately address climate-induced displacement. DRC, together with MMC and other partners, is already working to pave the way for climate migrants, but more systemic solutions are needed. Some emerging legal cases may help establish a legal basis for climate-related asylum, for example, from small island nations threatened by rising seas.

However, this is a difficult path. Last year’s COP about climate finance was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a major disappointment from a humanitarian perspective. The USD 300 billion pledged does not include specific funding for adaptation. Rather, the risk is that much of this funding will go to climate mitigation rather than to alleviate the consequences for the most vulnerable populations, including those displaced.

Political opposition to asylum seekers is strong in many countries, and climate displacement will likely look very different from traditional refugee flows. Preparing for it requires innovation, coordination and international solidarity, as these challenges will only grow in scale over the coming decades. It is also imperative that displaced populations are included in these responses.

What do you mean when you say that climate displacement will look very different from traditional refugee flows?

I mean that, in many countries in northern and central Africa, parts of the land will become uninhabitable. People will be forced to move, or conflict may arise as a consequence of climate change. In either case, the impact on civilians will be far more severe than what we see today. We are already seeing how water scarcity is

further fuelling conflicts, including in the Middle East and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This is where anticipatory action tools become crucial. We need to identify areas where conditions are likely to become extremely harsh due to climate change and plan how to assist people before crises escalate. We also need to consider how the international community can support structured, large-scale resettlement for those who will have to leave their homes in the coming years.

Local solutions alone won’t be enough. What’s needed is global solidarity and coordinated international solutions to address the consequences of climate change effectively.

Do you have any views on artificial intelligence and the impact it may have in relation to border management and asylum?

First and foremost, I’d say that artificial intelligence is a powerful tool for understanding where displacement is likely to occur and for anticipating crises before they spiral out of control. DRC is already harnessing AI in this way. We have developed a model, built with technical and economic support from IBM and financial backing from the Danish government, that allows us to make accurate predictions of displacement over the next one to three years. This enables much better crisis preparedness. The model analyses multiple indicators from open-source data to forecast displacement trends. It’s an algorithm that has been elaborated and tested over time, and it has become quite accurate.

Currently, it covers 27 countries, representing 93 percent of the places from which global displacement originates. Acting on these predictions is crucial, not just for DRC, but for the wider humanitarian system. We can use the insights to plan preventive, anticipatory action to protect populations at risk. We can also pre-position support and resources in areas where displacement is likely, ensuring aid reaches people quickly and more effectively.

On the negative side, together with more traditional tools, AI can also be used to deter people from seeking asylum and protection. It has become part of systems used to push people back at borders, which is clearly unacceptable and not aligned with international obligations. DRC runs a monitoring initiative on European borders and has documented pushbacks occurring across many countries, often involving physical measures.

Is there anything positive to report on migration at the moment, and where do you see the future of migration going in this very tumultuous geopolitical climate that we’re in? Or are you just bracing yourself?

I think the advocacy that DRC and similar actors carry out with politicians worldwide will remain crucial. We

need international politics to better cater to the needs of people requiring humanitarian assistance, to prevent crises from occurring and to alleviate the suffering of millions globally.

Changes won't come easily. At the moment, governments face intense competition for resources, particularly given heightened defence spending and financial pressures in many countries.

“Where I see room for optimism is in the growing capacity of local and community-based organisations, national NGOs and local authorities to manage crises in their own neighbourhoods.”

Where I see room for optimism is in the growing capacity of local and community-based organisations, national NGOs and local authorities to manage crises in their own neighbourhoods. This shift of political and operational power toward the countries hosting crises is a key part of the humanitarian reset we're seeing. It's essential, however, that this local capacity-building recognises and builds upon existing capabilities.

I foresee international organisations like DRC increasingly serving as service providers to local and national actors (offering technical expertise, humanitarian knowledge, procurement support and systems guidance) rather than managing operations directly. This approach strengthens political capacity and empowers countries to own their crises, which is critical for long-term sustainability.

That said, this transition cannot be rushed. Delegating resources to local organisations isn't a one-off fix; it must be carefully constructed according to each country's context. Donors often expect this shift, but practical challenges remain in efficiently directing support through multiple local actors. Mechanisms to coordinate this transition, where international NGOs and the UN play a role, are essential.

“I foresee international organisations like DRC increasingly serving as service providers to local and national actors ... rather than managing operations directly. This approach strengthens political capacity and empowers countries to own their crises, which is critical for long-term sustainability.”

The rise of the border industrial complex: AI, surveillance and the privatisation of migration management

Petra Molnar¹

Photo 1. Maritime surveillance on Lesbos Island



Photo credit: Molnar, P. (2022)

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital surveillance technologies have become central to the global governance of mixed migration. From biometric registration inside refugee camps to algorithmic risk scoring at the border, these systems increasingly shape how states and international organisations define, control and regulate mobility. During these times of geopolitical turbulence, governments are embracing AI to render people on the move as knowable and manageable, framing data and relying on technical solutions to so-called migration crises. Yet this shift toward digital border governance raises urgent concerns about transparency, accountability and the human rights impacts of these unregulated and high-risk technologies.²

High-risk technologies used in migration are also deeply embedded in a system of power relations that reproduce structural inequalities, systemic racism and exclusion.

Governments are not the only powerful actors managing mobility in the digital age. Private companies are increasingly setting the agenda on how to innovate at the border. Since governments are often not able to develop technologies in-house, they rely on public-private partnerships to do so. When governments frame migration as a “problem” to solve, the private sector steps in and offers a technological solution, in the form of a robo-dog at the US-Mexico border or an AI lie detector in the EU.³ These so-called solutions are often military-

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- 2 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.
- 3 Department of Homeland Security. (2022) [Robot dogs take another step towards deployment at the border](#); Also Gallagher R. and Jona, L. (2019) [We tested Europe’s new lie detector for travelers – and immediately tripped a false positive](#). The Intercept.

grade, created with opaque algorithms and with very few human rights safeguards governing their use. They are also very lucrative, giving rise to a USD 70 billion global border industrial complex.⁴ This industry is also deeply tied to politics. For example, the day after the re-election of current US president Donald Trump, stocks of private prison and surveillance companies soared, as did those of Tesla, the company belonging to Elon Musk who suddenly had an open-door invitation to the Oval Office, along with other tech actors who are increasingly able to influence government policy.⁵

Therefore, the introduction of AI-type tools does not merely streamline border control: it reconfigures the very logic of migration governance. These systems are often deployed without adequate legal safeguards or meaningful oversight, leaving people on the move exposed to opaque decision making and rights violations.⁶ Technologies initially developed for military use are now repurposed to surveil and sort mobile populations, often

under the guise of humanitarian efficiency or national security. As a result, digital infrastructures are becoming central to how borders are enforced, movement is restricted and vulnerability is managed.

This essay examines how AI and digital surveillance are transforming migration governance across key global regions, including North America, Europe, the Gulf and East Africa. It explores the expansion of public-private partnerships and the growth of the border surveillance industry, the political role of misinformation and narrative construction, and the ways in which people on the move and human smugglers alike navigate these technologies.⁷ While the promise of more efficient governance is often highlighted, the legal, ethical and humanitarian risks of digital technologies are profound and growing in a climate that is curtailing human movement with increasing violence.

Tech-driven borders: the new infrastructure of migration control

Photo 2. Elbit Systems AI surveillance tower, Arizona.



Photo credit: Molnar, P. (2024)

4 Higgins, M. (2021) [How the \\$68 Billion Border Surveillance Industrial Complex Affects Us All](#). Vice.

5 Molnar, P. (2024) [In the war on migrants, A Trump win is really a win for big tech](#). Tech Policy.press.

6 Achiume E. T. (2021) [Digital Racial Borders](#). AJIL Unbound.

7 See also Miller, T. (2024) [The Many Scandals of the Border Industrial Complex](#). TNI.

How AI-driven systems are increasingly becoming a central part of migration management

From visa processing and asylum screening to deportation prioritisation and real-time border surveillance, AI-driven systems are being deployed to manage migration at every stage across multiple jurisdictions globally. These systems vary widely in complexity and legality but share a common logic: data-driven control of mobility under conditions of heightened securitisation and politicisation of migration.

In the United States, federal agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have adopted predictive analytics, facial recognition and machine learning tools to monitor people's digital footprints and assess risk profiles, in addition to the growing physical surveillance infrastructure at both the US-Mexico and US-Canada borders such as AI towers, drones and even robo-dogs. Private companies like Clearview AI and Palantir Technologies provide the platforms that scrape social media and public data to generate behavioural assessments used in detention and deportation decisions.⁸ These tools operate in legal grey zones, bypassing traditional requirements for judicial oversight or due process.⁹ During the second Trump presidency, there has been an exponential rise in automated surveillance technologies, including scraping of social media data and revoking visas as a result, as well as the reliance on surveillance technologies and algorithmic decision making.¹⁰ Similar trends are visible in Canada, where automated decision systems have been used in immigration adjudication processes, raising concerns over transparency and algorithmic bias, while border surveillance infrastructure only continues to grow.¹¹

In the European Union, the EU's border force Frontex is a primary driver of technological development. Budgets have ballooned: the EU's overall 2021-2027 financial framework increased funding for border policies by 94 percent (EUR 113.3 billion) compared to the previous budget cycle, with various funds such as EUR 5.2 billion

for the Integrated Border Management Fund: Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI) covering technical equipment for Frontex.¹² Frontex has partnered with major defence contractors and AI developers to enhance its surveillance infrastructure, including a special interest in predictive analytics for border interdictions.¹³ Reliance on interoperable data bases and data infrastructure is also growing across the region, such as the ongoing development of the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS), which consolidates biometric and travel data across multiple EU databases.¹⁴ The use of AI to assess travel risk and automate border screening processes is accelerating, despite evidence that such tools may exacerbate racial profiling and undermine procedural fairness.¹⁵ The EU also missed an opportunity to strengthen global governance of AI, including in migration. Heralded as the first regional attempt to govern AI and ratified in August 2024 after years of negotiations, the EU's Act to Regulate Artificial Intelligence (AI Act) offers very limited protection for non-citizens and contains loopholes for migration-related AI applications.¹⁶ These loopholes include not recognising various migration-related applications (including biometric identification systems, fingerprint scanners and forecasting tools used to predict, interdict and curtail migration) as high risk, weakening what little governance and oversight mechanisms exist. The act also allows for the expansion of large and interoperable databases and does not set guardrails against the exportation of surveillance systems developed by EU companies – even those which may be banned in the EU – to places like China and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

In the Gulf States and the Middle East, biometric surveillance of migrant labourers is a central feature of migration control. Systems such as facial recognition, iris scans and digital ID cards are used to monitor movement, enforce curfews and restrict access to services.¹⁷ These technologies, often provided by Western and Chinese firms, are embedded in exploitative labour governance regimes like the Kafala sponsorship system, where surveillance functions as a tool of coercion and containment.¹⁸ Israel is another major player in the development of surveillance technology which is first tested out in Palestine and then exported for border

8 Cox, J. (2025). [This Is Palantir's Justification for Building ICE's Master Database](#). 404 Media.

9 Achiume, E.T. (2021) 'Racial and Xenophobic Discrimination and the Use of Digital Technologies in Border and Immigration Enforcement.' [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, UN Doc A/HRC/48/76, December 17.](#)

10 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#), The New Press.

11 Molnar, P. (2025) [The Great White North: Canada's New Border Bill Appeases the Trump Administration](#), Tech Policy.press; Also Molnar, P. and Gill, L. (2018) [Bots at the Gate: A Human Rights Analysis of Automated Decision Making in Canada's Immigration and Refugee System](#), University of Toronto.

12 Statewatch (2023) [Europe's Technoborders](#).

13 Gandhi, S. (2024) [Frontex as a hub for surveillance and data sharing: Challenges for data protection and privacy rights](#), Computer Law & Security Review, 53.

14 European Parliament (2025) [Border security: screening travellers before they arrive in the EU](#).

15 EDRI (2020) [Technological Testing Grounds: Migration Management Experiments from the Ground Up](#), Refugee Law Lab, York University.

16 Molnar, P. (2023) [EU's AI Act Falls Short on Protecting Rights at Borders](#), Just Security.

17 Amnesty International (2023) [UAE: Concerns around authorities' use of digital surveillance during COP28](#).

18 Human Rights Watch (2022) [Lebanon's Abusive Kafala \(Sponsorship\) System](#).

enforcement to the European Union and the United States, including Israeli drones that patrol the Mediterranean and AI surveillance towers along the US-Mexico border, among other surveillance technologies.¹⁹

In East Africa, another trend of digitisation and surveillance is unfolding through international humanitarian actors, with predictive analytics for humanitarian preparedness, such as the Foresight Model of the Danish Refugee Council, on the rise. These tools use big data to predict displacement in order to aid people as quickly and efficiently as possible.²⁰ While predictive analytics in this space offer laudable solutions to complex problems, predicting human movement without adequate safeguards presents the risk of co-optation by other actors, such as border enforcement, which continually signals its appetite for developing similar predictive tools to use for interdictions.²¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has also implemented biometric registration programmes in Kenyan and Ugandan refugee camps, often in partnership with private firms. For example, the collaboration between UNHCR and the company IrisGuard in Jordanian refugee camps uses iris scans to manage aid distribution, but this raises concerns about consent, data ownership and surveillance creep.²² While presented as tools for efficiency and fraud prevention, these systems also consolidate sensitive biometric data without robust safeguards or meaningful oversight mechanisms.

What are the risks?

Across all these contexts, several critical risks emerge. Privacy is routinely undermined by the collection of sensitive biometric and behavioural data with minimal transparency. Free and informed consent is also threatened when people feel coerced into giving up their data in spaces with vast power differentials, like a refugee camp. Discrimination is often encoded into algorithmic systems, whether through biased training data or unaccountable decision-making logics.²³ Procedural rights, such as the ability to challenge decisions or understand how data is being used, are frequently denied to people on the move, who are already structurally excluded from the legal protections available to citizens. The result is a global system where technological opacity compounds existing inequalities and systemic racism. This system reinforces hierarchies between who is allowed to enter and who is turned away, with the Global North enjoying increased mobility while the Majority World continues to be tracked, surveilled and, ultimately, excluded.²⁴

Furthermore, the global nature of these technologies creates a patchwork of accountability gaps. International data-sharing agreements and outsourced tech infrastructure weaken national oversight, while global migration institutions such as international humanitarian organisations often lack strong governance frameworks for AI procurement and deployment. As AI tools proliferate, they risk entrenching a digital border regime in which migration is managed less by law than by proprietary code and predictive algorithms.²⁵

19 See also Loewenstein, A. (2023) [The Palestine Laboratory](#). Verso Books.

20 Danish Refugee Council (2025) [Foresight: Displacement forecasts](#).

21 See for example Winward (2021) [Frontex has selected Winward's maritime analytics Predictive Intelligence](#).

22 See also Madianou, M. (2019) [Technocolonialism: Digital Innovation and Data Practices in the Humanitarian Response to Refugee Crises](#). Social Media + Society, 5(3).

23 Achiume, E.T. (2021) 'Racial and Xenophobic Discrimination and the Use of Digital Technologies in Border and Immigration Enforcement.' [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance](#). UN Doc A/HRC/48/76, December 17. Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.

24 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press. See also Nyabola, N. (2020). [Travelling while Black: Essays inspired by a life on the move](#). Hurst Publishers.

25 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.

Narratives and politics: AI, misinformation and the construction of a border crisis

Photo 3. Map marking the deaths recorded in the Sonoran Desert, Sasabe, Mexico



Photo credit: Molnar, P. (2022)

AI technologies are not only deployed at physical borders. They also operate in digital spaces, such as social media platforms, where migration is politicised and public opinion is shaped. Social media, in particular, has played an increasingly powerful role in shaping elections and exacerbating anti-migrant sentiments, with politicians manipulating numbers and stoking fears of migration for political gains.²⁶ For example, misinformation and disinformation along with hateful language have become the hallmarks of several far-right leaders, including US president Donald Trump, Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán and others.²⁷ Governments and private actors increasingly also use AI to monitor, interpret and influence online discourse around migration. This type of technological weaponisation expands the reach of border control into the realm of perception management, where mobile communities are often framed as threats and algorithms amplify xenophobic narratives. The convergence of AI, surveillance and disinformation is not a passive byproduct of the digital age: it has become a strategic feature of migration governance. AI is also actively shaping how migration is portrayed. Automated content recommendation systems used by

platforms like Facebook (Meta), X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok have been shown to amplify anti-migrant rhetoric, particularly during periods of political tension. For example, in the run-up to the 2020 US election, AI-curated feeds on Meta platforms promoted posts associating people on the move with crime, disease and invasion – narratives that have no basis in fact but generate high engagement metrics.²⁸

In the United States, multiple federal agencies including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and ICE have also implemented AI-driven systems to monitor social media activity for so-called risk profiling. Tools provided by companies like Palantir scrape public data and generate behavioural risk assessments of individuals used in immigration adjudication and enforcement decisions.²⁹ For example, since the launch of the Trump administration's AI-driven Catch and Revoke initiative, over 600 visas have been rescinded.³⁰

The effects of AI-fuelled misinformation are not only discursive, they also directly shape policy and enforcement. Algorithms help construct risk profiles not only for individuals, but for entire groups or migratory routes, reinforcing the notion of 'dangerous flows' that require preemptive control. Predictive models used by ICE and CBP to estimate future arrivals or 'threats' often rely on decontextualised data scraped from social media, weather patterns and economic indicators. These models have been critiqued for encoding racial and national biases as they routinely target migrants from Latin America and the Middle East for enhanced scrutiny.³¹

This AI-driven securitisation extends to platform-moderation practices, where migration-related content is often over-moderated or removed based on automated classifiers. People on the move who use social media to document abuses at borders, share survival information or challenge state narratives are silenced by algorithmic moderation systems that conflate their content with extremism or illegal facilitation.³² As predictive profiling and misinformation combine, people on the move are increasingly treated, not as rights-bearing individuals to be protected, but as risks to be managed. The use of AI in narrative construction contributes to a securitised discourse which justifies invasive technologies, in turn reinforcing exclusionary narratives.

26 See for example The Globe and Mail (2018) [Globe editorial: Donald Trump is lying about the caravan in Mexico](#)

27 Niezen, R. (2025) 'Aliens' and 'animals' – language of hate used by Trump and others can be part of a violent design. The Conversation.

28 Nasuto, A. and Rowe, F. (2024) [Understanding anti-immigration sentiment spreading on Twitter](#). PLOS ONE. See also Mejias, U. A. (2025) [Big Tech is powering Trump's immigration crackdown](#). Al Jazeera.

29 Cox, J. (2025) [This Is Palantir's Justification for Building ICE's Master Database](#). 404 Media.

30 Molnar P. (2025) [Trump's social media surveillance: social scoring by another name](#), Tech Policy Press.

31 Achiume, E. T. (2021) 'Racial and Xenophobic Discrimination and the Use of Digital Technologies in Border and Immigration Enforcement.' [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, UN Doc A/HRC/48/76, December 17.](#) and Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#), The New Press.

32 Triandafyllidou, A. and Monteiro, S. (2024) [Migration narratives on social media: Digital racism and subversive migrant subjectivities](#). First Monday, 29(8).

The role of privatisation and the growing border industrial complex

Photo 4. Maritime surveillance drone, DEFEA Conference, Greece



Photo credit: Molnar, P. (2021)

The global expansion of AI in migration governance has not been led solely by governments or humanitarian institutions. Increasingly, private technology companies are the architects, contractors and operators of border infrastructure. These firms play a central role in shaping how migration is understood, monitored and managed: through contracts that are often opaque, under-regulated and driven by profit rather than protection. Many of these players are active in developing technologies for the defence industry, used in wars and causing mass forced displacement.³³ This creates a sort of perverse 'circular economy' where companies benefit twice: once from technologies that create displacement and then, a second time, from technologies that contain it.³⁴

Big Tech firms have become powerful geopolitical actors in migration governance. US-based companies like Palantir, Microsoft, Clearview AI, Anduril and Amazon are deeply embedded in the infrastructures of immigration enforcement.³⁵ In Europe, a similar ecosystem has emerged. The EU's border agency Frontex has increasingly outsourced AI development and biometric surveillance systems to major defence and IT contractors. These partnerships enable real-time drone surveillance, thermal imaging and facial recognition integration at external borders. While framed as "smart borders", these technologies often facilitate pushbacks, automated risk screening

and racialised profiling, raising questions about their compliance with international law.³⁶

The humanitarian sector has not been immune to this privatisation trend either. Public-private partnerships between UN agencies and tech companies now play a central role in refugee identification, aid distribution and data analytics. These arrangements often begin as pilot projects or innovation partnerships but quickly evolve into core infrastructure with long-term dependencies. The World Food Programme's partnership with Palantir is a prominent example. Initially justified to enhance logistics and food security, the collaboration granted Palantir access to vast datasets on refugee movements and aid delivery, raising alarm over data ownership, consent and surveillance.³⁷ The IOM has also commissioned a digital tool to speed up the removal of people from their host countries, contracting with private firms that have previously been used by the Bangladeshi Rapid Action Battalion, a US-sanctioned elite police unit also alleged to be a death squad.³⁸

These public-private partnerships reveal a deeper structural problem: the outsourcing of core governance functions to actors who are not bound by the same accountability frameworks as states or UN bodies. As procurement processes prioritise innovation and scalability over transparency and consent, tech firms are increasingly positioned as de facto migration policymakers. Their systems determine eligibility, shape risk profiles and mediate access to rights, with little-to-no external scrutiny. The over-reliance on private actors also weakens state and institutional accountability in several ways. First, it obscures responsibility: when a wrongful deportation or biometric data breach occurs, it is often unclear whether the state, the vendor or a subcontractor is at fault.³⁹ Second, it entrenches asymmetries of power, as private companies gain leverage through proprietary technologies and exclusive access to sensitive data. Third, it promotes a model of governance that treats migration as a logistics problem to be optimised, rather than a human rights issue requiring care, deliberation and justice.

Despite growing awareness of these risks, regulatory mechanisms remain weak. Humanitarian procurement contracts are rarely made public, and data protection standards vary widely by country and agency. While the EU's AI Act contains provisions on transparency and high-risk systems, its jurisdiction is limited, and exemptions for migration-related technologies remain

33 Frouws, B. (2020) [Mistaken metaphor: the 'root causes' approach to migration is both dishonest and ineffective](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

34 Akkerman, M. (2021) 'Lucrative barriers, deadly consequences', in Horwood, C. & Frouws, B. eds. [The Mixed Migration Review 2021](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

35 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.

36 ECRE (European Council on Refugees and Exiles) (2022) [Atlantic Route and Spain: Court Rejects Complaint on Reception Failings, 'Smart' Borders Risk Reinforcing Racism, Tragedy at Sea Driven by Sahel Displacement](#).

37 Madianou, M. (2024) [Technocolonialism: When technology for good is harmful](#). Wiley.

38 Goldberg, J. and Krishnamoorthy, H. (2025) [IOM's digital tool aims to speed up migrant removals, but at what cost?](#) The New Humanitarian.

39 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.

troubling.⁴⁰ In humanitarian contexts, few binding standards exist to ensure that private AI systems adhere to principles of consent, proportionality and redress.⁴¹ The rise of the multi-billion dollar border industrial

complex must be understood as a shift in the political economy of migration.

Use of technologies by mobile communities: navigating surveillance and risk

Photo 5. Ritsona refugee camp, Greece



Photo credit: Molnar, P. (2024)

While much of the discourse on AI in migration focuses on how states and institutions govern movement, mobile communities themselves are active users, developers and subverters of technology. People on the move increasingly rely on social media, digital tools and AI-enhanced platforms to find and plan routes, communicate with families, avoid detection and access services.⁴² These practices demonstrate, not only technological adaptation, but also the political agency of mobile communities navigating a world of intensified surveillance.

For example, people on the move often use encrypted messaging apps, GPS tools and crowd-sourced platforms to evade state surveillance or circumvent hostile enforcement environments. WhatsApp,

Telegram and Signal remain vital channels for real-time route coordination and updates on border patrols or checkpoints. More recently, AI-powered tools such as real-time translation apps, chatbots for asylum assistance or location-aware warning systems have been used by people on the move to assess risks and organise their journeys.⁴³

In parallel, smuggling networks and human traffickers have integrated AI and digital technologies into their operations with increasing sophistication. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, Facebook and YouTube are used to advertise clandestine services and target potential clients, often using deceptive tactics or false safety assurances.⁴⁴ Trafficking for labour or sexual

40 PICUM (2024). [A dangerous precedent: how the EU AI Act fails migrants and people on the move.](#)

41 Madianou, M. (2024) [Technocolonialism: When technology for good is harmful.](#) Wiley.

42 Mixed Migration Centre. (2024) [Online communities: How do people on the move to North America use social media?](#)

43 See for example the work of the [Migration and Technology Monitor Project](#), incubated at the Refugee Law Lab, York University.

44 Janestky, M. (2025) [TikTok becomes a tool of choice in cat-and-mouse game between migrant smugglers and authorities.](#) NBC News.

exploitation has also evolved digitally. Recruiters use online job portals, informal apps and social media chat groups to lure vulnerable people, particularly women, under the pretence of legitimate employment opportunities. In regions like Southeast Asia and the Gulf, biometric surveillance is often repurposed, not to protect, but to entrench exploitative systems like the Kafala regime, which ties migrant workers to sponsors with near-total control.⁴⁵

Traffickers often use geolocation and messaging apps to track victims and prevent escape. Emerging digital technologies can therefore simultaneously empower people on the move to survive and resist, while also exposing them to heightened risks of exploitation. The same digital tools that allow people to navigate

repression can also generate data trails which feed AI surveillance systems. Smugglers' digital presence, meanwhile, is often weaponised by states to justify broader crackdowns which criminalise all forms of irregular movement, regardless of intent or necessity.

Moreover, discussions around technologies used in migration insufficiently consider the agency or digital literacy of mobile communities. Too often, people on the move are framed as passive subjects rather than active creators, users and participants in tech ecosystems. A more nuanced and inclusive model would recognise that mobile communities engage with technology in ways that reflect both resistance and necessity, and that these practices must inform how technologies in migration are designed and regulated.

Future developments: AI at a crossroads in migration governance

Photo 6. New refugee camp on the Island of Kos, Greece



Photo credit: Molnar, P. (2021)

As AI systems become more deeply embedded in migration management, they present both the possibility for more humane governance and the risk of deeper exclusion. The coming years will determine whether

AI and digital technologies used in migration serve to enhance rights and dignity or further entrench control and inequality. Unfortunately, the ecosystem seems to be trending towards the latter.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch (2022) [Lebanon's Abusive Kafala \(Sponsorship\) System](#).

Governments and international agencies often present AI as a way to enhance efficiency, reduce bias and increase fairness in decision making. Tools such as AI-based asylum screening algorithms, digital ID verification systems and automated fraud detection mechanisms are marketed as objective and scalable. Yet numerous audits and rights assessments have shown that these tools frequently reproduce existing social and geopolitical hierarchies, especially when they are trained on biased or incomplete data.⁴⁶ For example, predictive models used to determine refugee eligibility or prioritise deportation cases tend to focus on perceived risk factors tied to nationality, social media behaviour or prior travel patterns.⁴⁷ While still relatively new in the asylum determination space, various member states of the EU have started to use dialect recognition to verify or obtain further information on people's country or region of origin.⁴⁸ Yet these use cases which lack transparency in how decisions are made or how they can be challenged, especially for factors as malleable as people's accents or tone of voice. Without meaningful appeal mechanisms or due process safeguards, AI becomes a tool for automated exclusion rather than enhanced protection.

Unfortunately, there is inadequate global governance to rein in the techno-solutionism which has taken over migration management. While, in 2023, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued guidance for a human rights-based approach to digital border governance (co-written by this author), these guardrails have not been meaningfully implemented. Regional attempts like the EU's AI Act could have set global standards on the regulation of AI; instead, they are falling short on some of the most high-risk implementations, such as border tech, emboldening other regions like the United States to further dilute what little regulation exists.⁴⁹ Globally, AI regulation remains fragmented, with little enforcement power.

Moreover, a rights-based AI governance framework requires more than regulatory checklists. It must also include participatory design, transparency and meaningful accountability. To date, there is little evidence that the perspectives of affected communities, especially people on the move, are meaningfully incorporated into the development or auditing of migration-related AI. Mobile communities and their lived expertise remain largely invisible in data governance processes, despite being among the most surveilled and risk-assessed populations in the world.⁵⁰

Some emerging efforts offer hope. Initiatives such as the Migration and Technology Monitor incubate community-led digital rights audits and human-centred design practices in refugee technologies, while participatory digital ID governance pilots are beginning to challenge top-down models of migration management technologies.⁵¹ Advocacy coalitions are also pushing to include migrant justice frameworks in global tech governance negotiations, such as the EU's Protect Not Surveil project.⁵²

Ultimately, the future of AI in migration governance hinges, not only on the sophistication of its technical architecture, but also on the political choices and powerful narratives that shape how it is deployed. AI systems are not neutral tools. They are embedded with the values, assumptions and priorities of the institutions that design and implement them. When driven by securitised logics, commercial incentives or exclusionary politics, AI becomes a force multiplier for control, surveillance and discrimination. People on the move are turned into visible and trackable data subjects, while their rights are steadily eroded by opaque and unaccountable systems.

During times of geopolitical turmoil that challenge the bedrock of global migration governance, AI continues to transform the global mobility landscape. Unfortunately, the question is no longer whether AI and other digital technologies will be used but, rather, whose interests they will serve. Technologies can be tools for empowerment. They can strengthen protection, transparency and dignity, but only if their development, deployment and subsequent governance are reoriented towards human rights, participatory design and global justice. This approach requires more than regulatory reform. It demands a shift in who gets to define the problem, who builds the technology and who holds the power to decide what constitutes ethical use. People on the move must not be treated merely as end users or data points, but as co-creators of the systems that affect their lives.

46 Eubanks, V. (2018) [Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor](#). St. Martin's Press. See also Madianou, M. (2024) [Technocolonialism: When technology for good is harmful](#). Wiley. Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.

47 Nyabola, N. (2020) [Travelling while Black: Essays inspired by a life on the move](#). Hurst Publishers.

48 European Parliament (2025) [Artificial intelligence in asylum procedures in the EU](#).

49 McGregor, L. and Molnar, P. (2023) [Digital Border Governance: A Human Rights Based Approach](#). UN OHCHR.

50 Molnar, P. (2024) [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#). The New Press.

51 Migration Tech Monitor (n.d.) [With a focus on migration, technology, and human rights, we interrogate tech experiments on people crossing borders](#).

52 Protect not surveil (n.d.) [EU #Protect Not Surveil](#).

How offshore asylum and migration management went global in 2025

Despite damning criticism from rights agencies and human rights lawyers, offshoring the processing of asylum seekers is becoming increasingly popularised, with several governments around the world either adopting this approach or exploring avenues for imminent implementation.

Offloading the logistical, administrative and socio-economic 'burden' of processing irregular arrivals to external countries is seen as an effective deterrent and a route to curbing irregular migration. Pioneered by Australia in 2001, although already proposed as early as 1986 by Denmark, this method saw a surge in 2023, 2024 and 2025, and currently shows no sign of slowing down, pointing to a normalisation of the so-called Australian model.¹

In the context of asylum, offshoring can be applied in different ways. One form involves sending asylum seekers to a third country where their claim is then processed. If successful, the person is recognised as an asylum seeker in the country where they arrived. This is the case, for instance, with the current agreement between Italy and Albania, discussed below.

A second form is the Australian system of 'diverting' asylum seekers who arrive by boat to offshore locations, such as Papua New Guinea and Nauru, for the processing of their claims and potential resettlement – manifestly not in Australia.

Another form of offshoring refers to sending arrivals to a third country which takes full responsibility, not only for claims processing, but also for granting people asylum status locally. Originally, this was the aim of the never-implemented Rwanda Bill in the UK.

Why offshore asylum seekers?

Offshoring is part of broader externalisation practices which, as UNHCR points out, refer to "the transfer of people from one country to another, without adequate

protection safeguards or standards of treatment. Externalization can lead to indefinite 'warehousing' of asylum seekers in isolated places, exposing them to indirect refoulement and other dangers. Externalization may also de-humanize asylum seekers and label people in need of international protection as unwanted."²

There are various reasons why states are interested in offshoring asylum processing. Apart from the deterrence argument, countries may opt for it in order to 'export' irregular migration and, thereby, better control and protect their borders. Governments want to be seen to be 'taking action' to reduce the frustration and unhappiness of electorates in migrant-receiving countries; others, nonetheless, view this practice as contributing to perpetuating a fear-based narrative that depicts migration as a 'crisis' that must be forcibly controlled and contained.

Some migration experts also argue that it's easier to return unsuccessful asylum seekers from third countries than from destination countries. Among these is the UN high commissioner for refugees Filippo Grandi, who recently stated: "The UNHCR is also developing new proposals that would see asylum claims processed regionally as well as inside the EU. Under these proposals, the most complex and credible asylum cases would be heard in EU countries, while the most tenuous would be processed regionally in safe third countries. From there, people could be more easily returned to their home countries when appropriate, while those recognised as refugees would be readmitted into Europe. All claims would still be fairly and properly considered."³

The offshoring approach is legally complicated and attracts much critique, mainly by rights-based organisations, as it is judged to be a human rights violation as well as causing affected asylum seekers physical and psychological abuse during transfer and while in detention.⁴ Human rights organisations, activists and civil society have also highlighted how offshoring is not in compliance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and other treaties, while also displaying

1 In 1986, Denmark tabled a draft resolution in the United Nations General Assembly to create UN centres where asylum claims could be processed, in order to coordinate the resettlement of refugees among all states. See also European Parliament (2025) [Extraterritorial processing of asylum claims](#).

2 UNHCR (2021) [UNHCR Note on the "Externalization" of International Protection](#).

3 Grandi, P. (2024) [Populist politicians will never 'control' immigration. Here are the humane alternatives](#). The Guardian.

4 NIJC (2021) ; Also Doherty, B. (2025) [Australia violated rights of asylum seekers on Nauru, UN watchdog rules](#). The Guardian; Also Doherty, B. (2024) [Offshore detention makes it 20 times more likely asylum seekers will suffer PTSD, Australian study finds](#). The Guardian.

problematic elements around jurisdiction, due process and access to asylum in general.⁵ There is concern that the offshoring process just means that wealthy countries in the Global North essentially ‘outsource’ refugee-related responsibility, at a price, to poorer nations in the Global South.⁶

In addition to the above critique, offshoring systems have also been proven to be highly costly and inefficient, with people remaining in detention or detention-like settings for extended periods of time, “leading to lengthy delays, uncertainty and arbitrary detention”.⁷

The ‘Australian model’

In 2001, Australia launched the first institutionalised offshoring programme, dubbed the Pacific solution.⁸ Under this, several of Australia’s islands that had historically received irregular maritime arrivals were excised from Australia’s migration zone, preventing asylum seekers who landed there from applying for protection in Australia. Instead, people arriving in Australia irregularly by boat were transferred to detention centres in the Pacific Islands of Nauru and Manus while their claims were being reviewed and assessed in order to determine their refugee status.⁹

Between 2001 and 2008, around 60 percent of refugees from offshore processing centres were resettled in Australia, while others were sent to third countries such as New Zealand, Canada, Sweden and the United States.¹⁰ Those whose claims were rejected were either returned to their country of origin or transferred to another state willing to accept them, a practice that nevertheless drew sharp criticism from rights organisations.

Facing mounting public outcry, both internationally and domestically, the policy was suspended in 2008 by Prime Minister Rudd. However, this was a short-lived break, as offshore processing was again re-opened in 2012 – with the regular practice, for the first time, of children being transferred to the centres, a decision described as “disastrous”.¹¹

A further major shift occurred in July 2013, when Prime Minister Rudd, in his second term, announced that no asylum seeker arriving by boat would ever be resettled in Australia. From then on, people found to be refugees were to be resettled in Papua New Guinea, Nauru or other third countries, but not in Australia, in a policy of “deterrence”.¹²

The remoteness of both the islands of Nauru and Manus resulted in limited access to medical and mental health care, with multiple reports from NGOs and monitoring bodies documenting inadequate living conditions, high levels of distress and widespread incidents of self-harm and suicide attempts, including among children.¹³ Although the centres were condemned for reports of serious human suffering and rights abuses, they were part of the ‘stop the boats’ policy which, aiming for zero tolerance of irregular maritime migration, proved politically popular with parts of the Australian electorate, while also enjoying bi-partisan governmental support.

In 2024, Australia renewed its agreement with Nauru to deter boat arrivals and, by late 2024, it is reported that just over 100 people were still detained on the island.¹⁴

Normalising and globalising offshoring

The ‘Australian model’ has served as a template for other countries seeking to replicate the approach in an effort to curb irregular migration.

In early 2024, Italy finalised an agreement with Albania that will allow it to forcibly move up to 36,000 asylum seekers annually intercepted at sea by the Italian coastguard and the Italian Navy to Albania, while their claims are being assessed. Those who are granted asylum will be allowed to go to Italy, whereas those who see their claim rejected will be forcibly transferred back to their country of origin.¹⁵

- 5 Verfassungsblog (2024) [Why Offshore Processing of Asylum Applications is Actually Racist](#); Also Sanderson, S. (2025) [Migrant offshoring: the EU’s plan to deport more rejected asylum seekers under scrutiny](#). Infomigrants.
- 6 Kohlenberger, J. (2024) [Migration Policy: European Union Increasingly Outsources Responsibility for Asylum](#). Heinrich Böll Stiftung; Also Bhaga, A. and Lebaron, G. (2024) [Outsourcing of refugees increases corruption](#). Global Bar Magazine.
- 7 Gleeson, M. and Yacub, N. (2021) [Cruel, costly and ineffective: The failure of offshore processing in Australia](#). Kaldor Centre for International refugee Law.
- 8 Asylum Insight (2025) [NAURU ARRANGEMENT](#).
- 9 Parliament of Australia (2014) [Incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre from 16 February to 18 February 2014](#), Chapter 1.
- 10 Parliament of Australia (2014) [Incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre from 16 February to 18 February 2014](#), Chapter 1.
- 11 Refugee Council of Australia (2020) [Australia’s offshore processing regime: The facts](#); Also Pearson, E. (2020) [Seven Years of Suffering for Australia’s Asylum Seekers, Refugees](#). Human Rights Watch.
- 12 Parliament of Australia (2014) [Incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre from 16 February to 18 February 2014](#), Chapter 1.
- 13 Médecins Sans Frontières (2018) [Indefinite despair: mental health consequences on Nauru](#).
- 14 Refugee Council of Australia (2025) [Offshore processing statistics](#).
- 15 International Rescue Committee (2024) [What is the Italy-Albania asylum deal?](#)

In practice, though, the deal is not functioning as smoothly as its supporters expected. Courts already blocked various transfer attempts of asylum seekers in both Italy and Albania, with a major legal challenge occurring in July 2025.¹⁶ By the second half of 2025, the scheme was being applied as something of an ‘experimental return hub’, focused on rejected applicants instead of on the active processing of asylum claims.¹⁷ Although some (66 in total, to date) have been successfully sent to Albania as ‘proof of concept’, it seems likely that the plan will not go beyond this and only handle an irrelevantly small number compared to the total number of people seeking asylum.¹⁸

In the UK, former Conservative PMs Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak proposed the so-called Rwanda Plan, whereby asylum seekers arriving in the country would be transferred to Rwanda to have their claims reviewed.¹⁹ The plan, however, never came to fruition: although the UK’s Supreme Court ruled that Rwanda could not be considered a “safe country”, that problem was legally “fixed” – albeit too late to save the scheme. The new Labour prime minister, Keir Starmer, immediately scrapped the deal following his election victory in 2024. Nonetheless, partly in response to the seemingly unstoppable ‘small boat’ channel-crossing migrants and asylum seekers and their unpopular accommodation in English hotels, Starmer has publicly expressed his interest in exploring other avenues to implement a new offshoring programme – possibly similar to the Italy-Albania agreement.²⁰

In March 2025, the European Commission updated its Pact on Migration and Asylum – 2024 legislation which enables stricter border procedures and faster deportations of irregular migrants and people whose asylum claims were rejected. Eyeing the perceived benefits of an offshoring approach, the commission added a plan for swifter returns of rejected asylum seekers through “clear rules on forced return”, as well as offshoring returns through the creation of so-called return hubs – an “agreement or arrangement for return with a third country that respects international human rights standards and principles in accordance with international law.”²¹

The commission has linked this policy to the ongoing reform of the EU Return Directive. Under its previous version, the directive required that people would be transferred to a third country only if they had a connection to it – whether by previous residence, transit or family – effectively greatly hampering the feasibility of return hubs. Through the proposed reform, however, this connection requirement would either be relaxed or removed entirely, allowing the transfer of rejected asylum seekers to return hubs in countries where they have no connection of any kind.²²

Donald Trump’s US is also actively involved in a range of offshoring programmes where differences between warehousing, deportation and offshoring become blurred. In February 2025, approximately 350 migrants from Asia and Africa were flown to detention centres in Panama, while a few days later, 135 migrants were transferred to Costa Rica before being processed for asylum in the United States. In March 2025, 261 migrants were forcibly transported to El Salvador: almost all of these were Venezuelan nationals claimed by law officers to be members of the infamous Tren de Aragua criminal gang. They were subsequently moved to one of El Salvador’s maximum-security prisons, the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT). It later transpired that one of these individuals had refugee status in the US.²³ In May, bilateral conversations signalled an interest from the US to consider Rwanda as a host country for the US’s irregular arrivals.²⁴ By the last week of August, seven migrants deported from the US arrived in Rwanda, the first of 250 expected to be taken in under a new US-Rwanda deal. A spokesperson gave no details about their nationalities, only explaining that four of them would remain in Rwanda, with three opting to return to their home countries.²⁵

Rwanda is not new to being courted or used as an offshore processing location. Interestingly, under a hybrid agreement reached with the UNHCR and African Union in 2019, nearly 2,800 refugees and asylum seekers trapped in Libya – mainly from Sub-Saharan and the Horn of Africa – were evacuated to Rwanda between September 2019 and April 2025. As of April 2025, over 2,100 refugees have subsequently been resettled to third countries, suggesting around 700 remain in Rwanda.²⁶

16 Peretti, A. (2025) [Italy-Albania migrant deal faces its biggest legal challenge yet](#). EURACTIV.

17 De La Feld, S. (2025) [EU shows the way, and Italian centres in Albania become the first return hubs](#). EU News.

18 Al Jazeera (2025) [Italy sends 40 asylum seekers awaiting deportation to Albania](#).

19 Walsh, P. W. (2024) [Q&A: The UK’s former policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda](#). The Migration Observatory.

20 Giuffrida, A. (2025) [Far-right Italian PM says she is ‘in tune on many issues’ with Keir Starmer](#). The Guardian.

21 European Commission (2025) [Migration: Commission proposes new European approach to returns](#).

22 European Commission (2025) [New Common European System for Returns](#); Also EU Lex (2025) [Establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union](#); Also Dello Iacono, F. (2025) [The Reform of the EU return directive: a step back for fundamental rights?](#) IARI.

23 Núñez Ochoa, M. A. (2025) [The new unofficial, informal and undisclosed asylum externalisation and offshoring detention system of the US](#). Border Criminologies.

24 Mureithi, C. (2025) [Rwandan talks with US over deported migrants are chance to expand its influence](#). The Guardian.

25 Flemming, L. (2025) [First deportees arrive in Rwanda from the US](#). BBC.

26 UNHCR (2025) [Evacuees from Libya - Emergency Transit Mechanism](#).

What future for offshore processing?

International human rights organisations have invariably voiced their strong opposition to the offshoring model, with the International Rescue Committee calling some of these bilateral agreements “cruel, costly and counterproductive”.²⁷

While no formal offshoring plans are currently in place, countries like Greece,²⁸ Denmark,²⁹ Germany,³⁰ Austria³¹ and the Netherlands³² are actively imposing tougher measures around forced returns as well as asylum and migration management in general, spurred both by right-wing party victories at the 2024 elections and by the recently introduced EU legislation.

The current political climate in many countries around the world – characterised by the rise of far-right parties and/or anti-migrant discourse and attitudes – points to a normalisation and a mainstreaming of the offshoring and externalisation of asylum processing, as illustrated by the surge in countries that are either actively launching offshoring plans or are keen to explore and implement the offshoring processing of asylum seekers alongside other tough management measures. The target for all is to find ways to deter irregular migration. Meanwhile, resistance and opposition to offshoring will likely continue, led by human rights organisations, activists and civil society – potentially obstructing its aims.

27 International Rescue Committee (2024) [What is the Italy-Albania asylum deal?](#)

28 Reuters (2025) [Greece drafts tougher law for rejected asylum seekers, PM says.](#)

29 Sanderson, S. (2025) [Denmark: Unprecedented measures to signal to migrants they are not welcome.](#) Infomigrants.

30 Sanderson, S. (2023) [Between deportation and offshore processing: Germany mulls changes to asylum process.](#) Infomigrants.

31 International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2024) [Vienna Migration Conference 2024 discussed safe pathways and labour mobility, irregular migration, international partnerships, and roll-out of EU Pact.](#)

32 Government of The Netherlands (2024) [Government investing in stricter asylum policy.](#)

The end of development aid? How aid cuts may reshape migration

Bram Frouws¹, Jennifer Vallentine² and Rose Worden³

Soon after coming into office for his second term, President Trump announced the dismantling of USAID. The decision, and subsequent 'stop work' orders issued, triggered widespread panic across the aid sector, particularly given that the United States alone had previously accounted for 43 percent of humanitarian spending globally.⁴ By March 2025, roughly 83 percent of USAID's programmes were cancelled, leaving millions of people suddenly without support.⁵ On 1 July, USAID officially closed as an independent agency, with the vast majority of staff laid off.⁶

While the Trump administration's actions were swift, drastic and unprecedented, they reflect a longer downward trend in Western aid budgets. In 2024 – before Trump returned to office – the OECD recorded a 9 percent fall in official development assistance.⁷ That same year, three other major donors – France, Germany and the UK – also announced cuts, which together with the US, could amount to a 17 percent reduction in global aid spending in 2025.⁸

At the same time, as cuts to development aid soar, donors are increasing their security spending, with migration control and defence as clear priorities. The budget of Europe's Frontex agency, for example, surpassed EUR 750 million in 2023, making it the fastest-growing EU agency.⁹ In the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest federal law enforcement agency with USD 170 billion allocated toward deportations alone over four years.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and other NATO members are responding to pressure from the Trump administration and the Russia-Ukraine war to increase defence spending to 5 percent of GDP.¹¹

For institutions focused on migration and refugee protections, the impact of these cuts has been stark. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has a projected fall in its budget from USD 4 billion to USD 2.89 billion, with little flexibility to reallocate funds due to its projectised funding.¹² UNHCR, meanwhile, anticipates having to leave one third of its target population without assistance, having received only 23 percent of its current budget of USD 10.6 billion for activities like protection, basic needs and resettlement.¹³ Since nearly half of all official development aid in 2023 was channelled through multilateral agencies, further cuts to these organisations are expected to have cascading effects across the sector which are yet to be fully seen.¹⁴

With sharply reduced budgets, aid agencies are being forced to 'hyper-prioritise' resources, curtail life-saving programmes and leave millions without support.¹⁵ The immediate consequences are already being felt by the most vulnerable, including people on the move. What remains to be seen is how mixed migration dynamics will shift as aid is hollowed out while security and migration-control budgets expand. This essay examines the global aid system, how funding cuts are reshaping the aid landscape and, in turn, what this may mean for refugees, migrants and mixed migration dynamics.

The emergence of a global aid system and its links to migration management

After the Second World War, the United States, as the dominant global power, spearheaded the creation of a Western-led multilateral aid system, which remained

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- 3 Rose Worden is a Washington, DC-based policy researcher and advocate focused on global policy and humanitarian issues.
- 4 Pearson, M. (2025) [Humanitarian Aid's Extreme Donor Dependency Problem in Five Charts](#). The New Humanitarian.
- 5 Schreiber, M. (2025) [Rubio announces that 83% of USAID contracts will be cancelled](#). NPR.
- 6 Schreiber, M. (2025) [Rubio announces that 83% of USAID contracts will be cancelled](#). NPR.
- 7 OECD (2025) [Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term](#). OECD Policy Briefs.
- 8 OECD (2025) [Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term](#). OECD Policy Briefs.
- 9 Akkerman, M. (2023) [Global Spending on Immigration Enforcement is Higher than Ever and Rising](#). MPI.
- 10 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2025) [Trump's "big, beautiful bill" gives ICE unprecedented funds to ramp up mass deportation campaign](#). CBS News.
- 11 NATO (2025) [Defence expenditures and NATO's 5% commitment](#).
- 12 Forge, E. (2025) [UN migration agency chief sees budget cuts worsening in 2026](#). Reuters.
- 13 UNifeed (2025) [Geneva/UNHCR funding cuts](#).
- 14 OECD (2025) [Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term](#). OECD Policy Briefs.
- 15 OCHA (2025) [UN, partners unveil hyper-prioritized aid appeal amid 'cruel math' of brutal funding cuts](#).

largely under its (and its European allies') control in both governance and funding. One of the first tasks was to address the millions displaced by war, leading to the adoption of the Refugee Convention, which provided international protection to a defined group of people displaced before 1951 with a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Yet hundreds of thousands more remained outside their countries, without meeting asylum criteria, unable to find work and described in policy debates as a "surplus" labour force. In response, the United States worked with Western European states – through bodies such as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (later, the IOM)¹⁶ – to resettle and redistribute workers in ways that aligned with their economic and political priorities.

Over the decades since World War II, Western donors supported the growth of foreign assistance into a large industry following a sort of 'carrot and stick' approach, regularly pairing aid (the 'carrot') with security measures and maintaining conditionalities on spending tied to their own productive economic sectors (the 'stick').¹⁷ Under US and European stewardship, foreign assistance generated dependencies among developing countries and created a system of international NGOs and multilateral agencies dependent on and accountable foremost to a small group of donors, leaving limited ability to reform the system from within.

In recent years, major donors have also broadly shared the same political objective to reduce irregular migration to their borders. Across both right-wing and centre-left platforms, irregular migration has increasingly been framed as a security threat, drawing heavily on discourses shaped by the Global War on Terror. In the United States, development was incorporated into the national security strategy following the 9/11 attacks, making migrants the object of both development and security responses.¹⁸

These dynamics have underpinned a decade of aid responses designed to target the so-called root causes of migration.¹⁹ In 2015, EU leaders launched the Valletta Summit Action Plan with African governments to limit irregular migration, including support for migrant returns, readmission and reintegration.²⁰ Its main vehicle, the Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) with pledged contributions of EUR 1.8 billion (later expanded to over EUR 5 billion), was widely criticised for its opacity and

for prioritising border control and return programmes over stated objectives like employment creation and the provision of local services.²¹ Likewise, the Biden administration marshalled a Root Causes Strategy for Central Americans, pledging USD 4 billion over four years to reduce irregular migration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.²² Largely managed by USAID, the initiative targeted "corruption, violence, trafficking, and poverty".²³

What do aid cuts mean for mixed migration dynamics?

There is little doubt that widespread aid cuts have already begun to profoundly affect recipient communities. Critical services such as food distribution, shelter, access to livelihoods, health care and psycho-social support face abrupt suspension. Alongside shrinking resettlement opportunities and tightened border security, these dynamics create a perfect storm of heightened and protracted vulnerability, reduced protection and escalating risks for vulnerable populations, including many refugees and migrants.

Impact on refugees in host countries

Foreign aid cuts by the US and other major donors are being felt most immediately in the large refugee-hosting countries, where humanitarian budgets already struggle to meet basic needs. Reduced food rations, health services and protection programming increase their vulnerability, especially for refugees in camp settings who are structurally dependent on external support and lack opportunities to generate their own income. While such cuts are already deepening hardship and risk eroding stability in host states, they most likely will not automatically translate into more long-distance migration, since refugees who rely on aid typically lack the resources needed to finance irregular journeys requiring smugglers and significant payments upfront. Thus the impact on large-scale onward movement or secondary migration to distant destinations is likely to remain limited. Instead, the more probable outcomes are deepened hardship, rising tensions with host communities and the erosion of stability in host states. In some instances, refugees may

16 IOM (n.d.) [IOM History](#).

17 Tsourdi, E. and Zardo, F. (2025) [Migration Governance Through Funding: Theoretical, Normative, and Empirical Perspectives](#). Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 23(1), 1-15.

18 Council on Foreign Relations (2025) [How 9/11 Reshaped Foreign Policy](#).

19 Tsourdi, E. and Zardo, F. (2025) [Migration Governance Through Funding: Theoretical, Normative, and Empirical Perspectives](#). Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 23(1), 1-15.

20 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration (2015) [Valletta Summit Action Plan](#).

21 Grün, G. C. (2018) [Follow the money: The EU's migration policy priorities](#). DW.

22 National Security Council (2021) [U.S. Strategy for addressing the root causes of migration in Central America](#). The White House.

23 National Security Council (2021) [U.S. Strategy for addressing the root causes of migration in Central America](#). The White House.

also be forced to return to their countries of origin, despite it not being safe to do so, as it is no longer viable for them to survive in host countries.

Recent examples highlight the severity of the situation: in Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, cuts have led to the discontinuation of food distributions and health services, triggering hunger, unrest and decisions by at least 6,000 people to leave.²⁴

The more than 1 million Rohingya population living in camps in and around Cox's Bazar has relied mostly on US funding for basic services. With US funding reduced from USD 300 million to USD 12 million, the consequences are multiple and dire. In terms of education alone, half a million Rohingya children are set to lose access to schooling due to aid cuts which have forced the closure of learning centres across Bangladesh.²⁵

Impact along migration routes

The effect of aid cuts has also been visible for those still on the move. In the Americas, these cuts, along with political pressures, have forced some migrant shelters at the US-Mexico border to close or significantly scale back.²⁶ Combined with the suspension of the CBP One App and Safe Mobility Offices, thousands of migrants are stuck in limbo unable to change course and, in some cases, having expended all their resources to fund journeys north.²⁷ In Southern Mexico, for example, more than 270,000 migrants waiting in a virtual queue for asylum appointments were left stranded in chokepoints such as Tapachula, near the Mexico-Guatemala border, when the Trump administration closed it down.²⁸ Across the region, the scale of assistance has also collapsed: support for Venezuelan migrants and refugees has shrunk from USD 2.34 million to just USD 577,700.²⁹

Potential new displacements

In many lower and middle income countries – typically, migrant-sending – aid cuts will likely exacerbate economic, social and environmental pressure, if they haven't already done so. Reduced funding for livelihood, education, health care and climate adaptation will leave households with fewer resources to cope with shocks, increasing precarity.

At the same time, the broader geopolitical turbulence compounds the effects of aid retrenchment. Reduced investment in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, combined with the retrenchment of US engagement in Africa and other regions, diminishes the capacity for early action to mitigate emerging crises. The Danish Refugee Council's recent forecasting work underlines the risk of new and escalating conflicts in precisely those contexts where humanitarian need is greatest and international engagement is shrinking, estimating that US aid cuts alone could contribute to an additional 3.95 to 7.85 million people living in displacement in 2025.³⁰ These risks are magnified by the massive surge in defence spending agreed by NATO countries and others. Not only does increased investment in the arms industry risk fueling new conflicts and displacement – since the weapons these countries produce are used in conflicts that drive displacement – but many of the same companies profiting from weapon sales are also central players in the migration control industry, benefitting from both the production of displacement and the containment of displaced people.³¹ Cuts to aid, therefore, carry a dual danger: on the one hand, weakening the resilience of displaced populations while, on the other, contributing to fresh displacement when crises are left to erupt without early prevention and mitigation. On top of that, global security investments actively drive even further instability and more displacement. The likely outcome, though – in line with the notion above on onward movement of refugees – is not necessarily a surge in long-distance irregular migration, but rather the fact that more people will be forced from their homes and left stuck in situations of protracted displacement with fewer resources to cope, both for themselves and for the communities hosting them.

Cuts in funding to address climate change risk exacerbating mobility pressures, particularly in fragile and climate-vulnerable contexts. As MMC and others have consistently underlined, climate-related mobility overwhelmingly occurs within countries or across neighbouring borders, rather than driving large-scale, long-distance international migration.³² Yet, by reducing resources for mitigation-, adaptation- and resilience-building, foreign aid cuts may leave communities more exposed to environmental shocks and less able to cope locally. The likely outcome is an increase in short-distance displacement and greater strain on already fragile systems of support.

24 AFP (2025) [More than 6,000 Flee Kenya Refugee Camp as Aid Shortages Worsen: UN](#). Barrons.

25 International Rescue Committee (2025) [Half a million Rohingya children left without schooling in Bangladesh, as foreign aid freeze forces closure of learning centres](#).

26 Taylor, L. (2025) [Trump's border closure escalates migrant mental health crisis in Mexico, says MSF](#). BMJ.

27 Watson, J. and Janetsky, M. (2025) [Migrants stranded when thousands of appointments to enter the US are cancelled as Trump takes office](#). AP.

28 Díaz, D. (2025) [Stranded: The Trump-induced migration crisis in Mexico](#). The New Humanitarian.

29 Associated Press (2025) [14,000 US-bound people have returned south since Trump border crackdown, UN finds](#). The Guardian.

30 Danish Refugee Council (2025) [Impact Brief: Donor funding cuts impact on global displacement crisis](#).

31 Frouws, B. (2020) [Mistaken metaphor: the 'root causes' approach to migration is both dishonest and ineffective](#). MMC.

32 Linekar, J. and Frouws, B. (2022) [Climate change, environmental stressors, and mixed migration](#). MMC.

Unpacking the assumption that less aid equals more migration

Since substantial aid cuts were announced at the beginning of President Trump's second term, some analysts have been quick to claim that the result will be new migration movements, particularly onward movement to Western countries.

Indeed, for decades, donors have worked from the premise that aid can reduce migration, often under the 'addressing the root causes' approach that has shaped much of development and aid spending. The logic is, thus: improve livelihoods, reduce migration pressures. Yet the relationship between aid and migration is far more complex. Research on 'migration transition' shows that emigration rates tend to rise as countries develop economically – typically, until reaching GDP per capita of USD8,000-USD 10,000 purchasing power parity (PPP).³³ By this reasoning, aid and development assistance may actually increase migration, rather than prevent it, because more people will have more resources to finance expensive, long-distance irregular migration journeys – a notion that has been at the heart of much of the critique of the 'root causes' approach. Conversely, funding cuts could actually constrain people's ability to move, at least in the short run, and, instead, lead to situations of immobility rather than mass onward migration.

In reality, development aid has done little to transform overall income levels in lower- and middle-income countries,³⁴ so aid cuts are unlikely to dramatically affect international migration numbers. Instead, the impact is felt most acutely in daily life: the loss of funding for livelihoods, health, education and climate adaptations strips vulnerable communities of crucial resources. Combined with trade restrictions or weak local economies, these dynamics risk worsening poverty, fuelling tensions and eroding stability in host and origin countries alike. The paradox is clear: as aid shrinks, more people may need or want to move, but fewer may have the resources to do so, leaving populations trapped in precarious conditions, whether at home or along migration routes.

In the Americas, this dynamic is already unfolding. Under the Trump administration, restrictive measures sharply reduced migration, both at the US southern border and further south, along key transit routes such as the Darién Gap.³⁵ At the same time, significant cuts were made to "root causes" development aid funding that had been intended to reduce the pressures driving people to migrate in the first place. This creates a double bind for

migrant-sending communities: not only are opportunities to leave curtailed, but so, too, are resources for addressing poverty, insecurity and lack of opportunities at home. While remittances often provide a more substantial flow of income than official development assistance or foreign investment, they cannot fully substitute for lost aid, especially when stricter enforcement, mass detention and deportations in the US also threaten to reduce remittance flows. The result is a scenario where families and communities across the region risk being doubly impoverished – cut off from both the possibility of mobility and from the financial and developmental support that once sustained them.

Migration diplomacy and other options: adaptation to shrinking aid budgets amidst the rise of deterrence

Foreign aid has long been defended, not only on humanitarian and development grounds, but also as a tool of soft power – a way for donor states to cultivate influence and secure cooperation from partners. This dimension has become increasingly visible in the migration sphere, where aid allocations are tied to migration management, return agreements and broader security concerns. In this context, migrants are often instrumentalised as bargaining chips, with aid offered or withheld depending on the willingness of sending and transit countries to align with donor priorities.³⁶

If aid budgets are cut, donor states may lose some leverage. It is equally plausible, however, that the reduced aid that remains will be further politicised and targeted almost exclusively at migration control. These risks narrow the scope of aid even further away from genuine development objectives, reinforcing a shift toward a transactional, securitised model of cooperation that undermines both long-term development and principled humanitarian action.

Strategic leverage along migration routes

Dwindling aid budgets, coupled with increased migration deterrence priorities, will likely increase the bargaining power of strategically significant countries along the routes towards the Global North. Countries such as Türkiye, Tunisia, Egypt or Mexico, for example, may further

33 Ward, C. and Plant, M. [West Africa at a Crossroads: Fostering Stability After Aid Cuts](#). Centre for Global Development.

34 Dreher, A., Lang, V. and Reinsberg, B. (2024) [Aid effectiveness and donor motives](#). World Development, 176.

35 MMC and ProLAC (2025) [Migration dynamics and protection risks in north-south return movements in the Americas](#).

36 Vallentine, J., Frouws, B. and Forin, R. (2024) [Power dynamics, arm twisting and migrant rights: the many \(ugly\) faces of migration diplomacy](#). MMC.

leverage their strategic value to extract concessions from Western governments keen to curb irregular arrivals. While these concessions may not take the form of traditional development funding, they will come through enhanced security cooperation agreements – already in place, but poised to grow under current circumstances (see also *The erosion of migration multilateralism and the 'new world order'*, [p. 252](#)).

Non-strategically placed countries affected by aid cuts have few options. Some may turn (further) towards non-traditional donors such as China, Gulf States or Russia, for investment and development financing.

Returns, deportations and conditionality

An especially troubling development in the current landscape is the increasing resort to deportations to third countries – where migrants have no prior connection – by the United States. Recent cases involve transfers not only to regional states such as El Salvador and Panama, but also to countries further afield, including Uganda, South Sudan and Rwanda.³⁷ While details remain opaque, it is difficult to separate these practices from the broader context of shrinking aid budgets and conditionality.

For recipient states facing the prospect of steep aid cuts, cooperation on such deportation schemes may be seen as a way to secure concessions: lower reductions in assistance, alternative financial benefits or the avoidance of additional punitive measures such as trade tariffs. If they refuse, the risk of further cuts or economic pressure looms. Conditionality in aid allocation linked to migration cooperation is not new – Europe has long tied development support to return agreements – but the US appears to be pushing this logic further, institutionalising deportation-to-third-country arrangements as part of its externalised migration control toolkit. In a context of massively reduced aid, the leverage of donor governments increases, raising the likelihood that more states may acquiesce to such deals in order to salvage limited aid flows or shield themselves from other sanctions.

Implications for migration governance

The funding crisis facing UNHCR and IOM has profound implications for global migration governance. With shrinking resources, both agencies might face reduced

capacity to deliver protection, assistance and durable solutions at scale. At the same time, their heavy dependence on a small group of major Western donors – all migration destination countries experiencing strong political pressure to reduce irregular migration – makes them increasingly vulnerable to political conditionalities attached to funding. This risks aligning agency priorities more closely with donor governments' domestic anti-migration agendas rather than with principled protection mandates. We already see this in the growing emphasis on route-based or 'whole of route' approaches – very much embraced by some states and agencies but criticised by many others³⁸ for instrumentalising aid in the service of migration control, with some calling it "deterrence humanitarianism".³⁹ Similarly, UNHCR's cautious endorsement of return hubs⁴⁰ has raised concern that protection standards are being compromised under donor pressure. In this way, aid cuts do not just weaken operational capacity, but also shift the governance architecture toward securitised, donor-driven agendas, potentially at the expense of broader humanitarian and development objectives.

Where to from here?

Looking ahead, the challenge is to prevent aid cuts from translating directly into heightened vulnerability for migrants, refugees and displacement-affected communities. While donor budgets are unlikely to rebound in the near term, there is scope to rethink how existing resources are allocated and to protect core humanitarian and protection programming from being crowded out by narrowly securitised objectives.

As formal aid structures contract, communities are increasingly having to turn to alternative survival strategies. Migrant- and refugee-led grassroots organisations already operating on shoestring budgets are working to fill these gaps, while diaspora networks and remittances are relied upon more heavily. Crowdfunding platforms and informal mutual aid networks have surged, trying to provide vital stopgaps. However, while community-led responses are essential for long-term sustainability, without systemic supports they cannot substitute for the scale and predictability of formal budgets. Stronger investment in locally-led responses could help stretch reduced funding further, empowering community-based actors and migrant and refugee-led organisations which are often more agile and cost-effective than large international structures. Equally, strengthening remittance systems and lowering transaction costs could provide an important buffer for families, in the absence of more traditional forms of aid.

37 Metzler, J. (2025) [What are third-country deportations, and why is Trump using them?](#) Council on Foreign Relations.

38 Alio, M. and Gardi, R. (2025) [Protection or prevention? The global refugee system is at a crossroads](#), The New Humanitarian; Also Frouws, B. and Bonfiglio, A. (2024) [Humanitarians: Stop using fear of migration to drive fundraising and advocacy](#), The New Humanitarian.

39 Stierl, M. (2025) [Sahara desert vs Mediterranean – where do more migrants actually die?](#) Euobserver.

40 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR welcomes EU Return Regulation Proposal, calls for strong safeguards and focus on effective and sustainable returns](#).

At the same time, moments of disruption can also create opportunities for overdue reform. A recalibration of migration governance could help shift the emphasis back towards protection, solutions and resilience, rather than containment. More honest recognition of the limits of aid as a migration management tool might pave the way for approaches that are both more principled and more effective. Partnerships that prioritise shared responsibility – between donors, host states and affected communities – could lay the foundation for more sustainable responses, even within tighter fiscal constraints. In short, while the risks of aid retrenchment are substantial, the current turbulence also offers a chance to innovate and to re-anchor migration and displacement governance in long-term, rights-based and locally-grounded strategies.

New institutions are showing promise in supporting cooperation among Global South countries on more equitable terms than those donors may be providing. The BRICS New Development Bank, for instance, promotes equal governance power among its members, provides lending free of conditionalities and has grown its portfolio to USD 40 billion.⁴¹ While not yet focused on migration, it could eventually develop concessional financial windows to support refugees and host communities, helping governments reduce debt burdens and increase their autonomy in designing integration policies.

For donor countries, maintaining foreign aid at reduced levels also carries risks that go beyond humanitarian fallout. By withdrawing support, they risk fuelling instability in fragile states, creating larger humanitarian crises that, ultimately, demand more expensive emergency interventions later. They also weaken their own influence and credibility in global governance, ceding space to other actors who may fill the vacuum with very different agendas. Finally, by instrumentalising the remaining aid narrowly for migration control, donor states risk undermining trust with partners in the Global South, entrenching resentment and reducing cooperation in the long run. In short, underfunding today may buy short-term political gains domestically, but it risks producing greater insecurity, displacement and diplomatic costs for donor countries themselves in the future.

41 BRICS (2025) [New Development Bank consolidates strategic expansion and reinforces commitment to sustainable development in the Global South](#).

4Mi data analysis:



**The impact of the Trump
administration's policy
changes on migrants
across the globe**

The impact of the Trump administration's policy changes on migrants across the globe

About 4Mi

4Mi is the MMC's flagship primary data collection system, which helps fill knowledge gaps and informs mixed migration policy and response. 4Mi is a standardised, quantitative and globalised survey, operating via a network of more than 120 field enumerators who are conducting interviews with migrants on the move in around 15 countries at any one point in time. Our enumerators collect more than 1,000 4Mi interviews per month, and since 4Mi began in 2014, more than 125,000 interviews have been conducted.

For more see mixedmigration.org/4mi.

Migration in the context of geopolitical turmoil

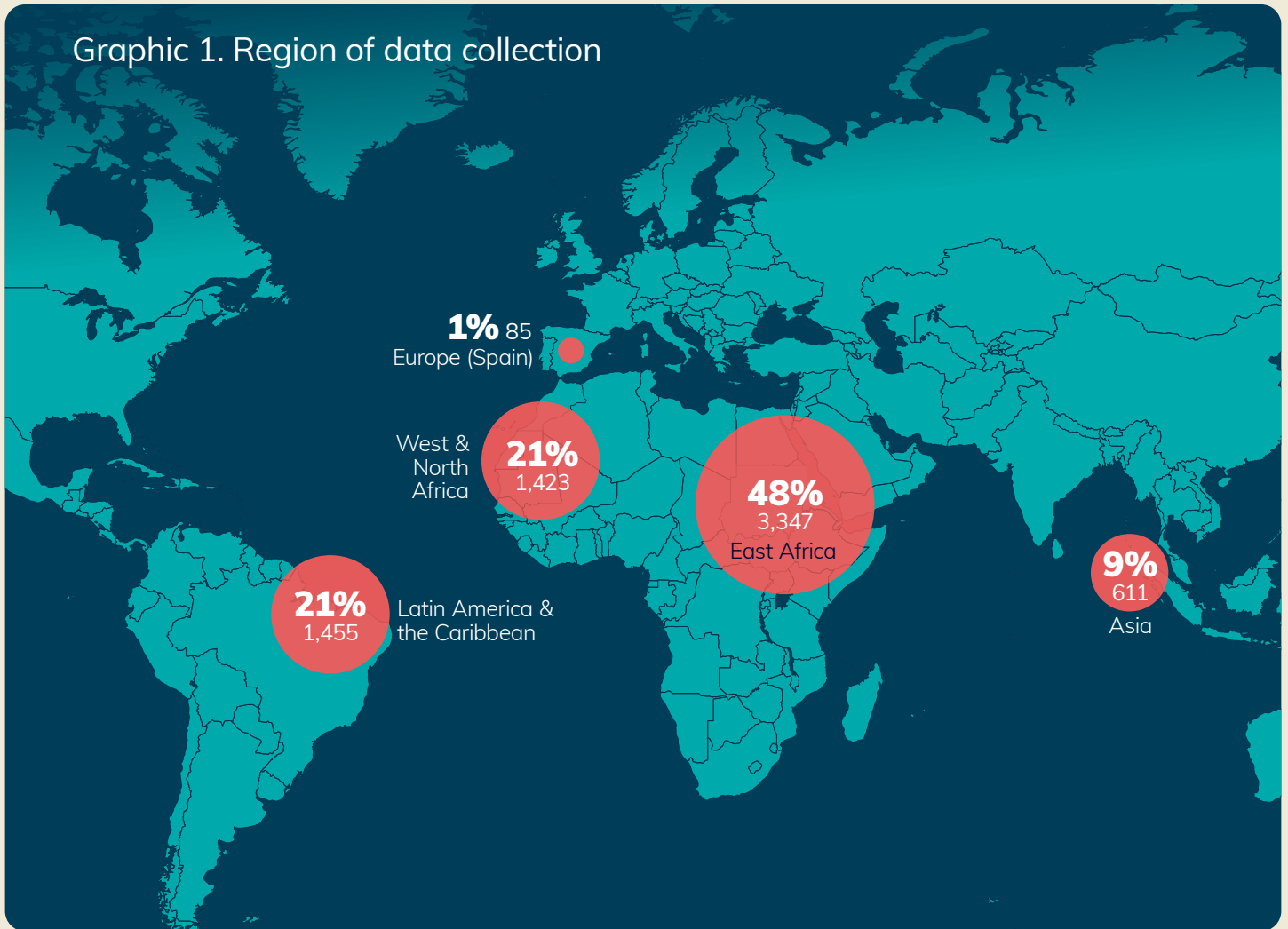
Capitalising on 4Mi's adaptability and agility, in March 2025, MMC quickly added two questions to the 4Mi survey.¹ One was about migrants' knowledge and experience of recent migration policy changes enacted by the Trump administration. The question asked the extent to which migrants feel impacted by the Trump administration's changes to US foreign policy, including changes to migration policies, the suspension of humanitarian and development funding, and the pausing of refugee resettlement. Secondly, respondents were asked to elaborate their experiences through an open-ended question. The following analysis draws from

6,921 interviews conducted between March and June 2025 across 19 countries, exploring both quantitative and qualitative responses. Importantly, beyond the more abstract discussions on the impact of the geopolitical turmoil and decisions by the Trump administration on migration, the sections below provide direct insights from thousands of migrants on the move about how they are impacted in their daily lives. Not only in the form of quantitative data, but by talking to them through the 4Mi programme, every single day and all over the world, their stories can be told, unedited, in their own words.

1 MMC's 4Mi methodology allows for the rapid inclusion of a select number of additional questions – either to all globally comparable surveys or in select geographies – on specific emerging dynamics. MMC has, for example, previously done this in response to the earthquake in Syria and Türkiye, the war in Tigray and in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Profiles and sampling

Graphic 1. Region of data collection



Graphic 2.
Gender of
respondents

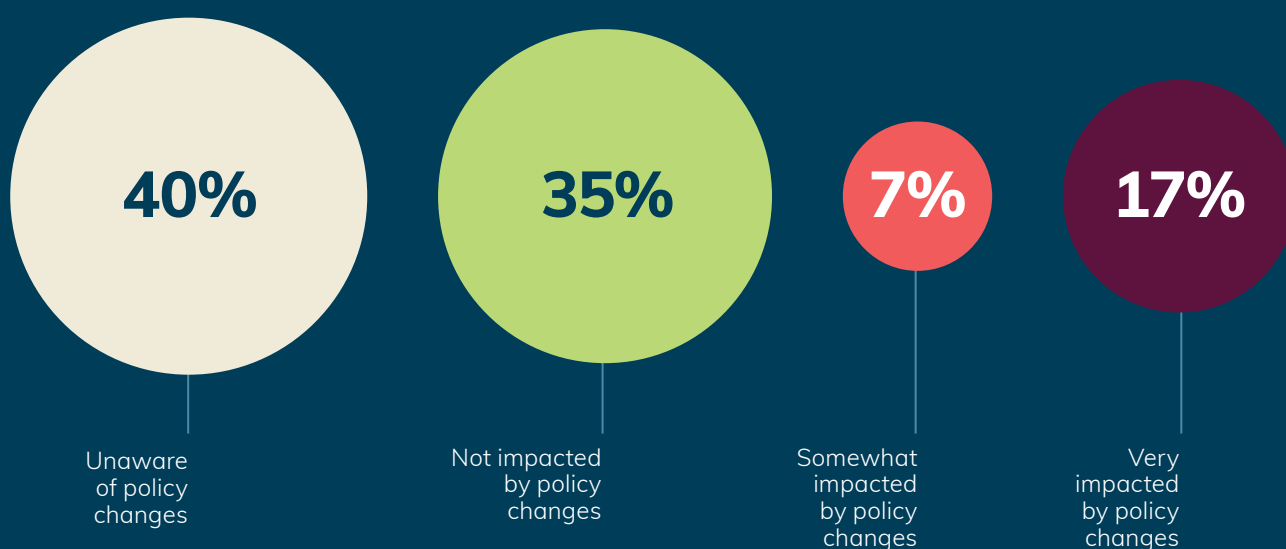


What impacts are being felt by migrants across the globe?

Around one quarter of respondents interviewed globally reported being impacted (17% very impacted, and 7% somewhat impacted) by the Trump administration's policy changes. Roughly a third (35%) reported that they

were not impacted, and a further 40% were unaware of the Trump administration's policy changes at the time of the interview.

Graphic 3. Impact of the Trump administration's policy changes



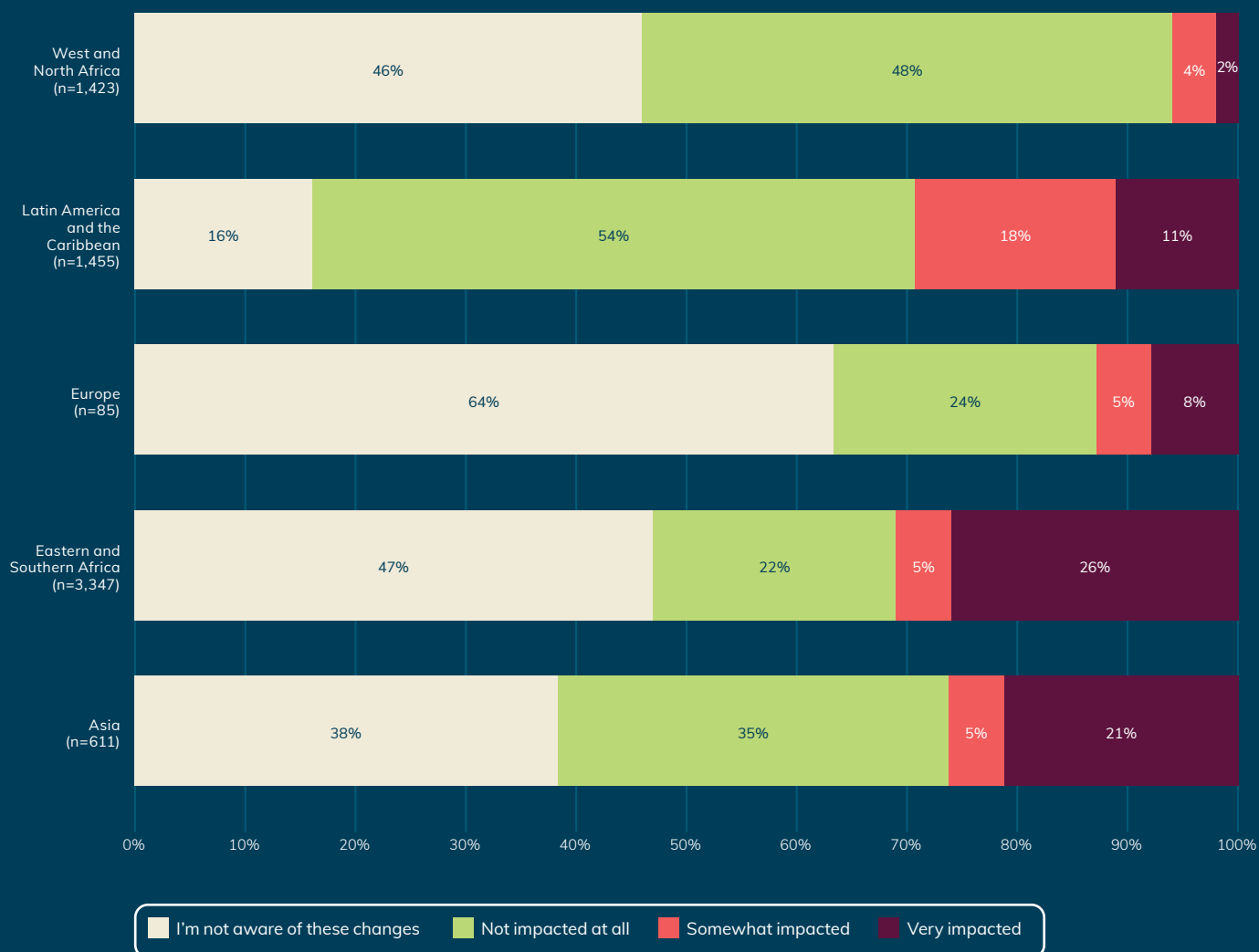
By region, migrants interviewed in Eastern and Southern Africa most commonly reported being impacted by the Trump administration's changes (31%), followed by Latin America (29%), Asia (26%), Europe (13%) and West and North Africa (6%) (see Graphic 4).

Probably due to their proximity to the United States' border, migrants in Latin America demonstrated the greatest awareness of the Trump administration's changes, with only 16% reporting they were unaware of the changes. In contrast, 64% of migrants interviewed in Europe (Spain) were not aware of the Trump administration's changes – the highest proportion across all regions – likely because these are less relevant to them directly, as they have already left their regions of origin and are likely to have a European country as the intended destination.

When examining responses by country of interview, clear differences emerge in the extent to which migrants report being impacted, as well as the types of impacts they report experiencing. Beyond global averages, regional differences are striking. In Latin America and the Caribbean, impacts were mainly tied to restrictions on freedom of movement, with the loss of legal mobility pathways such as Safe Mobility Offices and the CBP One app. In East Africa, the main effect came through cuts to humanitarian and development aid, reducing access to food, health care, and livelihoods. In Asia, particularly Indonesia, Afghans and Rohingya described deep uncertainty caused by the suspension of US resettlement and reductions in support. In Europe, while material effects were limited, migrants reported feeling the weight of Trump's toxic anti-migrant narrative, which left them stigmatised and fearful of similar rhetoric spreading in the EU. The following sections analyse the impacts of the Trump administration's changes by region and country of interview.

Graphic 4. Impact of Trump administration policy changes by region

Survey question: The new president of the United States, Donald Trump, has taken many decisions leading to changes in US foreign policy, changes in migration policies, suspending the United States' humanitarian and development funding, pausing refugee resettlement, etc. To what extent do you feel impacted by these changes?



What impacts are being felt by migrants in Latin America?

While overall 29% of migrants interviewed in Latin America reported feeling impacted by the Trump administration's policy changes. The majority of interviewees were located in South America, and nearly all migrants interviewed in Costa Rica and Mexico reported being impacted (although please note the small sample size of migrants interviewed in these two locations,

n=57). Over a third (37%) of migrants interviewed in Peru also reported being impacted, followed by 29% in Colombia, 24% in Bolivia, and 20% in Argentina/Brazil/Chile. The lowest proportion of migrants who reported feeling impacted in Latin America was 12% in Uruguay (see Graphic 5).

Graphic 5. Impact of Trump administration policy changes in Latin America, disaggregated by country of interview



Costa Rica & Mexico

When asked how they were impacted, several migrants interviewed in Costa Rica and Mexico specifically mentioned being affected by the elimination of the Safe Mobility Offices as well as the cancellation of the CBP One app.

They eliminated all the programmes that allowed you to enter legally, safe mobility, they eliminated all of that. That's the hope we had, even if we had to wait a long time, we knew it was coming. That's why many people were discouraged, because they had been waiting for a year or many months, and then they took everything away.

Venezuelan woman, 23, interviewed in Costa Rica

Many spoke about the devastation they felt at the loss of their 'American dream', through having their appointments cancelled.

Obviously, it's affecting us because if they treated immigrants badly before, now it's worse. They hunt us down like we're criminals. You don't really know if when you turn yourself in to immigration, they'll let you pass, they'll send you back, or if they'll lock you up. We can no longer cross into the United States, and that was the dream many of us had.

Venezuelan man, 28, interviewed in Mexico

I was in shock and trauma for about a month. You think so much about what you went through, so much that I risked my daughter to get there, so that this man, yes, maybe he's thinking about the safety of his country, but I don't know... It's not fair. It took me a month to accept it. I cried a lot until I accepted it because there was nothing else I could do.

Venezuelan woman, 34, interviewed in Costa Rica

Despite the effective closure of the US-Mexico border for asylum seekers and the end of Safe Mobility Offices and the CBP One app, some migrants reported that their goal of reaching the United States remains unchanged. One migrant said that in the absence of other options, she is now pursuing irregular migration into the US via a smuggler.

My goal is to reach the United States. At first, I had the idea of doing it with a coyote [smuggler], but the opportunity for a CBP One appointment presented itself. When CBP failed, we went back to the coyote option. It only delayed me, but my goal is the same.

Honduran woman, 33, interviewed in Mexico

My final destination was the United States, and that's where the family is who can help me settle. I'm not going back to El Salvador, but it's going to be harder.

Man from El Salvador 34, interviewed in Mexico

Several migrants also spoke about the rise in xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment, which they felt was a direct result of President Trump's rhetoric.

I think we all knew that if he came to power he would shut us down, but we don't even want to go there anymore, there's a lot of xenophobia, it's no longer our dream.

Venezuelan woman, 25, interviewed in Costa Rica

Peru

In Peru, migrants who reported being impacted commonly mentioned a severe lack of support from NGOs due to the Trump administration's funding cuts.

They told me that there used to be more help for migrants, and they also said that about three months ago, several offices that helped migrants closed, and now there's no such help, or it's limited.

Venezuelan man, 37, interviewed in Peru

I was very surprised because at that time we were in a shelter and they suddenly told us that they could no longer accept migrants because they no longer had the means to sustain the place.

Venezuelan man, 26, interviewed in Peru

Current services cover absolutely nothing; there are several needs, such as psychological and medical care, that are lacking.

Venezuelan woman, 31, interviewed in Peru

Migrants interviewed spoke of limited access to support as well as employment, resulting in great difficulty remaining in Peru. Regarding migration intentions, one man mentioned that, as a result of the Trump administration's policy changes, he had observed migrants returning from further north at the United States' border and heading south. This reflects research conducted by MMC in May 2025, that observed a notable increase in Latin American refugees and migrants who, having seen their plans to reach the US disrupted, were embarking on return movements towards Latin America.²

I saw other migrants returning from the north and planning to migrate south. I think more of us will be migrating south, so assistance will be limited. I was also told that several offices have closed, and assistance is less.

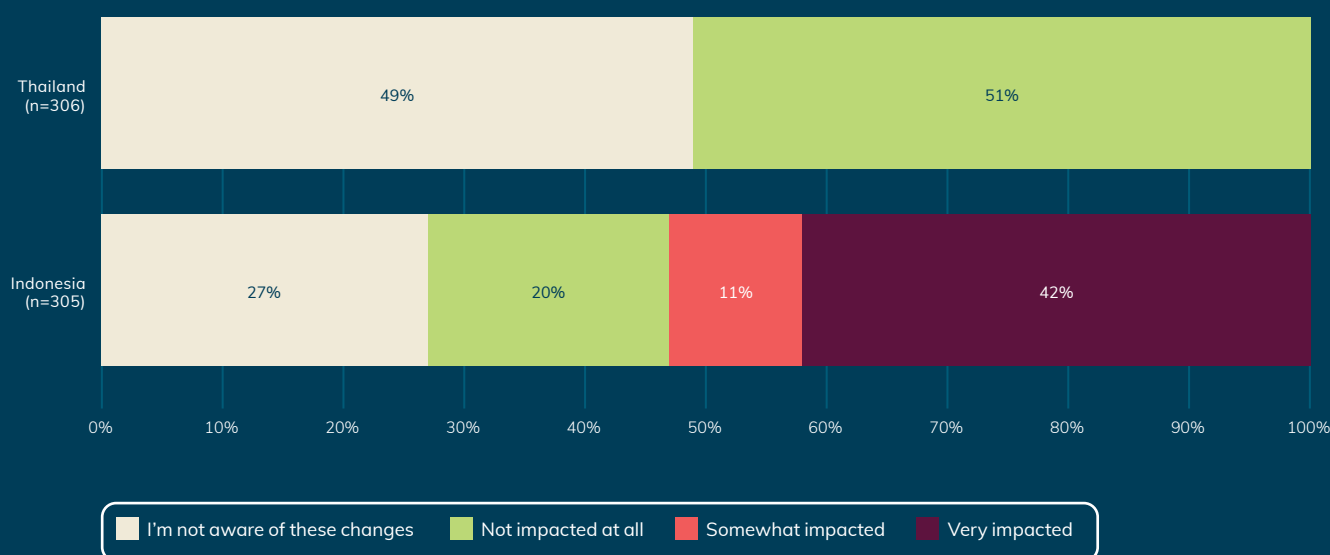
Venezuelan man, 29, interviewed in Peru

² MMC (2025) [Migration dynamics and protection risks in north-south return movements in the Americas](#).

What impacts are being felt by migrants in Asia?

Within Asia, there were considerable differences reported between the two countries of interview – Thailand and Indonesia (see Graphic 6).

Graphic 6. Impact of Trump administration policy changes in Asia, disaggregated by country of interview



Indonesia

In Indonesia, 53% of migrants interviewed reported feeling impacted by the Trump administration's policy changes, the second highest proportion of any country, after Costa Rica.

Around 31% of all Afghans interviewed in Indonesia (n=123) said that they felt somewhat or very impacted by the changes. Several respondents specifically mentioned being affected by the cessation of resettlement to the US. Refugees in Indonesia face long resettlement waiting times, and historically the United States has been one of the resettlement countries for refugees hosted in Indonesia.³ As a result, many reported severe mental health impacts.

Since I arrived in Indonesia, I have been registered with the United Nations, and the United States resettled immigrants from Indonesia every year, and I have seen immigrants who have been in Indonesia for years before me and are waiting for resettlement. Immigrants in Indonesia do not have any rights. Indeed, the recent statements of the president of the United States have affected not only me but all immigrants.

Afghan man, 49, interviewed in Indonesia

³ MMC (2021) [A Transit Country No More: Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Indonesia](#).

The US resettles many refugees every year, especially those residing in Indonesia. Now that the US president has changed the laws, it has affected not only me but all refugees who were and are waiting for resettlement. If the US no longer accepts refugees, all refugees, especially those residing in Indonesia, will be in a bad situation. Everyone is suffering from unemployment, illness, stress and an uncertain future

Afghan man, 25, interviewed in Indonesia

68% of Rohingya interviewed in Indonesia (n=182) also reported being impacted. Like Afghan interviewees, Rohingya also spoke about being impacted in terms of resettlement. In addition, many Rohingya also mentioned the impact of funding cuts, particularly a loss or reduction of support from IOM.

A few months back IOM took away our accommodation and cut our allowance because of Donald Trump's decision against USAID. That's why we are impacted

Man from Myanmar, 24, interviewed in Indonesia

Thailand

Interestingly, no migrants interviewed in Thailand reported being impacted by the changes. All respondents in Thailand were from Myanmar and were interviewed in locations outside refugee camps at the Thai/Myanmar border. Therefore, it is likely that many interviewed were not recipients of humanitarian aid, the supply of which

has been impacted by the Trump administration's policy changes.⁴ Within Thailand, there was an almost even split between migrants who were aware and migrants who were not aware of the Trump administration's policy changes (see Graphic 6).

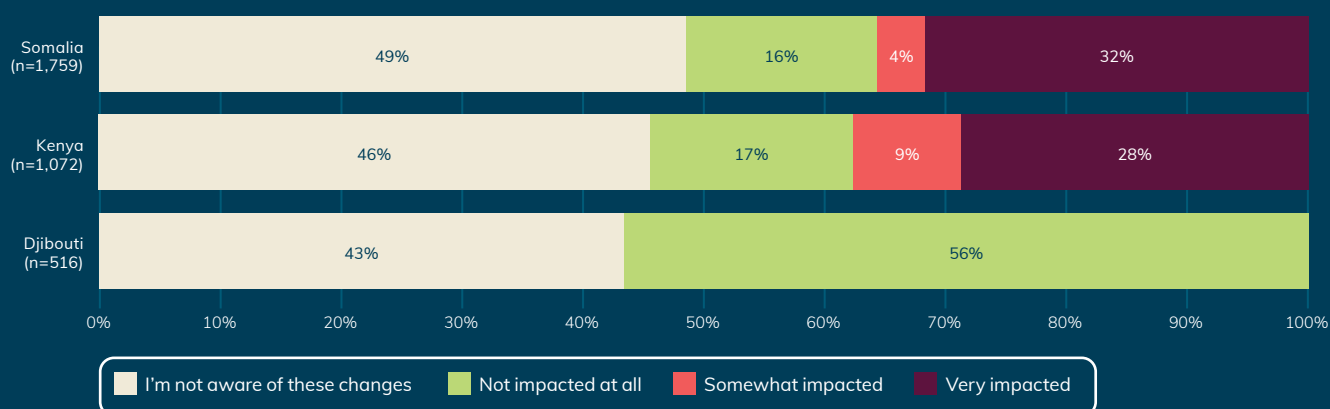
⁴ Human Rights Watch (2025) [Thailand: Aid Cuts Put Myanmar Refugees at Grave Risk](#).

What impacts are being felt by migrants in East Africa?

Over a third of migrants interviewed in both Kenya and Somalia reported feeling impacted by the Trump administration's policy changes (37% and 36%

respectively). Almost half of all respondents across the three countries of interview reported not being aware of the changes (see Graphic 7).

Graphic 7. Impact of Trump administration policy changes in East Africa, disaggregated by country of interview



Kenya

In Kenya specifically, migrants reported experiencing the impacts of reduced aid and funding, which led to access to food, health care and education being diminished or stopped altogether.

As a result of the cuts, one woman described the pressure to return home and the difficult decision she faced when confronted by a deteriorating situation in Kenya and a lack of safety if she returned home.

Since the aid stopped, vulnerable people barely have enough to eat or drink. There is no proper shelter or medical help. It is hardest on the kids and the elderly. We feel abandoned.

Ethiopian woman, 30, interviewed in Kenya

There is pressure to return home even if it's unsafe due to cuts of funding and cuts of livelihood programmes that help migrants become self-reliant.

Somali woman, 37, interviewed in Kenya

Somalia

Similar to Kenya, migrants spoke about feeling the impacts of funding cuts. Migrants specifically mentioned a loss of income, food scarcity, inflation, and a reduction in assistance, which they felt were directly related to the Trump administration's policy changes.

In terms of Ethiopia, American aid has had a huge impact on us because the Ethiopian currency, food prices, and living standards have increased.

Ethiopian man, 24, interviewed in Somalia

When the US stopped some of the aid and development support in Ethiopia, it really affected people like me. Before, there were some programmes in my area helping farmers, giving food assistance, and even a little training for youth. But after the funding stopped, those services disappeared, and life became harder.

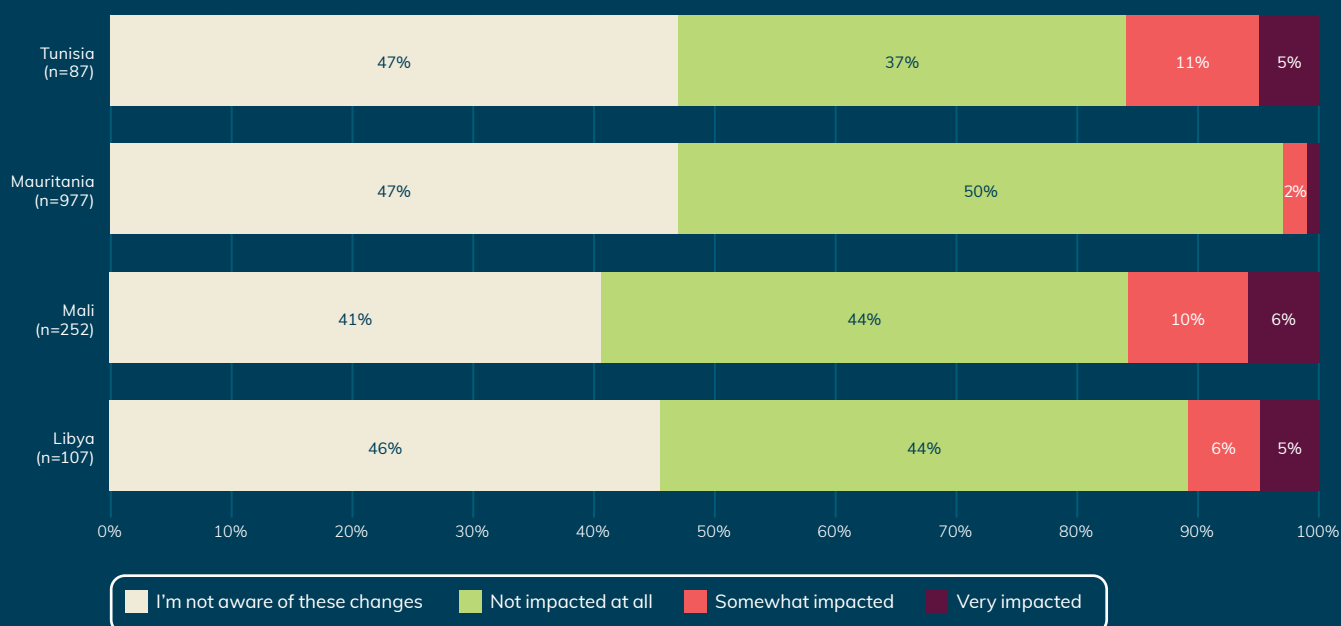
Ethiopian man, 25, interviewed in Somalia

What impacts are being felt by migrants in West and North Africa?

The West and North Africa regions (WANA) had the lowest reported impact across all regions. Within WANA, respondents in Tunisia and Mali reported that they were the most impacted followed by Libya then Mauritania (see Graphic 8).

Almost half of respondents across all countries in WANA were not aware of Trump's policy changes.

Graphic 8. Impact of Trump administration policy changes in WANA, disaggregated by country of interview



Tunisia

Eighty-seven migrants were interviewed in Tunisia with 14 reporting they were impacted by the Trump administration's policy changes. Several spoke about how the US had been their intended destination, and that recent policy changes would now prevent them from reaching the US. They also spoke about long delays and the cessation of resettlement. One man mentioned that due to delays in resettlement he will now attempt to cross irregularly by sea into the EU.

Because I am registered at the UNHCR and I was planning to go to the United States but with everything that is happening I will first try by sea.

Nigerian man, 30, interviewed in Tunisia

It has an impact because it's the country I've always dreamed of going to, so I have to choose another country, and I have a lot of friends who have been repatriated there. But I hope that by the time I arrive, everything will have changed.

Sudanese woman, 27, interviewed in Tunisia

Mali

Migrants who reported being impacted by the policy changes spoke about the cuts to humanitarian aid and resettlement delays/cessation. One migrant from Burkina Faso felt that the cuts had resulted in increased instability.

There are fewer opportunities and a lack of employment due to the suspension of humanitarian aid and development funding, which has affected my country somewhat. Similarly, security is also completely threatened.

Man from Burkina Faso, 30, interviewed in Mali

What impacts are being felt by migrants in Europe?

Spain was the only country of interview in Europe, and most migrants reported that they were either not aware or impacted by the Trump administration's policy changes. Roughly one in 10 migrants felt that they were impacted. However, as compared to other locations, their reported impacts were less material and instead more psychological. For instance, migrants who felt impacted commonly spoke about the impact of President Trump's anti-migrant rhetoric.

What Donald Trump said about immigration hit me deeply. I feel like he's talking about me and my family, portraying immigrants as a threat, when people are just trying to live with dignity. Even though I don't live in the United States, it affects me a lot

Man from Benin, 45, interviewed in Spain

When I hear Donald Trump talk about immigrants as if they were a threat, it hurts. I feel like he forgets that immigrants are also human beings with dreams and dignity. His words wound, and they leave scars.

Man from Togo, 25, interviewed in Spain

One migrant from the Gambia spoke openly about his fears that EU countries will follow in the steps of the US with increasingly hardline approaches.

I believe that if this happens, all the countries of the European Union will do the same.

Man from Gambia, 19, interviewed in Spain

The erosion of migration multilateralism and the ‘new world order’

Nicholas R. Micinski¹

The United Nations, and multilateralism more generally, is under pressure from all sides: insurgent nationalist governments, perpetual funding crises, a hamstrung Security Council that has failed to act on the famine and genocide in Gaza, record levels of UN staff killed in conflict zones, open defiance of International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings and the returning Trump administration whose mantra continues to be “America First”.

In particular, the Trump Administration 2.0 has reasserted its aggressive, transactional diplomatic style – especially on policies impacting migrants and refugees, while at the same time undermining traditional multilateralism and global forums. Trump has disregarded core principles of the world order – like the UN Charter’s ban on the use of force and conquest – and openly threatens military force against America’s neighbours and allies.² Trump is more emboldened in his second term than his first, because he interprets his re-election as an endorsement of his hardball style of governance. In addition, there are few moderate Republicans in his cabinet after the 6 January attack on the US capital, and few checks on his powers because Republicans hold the House of Representatives, the Senate and the majority on the Supreme Court.

While many of Trump’s immigration executive orders have focused on domestic enforcement and deportations, migration and displacement have also emerged as contentious foreign policy issues. Trump’s style of hardball migration diplomacy – with travel bans and visa sanctions, tariff threats and drastic cuts to migration aid – is an assault on global migration governance.³

This essay surveys the escalation of hardball diplomacy before analysing the current state of global migration governance. There is a growing gap in leadership and political power within multilateral institutions without the United States, but it is unclear if the EU, China or other governments can or are willing to step into the void. The Global Compacts on refugees and for migration, along

with the global forums every four years, appear even more irrelevant in the current political climate. However, UN plans for reform and the pledging format of each forum could open space for more transactional politics.

Migration multilateralism under attack

For nearly 80 years, the US was one of the global hegemony providing leadership, funding and programmes that formed the basis of migration multilateralism. While much global migration governance was ad hoc, it became increasingly more institutionalised in the last 20 years with regular global forums, increasing migration aid, the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and the 2018 Global Compacts.⁴ From 2003 to 2023, the US resettled more than a million refugees, accounting for 60 percent of those resettled through UNHCR.⁵ In 2023, the US was the lead donor for UNHCR (USD 1.9 billion, or 57% of UNHCR’s total donations), IOM (USD 1.4 billion, or 51%) and UNRWA (USD 422 million, or 33%).⁶ The next largest donors to UN agencies specialising in migration were Germany (USD 796 million), The Netherlands (USD 273 million), Canada (USD 287 million) and the United Kingdom (USD 250 million).⁷ In 2016, the US hosted the Leaders’ Summit, at which Obama cajoled world leaders into pledging more commitments to refugees and eagerly signed the New York Declaration.

However, the first Trump administration pulled the US out of negotiations for the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), slashed refugee resettlement and temporarily paused funding to UNRWA. While chants of “Build the Wall” dominated rallies and headlines, Trump 1.0 was more focused on domestic enforcement – through deportations, ending Temporary Protection Status (TPS) and child-separation policy – than global engagement on migration.

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2 Hathaway, O. and Shapiro, S. (2025) [Might Unmakes Right](#). Foreign Affairs.

3 Migration management aid, or migration aid for short, includes any foreign aid intended to control the movement of people, including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, labor migrants and mixed movements. See: Norman, K. and Micinski, N. (2023) [The European Union’s migration management aid: Developing democracies or supporting authoritarianism?](#) International Migration.

4 Micinski, N. (2021) *UN Global Compacts: Governing Migrants and Refugees*. Routledge.

5 Statista (2024) [Number of refugee admissions in the U.S. from the fiscal year of 1990 to the fiscal year of 2024](#); Also UNHCR [Refugee Data Finder](#).

6 United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (2023) [Revenue by Government Donor](#).

7 Amounts calculated as total government voluntary core (un-earmarked) and non-core (earmarked) contributions to UNHCR, IOM and UNRWA in 2023. See: UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (2023) [Revenue by Government Donor](#).

Trump 2.0 is setting fire to the UN and migration multilateralism. Trump is withdrawing the US from key UN agencies and treaties, like the World Health Organization, UN Human Rights Council, UNRWA, UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, and sanctioning the ICC.⁸ The closing of USAID and cuts to foreign aid will impact the WFP, UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF; a leaked document suggested that USD 781 million (74%) of USAID grants to IOM could be terminated (see also *The end of development aid? How aid cuts may reshape migration*, p. 233).⁹ Instead of channeling US aid through UN agencies that have operated in Gaza for 76 years, the Trump administration is backing the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) – a recently created American non-profit founded by private security contractors with no experience of delivering aid – despite nearly 1,400 Palestinians being killed attempting to receive food aid from GHF.¹⁰ Trump's strategy in Gaza – sidelining UN agencies, empowering private contractors and threatening military conquest – may foreshadow his approach to conflicts and displacements around the world. Trump is not afraid to threaten the use of military force or conquest by the US to end wars – despite its explicit prohibition in the UN Charter.¹¹

Trump 2.0's damage to migration multilateralism – and global governance writ large – is extensive and will likely get worse over the next three years. Without strong diplomacy and multilateral institutions, the international community will be left with few tools for ending conflicts and preventing mass displacements.

Trump's hardball migration diplomacy

Instead of working through United Nations or other multilateral forums, states sometimes make backroom deals about migration and displacement. Scholars define migration diplomacy as the process through which countries use diplomatic tools like treaties, declarations, bilateral agreements or development aid to control the movement of people or use the movement of people to influence diplomacy.¹² For example, the UK, Australia and the EU have spent billions in order to deter migration, while transit countries like Libya, Turkey or Belarus have deliberately encouraged migration to Europe in order to extract concessions from the EU. While Trump has

a unique rhetorical style and penchant for X (formerly Twitter) tantrums, migration diplomacy has been used by many other countries to deter or manage migration.

In many ways, Trump's personality and governing style are conducive to transactional, tit-for-tat agreements related to migration. Because migration was a central issue of his first term, Trump was willing to negotiate over, threaten and pull in tangential issues (like tariffs or trade agreements) to US migration diplomacy. During Trump 1.0, the administration used threats of tariffs, cuts in migration aid, bilateral deportation agreements and travel bans and visa sanctions to coerce states into cooperating with his migration agenda.

In March 2025, Trump made a USD 6 million deal with El Salvadorean dictator Nayib Bukele to accept deportations from the US and indefinitely detain migrants in CECOT, the mega-prison notorious for its brutal conditions and absence of due process.¹³ Similarly, the US Supreme Court approved deportations of non-nationals to South Sudan and was reportedly considering Libya as well.¹⁴ Both Israel and President Trump floated a plan for forcibly resettling Palestinians from Gaza to Libya or South Sudan – despite scholars considering these plans as ethnic cleansing.¹⁵ We may be entering another era in which powerful Western states shuffle people from country to country, based on geopolitical and financial interests, not human rights or international law.

In May 2019, Trump tweeted: “the United States will impose a 5 percent Tariff on all goods coming into our Country from Mexico, until such time as illegal migrants coming through Mexico, and into our Country, STOP. The Tariff will gradually increase until the Illegal Immigration problem is remedied (sic).”¹⁶ Mexico agreed, just 11 days later, to increase border enforcement, expand the Remain in Mexico programme and work to counter human trafficking. Similarly, Trump threatened on X to cut USD 400 million in aid to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras; within a few months, all signed Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACA) with the United States.¹⁷ ACAs are safe third country agreements which allow the US to deport asylum seekers to these countries if they have travelled through their territories on their way to the US.

Trump 2.0 has expanded this hardball migration diplomacy. Just six days after his second inauguration, Trump threatened 25 percent tariffs, travel bans

8 Executive office of the President (2025) [Executive Order 14199](#).

9 Langrand, M. (2025) [International Geneva: who may be losing US aid?](#) Geneva Solutions.

10 United Nations News (2025) [Gaza: Nearly 1,400 Palestinians killed while seeking food, as UN warns airdrops are no solution](#).

11 Hathaway, O. and Shapiro, S. (2025) [Might Unmakes Right](#). Foreign Affairs.

12 Adamson, F. and Tsourapas, G. (2019) [Migration Diplomacy in World Politics](#), 20(2), 113–128. International Studies Perspectives.

13 Reuters (2025) [What to know about the El Salvador mega-prison where Trump sent deported Venezuelans](#). The Guardian.

14 Paynter, E. (2025) [Supreme Court rules Trump can rapidly deport immigrants to Libya, South Sudan and other countries they aren't from](#). The Conversation.

15 Said, S., Gramer, R. and Abdel-Baqi, O. (2025) [Israel Is Quietly in Talks to Relocate Palestinians From Gaza](#). Wall Street Journal.

16 Karni, A., Swanson, A. and Shear, M. D. (2019) [Trump Says U.S. Will Hit Mexico With 5% Tariffs on All Goods](#). The New York Times.

17 Congressional Research Service (2021) [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview](#).

and financial sanctions on Colombia because their government refused to cooperate on deportations.¹⁸ Within hours, Colombian president Gustavo Petro conceded, after obtaining guarantees that Colombian deportees would be treated humanely during the deportation process. Other countries took note and began talks with the Trump administration about repatriation agreements.

In June 2025, the Trump administration reinstated the infamous “travel ban” – effectively blocking entry into the US by any citizen from 12 countries, and imposing partial bans on seven more.¹⁹ These bans and threats to ban are a type of blackmail: conform to US standards of data sharing and identity management or be banned. The administration demanded that 36 other countries conform to US data-sharing practices or else be added to the travel ban list.²⁰

What is clear from Trump’s first term and the first months of his second is that hardball migration diplomacy has been successful at achieving his short-term goals. States are making deals, conceding to threats and mimicking his transactional style of governance to the detriment of international law and international organisations. What is not clear yet is what will happen if or when states stop conceding to the United States and instead fight back.

The future of migration multilateralism

While Europe has not been as brash as Trump, it embraced a similar approach to migration through deterrence, externalisation and deportations long before Trump’s second term.²¹ The European Commission just proposed its new budget for 2028-2034, earmarking some EUR 81 billion for migration controls, tripling the amount from the previous budget.²² The EU was key in negotiations for the Global Compact for Migration and European governments made significant pledges at the 2022 International Migration Review Forum, even though there is no continent with such a low adoption rate of the GCM as Europe and the GCM is generally absent from any European migration policy discussions. But the European approach to migration is not so different from Trump’s – despite their engagement with multilateral institutions. In March 2024, the European Council adopted the Pact on

Asylum and Migration as a set of Europe-wide reforms on asylum, detention and resettlement. The goal is a more unified approach, but it will potentially undermine migrant and refugee rights in similar ways to Trump. The pact allows the EU to collect more information about asylum seekers in EU-wide databases, expands detention in hotspots or “transit zones” and allows states to suspend asylum rules when neighbouring states weaponise migration – (think, for example, of Trump’s calls to suspend asylum because of migrant caravans approaching the US border).²³

The EU pact also pushed for an expanded use of “safe countries” – meaning asylum seekers who travel through other countries can be deported to those countries, regardless of the “connection criteria” enshrined in the EU Return Directive, which states that someone needs to have a connection to the country they are deported to.²⁴ This mirrors Trump’s agreements with Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras and opens the door for the EU to deport rejected asylum seekers to places like Albania or Rwanda.

Remarkably, Denmark – who was beginning its turn in the EU Council presidency – issued a joint letter in May 2025, along with eight other EU governments, demanding more flexibility in deporting “criminal foreign nationals”. The letter calls for a wider reinterpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights, claiming that the high court has protected “the wrong people and posed too many limitations on the states’ ability to decide whom to expel from their territories.”²⁵ This rhetoric and legal interpretation parallels Trump’s challenges to US courts and judges who frustrated his attempts to deport supposedly “criminal” migrants in the first months of his second term.

In March 2025, the European Commission proposed new rules on returns (i.e. deportations) that would allow for fast-track deportations, removals before appeals are decided and return hubs outside the EU. All this points to the EU following Trump’s playbook on migration diplomacy and the externalisation of migration controls. EU-level cooperation on deportations (i.e. European governments using treaties to manage migration) is a type of migration diplomacy within the continent and also requires diplomacy with countries of origin who must agree to cooperate on deportations. The European style of migration diplomacy comes with less blackmail and more

18 Trump, D. (2025) [Truth Details](#). Truth Social.

19 Full ban: Afghanistan, Burma, Chad, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. Partial: Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan and Venezuela. See: White House (2025) [Restricting The Entry Of Foreign Nationals To Protect The United States From Foreign Terrorists And Other National Security And Public Safety Threats](#).

20 Lee, M. (2025) [Trump administration demands action from 36 countries to avoid travel ban](#). AP.

21 Micinski, N. (2022) [Delegating Responsibility: International Cooperation On Migration In the European Union](#). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

22 European Commission (2025) [Home Affairs Funds: Migration Borders Security](#).

23 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Civil Society Organisations Call on MEPs to Vote Down Harmful EU Migration Pact](#).

24 European Union (2024) [Asylum Procedure Regulation \(2024/1348\), Article 77](#); Also EPRS (2024) [Safe third country concept in the EU pact on migration and asylum](#).

25 Government of Denmark (2025) [“Fælles brev om konventioner.”](#)

migration aid but to the same effect. The EU still believes in international cooperation – however, nationalist governments are using international institutions (EU and UN agencies) to endorse and facilitate more restrictive migration policies.

New players in migration multilateralism?

Geopolitically, China could seize this moment to assert its leadership within migration multilateralism by expanding its Belt and Road Initiative to include migration infrastructure, like shipping ports, airports or railways that move both people and goods. However, there is little evidence that migration is high on its agenda: China only became a member of IOM in 2016 and was a tepid participant in the GCM negotiations.

If China did prioritise migration multilateralism, it would likely prioritise development and global inequality. Chinese representatives often say in multilateral forums that, “Underdevelopment and unbalanced development are the main drivers of migration. Ultimately, solutions to the problems resulting from underdevelopment can only be achieved through development.”²⁶ During the 2022 IMRF, the Chinese representative emphasised that regional forums like the Bali Process, Colombo Process or ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea) were important for the implementation of the GCM.²⁷

Alternatively, Gulf states are seeking to expand their diplomatic agenda and soft power. For example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) volunteered for the chair of two migration forums: the Global Forum on Migration and Development in 2020 and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (2020-21). In addition, UAE hosted the UN climate conference (COP28) in 2023. The UAE invested significantly in its diplomatic capacity to host the delegates for each event, in part seeking to gain a reputation as a developed, responsible state within the international community. The UAE also established the International Humanitarian City (renamed Dubai Humanitarian in 2024) as a logistics and warehouse hub for UN agencies and other humanitarian actors. In 2024, the hub facilitated 22,000 tons of aid, primarily to Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan and the DR Congo.²⁸ The UAE, Rwanda and Kenya – amongst others – expressed interest in relocating the headquarters of some UN agencies to their capitals.

Importantly, the UAE aspires to be a leader within migration multilateralism through hosting and logistics – but not necessarily reinforcing the normative core of refugee and migrant rights and treaties. Complicating matters, the UAE has been accused of providing weapons and aid to the Rapid Support Force in Sudan.²⁹ In March 2025, Sudan filed a case against the UAE at the ICJ, accusing the UAE of being complicit in the genocide in Darfur.³⁰ While clearly hypocritical, it is not the first leader in global migration governance to contribute to the persecution and the aid of the same refugees.

Regardless of who may step in to fill the void, the result of Trump 2.0 is a severely weakened multilateral system, which will likely struggle even further to resolve the conflicts that often drive much of the world’s migration.

What is left after Trump 2.0?

The architecture of global migration governance – regular global forums, UN agencies, treaties and compacts – remains in place but looks more irrelevant than ever. The Trump administration’s cuts, threats and deals will disrupt the way humanitarian organisations assist people along mixed migration routes with direct impact on aid, staff and protection pathways. This will likely result in less protection, less direct support and less trust in legal routes to migration – resulting in more people turning to smugglers to circumvent tougher restrictions and militarised borders.

UNHCR still plans to host the Global Refugee Forum in December 2025, but the prospects for major pledges are slim given the current geopolitical climate. The International Migration Review Forum is scheduled for 2026, but there has been slow momentum in the regional reviews and national UN Networks on Migration. Both global forums include voluntary reviews and pledges, which could suit a transactional style of migration diplomacy because states often make their pledges contingent on adequate financial support from rich countries. It is, nonetheless, unlikely the Trump administration will participate in the forums for fear of legitimising any role for the UN or multilateralism in migration governance.

Trump’s assault on multilateralism means that UN agencies will struggle in the new climate. Cuts to US funding mean that the UN refugee and migration agencies will struggle to continue their current operations. The UN is considering significant reforms

26 Li, L. (2018) [Statement of Ambassador Li Li, Leader of the Chinese Delegation and Chinese Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco, At the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact For Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#). Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact For Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, Marrakesh.

27 China (2025) [Statement on Topic 2 of the Second Asia-Pacific Regional Review Meeting on the Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration](#). IMRF.

28 Dubai Humanitarian (2025) [Annual Report](#).

29 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Fanning the Flames: Sudanese Warring Parties’ Access To New Foreign-Made Weapons and Equipment](#).

30 Spivey, M. (2025) [Sudan takes UAE to world court over ‘complicity in genocide’](#). BBC.

– including the potential merger of UNHCR, IOM, UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies like OCHA and WFP – to streamline operations and cut overlap.³¹ One advantage of a merged UN Refugee and Migrant Agency would be that mixed migration would be covered in one organisation that could coordinate work in this complex space. But the disadvantages would be the dilution of UNHCR's normative mandate, the shrinking of the protection space and an agency that is less critical of its member states' policies.

Since joining the UN system in 2016, IOM has gained diplomatic strength within international forums. In May 2025, IOM announced it was partnering with the United States to deliver assisted voluntary returns (AVR) – a controversial but standard part of IOM programming around the world.³² Trump posted a video claiming that he created “the first-ever self-deportation programme for illegal aliens”, including “free flights” and “exit bonuses”.³³ IOM attempted to distance itself by asserting that it does not do deportations – but at least Trump considers IOM's new AVR programme as self-deportation. In partnering with Trump, IOM may find a way to maintain and gain relevance within global migration governance over the next four years.

Trump's hardball migration diplomacy is displacing that of the rules-based system. In this new world order, regular forums, cooperation and shared responsibility are replaced with threats, backroom deals and delegated responsibility. While it is easy to pin this normative shift on Trump 2.0, the EU and others are joining this race to the bottom.

31 United Nations (n.d.) [UN80 structural changes and programmatic realignment: Compilation of non-attributable suggestions by the UN80 Task Force](#); Also Crisp, J. (2025) [Can the UN's Migration and Refugee Agencies Become One?](#) PassBlue.

32 United Nations (2025) [UN migration agency helping migrants in the US return home voluntarily](#).

33 The White House (2025) [Instagram](#).

Section 4

Resisting or normalising the extreme?

As it does every year, the Mixed Migration Review 2025 features two complementary reports: *Normalising the extreme* and *Resisting the extreme*, which chart the negative and positive state-led interventions and policies that directly impact migrants. In 2025, *Normalising the extreme* is brimming with examples – including mounting deportations, pushbacks at the borders, threats of citizenship revocations and increased border fortification. By contrast, *Resisting the extreme*, showcasing examples of positive or innovative migration actions or policies, remains far harder to populate, with only a handful of noteworthy examples standing out against the dominant tide of restrictive measures.

Normalising the extreme

Over successive volumes of the Mixed Migration Review, a depressing pattern has emerged: a migration-related action or policy that inspires outrage or condemnation today may, in the space of just a year or two, become accepted practice. This phenomenon of “normalising the extreme” means that some of the most egregious acts and policies documented this year, far from being disturbing anomalies, may instead serve as a tideline for what could soon be regarded as unremarkable or mainstream. Bearing that in mind, the incidents documented in this section – while reprehensible in themselves – also offer a wider warning of worse to come.

Peter Grant

This year, led by the **United States**, the normalisation process has accelerated, potentially increasing the threat to the global migration and asylum system. As a result, the boundaries are now so rapidly being redefined that the normalisation might no longer be a gradual, slippery slope, but a sudden paradigm shift. This acceleration might not only mean that what the US is doing now might be regarded as mainstream in a few years; it could also result in other countries following suit and feeling suddenly even more emboldened to implement more extreme anti-migration measures: as long as what they do is less extreme than what the Trump administration is doing, it might fall within the new window of what is seen as acceptable (for more in depth analysis see *When the extreme is normalised: shifting boundaries in ‘acceptable’ migration policies*, [p. 192](#)).

A radical new politics of migration

The beginning of US President Donald Trump’s second term in January 2025 ushered in a radical new doctrine on asylum and immigration that has not only empowered other right-leaning governments with similar agendas, but also mainstreamed what were previously seen as hardline positions among moderate and centrist governments. Though Trump has led the way, dismantling many established norms in unprecedented ways and encouraging others to do the same,¹ many countries are emulating his policies – in the process upending long-established norms and practices. In the **United Kingdom**, for example, the prime minister Keir Starmer announced new restrictions on labour immigration by lambasting “Britain’s failed experiment in open borders”² and described the country as “an island of strangers” – a

speech condemned even by members of his own party as echoing far-right talking points.³ While Starmer’s Labour party sits on the centre-left, it has steadily hardened its rhetoric and policies towards asylum and immigration in an unsuccessful effort to outflank the growing popularity of the right-wing, anti-migrant Reform party.

This mirrors a trend evident among mainstream politicians across Europe, despite evidence suggesting that, in most countries, this approach is only serving to entrench support for the far right.⁴ In **Germany**, for instance, a country that, until recently, was regarded as one of the most progressive member states in the European Union (EU) on asylum and migration, a raft of measures introduced by newly elected chancellor Friedrich Merz has seen the rollback of many rights and protections for refugees and migrants. However, perhaps the most shocking development was his decision, in January 2025, to break the longstanding, metaphorical ‘firewall’ separating mainstream political parties from the far right by attempting to introduce a bill to tighten immigration restrictions with the support of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) far-right party.⁵ This demonstrates the increasing willingness of governments to undermine fundamental legal and ethical principles to reduce irregular migration. Though Merz’s conservative CDU/CSU party won the subsequent elections, the AfD also made huge gains and, by August, was polling as the most popular party in the country (for more, see the Thematic snapshot *Migration policy in a rightward-shifting political landscape: the case of Germany*, [p. 134](#)).⁶

One of the most controversial elements in the AfD’s agenda is the opaque concept of ‘remigration’. While its leaders insist the term refers only to the return of undocumented migrants, some of its proponents also wish to extend it to the removal of naturalised

1 Melimopoulos, M. (2025) [“You’re destroying your countries”: Key moments from Trump’s UN speech](#). Al Jazeera.

2 Kirka, D. (2025) [UK government to tighten immigration rules amid voter anger over “failed experiment in open borders”](#). The Independent.

3 Syal, R. (2025) [Starmer accused of echoing far right with “island of strangers” speech](#). The Guardian.

4 Mueller, J. W. (2025) [Normalizing the normalization of the far right](#). Project Syndicate.

5 Connolly, K. (2025) [German parliament rejects immigration bill backed by far right](#). The Guardian.

6 Knapp, F. (2025) [Far-right AfD tops German popularity ranking in bombshell new survey](#). Politico.

citizens born outside Germany.⁷ Consequently, the May 2025 announcement by the US government that the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) would be rebranded as the Office of Remigration and tasked with facilitating repatriations⁸ was seen by some critics as a 'red flag' signalling the government's extreme intentions.⁹ While, at the time of writing, the proposed reorganisation had yet to be formalised, the announcement appeared to tap into the divisive associations of the phrase and its blurring of migration management with ethnonationalism.¹⁰

At a practical level, the implications are starkly illustrated by the September 2025 Supreme Court ruling permitting immigration officials to stop residents in Los Angeles simply on the basis of them speaking Spanish or being Latino – a move that activists argue constitutes racial profiling and discriminatory policing.¹¹ A similar process appears to be underway with the instrumentalisation of immigration enforcement to target dissent, aided by an obscure provision in the Immigration and Nationality Act ruling that any "alien whose presence or activities" could have "potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States" is "deportable". This vaguely defined wording has been weaponised against a number of foreign nationals who have expressed solidarity with Palestine and now face deportation proceedings.¹²

A new kind of politics appears to be emerging, not only in domestic politics, but also in international relations, with countries willing to accept what would have been previously unacceptable geopolitical positions in the interests of achieving their migration agendas. **Germany**, for instance, despite no official diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in 2021, appears to have initiated informal discussions with the de facto authorities to facilitate mass deportations of Afghan nationals. This controversial move has been criticised by the German opposition, with one MP arguing that it "legitimises terror and oppression".¹³ Even more shocking were reports, during the year, that the US government was mulling a proposal to permanently resettle up to 1 million displaced Palestinians from Gaza in Libya,¹⁴ particularly in light of the subsequent leak of plans to build a "Gaza Riviera" on the ruins, a vision that is dependent on "urbicide and expulsion".¹⁵

In **India**, the longstanding mobilisation of communal politics by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) intensified in the wake of a deadly attack by militants in April 2025 in the contested Kashmir region. In the ensuing weeks, the government escalated the deportation of migrants and refugees – predominantly, those from Muslim countries or communities – from its territory, on national security grounds. Ethnic Bengalis and Rohingya were especially targeted, with hundreds expelled to Bangladesh and Myanmar. While authorities claimed the deportations were carried out against "illegal immigrants", many Indian nationals were reportedly among those expelled, including people who have spent their entire lives in India but have faced administrative difficulties in providing their citizenship.¹⁶ With officials calling for the removal of "infiltrators"¹⁷ (a dog whistle previously deployed by the prime minister Narendra Modi to refer to India's large Muslim population),¹⁸ the campaign is being exploited to target not only vulnerable Rohingya and other refugees but also Indian Muslims.¹⁹

The erosion of citizenship rights appears to be a new frontline in migration policy for many governments, including the US, with Trump issuing an executive order at the very beginning of his presidency, revoking birthright citizenship for the children of migrants living in the US irregularly or on temporary visas. At the time of writing, with legal challenges ongoing, the proposed amendment has yet to come into effect.²⁰ In the UK, meanwhile, a February 2025 amendment to existing refugee policy effectively bars anyone who arrived in the UK irregularly from ever securing permanent citizenship, even though this is the only available means of entry for many vulnerable individuals. The motivation for this change may, in part, be rooted in deterrence – the idea that, by revoking citizenship pathways, some people may be discouraged from attempting to reach the UK – but, with persistent factors that drive migration towards the UK continuing, this is unlikely to impact meaningfully on numbers.²¹

France, too, took the controversial step, in April 2025, of suspending the constitutionally protected "right to soil" in the French-administered department of **Mayotte**, an island in the Indian Ocean. While all children born in French territory currently enjoy automatic citizenship rights, regardless of the nationality or status of their father

7 Moore, M. (2025) [Could "remigration" blow up the AfD's plan for power?](#) DW.

8 Roth, A. (2025) [State department ramps up Trump anti-immigration agenda with new "remigration" office](#). The Guardian.

9 Dirks, S. (2025) [Who's welcome in the US?](#) NPR.

10 NPR (2025) [How calls for mass deportations went mainstream](#).

11 Gambino, L. (2025) [US supreme court "effectively legalized racial profiling", immigration experts warn](#). The Guardian.

12 Anderson, S. (2025) [Trump promises to deport immigrants for their foreign policy views](#). Forbes.

13 Thureau, J. (2025) [German government nears deal with Taliban on deportations](#). DW.

14 Sky News (2025) [Up to a million Palestinians could be 'permanently relocated' to war-torn Libya under US plans](#).

15 Silver, J. (2025) [The "Gaza Riviera" is a fantasy plan that relies on urbicide and expulsion](#). The Conversation.

16 Human Rights Watch (2025) [India: Hundreds of Muslims unlawfully expelled to Bangladesh](#).

17 Fortify Rights (2025) [India: End unlawful expulsion of Indian Muslim citizens and Rohingya refugees](#).

18 Sharma, Y. (2024) ["Infiltrators": Modi accused of anti-Muslim hate speech amid India election](#). Al Jazeera.

19 Fortify Rights (2025) [India: End unlawful expulsion of Indian Muslim citizens and Rohingya refugees](#).

20 Wofsky, C. (2025) [Trump's birthright citizenship executive order: What happens next](#). ACLU.

21 The Guardian (2025) [The Observer view: Change to UK citizenship rule is cruel and misjudged](#).

or mother, the new law imposes additional restrictions on those born in Mayotte, with both parents having to have resided there legally for at least a year. Though presented as a means to make Mayotte less attractive as a destination for irregular migrants, the move has been condemned for turning the island into a “laboratory for the ideas of the far right”.²² Critics previously warned that the amendment would “open a Pandora’s box” and could eventually be extended to the rest of France.²³ To some extent, the realisation of this prediction appears already to be underway. In February 2025, the conservative justice minister, who oversaw the development of the Mayotte amendment, announced that he would be campaigning in the 2027 presidential elections for a referendum on whether birthright citizenship should be ended entirely across France.²⁴ If implemented, this would be yet another example of a supposed exception quickly becoming the norm.

Even more insidious than the rollback of citizenship pathways, however, are proposals to strip citizenship under certain circumstances: for instance, for providing false information to immigration authorities or engaging in terrorism (though Denmark, one of the early adopters of this legislation, subsequently extended this to include gang-related criminal activity as well). Because stripping someone of their sole nationality would effectively render them stateless, in contravention of international law, in practice, the group most vulnerable to losing their citizenship are those with dual nationality – in other words, migrants and those with a migrant background. During 2025, a number of countries, including Finland, Iceland and Sweden, have announced proposals along these lines.²⁵

One of the dangers of these reforms is that they could easily be repurposed over time to extend their scope: **Sweden**, for example, initially wished to follow Denmark’s lead and include gang membership alongside treason and espionage as one of the proscribed activities meriting citizenship removal.²⁶ In the **Netherlands**, on the other hand, the government has expressed its intention to revoke citizenship for “serious crimes with an antisemitic aspect”²⁷ – a move that implicitly targets its Moroccan population, who are unable to cancel their other nationality and are, therefore, disproportionately at risk of being targeted by the legislation.²⁸ This is especially troubling

given the increasing tendency to conflate antisemitism with criticism of the state of Israel’s actions.²⁹

Ultimately, these proposals risk the creation of a two-tier system of citizenship, while solidifying unfounded associations between immigration and crime. When Merz voiced support for the removal of German citizenship for dual nationals with serious criminal convictions, he was accused of framing naturalised Germans as “second-class citizens” and of racial discrimination, with one commentator arguing that the proposal was effectively repackaging many of the same assumptions that underpin the vision of remigration.³⁰

Harsher policies for Central Asian migrants in Russia

Despite making up a large share of **Russia’s** workforce, migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries have long been socially and economically marginalised. However, their situation has become markedly more difficult since a deadly mass shooting by Tajik militants in Moscow in March 2024, that left at least 137 people dead and 100 injured.³¹ Despite a wave of anti-migrant hate crimes carried out in its wake, Russian authorities – rather than seeking to protect the Central Asian population – have instead imposed a series of harsh restrictions on them. In addition to the passage of legislation barring children of migrants from accessing state education unless they are fluent in Russian,³² regulations have been relaxed to make deportations easier, resulting in tens of thousands more expulsions.³³ As of September 2025, all foreigners in Moscow will also, in principle, be required to subject themselves to geolocation tracking at all times.³⁴ Most disturbingly, there are reports that Central Asian migrants have been coerced under duress, in detention, to fight as mercenaries in Russia’s war in Ukraine.³⁵

While the terrorist incident in 2024 has galvanised popular xenophobia towards Central Asians, the increasingly hostile environment in Russia towards them also needs to be understood in the context of Russia’s internal politics and the invasion of

22 France24 (2025) [French parliament restricts birthright citizenship in Mayotte, left slams “laboratory of far right”](#).

23 Willsher, K. (2025) [“It’s non-negotiable”: French MPs angry at move to restrict citizenship on Mayotte](#). The Guardian.

24 France24 (2025) [What does it mean to be French? PM Bayrou calls for a national debate](#).

25 Kassam, A. (2025) [“One mistake and their Germanness is gone”: how idea of stripping citizenship for crimes spread across Europe](#). The Guardian.

26 Reuters (2025) [Sweden seeks to change constitution to be able to revoke citizenships](#).

27 The Government of Netherlands (2024) [Multifaceted approach to tackle the multi-headed hydra of antisemitism](#).

28 Dutch News (2024) [Anti-Semitism passport plan is “discriminatory and polarising”](#).

29 Solanki, J. (2025) [A disturbing pattern of repression is emerging in Europe](#). Al Jazeera.

30 Mellersh, N. (2025) [German opposition calls for reversal of citizenship reform](#). InfoMigrants.

31 Baker, G. and Greenall, R. (2024) [Russian court charges four men with act of terrorism in Moscow attack](#). BBC.

32 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Russia: Xenophobic crackdown on Central Asian migrants](#).

33 Jumaeva, R. (2025) [Central Asian migrants face Russia’s cold shoulder](#). DW.

34 Norov, K. (2025) [Russia imposes mandatory geolocation tracking for migrants in Moscow](#). The Diplomat.

35 RFERL (2025) [Thousands of Central Asians enlisted to fight Russia’s war in Ukraine through “coercion, enticements”](#).

Ukraine. Since 2022, the power and influence of the country's far-right nationalist wing have been consolidated, bringing this group's anti-migrant values to the fore.³⁶ Their ascendancy has released a "well of ethnic hatred" towards Central Asian migrants in particular,³⁷ increasingly framing them as "external enemies" alongside Ukrainians and the West.³⁸ With nationalists apparently poised to push for further restrictions on migrant labourers,³⁹ the future for Central Asians in Russia looks increasingly precarious.

The rollback of asylum

In recent years, the right to asylum has been undermined by the increasing willingness of governments (particularly, in Europe and North America) to prevent or constrain entry to their territories. Though this process has been underway for years, a tipping point appears to have been reached in 2025. Against a backdrop of "unprecedented and far-reaching" challenges, according to the World Refugee and Migration Council, the established framework for international protection and movement "is crumbling before our very eyes". Alongside right-wing populism and growing public hostility, it identified the failure of "more moderate voices to defend key democratic and human rights norms and principles" as a key factor in this disintegration.⁴⁰

The most visible symptom of this shift is the growing securitisation of migration management, including the erection of physical barriers. In addition to the increasing prevalence of 'partnership agreements' with transit countries to intercept or expel migrants and asylum seekers en route, many governments have opted to securitise their borders to prevent anyone from entering – in general, a prerequisite for claiming asylum. The erection of physical barriers is a key feature of this approach. Trump, having promised in his first term to build a "big, beautiful wall",⁴¹ has since announced plans not only to extend it,⁴² but even to paint it black to make it hotter and, therefore, more difficult to climb.⁴³

Furthermore, by designating a large stretch of border area as a militarised zone, the administration has been able to bypass restrictions on the use of the US army in immigration enforcement,⁴⁴ in the process trebling troop numbers at the border.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, one of the most extreme elements in Trump's agenda is the rollback of almost all forms of legal protection for asylum seekers. While his predecessor, former president Joe Biden, introduced an array of restrictions, including the temporary suspension of asylum during his term, these were, to a certain extent, balanced out by the expansion of various legal pathways, including for asylum applications.⁴⁶ By contrast, the Trump administration, besides effectively halting all asylum applications at the southern border,⁴⁷ has also suspended the country's refugee resettlement programme, leaving approximately 120,000 conditionally approved refugees in limbo.⁴⁸ In addition to preventing new asylum claims and refugee arrivals, the government has also dismantled most forms of humanitarian protection for refugees in the country. This includes the cancellation of the CBP One programme,⁴⁹ the removal of the Safe Mobility Offices, the annulment of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for nationals from a number of at-risk countries such as Afghanistan,⁵⁰ and the suspension of other parole programmes, including the Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela (CHNV) programme.⁵¹ The implications have extended far beyond the US, with thousands of migrants in **Mexico** and **Central America** stranded in desperate conditions and increasingly vulnerable to abuse by criminals in the absence of systematic support.⁵²

This represents something very different from the highly restrictive approach in place until January 2025: the systematic and almost wholesale dismantling of the country's asylum and protection framework. However, other countries appear to be heading in the same direction in rolling back their commitments to migrant protection. **Malta**, for instance, seems to have stepped back from humanitarian rescue since brokering a coordination agreement with Libya in 2020. While, in 2020, a boat in distress in Malta's waters was around three times more likely to be rescued by Armed Forces Malta (AFM) vessels

36 Jumaeva, R. (2025) [Central Asian migrants face Russia's cold shoulder](#). DW.

37 Nemtsova, A. (2024) [How Putin tapped a well of ethnic hatred in Russia](#). The Atlantic.

38 Davies, K. M. (2025) [Immigrants from Central Asia find hostility and violence in Russia](#). The Independent.

39 Jumaeva, R. (2025) [Central Asian migrants face Russia's cold shoulder](#). DW.

40 World Refugee and Migration Council (2025) [World Refugee & Migration Council urges actions to counter breakdown of the international refugee system](#).

41 Rogers, L. and Bailey, D. (2020) [Trump wall: How much has he actually built?](#) BBC.

42 Gilbert, S. (2025) [Trump's new border wall will threaten wildlife in an area where few people pass](#). The Guardian.

43 Debusmann, B. (2025) [Trump wants US-Mexico border wall to be painted black to stop climbers](#). BBC.

44 García Marco, D and Lentas, L. (2025) [This armoured vehicle was used in Iraq - now it's stationed at the US-Mexico border](#). BBC.

45 The Guardian (2025) ["Deterrence is boring": the US troops at sharp end of Trump's border crackdown](#).

46 For more see MMC (2025) [Opening Doors. Hardening Borders - a critical analysis of the Biden administration's approach to mixed migration](#).

47 Martínez-Beltrán, S. (2025) [President Trump's suspension of asylum marks a break from U.S. past](#). NPR.

48 Drenon, B. (2025) ["It's not fair": Other refugees in limbo as US welcomes white South Africans](#). BBC.

49 The Guardian (2025) [Homeland security revokes legal status for those who entered US via Biden-era CBP One app](#).

50 Gerstein, J. (2025) [Appeals court panel clears way for Trump admin to end TPS for Hondurans, Nepalis and Nicaraguans](#). Politico.

51 Totenberg, N. (2025) [Supreme Court allows Trump administration to end humanitarian status for some migrants](#). NPR.

52 Médecins Sans Frontières (2025) [Unwelcome: The devastating human impact of migration policy changes in the United States, Mexico and Central America](#).

than Libyan coastguards, the number of rescues by AFM since then has fallen by around 90 percent, while Libyan interceptions have tripled. This means that, by 2024, migrant boats were around 10 times more likely to be apprehended by the Libyan coastguard than the AFM.⁵³

Elsewhere, too, the European Union appears to be increasingly willing to militarise its borders to keep out migrants and asylum seekers. This is particularly evident on the Eastern Border with Russia and Belarus, where, in recent years, the apparent weaponisation of irregular migration by both countries has catalysed the creation of a violent and exclusionary border regime. This is particularly the case between **Poland** and Belarus, where the increasingly heavy-handed response of Polish authorities since 2021 has resulted in thousands of illegal pushbacks, often accompanied by violence, forcing migrants and asylum seekers into a no-man's land between the two countries.⁵⁴ While violence at the EU's borders is not a new phenomenon, it has previously been concealed in secrecy or denial: Greece, for example, has been implicated for years in serious and systematic abuses against migrants, but has frequently done so through plain clothed or masked vigilantes and even recruited migrants as proxies to carry out pushbacks.⁵⁵ The violence at the Polish border, on the other hand, is becoming increasingly formalised, with the government authorising the use of live ammunition against migrants in 2024, after three security guards were detained for endangering lives by firing on people crossing the border.⁵⁶

This culminated in Poland's announcement that it would be imposing a temporary, extendable suspension of asylum. The EU has not only refused to condemn this move but has also implicitly endorsed it. Having initially expressed reservations about the proposal in October 2024,⁵⁷ by December the EU had released a statement supporting Poland and other countries next to Belarus and Russia to respond accordingly in the event that irregular migration was weaponised against them.⁵⁸ The Crisis and Force Majeure provision, introduced earlier in 2024 under the framework of the Pact on Asylum and

Migration, also permits EU member states to "request the authorisation to apply derogations or to benefit from solidarity measures",⁵⁹ including the suspension of asylum. In this context, then, Poland was able to impose a 60-day suspension of the right to asylum at the border, subsequently extended in May,⁶⁰ without any public concerns from the EU.

Similarly, in July, in response to increasing irregular migration from Libya, **Greece** issued a three-month suspension of asylum applications from anyone who had travelled from North Africa.⁶¹ Despite attracting much criticism from human rights groups,⁶² not least because many arrivals (including displaced Sudanese) have evident protection needs,⁶³ the EU has again been silent on the issue.⁶⁴ This is, perhaps, in part because there is a diminishing number of member states that can credibly take a stand on the issue. Germany, for instance, is itself stretching established rules with the implementation of a new policy, in May 2025, of forcibly returning asylum seekers at the border without reviewing their claims.⁶⁵

Family reunification, a longstanding right for recognised refugees in Europe, is also being rolled back by various countries as a means of reducing their protection responsibilities. While **Austria** was the first EU member state to issue a temporary suspension of family reunification in March 2025, other countries have subsequently followed suit with similar measures of their own, including Germany, affecting hundreds of thousands of predominantly Syrian holders of temporary protection status.⁶⁶ The UK took a similar step in September.⁶⁷ Other countries, such as **Portugal**, have imposed tighter restrictions on family reunification⁶⁸ but stopped short of halting it outright. These decisions have had a devastating impact on thousands of families, many of whom have been separated for years and now face even greater uncertainty as to when they will be able to reunite. For both refugees in host countries and loved ones stranded in countries of origin, potentially in danger themselves, the indefinite closure of family reunification will prolong their trauma and could even encourage some

53 Cummings, J. (2025) [Malta sea rescues plummet as Libyan pushbacks soar in years since migration deal](#). Times of Malta.

54 HRW (2024) [Poland: Brutal pushbacks at Belarus border](#); Also 11be (2025) [Pushed, beaten, left to die: European pushback report 2024](#); Also Oxfam (2025) [Brutal barriers: Report on the Belarus-EU border](#).

55 Statewatch (2025) [Greece: Illegal, violent deportations: The heavy toll of seeking asylum in Europe](#); Also Human Rights Watch (2022) [Greece: using other migrants to expel asylum seekers](#).

56 Amnesty International (2024) [Poland: New firearms regulations risk undermining the rule of law](#).

57 Gavin, G. (2024) [EU warns Poland over bombshell plan to suspend asylum claims](#). Politico.

58 AP (2024) [EU says asylum rights can be suspended for migrants 'weaponized' by Russia and Belarus](#).

59 EU (2024) [EU migration and asylum policy – situations of crisis and force majeure](#).

60 De Ruiter, E. (2025) [Polish parliament votes to extend asylum suspension at Belarus border](#). Euronews.

61 Cossé, E. (2025) [Greece's asylum suspension denies rights, puts lives at risk](#). HRW.

62 Mouzourakis, M. (2025) [Neglect needs, manufacture crisis, rinse, repeat: The new Greek asylum ban and a textbook breach of international law](#). ECRE.

63 Amnesty International (2025) [Greece: New asylum and return proposals flagrantly breach international law and punish people seeking protection](#).

64 Mouzourakis, M. (2025) [Asylum bans in the European Union: How states break the law and get away with it](#). Heinrich Boll Stiftung; Also Cossé, E. (2025) [Greece's asylum suspension denies rights, puts lives at risk](#). Human Rights Watch.

65 Notes from Poland (2025) [German court rules against sending asylum seekers back to Poland at border](#).

66 Whittle, H. (2025) [Germany suspends refugees' family reunification](#). DW.

67 Francis, S. (2025) [UK suspends refugee family reunion applications](#). BBC.

68 Santos, A. P. (2025) [Portugal tightens immigration restrictions further](#). InfoMigrants.

to engage smugglers to embark on irregular onward journeys as their only remaining option.⁶⁹

While many examples of the contraction of the right to asylum originated in Europe or North America, similar restrictions are playing out elsewhere: in some cases, as with **Egypt**, in the shadow of new ‘partnership agreements’ with the EU around migration management. Though Egypt has had a longstanding self-settlement policy for displaced arrivals and has hosted millions of refugees in its territory, in December 2024, the government published a new Asylum Law – the first of its kind not only in Egypt, but also in the North Africa region. Despite its potential for enhancing legislative protections for asylum seekers, in practice, its lack of clarity and additional powers have raised concerns that it could be used to drive deportations.⁷⁰ At the time of writing, further details on how the law would be realised had yet to be released, with little in the way of substantive consultations with civil society or UN agencies to inform the process.⁷¹

Widening humanitarian and protection gaps in the wake of aid cuts

As host countries become increasingly inhospitable, the needs and threats migrants face are becoming less and less of a priority. However, the situation for displaced and migrant populations has become even more difficult in the wake of massive cuts to global humanitarian assistance. Though funds have been dwindling for years, Trump’s push to cancel the vast majority of USAID’s spending has sent shockwaves through the aid sector. Some other countries, rather than stepping up to help fill at least some of the gaps, have instead announced cuts of their own. The UK, for instance, subsequently announced it will reduce its aid spending by almost half.⁷² While these cuts have affected a wide range of individuals and communities in every part of the world who depended on their survival – one study by The Lancet has projected that the cuts to USAID alone could result in 14 million additional deaths by 2030⁷³ – displaced populations are among those worst affected, severely threatening their access to adequate nutrition, health care and other essentials.⁷⁴

UNHCR and other international agencies, as well as local organisations providing frontline support to vulnerable refugees and migrants, have been forced to drastically reduce their services as a result. The cuts have further accelerated the decline of basic protections for numerous refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.⁷⁵ In countries such as Afghanistan, millions of recent returnees have little to no access to assistance to support their immediate needs or longer-term reintegration, with IOM reporting that it has had to “deprioritise” the many Afghans returning home despite the acute economic and humanitarian conditions they face.⁷⁶ Similarly, in Bangladesh, for more than 1 million Rohingya refugees already living with widespread malnutrition, the spectre of further cuts risks pushing them “to the brink”.⁷⁷ Collectively, the slashing of aid budgets worldwide could pose an existential threat to many long-standing rights and protections, ultimately accelerating the dissolution of the humanitarian system.⁷⁸

While funding cuts are framed as a financial necessity, in reality, the decisions to reduce aid are deeply political, given that humanitarian assistance only represented a tiny portion of government spending in the Global North. It is in this light, too, that the calculated reductions in welfare and benefits to refugees and asylum seekers in host countries should also be seen. For example, while Germany has recently proposed reducing benefits to newly arrived Ukrainians, the cost-benefits of this move seem dubious at best and are likely to have been driven primarily by political considerations.⁷⁹ The fact that these cuts are proving politically acceptable is a dispiriting sign of declining public sympathy for migrants, even those recognised as refugees.

Arrests and deportations

While Trump promised that deportations from the US during his second presidency would reach unprecedented levels, the numbers so far have remained largely comparable to those under Biden.⁸⁰ The difference, however, is that most of those deported under Biden were

69 Kassam, A. (2025) “[I can’t sleep, I can’t get on with my life”: how Europe’s tougher rules are keeping families apart](#).” The Guardian.

70 Cone, D. and Sullivan, D. (2025) [No model of refuge: Sudanese refugees in Egypt](#). Refugees International.

71 EIPR (2025) [The collapse of Egypt’s protection for refugees: Systemic and widespread violations of the non-refoulement principle and the right to asylum](#).

72 Landale, J. and Graham, C. (2025) [Africa to be hit hard as UK foreign aid cuts revealed](#). BBC.

73 Cavalcanti, D. M. et al. (2025) [Evaluating the impact of two decades of USAID interventions and projecting the effects of defunding on mortality up to 2030: a retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis](#). The Lancet, 406 (10500).

74 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR: Funding cuts threaten the health of nearly 13 million displaced people](#).

75 Basok, T., Candiz, G. and ILCAN, S. (2025) [How international aid cuts are eroding refugee protections in the Global South](#). The Conversation.

76 Jones, M. G. (2025) [Afghanistan faces “triple” returnee, climate and aid cut crisis, IOM mission chief says](#). Euronews.

77 European Commission (2025) [Crisis in Cox’s Bazar: aid cuts push Rohingya to the brink](#).

78 Basok, T., Candiz, G. and ILCAN, S. (2025) [How international aid cuts are eroding refugee protections in the Global South](#). The Conversation.

79 Sanderson, S. (2025) [Germany to start legal procedure to lower welfare benefits for new Ukrainian arrivals](#). InfoMigrants.

80 Bennett, B. (2025) [What the data reveals about Trump’s push to arrest and deport more migrants](#). Time.

detected close to the border and returned to Mexico. With much tighter border restrictions in place, including the suspension of asylum, a much smaller number of migrants are being intercepted and returned this way. Instead, the government is now focusing on the apprehension and deportation of undocumented migrants in the interior, a process that has led to extensive raids and mass arrests by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).⁸¹

While ICE's budget has swollen⁸² amid reports of a minimum daily quota of 3,000 arrests or deportations,⁸³ the more extraordinary feature of the new administration's approach is the way it has expanded the scope of immigration functions to include an array of departments and agencies that would not normally be involved (for more, see the Thematic snapshot *ICE wars: the rising tension between state and federal immigration policies in 2025*, p. 98).⁸⁴ By exploiting legal loopholes, for instance, the government has empowered local and state police officers to collaborate in immigration enforcement.⁸⁵ ICE's operations under Trump have been markedly different in their visibility and targeting of schools, clinics, churches and other public spaces to arrest supposed unauthorised migrants,⁸⁶ ranging from teenage high school students to women in their sixties.⁸⁷ Many analysts believe that the fact these operations are often being carried out by masked men in broad daylight suggests that at least part of the purpose is a "publicity stunt",⁸⁸ with officials seeking to advertise "the spectacle of people being removed from the country."⁸⁹

While previous US governments have sought to signal their "tough" border management, this repackaging of arrests and raids as entertainment is a radical departure from previous norms. In addition to the "cruelty and chaos"⁹⁰ that have accompanied the unveiling of new detention centres, including the notorious "Alligator Alcatraz" facility built in Floridian swampland⁹¹ – a move celebrated by the Department of Homeland Security with

a photo of crocodiles wearing ICE caps and the words "Coming soon!" – the White House has also released mocking videos of deportation footage presented in the style of a package holiday advert.⁹² Critics have pointed out how this serves to "make these operations into a reality show", in the process spreading fear and numbing the public to the human cost of these actions.⁹³

There is also an evident disregard for the safety and wellbeing of those deported. Many have effectively been 'disappeared' into a 'purgatory' where detainees are continuously transferred between facilities within the US and onto a variety of third countries, making it difficult for even their lawyers to locate them.⁹⁴ This is illustrated by the transfer, in March, of hundreds of Venezuelans to Cecot in El Salvador, a mega-prison widely known for the extreme abuse and mistreatment inflicted on inmates there.⁹⁵ The Trump administration did not publish a full list of all the people who had been transferred there, meaning the families of detainees were left uncertain as to their whereabouts.⁹⁶ The administration has also deported people to other countries that could not currently be characterised as safe, such as South Sudan, and even attempted to send a group to Libya (though their flight was blocked by a judge).⁹⁷ Other countries where third-country immigrants have been sent to include Ghana, Rwanda and Eswatini, with many reportedly transferred in inhumane conditions and with little apparent concern for due process.⁹⁸ This is a prime example of how fast the US is accelerating the normalisation of the extreme.

While several European countries have been trying to develop programmes of various sorts through which people could be deported, returned or removed for external processing to a third country with which they have no connection (e.g., UK-Rwanda; Denmark-Rwanda; Italy-Albania), with none succeeding, in a matter of weeks, the US started actual deportations of people to a wide range of third countries.

- 81 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.
- 82 American Immigration Council (2025) [Senate approves unprecedented spending for mass deportation, ignoring what's broken in our immigration system](#).
- 83 Betts, A. (2025) [Trump administration denies daily quota for immigration arrests](#). The Guardian.
- 84 Chishti, M. and Bush-Joseph, K. (2025) [In first 100 days, Trump 2.0 has dramatically reshaped the U.S. immigration system, but is not meeting mass deportation aims](#). Migration Policy Institute.
- 85 American Immigration Council (2025) [The 287\(g\) program: An overview](#).
- 86 Woodward, A. (2025) [More churches are suing ICE over arrests in places of worship: "Congregations have gone underground"](#). The Independent.
- 87 Anguiano, D. and Clayton, A. (2025) [Community rallies around LA teen detained by Ice while walking dog](#). The Guardian; Also Dunbar, M. (2025) [Iranian woman, who has lived in US for 47 years, taken by Ice while gardening](#). The Guardian.
- 88 Gambino, L. and Singh, M. (2025) ["A publicity stunt": activists decry Trump's immigration raids marketed as "entertainment"](#). The Guardian.
- 89 Breland, A. (2025) [Trump's deportations aren't what they seem](#). The Atlantic.
- 90 Amnesty International (2025) [USA: Trump's first 100 days have "led with cruelty and chaos, creating a human rights emergency"](#).
- 91 Fischer, A. (2025) [Cruelty is the point of "Alligator Alcatraz"—and why it must be closed](#). Amnesty International.
- 92 Rufo, Y. (2025) [Jess Glynne calls White House deportation video with Jet2 song "sick"](#). BBC.
- 93 Gambino, L. and Singh, M. (2025) ["A publicity stunt": activists decry Trump's immigration raids marketed as "entertainment"](#). The Guardian.
- 94 Singh, M. and Craft, W. (2025) [Plane to purgatory: How Trump's deportation program shuttles immigrants into lawless limbo](#). The Guardian.
- 95 Dunbar, M. (2025) [Venezuelans deported by Trump to El Salvador describe "horror movie" mega-prison](#). The Guardian.
- 96 Singh, M. and Craft, W. (2025) [Plane to purgatory: How Trump's deportation program shuttles immigrants into lawless limbo](#). The Guardian.
- 97 Chibelushi, W. and Yousif, N. (2025) [US judge blocks plan to deport migrants to Libya](#). BBC.
- 98 Asodu, C. (2025) [More African nations are receiving third-country immigrants deported by the U.S. Here are 5 things to know](#). PBS; Also Savage, R. (2025) [West Africans deported by the US were denied their rights, says lawyer](#). The Guardian.

While **Australia** has long been ahead of most other countries in the extreme punitiveness of its asylum regime, new legislation passed in November 2024 has given the government even greater powers, including the ability to strip recognised refugees of their status.⁹⁹ It also allows the government to broker agreements with any third country to receive deportees, paving the way for as many as 80,000 people to be transferred in the future.¹⁰⁰ In August 2025, a further amendment was passed to “expressly exclude procedural fairness from applying” in cases involving foreigners with criminal records, so as to accelerate their removal.¹⁰¹ This has paved the way for a new deal with **Nauru** to accept foreign-born people with criminal convictions with no legal right to remain in Australia who cannot be returned to their country of origin.¹⁰² Though initially focused on the transfer of 354 detainees,¹⁰³ some commentators have predicted that, over time, it could result in tens of thousands of people being transferred there.¹⁰⁴

In the **Dominican Republic**, authorities have intensified their crackdown on the large but marginalised Haitian population, including not only undocumented migrants but also those with legal residency and Dominican nationals effectively rendered stateless in 2013. Between January and the end of August 2025, over 175,000 Haitians were expelled across the border to Haiti,¹⁰⁵ despite the chronic violence and deteriorating conditions there. As is reportedly the case with ICE in the US, Dominican security forces are attempting to keep pace with a government quota of 10,000 deportations every week. In April 2025, this target led them to expand their operations into clinics and maternity wards, rounding up hundreds of pregnant or lactating women before expelling them from the country.¹⁰⁶ This arguably represents a new low in a country that has carried out almost 600,000 deportations since 2021,¹⁰⁷ including many who have never stepped foot in Haiti.¹⁰⁸

While Iran and Pakistan have hosted millions of Afghan nationals for decades, the two countries have undertaken repeated deportations over the years, particularly at moments of political or economic crisis. However, the scale and scope of their actions during 2025 have taken this to unprecedented levels. **Pakistan**, having begun in 2023 with a crackdown on hundreds of thousands of undocumented Afghans, announced, in April 2025, that it would be removing around 800,000 Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders¹⁰⁹ and, in July, that around 1.3 million Afghans with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards would have to leave the country from September.¹¹⁰ The returns are extraordinary not only in terms of the numbers affected – as of 11 September, more than 603,000 Afghans had returned from Pakistan during the year¹¹¹ – but also in terms of who is being targeted, with no one apparently exempt, regardless of their protection needs or how long they have been resident in the country.¹¹²

In **Iran**, too, the process of large-scale deportations is not a new phenomenon but has, nevertheless, taken on an altogether different dimension during 2025. While 750,000 Afghans left the country in 2024,¹¹³ the total between January and early September 2025 was more than 2 million¹¹⁴ – in effect, around three times the number in just two-thirds of the timeframe. The government has done this by effectively cancelling most forms of legal protection for Afghans in the country.¹¹⁵ The crackdown gained added impetus in the wake of the war between Iran and Israel, when rumours spread that Afghan nationals were spying for Israel,¹¹⁶ leading to around 460,000 people expelled in July alone.¹¹⁷ While often abusive, the recent deportations have been particularly inhumane, with families reportedly separated¹¹⁸ and many Afghans beaten or stripped of their belongings by police.¹¹⁹ The brutality of these expulsions was highlighted in early September 2025, when Iranian border guards, using a mix of light and heavy artillery, opened fire on a group of Afghans crossing the border, killing six people and injuring five others. This was, reportedly, not an isolated incident, with a similar attack

99 Human Rights Law Centre (2024) [Standing with migrants and refugees against Australia's new anti-migrant laws](#).

100 Karp, P. (2024) [More than 80,000 at risk of deportation from Australia under Labor bill likened to UK's failed Rwanda plan](#). The Guardian.

101 Butler, J. (2025) [Labor accused of trying to 'sneak through' law change to strip non-citizens of fair process](#). The Guardian.

102 McGuirk, R. (2025) [Australia will pay Nauru to resettle foreign-born criminals](#). AP.

103 Al Jazeera (2025) [Australia to send hundreds to Nauru in \\$1.6bn migrant resettlement deal](#).

104 Basford Canales, S. (2025) [Up to 80,000 people in Australia may be affected by 'sledgehammer' powers to deport noncitizens to Nauru, lawyers warn](#). The Guardian.

105 IOM (2025) [Statistiques sur les personnes déportées en Haïti depuis 2021](#).

106 Llaneras Blanco, M. (2025) [For Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, "reproduction is like a death sentence"](#). The Conversation.

107 IOM (2025) [Statistiques sur les personnes déportées en Haïti depuis 2021](#).

108 Lemonnier, A. (2025) [Haiti: "I was deported to a country I never lived in"](#). UN News.

109 Amnesty International (2025) [Pakistan: 1.4 million refugees need registration renewal](#).

110 Dawn (2025) [Govt to begin repatriation of 1.3m Afghan PoR holders from Sept 1](#).

111 UNHCR (2025) [Afghanistan situation](#).

112 Ahmad, O. and Latifi, A. (2025) [For Afghans in Pakistan, legal papers now offer no protection from deportation](#). The New Humanitarian.

113 Naseh, M. (2025) [One of the world's largest refugee populations. Afghans have faced increasing restrictions in Iran](#). Migration Policy Institute.

114 UNHCR (2025) [Iran-Afghanistan returns emergency response as of 10 September 2025](#).

115 Mohammadi, A. (2025) [Iran's deportation drive and the growing crisis of forced Afghan returns](#). The Diplomat.

116 Latifi, A. (2025) [Iran uses Israeli bombings to speed up Afghan expulsions](#). The New Humanitarian.

117 UNHCR (2025) [Iran-Afghanistan returns emergency response as of 6 August 2025](#).

118 Yumar, M. Y. (2025) [Returned and reeling: Afghans expelled from Iran struggle to start over](#). Reuters.

119 Aram, F. and Radan, R. (2025) [Jobless, homeless and helpless without a man: Afghan women expelled by Iran into hands of the Taliban](#). The Guardian; Also Motamedi, M. (2025) [Inside Iran's crackdown on Afghan migrants after the war with Israel](#). Al Jazeera; Sanderson, S. (2024) [Afghan migrants expelled from Iran subject to abuse and trauma](#). InfoMigrants.

on Afghan civilians in October 2024 resulting in numerous casualties (for more see the Thematic snapshot *Iran's Afghan expulsion surges: bitter and dangerous returns for scapegoated Afghans*, p. 162).¹²⁰

In **Mauritania**, meanwhile, the government launched a large-scale crackdown on migrants – predominantly from conflict-affected Mali and Senegal – with some estimates suggesting that up to 30,000 people were rounded up in the first few months of 2025,¹²¹ including those legally resident in the country. This represents the latest chapter in several years of abusive migration policies carried out by Mauritanian authorities, with support from the EU and Spain.¹²² Many of those apprehended were, reportedly, mistreated in detention and expelled into Senegal or Mali,¹²³ prompting strong condemnations from the governments of both countries.¹²⁴ Given the region has previously enjoyed relatively unrestricted movement, the crackdown has been blamed, in part, on the EU and its efforts to impose its own 'neocolonial'¹²⁵ agenda in West Africa through a 2024 €210 million migration deal.¹²⁶ The agreement has successfully reduced the number of departures from Mauritania to the Canary Islands during the year, but at a significant cost to vulnerable migrants in the region.

Migrants in **Libya** also experienced a brutal crackdown in March 2025, driven in part by misinformation suggesting that the internally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU) had greenlit refugee resettlement from other countries. Against a backdrop of hate speech and public demonstrations, the GNU announced a major crackdown on migrants, with a quota of 100,000 deportations every four months.¹²⁷ The GNU has also engaged in the mass expulsion of Nigerien migrants, abandoning them in the desert in life-threatening conditions,¹²⁸ while the rival Government of National Stability (GNS) also deported hundreds of displaced Sudanese back into conflict-affected Sudan.¹²⁹ Similarly, in **Djibouti**, migrants were also subjected to a major crackdown beginning at the end of April, with thousands rounded up by security forces.¹³⁰

Europe's pivot to 'return hubs'

In Europe, **Italy's** controversial proposal to establish external asylum processing facilities in Albania has foundered following a series of legal challenges,¹³¹ culminating in the European Court of Justice ruling, in August 2025, that the government's operational definition of what constituted a 'safe country' contravened EU law.¹³² Directly or indirectly, the safe country concept has underpinned a number of restrictive immigration proposals in Europe and is enshrined in the 2024 Pact on Asylum and Migration: however, it has repeatedly fallen foul of the courts because most of the countries in question, while generally secure, could not be regarded as safe for all regions and minorities (the level required in EU law).¹³³ While these hurdles have prompted calls from some governments to review the existing legal framework – something discussed further in the next section – Italy has also responded by repurposing its facilities in Albania as holding centres for rejected asylum seekers prior to their deportation.¹³⁴

These repatriation centres are the realisation of a migration management model now being embraced across the EU. These so-called return hubs feature prominently in the EU's proposed Common European System for Returns, published in March 2025,¹³⁵ and involve the transfer of unauthorised migrants to a designated third country, while their repatriation to their country of origin is organised. Though the draft text has not outlined the development of a collective EU-wide system, as was previously mooted while it was under development,¹³⁶ it nevertheless offers a roadmap for EU member states to follow. The UK has also announced plans to create a similar system of its own.¹³⁷

120 Iran International (2025) [Iran border guards kill six Afghan migrants in Sistan-Baluchestan – Haalvsh](#).

121 InfoMigrants (2025) [Mauritania intercepts 30,000 migrants, cracks down on over 80 smuggling rings this year](#)

122 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Mauritania: Years of migration control abuses](#).

123 Lawal, S. (2025) ["Xenophobic": Neighbours outraged over Mauritania's mass migrant pushback](#). Al Jazeera.

124 Lawal, S. (2025) ["Xenophobic": Neighbours outraged over Mauritania's mass migrant pushback](#). Al Jazeera; Also Focus on Africa (2025) [Mauritania, Member of Parliament calls for cancellation of migration agreement with the EU](#).

125 Dan Yaye, M. and Ould Moctar, H. (2025) [Detained, deported, abandoned: A note on the situation of migrants in Mauritania](#). migration-control.info.

126 The European Commission (2024) [The European Commission launches new migration partnership with Mauritania](#).

127 ICJ (2025) [Libya: Immediately halt collective expulsions, arrests, violence and hate speech against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers](#).

128 Volkmann, E. (2025) [Libya expels 600 Nigeriens in "dangerous and traumatising" desert journey](#). The Guardian.

129 Wallis, E. (2025) [Libya: Eastern authorities deport 700 Sudanese migrants](#). InfoMigrants.

130 InfoMigrants (2025) [Djibouti launches crackdown on migrants](#).

131 MMC (2025) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Europe – Quarter 4 2024](#).

132 Rainsford, S. (2025) [Italy plan to process migrants in Albania dealt blow by EU court](#). BBC.

133 Kirby, P. (2025) [EU names seven countries as safe in plan to fast-track migrant returns](#). BBC.

134 Euronews (2025) [Italy approves new decree to use Albania migration centres as repatriation hubs](#); Also InfoMigrants (2025) [Italian NGOs call for suspension of Italy-Albania agreement](#); Also InfoMigrants (2025) [Italian detention model in Albania is 'inhuman and must not last', warns Caritas](#).

135 European Commission (2025) [New Common European System for Returns](#).

136 InfoMigrants (2025) [Sweden hints at introduction of EU migrant 'return hubs' in near future](#).

137 Bancroft, H. (2025) [UK draws up list of nine countries for migrant 'return hubs' plan](#). The Independent.

In May 2025, UNHCR welcomed the EU's proposals "as a positive step toward creating a more coherent and effective EU framework" and stated that the agency "stands ready to support solutions".¹³⁸ This move appears to have been inspired by a pragmatic recognition of the need to undertake returns to ensure the "effective functioning of the international protection regime" more generally, with UNHCR emphasising the importance of having clear safeguards in place at every stage of the process to ensure rights are respected.¹³⁹ However, the model has attracted significant criticism from activists, opposition politicians and legal officials, with Amnesty International describing the proposals as a "new low".¹⁴⁰

Targeting solidarity

In recent years, governments have increasingly sought to crack down on irregular migration by not only targeting refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, but also those who support them – a broad constituency that includes lawyers, journalists, activists, aid workers, local politicians and ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, the scale of these actions has taken on new levels, particularly in the US, where entire communities have been affected by these operations. Some of the cities most impacted by ICE operations are so-called sanctuary cities (the majority run by the opposition Democratic party) which have long resisted the enforcement of federal immigration policies, including mass arrests and deportations. Los Angeles was one of the most high-profile targets, with sweeping raids and a lawsuit filed by the administration against the city's sanctuary policies.¹⁴¹ Other sanctuary cities, such as Boston and Chicago, have been similarly targeted.¹⁴²

These actions have been intensified by the highly unusual deployment of troops to some of these cities, supposedly to maintain order. In particular, thousands of troops were sent to Los Angeles in June, following widespread protests against the Trump administration's mass detention of immigrants. This was the first time in 60 years that the National Guard had been sent into a US city

without the governor's approval, a move condemned by California governor Gavin Newsom as "an unmistakable step towards authoritarianism",¹⁴³ with a federal judge subsequently ruling that the deployment was illegal.¹⁴⁴ A similar deployment took place in August in Washington DC, against local wishes,¹⁴⁵ with Trump issuing an executive order in September to deploy military to Memphis and announcing that "we're going to be doing Chicago probably next".¹⁴⁶ While not all of these cities would be classified as sanctuary cities, they are all Democrat-run; some observers believe that these interventions are seeking to exploit immigration to further political ends.¹⁴⁷

In this regard, the biggest roadblock to the implementation of Trump's immigration agenda has been the courts, resulting in the vilification of judicial officials as "activist judges" when they have ruled against the administration.¹⁴⁸ In March, Trump even called for the impeachment of a federal judge who halted planned deportation proceedings, prompting a rebuke from the US Chief Justice.¹⁴⁹ Prime minister Giorgia Meloni has adopted a similar tactic in Italy, in response to repeated judicial rulings against her proposed creation of offshore detention facilities in Albania.¹⁵⁰ These issues predate the rulings in late 2024, however: the Council of Europe, based on an investigative visit earlier in the year, expressed its concerns about "verbal attacks on civil society actors providing support to migrants, as well as undue criticism aiming at undermining the authority of individual judges deciding on migration cases".¹⁵¹

This mood is not confined to Italy alone, however, with eight other EU member states – Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – also signing a joint statement, in May 2025, that advocated a "new and open-minded conversation about the interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights", with specific reference to its handling of migration-related cases.¹⁵² In response, the Council of Europe's secretary-general stated that "in a society governed by the rule of law, no judiciary should face political pressure" and warned that "the court must not be weaponised – neither against governments, nor by them".¹⁵³

138 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR welcomes EU Return Regulation Proposal, calls for strong safeguards and focus on effective and sustainable returns](#).

139 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR welcomes EU Return Regulation Proposal, calls for strong safeguards and focus on effective and sustainable returns](#).

140 Amnesty International (2025) [EU: Return proposals a "new low" for Europe's treatment of migrants](#); Also Bathke, B. (2025) [Top EU court questions premise of Italy's Albania migrant camp scheme](#). InfoMigrants.

141 Le Monde (2025) [Trump administration sues "sanctuary city" Los Angeles](#).

142 Willingham, L., Casey, M. and Ramer, H. (2025) [ICE crackdowns intensify across Boston as sanctuary cities face Trump's latest operation](#). The Independent.

143 Faguy, A. (2025) [Newsom says Trump "deranged" as thousands more troops sent to L.A.](#) BBC.

144 Epstein, K. (2025) [Trump's use of National Guard in Los Angeles was illegal, judge rules](#). BBC.

145 Popat, S. (2025) ["She doesn't have the power to stop him": DC mayor walks a tightrope with Trump](#). The Guardian.

146 Gambino, L. (2025) [Trump to send national guard to Memphis and says Chicago is "probably next"](#). The Guardian.

147 Leingang, R. (2025) [Trump is targeting sanctuary cities to settle political scores and potentially arrest his opponents](#). The Guardian.

148 Neuman, S. (2025) [Trump denounces "activist" judges. He's not the first president to do so](#). NPR.

149 Chung, A. and Kruzel, J. (2025) [US Chief Justice Roberts rebukes Trump's attack on judge](#). Reuters.

150 Giordano, E. (2024) [Giorgia Meloni's vendetta against Italy's judges](#). Politico.

151 ECRI (2024) [ECRI report on Italy \(sixth monitoring cycle\)](#).

152 France24 (2025) [Italy, other EU states urge rethink on European rights convention](#).

153 Council of Europe (2025) [Alain Berset on the joint letter challenging the European Court of Human Rights](#).

One of the most pernicious developments in European policy is the frequent criminalisation of search and rescue. The problem is partly rooted in existing EU counter-smuggling legislation prohibiting “facilitation”, a broad term that has been used to target individuals and NGOs providing assistance: while the framework is currently under revision, rights groups have expressed concerns that the new provisions will not clearly exempt rescue and other humanitarian activities from criminal penalties.¹⁵⁴ Italy, further aided by its highly proscriptive domestic legislation, has imposed an array of restrictions on humanitarian operations in its waters that have resulted in financial penalties and the prolonged detention of vessels. These actions reportedly escalated during 2025, with multiple boats detained during the summer, primarily for docking in critical conditions in nearby ports rather than the ones they had been allocated, a long distance away from where their rescues had been carried out.¹⁵⁵ Humanitarian NGOs have been accused of “facilitating illegal immigration to Italy”¹⁵⁶ and even reportedly targeted by the government with spyware.¹⁵⁷

Greece, like Italy, has also previously attempted to prosecute humanitarian workers on charges of espionage.¹⁵⁸ The government appears poised to begin a new chapter in its repression of civil society solidarity

for migrants with the passage of a “draconian” new law. Besides threatening rejected asylum seekers with prison terms of up to five years if they do not leave the country within two weeks of their application being refused,¹⁵⁹ the legislation will “worsen the already hostile environment” for NGOs.¹⁶⁰ In particular, it will reportedly allow for NGOs to be removed from the official registry if they oppose the government’s migration policy or legally challenge actions such as asylum suspensions or indefinite detentions.¹⁶¹

Finally, an increasing feature of anti-migrant policies is the transfer of responsibility for enforcement to civilians, with individuals potentially deemed criminally liable if they provide support or services to migrants. In **Pakistan**, for instance, legislation announced in April 2025 prohibits the population from providing accommodation or employment to undocumented Afghans.¹⁶² In the Netherlands, similarly, the passage of a new asylum policy in July has meant that not only are undocumented migrants potentially liable to be prosecuted, but also anyone providing them with assistance.¹⁶³ The Council of State subsequently advised that this could target not only landlords but also aid workers and activists: under the law’s provisions, even offering a bowl of soup could be a punishable offence.¹⁶⁴

154 Amnesty International (2025) [Considerations on the European Commission’s proposal to reform the Facilitators Package](#).

155 Kassam, A. (2025) [Italy’s detention of rescue vessels in Mediterranean will lead to more deaths, say campaigners](#). The Guardian.

156 European Parliament (2025) [Role of NGO vessels in facilitating illegal immigration to Italy](#).

157 Giuffrida, A. and Kirchgaessner, S. (2025) [Italian government approved use of spyware on members of refugee NGO, MPs told](#). The Guardian.

158 Smith, H. (2024) [Greek court drops espionage charges against aid workers](#). The Guardian.

159 Smith, H. (2025) [Greece passes draconian legislation with prison terms for rejected asylum seekers](#). The Guardian.

160 Cossé, E. (2025) [Greece’s latest assault on civil society](#). Human Rights Watch.

161 Papantoniou, S. (2025) [Greece to tighten rules on NGOs](#). Ekathimerini.

162 ANI (2025) [Pakistan bans housing, employment, and rentals for illegal Afghan immigrants](#).

163 NL Times (2025) [Dutch parliament adopts laws for the “strictest asylum policy ever”](#).

164 Dutch News (2025) [Offering undocumented migrants soup could be criminal offence](#).

Libya's attack on Ocean Viking: A case study in impunity

On 24 August 2025, following a brief exchange, Libyan coastguards launched an attack on the SOS Méditerranée-operated boat Ocean Viking, shortly after it rescued 87 migrants from a boat in distress. According to the NGO, Libyan security forces “unleashed 20 relentless minutes of assault gunfire” directly at them, circling the vessel to specifically target crew members and destroying vital infrastructure on the boat while the rescued migrants were forced to seek safety in the hold. Fortunately, no one was wounded, despite bullet holes at head height and a number of broken windows.¹⁶⁵

The attack, carried out by Libyan authorities with an EU-financed boat, was widely condemned.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, while members of the Italian opposition party called for an investigation and criticised Meloni's apparent silence on the issue as “political and moral surrender”,¹⁶⁷ the EU described the incident as “worrying”,¹⁶⁸ without taking any concrete action to hold Libya to account. The incident was not an isolated phenomenon, having been enabled by years of inaction on the EU's part with regard to its egregious human rights violations, despite the considerable financial and technical assistance it provides to Libya.¹⁶⁹ The failure to impose any meaningful penalties on Libya, let alone suspend its ongoing partnership with the country, is in striking contrast to the penalisation of rescue efforts that Italy has continued to carry out even in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Ultimately, in the words of the IFRC, the incident “underscores not only the growing risks for those undertaking life-saving rescues in the Mediterranean, but also the dangerous reality facing humanitarian workers worldwide”.¹⁷⁰

165 SOS Méditerranée (2025) [Ocean Viking under heavy fire by Libyan Coast Guard in unprecedented attack against survivors and humanitarian workers](#).

166 InfoMigrants (2025) [Europe demands answers from Libya after rescue boat shooting](#).

167 Giordano, E. (2025) [Migration ties with Libya criticized after patrol boat shoots at NGO rescue team](#). Politico.

168 Giordano, E. (2025) [Migration ties with Libya criticized after patrol boat shoots at NGO rescue team](#). Politico.

169 Statwatch (2025) [EU-funded aggression: How years of impunity led to the attack on the Ocean Viking](#).

170 IFRC (2025) [Statement: Attack on Ocean Viking deeply concerning, endangering humanitarian workers and survivors in the Mediterranean](#).

Resisting the extreme

While so much of international migration policy appears to be characterised by the normalisation of increasingly abusive practices, it is also the case that an array of activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, lawyers, politicians and local residents continue to offer positive examples of inclusion, protection and support towards people on the move. These actions offer a powerful rejoinder to the narratives espoused all too often around migration and demonstrate that a different way is possible – and that, contrary to widespread perceptions, there is an appetite among host communities as well as policymakers for sustainable and humane solutions. It should also be noted that some of the positive practices documented here are occurring in countries where abusive or exploitative practices against migrants are also taking place: in these instances, their inclusion does not represent an endorsement of their policies overall but an acknowledgement that better approaches are possible, even in inhospitable conditions.

Peter Grant

Protection

As migration has become more securitised in recent years and abuses such as pushbacks are increasingly normalised, the basic needs and security of the most vulnerable have become a low priority. However, the granting of refugee status in **France** to a Palestinian mother and her son, who had escaped the violence in Gaza, offers an important affirmation of the principles of protection under international law. According to the court, the grounds for the decision were on the basis of the persecution they would face on account of their “nationality” as stateless Palestinians. The move was ground-breaking in that it set a precedent for other Palestinians outside the UN’s mandate to access asylum as well: until then, only Palestinians who fell within the jurisdiction of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) were potentially eligible for refugee status in France.¹ Though the case itself represented an isolated victory in a context where the large majority of the Gazan population are unable to access any form of humanitarian protection, it was the first time a French court recognised the collective “persecution” of Palestinians on the basis on their nationality. Amnesty International described it as, “A historic decision for Palestinian rights ... a major precedent, paving the way for recognition of refugee status in France for all Gazans fleeing persecution by the Israeli occupation forces”.²

In a context increasingly characterised by mass forced returns, the protection needs of large numbers of returnees are becoming an urgent humanitarian issue. In **Mexico**, in anticipation of the United States administration’s mass deportation drive, the government launched “México te abraza” (“Mexico embraces you”) to support the return of deported Mexican nationals.³ Among other elements, this wide-ranging programme includes the construction of care centres near the border to help Mexican returnees access welfare and employment, as well as the distribution of a Bienestar Paisano Card that will provide them with initial funds (around USD 100) to support arrivals with immediate living expenses and also enable them to enrol for medical care and other benefits. While many returnees may have more complex needs which will extend beyond this immediate provision, such as counselling for trauma, the programme nevertheless offers a positive example of reintegration and assistance that is all too often lacking.⁴

Even countries associated with hardline immigration policies may see positive initiatives to promote protection. **Italy**, for instance, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Community of Sant’Egidio, in April 2025, to settle around 700 Afghans in the country through humanitarian pathways,⁵ followed, in June, by another MoU with UNHCR and partner NGOs to establish labour migration corridors for refugees living in Colombia, Egypt, Jordan and Uganda to be employed in various sectors including shipbuilding, IT and goldsmithing.⁶ Local governments can also play

1 Cakirtekin, I. (2025) [French court grants refugee status to Gazans outside UN mandate for 1st time](#). AA.

2 InfoMigrants (2025) [France grants asylum to a Gazan mother and her son in landmark ruling](#).

3 Government of Mexico (2025) [México te abraza](#).

4 Connors, M. (2025) [Mexico’s response to mass deportations: “Mexico embraces you”](#). Feminist Majority Foundation.

5 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Humanitarian corridor agreement set to bring in 700 Afghan refugees](#).

6 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy and UNHCR sign MoU for refugee work corridors](#).

an important role in implementing programmes, with municipalities and regions such as Genoa and Puglia developing labour protocols,⁷ social integration hubs⁸ and safe accommodation⁹ to prevent migrants from being exploited by gangmasters. However, many of the most innovative initiatives are the result of the efforts of other actors – such as charities, community organisations and faith groups – to support inclusion. In Naples, for instance, the first facility in southern Italy to host LGBTQI+ migrants was established at the beginning of 2025 and is being managed by the association Arci Mediterraneo.¹⁰

Against a backdrop of massive reductions in international aid, the role of mutual aid initiatives has taken on an even greater importance for vulnerable migrant populations. In **Sudan**, for example, established support networks have been crucial in helping fill some of the large gaps left by the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance. Informal but highly effective initiatives such as Emergency Response Rooms – nominated for the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize – continue to play a vital role in the face of funding shortages and chronic insecurity, adapting to the shifting dynamics of displacement and return in the country.¹¹

Kenya inaugurates a bold new vision for its refugees

After years of preparation, in March 2025, **Kenya** launched a new era for its sizeable refugee population. Its strategy, known as the Shirika Plan, will see the country move away from the large camps, such as Dadaab and Kakuma, that have dominated the lives of more than 740,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country.¹² In partnership with UNHCR and a range of other international agencies and NGOs, the government will formally transition these camps into functioning settlements with improved access to services and livelihood opportunities. Crucially, these will serve as fully integrated municipalities that connect rather than separate displaced and host communities, bringing benefits to both groups.

The Shirika Plan is not without its controversies, particularly amidst local concerns that the rollout could place even greater pressure on limited resources. Furthermore, while host communities are keen to see investments in services and infrastructure prioritised, some refugees are disappointed that the reforms did not go further: while opening up freedom of movement within the municipalities, they will not be permitted, under the current terms of the plan, to move elsewhere in Kenya.¹³ Nevertheless, especially in light of dwindling humanitarian assistance, this approach could ultimately offer a much-needed alternative to the segregation and aid dependency of the camps. Besides providing refugees with greater autonomy and wellbeing, this model is also far less costly to operate. In the words of the UN high commissioner for refugees, Filippo Grandi, “Shirika recognizes that solutions, which shift away from refugee dependency on humanitarian aid towards greater self-reliance, are possible. UNHCR is committed to supporting the government of Kenya to now turn this innovative plan into a reality.”¹⁴

Regularisation efforts

A key source of vulnerability for many migrants is their lack of legal status, a situation that can exclude them from education, health care and employment, while also leaving them at risk of arrest and deportation. Full regularisation, providing migrants with the right to live and work legally in the country, can bring many benefits to both them and their host communities by providing a secure and formalised workforce. In this regard, **Thailand**'s announcement, in August 2025, that it would allow an estimated 81,000 long-term displaced from Myanmar living in camps near the border to legally work could prove transformative: for decades, they have been stranded without opportunities and dependent on aid. UNHCR celebrated the move as “a turning point” by stating, “with this policy shift, Thailand transforms hosting refugees into an engine of growth – for refugees, for host communities and for the nation as a whole.”¹⁵ Elsewhere in Asia, again bringing together refugee protection and labour migration, UNHCR and IOM have announced a new “train-to-hire” programme that will seek to match the skills of displaced individuals in the region with international employment opportunities.¹⁶

7 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: New protocol seeks to avoid migrant labor exploitation](#).

8 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Social integration hubs in Puglia to combat gangmastering system](#).

9 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: First migrant lodging projects launched in the region of Puglia](#).

10 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: First home in south to host LGBTQI+ migrants opens in Naples](#).

11 Lijeström, L. (2025) [The Heart of Sudan's Crisis Response: Mutual Aid and Local Leadership](#). LSE Blogs.

12 UNHCR (2025) [Kenya: Registered refugees and asylum seekers as of 31 July 2025](#).

13 Okata, J. (2025) [Kenya's flagship refugee integration plan runs into local opposition](#). The New Humanitarian.

14 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR's Grandi hails launch of Kenya's landmark refugee inclusion plan](#).

15 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR welcomes Royal Thai Government resolution providing long-term refugees the right to work](#).

16 IOM (2025) [IOM and UNHCR launch 'train-to-hire' initiative to boost international refugee employment](#).

While much of Europe appears preoccupied with increasing deportations of irregular migrants, **Spain** has chosen a very different path with an ambitious regularisation programme. Announced in November 2024 and formally launched in May 2025, the scheme envisions the regularisation of 300,000 undocumented migrants annually for the next three years – a total of 900,000 people already in the country who will be able to live and work there legally as a result. In addition to simplifying procedures and strengthening the rights of seasonal workers, the new regulations also allow rejected asylum seekers to access temporary regularisation by applying for residency on other grounds.¹⁷ The benefits of Spain's relatively open approach to labour migration is discussed in the box below (for more in-depth analysis, see Thematic snapshot *Migration and economic growth: Spain's divergent path in an increasingly right-wing and anti-migration EU*, [p. 122](#)).

In Italy, though the policy context is very different from that in Spain, a number of projects have been recently launched which seek to support economic and social integration for migrants in various ways. These programmes, besides benefitting from significant public support,¹⁸ highlight the contribution that non-governmental actors can make to greater inclusion. Though often small-scale, the impacts of these initiatives can be considerable and range from a training programme for migrants in Palermo, supported by the municipality and corporate sponsors,¹⁹ to a labour migration pathway for refugees to enter the IT sector, part of a collaboration between UNHCR, companies and private foundations.²⁰ Other recent initiatives include the launch of the Piuscuola ("More school") programme in Rome, in April 2025, for the duration of the summer: funded by the regional government, it aims to support the integration of migrant children into schools, with a particular focus on unaccompanied minors.²¹

How Spain's inclusive migrant policies are also good for business

As discussed above, Spain has been notable for its progressive attitude towards regularisation, pushing against the prevalent narrative that migration is damaging economies. Prime minister Pedro Sánchez, speaking in October 2024, framed it clearly: "Spain needs to choose between being an open and prosperous country or a closed-off, poor country."²² This is in stark contrast to the reactionary attitude that is becoming increasingly evident across Europe. Pointing to the reality of Spain's ageing demographic and the need for younger migrant workers to fill crucial gaps, he linked the "moral debt" Spain owed its older generation with the need to pave the way for continued prosperity in the future. As Sánchez put it, "We Spaniards are children of emigration. We are not going to be the parents of xenophobia."²³

The data appears to have confirmed his optimistic vision: while countries such as Germany and Italy saw only modest GDP growth (0.1% and 0.5% respectively) in 2024, Spain's increased by 3.2 percent and unemployment is at its lowest for more than 15 years.²⁴ Migrants have filled almost half of newly created jobs since 2022 and now account for 13 percent of the country's workforce, playing a particularly critical role in key sectors such as agriculture, construction and tourism. With immigration now accounting for almost all of the country's demographic growth, it plays a vital role in countering demographic decline and maintaining Spain's welfare system.²⁵

These findings echo studies conducted elsewhere in Europe that show, contrary to populist narratives, how immigration is bolstering local economies and driving growth. In Poland, for instance, even though the presence of more than 1 million Ukrainians displaced by Russia's invasion has, over time, become the focus of rising xenophobia among far-right groups,²⁶ including tensions around employment, a recent study by the consultancy firm Deloitte found that Ukrainians generated

17 European Insights (2025) [In Spain, a new regularisation campaign goes against the European retreat.](#)

18 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italians support policies for migrant regularization.](#)

19 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Project in Palermo offers training and jobs for migrants.](#)

20 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Five refugees arrive in Naples via work program.](#)

21 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Support project kicks off to help migrant children integrate at school.](#)

22 Kassam, A. and Jones, S. (2024) [Pedro Sánchez unveils plans to help migrants settle in Spain.](#) The Guardian.

23 Kassam, A. and Jones, S. (2024) [Pedro Sánchez unveils plans to help migrants settle in Spain.](#) The Guardian.

24 Kassam, A. (2025) [How Spain's radically different approach to migration helped its economy soar.](#) The Guardian.

25 ETIAS (2025) [Spain's economy booms as foreign workers fill critical labor gaps.](#)

26 Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A. (2025) [Where does Poland's new president stand on Ukraine?](#) Al Jazeera.

2.7 percent of Poland's GDP and countered many economic myths propagated about them. Far from raising unemployment levels or driving down wages, Ukrainian workers contributed to improved productivity and job growth. According to UNHCR, which commissioned the report, "All evidence shows that Ukrainian refugees will continue having a positive economic impact while they remain in Poland, vastly outstripping the cost of any support they received."²⁷

Upholding the rule of law

Globally, the role of the judiciary in countering the implementation of extreme asylum and immigration policies has never been more important. This is generally not, as some politicians have characterised it, a case of courts imposing their own "ideological views"²⁸ on migration policy but rather their protection of legal and constitutional norms. In the **US**, for instance, many of the policies imposed by the current administration have either been in violation of existing laws or sought to circumvent them by exploiting loopholes. Among other policies, federal judges have determined that the government's freezing of refugee resettlement,²⁹ suspension of asylum³⁰ and revocation of humanitarian parole³¹ were all illegal or discriminatory, and provided opportunities for citizens and organisations to challenge measures such as the proposed annulment of birthright citizenship.³²

While the administration has been able to circumvent or dilute the effects of these decisions in many cases, sometimes through appeals to the Supreme Court – the majority of whom are Trump appointees – their work has nevertheless served to highlight the rights of migrants and at least delayed some of the impacts (for instance, postponing the termination of temporary protection status for Haitians in the country from September 2025 until February 2026).³³ The July 2025 blocking of the government's suspension of asylum at the border as "unlawful"³⁴ is illustrative, in that the ruling was partly undone by a decision, the following month, by a panel of

federal judges which determined that the administration could continue to withhold asylum to some asylum seekers at the border. However, the panel upheld some of the ruling in deeming that the administration was still obliged to observe "withholding of removal" and protection (a status with a higher legal threshold than asylum) for those fleeing torture or persecution.³⁵ Other policies, such as deportation agreements, have also been challenged in these countries. In Eswatini, for instance, activists and NGOs launched a legal challenge in August against the government for agreeing to the deportation from the US of five men without due process.³⁶

Similar challenges have played out in courts across Europe, in relation to government policies on asylum and immigration, with Italy at the centre of these debates. Though various rulings have upheld or acknowledged migrant rights, including a July 2025 judgement in a Bologna court that found the exclusion of foreign workers from public housing was discriminatory,³⁷ the most impactful area has been in relation to Italy's proposal to hold asylum seekers in offshore facilities in Albania while their claims were fast-tracked. The controversy hinged on the programme's designation of selected 'safe countries' such as Bangladesh or Egypt that migrants could be returned to, with courts ruling repeatedly against the classification both in Italy and in the European Court of Justice.³⁸

Even cases that uphold existing migration policies can serve to bring greater clarity to how and when these should be applied. In July 2025, for instance, Italy's Constitutional Court dismissed an appeal against legislation authorising the detention of search and rescue ships. Though the verdict upheld the government's ability to impound these vessels, humanitarian workers and rights groups, nevertheless, welcomed some of the principles highlighted in the ruling. In particular, the court's statement that any order that would prevent them from the primary obligation of saving lives is illegitimate and can therefore be ignored without legal consequences represents a significant "silver lining"³⁹ and will help give search and rescue workers a "firmer legal ground"⁴⁰ to challenge the detention of their boats.

27 UNHCR (2025) [Refugees generated a stunning 2.7 percent of Poland's GDP in 2024, study shows](#).

28 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italian interior minister: "Some judges ideologically biased on migrant issue"](#).

29 Woodward, A. (2025) [Trump cancels contracts with refugee groups one day after judge blocks suspension of resettlement program](#). The Independent.

30 Singh, M. (2025) ["A win for humanity": Trump's asylum ban at US-Mexico border ruled unlawful](#). The Guardian.

31 Woodward, A. (2025) ["Color is neither a poison nor a crime": Judge rips Kristi Noem's "racial animus" in latest ruling protecting migrants](#). The Independent.

32 Gedeon, J. (2025) [New Hampshire judge blocks Trump's birthright citizenship order](#). The Guardian.

33 USCIS (2025) [Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Haiti](#).

34 Singh, M. (2025) ["A win for humanity": Trump's asylum ban at US-Mexico border ruled unlawful](#). The Guardian.

35 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2025) [Court limits Trump's asylum crackdown at the U.S.-Mexico border](#). CBS.

36 Savage, R. (2025) [Eswatini government faces court challenge over men deported by US](#). The Guardian.

37 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Court rules city authorities cannot exclude immigrants from public housing](#).

38 Tondo, L., Henley, J. and Kassam, H. (2024) [Blow to Meloni's Albania deal as court orders asylum seekers' return to Italy](#). The Guardian; Also Giordano, E. and Ford, A. (2025) [Giorgia Meloni's Albania migration plan blasted after third failure](#). Politico; Also Rainsford, S. (2025) [Italy plan to process migrants in Albania dealt blow by EU court](#). BBC.

39 Sunderland, J. (2025) [A disappointing ruling in Italy with a silver lining](#). Human Rights Watch.

40 SOS Méditerranée (2025) [Italian Constitutional Court reinforces maritime law](#).

Elsewhere in Europe, a number of significant legal rulings have helped defend human rights principles and safeguards for migrants and asylum seekers. In **Germany**, for instance, legal challenges against the country's extended suspension of refugee resettlement for at-risk Afghans (in some cases, brought by approved Afghan applicants with NGO support) contributed to the government's resumption of admissions, in August.⁴¹ In **Denmark**, meanwhile, in June 2025, the Supreme Court ruled against the government's long-standing practice of prosecuting and imprisoning asylum seekers for using false documentation to enter the country. The judgement affirms that, in line with Article 31 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the legal prohibition on using false documents does not apply in the case of asylum seekers. Given that a criminal conviction has life-changing implications for even recognised refugees, including barring them from applying for permanent citizenship, the ruling will not only benefit future asylum seekers but also others who have previously received convictions that could now be overturned.⁴²

Legal cases are also an important tool to undermine the impunity that enables abuses against migrants to occur. **Greece** has been responsible for serious rights violations at its borders for years, but has maintained an official policy of denial and obfuscation in the face of extensive evidence.⁴³ However, in February 2025, the European Court of Human Rights ruled against Greece in a case involving the alleged expulsion of a Turkish woman, concluding that, at the time of the incident, there had been a "systematic" practice of illegal pushbacks⁴⁴ – a verdict hailed by the Greek Council for Refugees as "a landmark judgement".⁴⁵ This was followed, in May, by a Greek naval court's announcement of criminal charges against 17 coastguards for their responsibility in the deadly Pylos Shipwreck two years before, in which at least 596 people died. Despite the government, at the time, claiming that those on board had refused assistance, testimony from the survivors themselves suggested that unacceptable delays and efforts by security forces to tow the boat out of Greek waters contributed to the tragedy.⁴⁶ In different ways, both decisions help bring a measure of accountability to Greece for its actions.

The same can be said for a recent lawsuit by the civil society group Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX) in **South Africa**, which finally began in June 2025 in the High Court of Johannesburg. The case,

which has yet to be ruled on, is filed against the anti-migrant group known as Operation Dudula for its targeted campaigns against immigration communities, and was extended to also include the Department of Home Affairs and the South African Police Services for their role in not preventing and even assisting some of its actions.⁴⁷ In **Colombia**, meanwhile, the Constitutional Court ruled against the government in a case involving the forced return of three Cameroonian women in 2024. The judgement found that their removal, without any due process in place, broke international law and recommended that the government enhance its procedures, publish an accessible booklet to raise awareness among migrants about their rights and strengthen legal protections for people in transit.⁴⁸

Polish activists acquitted in "great victory for justice"

Across Europe, the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance to migrants has seen activists and volunteers from a variety of countries, including Greece, Italy, France and Bulgaria, charged for supposedly facilitating illegal entry. The number of migration-related prosecutions has only risen in recent years, with the organisation PICUM estimating that "at least 142 people faced judicial proceedings in the EU for helping migrants" – up from 117 people in 2023 and 102 in 2022.⁴⁹ These numbers point to the fact that, despite some high-profile acquittals, NGO workers and volunteers continue to face harassment and intimidation simply for providing life-saving assistance to those in need.

In Poland, alongside the increasingly violent policing of the border, volunteers and activists have been prevented from providing humanitarian assistance through the creation of an 'exclusion zone' and the threat of criminal penalties. In January 2025, proceedings against five volunteers began on charges relating to their provision of emergency assistance to an Iraqi family (including seven children) and their efforts to transport them to a nearby town. Initially accused of organising illegal crossings, a crime punishable with up to eight years in prison, these were subsequently downgraded to facilitating the illegal stay of another person in Poland for material or personal gain. Prosecutors

41 Mellersh, N. (2025) [Germany and Netherlands face court pressure over Afghan admissions](#). InfoMigrants; Also Mellersh, N. (2025) [Germany ends admission freeze for vulnerable Afghans](#). InfoMigrants.

42 Clanten Bendixen, M. (2025) [The Supreme Court puts an end to many years of illegal practice for refugees](#). Refugees DK.

43 Henley, J. (2024) [Greek coastguard's treatment of migrants "clearly illegal", says ex-officer](#). The Guardian; Also Smith, H. (2025) [Strasbourg court finds Greece guilty of "systematic" pushback of asylum seekers](#). The Guardian.

44 Council of Europe (2025) [ECtHR rules in several migrant-related cases](#).

45 Smith, H. (2025) [Strasbourg court finds Greece guilty of "systematic" pushback of asylum seekers](#). The Guardian.

46 Beake, N. and Kallergis, K. (2025) [Greek coastguards charged over 2023 migrant shipwreck](#). BBC; Also Fallon, K., Christides, G., Busch, J. and Emmanouilidou, L. (2025) [Greek shipwreck: hi-tech investigation suggests coastguard responsible for sinking](#). The Guardian.

47 Mutsila, L. (2025) [Operation Dudula in the dock — rights organisations confront anti-migrant group in court battle](#). Daily Maverick.

48 Global Strategic Litigation Council (2025) [Colombia's Constitutional Court upholds non-refoulement in landmark ruling](#).

49 PICUM (2025) [At least 142 people criminalised for helping migrants in Europe in 2024](#).

argued that, though the activists were themselves volunteers who were not paid to help, the rescued migrants benefitted materially from their assistance and so the activists could be held criminally liable for their actions.⁵⁰

The defence pushed back against this interpretation, however, and pointed out that refusing to provide assistance to someone whose life or health is in danger is, in fact, a crime. Furthermore, as previous court rulings have found that pushbacks are themselves illegal, protecting someone from being illegally forced back into Belarus cannot be deemed a prosecutable offense. The judge ultimately accepted this argument, acquitting the activists in September and highlighting, in his closing remarks, that the law could only be applied if the activists had benefitted themselves from their actions. While the case is unlikely to bring an end to the government's prosecution of volunteers and activists immediately – another trial of a volunteer who is accused of obstructing and threatening border security guards while helping an injured Somali student apply for asylum⁵¹ – the ruling was nevertheless celebrated “as a great victory for justice” by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), with the verdict proving that “contrary to politicians’ narratives, humanitarian aid is and will remain legal”.⁵²

Investigative journalism also continues to play a vital role in uncovering abuses against migrants, including systematic and protracted rights violations that might otherwise go unreported. In this regard, the organisation Lighthouse Reports and its various media partners have undertaken extraordinary work in revealing the impact of official policies on vulnerable migrants. In October 2024, they released a report on the “shadowy deportation system” funded by the EU in Türkiye and the numerous Syrians and Afghans who “have been detained, abused, and even killed as a result”.⁵⁴ The organisation followed this up in September 2025 with a devastating exposé of the deadly collision and capsizing of migrant vessels by French security forces in Mayotte, a practice that has allegedly led to dozens of deaths since 2007 and may soon be replicated in the Channel.⁵⁵

While governments may shrug off even the most shocking revelations with silence or denial, in some cases, the revelations have gathered sufficient momentum to force them to change course as a direct result. One example of this was the announcement, in January 2025, that the EU would be amending the way it made payments to Tunisia as part of its ongoing migration management deal, with firmer conditions in place to ensure human rights and democratic principles are respected. The move appears to have been driven by the publication, in September 2024, by The Guardian newspaper of extensive sexual and physical assaults of migrants at the hands of Tunisian security forces, prompting calls for better safeguards to be put in place.⁵⁶

Reporting and investigations

At a moment when the spread of misinformation is increasingly implicated in anti-migrant protests and violence, the role of accurate and effective reporting is more important than ever. In this spirit, the inauguration of a new migration observatory in Puglia, Italy, is a welcome step to develop a concrete evidence base on contemporary migration trends as a basis to develop productive, inclusive policies that benefit both migrants and local communities. In the words of the regional governor at its opening ceremony, the observatory “is useful [for getting] to know the great opportunities stemming from the desire many people have of living and working in our region. The arrival of new migrant workers is often used to scare people who are in our area and have no job – but we know that the economy doesn't work in this way.”⁵³

The organisation Forensic Architecture is another powerful force for accountability at a time when governments, smugglers and vigilantes all too often enjoy impunity for their actions. In addition to a detailed spatial analysis of “humanitarian displacement” and other egregious war crimes carried out by Israel in Gaza,⁵⁷ it has reconstructed migrant detention facilities in Libya where serious abuse took place⁵⁸ and mapped out historic and contemporary human rights violations at the Greek-Turkish border between 1926 and 2025.⁵⁹ The power of these investigations, combining recent incidents and the careful unearthing of historic acts of violence, is to challenge the invisibility of the abuse of migrants and other marginalised groups by recording and bearing witness to them.

50 Notes from Poland (2025) [Activists on trial in Poland for assisting illegal migrants found not guilty](#).

51 Wojcik, N. (2025) [Poland: Is helping immigrants a crime?](#) DW.

52 Notes from Poland (2025) [Activists on trial in Poland for assisting illegal migrants found not guilty](#).

53 InfoMigrants (2025) [New migration observatory opens in Puglia](#).

54 Lighthouse Reports (2024) [Turkey's EU-funded deportation machine](#).

55 Lighthouse Reports (2025) [“They hit us and watched us drown”](#).

56 Townsend, M. (2025) [Europe overhauls funding to Tunisia after Guardian exposes migrant abuse](#). The Guardian.

57 Forensic Architecture (2024) [A cartography of genocide](#).

58 counter-investigations.org (2025) [Escaping Libya's detention industry](#).

59 Forensic Architecture (2025) [The Evros/Meriç river: A century of border design](#).

Activism and solidarity

At a time when too many governments appear to be capitulating to racism and xenophobia towards migrants, even those previously associated with moderate or inclusive policies, activism is more important than ever. Migrants are often at the forefront of protest movements themselves, with hundreds gathering in Palermo, Italy, to demand residency permits earlier in the year.⁶⁰ However, particularly in today's divisive political context, all citizens have a vital role to play.

In the UK, for instance, while the government largely condemned the anti-migrant demonstrations that spread to a number of cities during the summer of 2025,⁶¹ the most powerful rejoinder came from the thousands of counter-protestors who turned up to anti-migrant gatherings to challenge their hostility.⁶² Local communities have been working, too, to support cohesion and integration even as the broader climate across the country has become steadily more inhospitable to refugees and asylum seekers.⁶³ These efforts have enormous value at a time when even mainstream politicians in the UK are vocalising negative narratives around immigration.

In the US, where the most extreme anti-migrant actions are now originating from the government itself, thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets to protest against heavily militarised operations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to round up undocumented

migrants (see Thematic snapshot *ICE wars: the rising tension between state and federal immigration policies in 2025*, p. 98).⁶⁴ Analysis of immigration-related protests in the first months of 2025 found that the overwhelming majority – 97 percent – were supportive of immigrant rights.⁶⁵ Activists have also collaborated, among other areas, in sharing information about local raids to warn those potentially at risk of being apprehended and detained.⁶⁶ Protestors, including lawmakers, have also appeared at holding facilities to condemn the detention of migrants there.⁶⁷ Many of these protests have been notable for encompassing a wide range of groups, from faith groups to labour unions.⁶⁸

Support and assistance can also be expressed through optimistic acts, such as the “solidarity holiday” laid on by the association Community of Sant'Egidio in camps in Cyprus to provide refugees with food and recreational activities.⁶⁹ Some of the most effective interventions are those that seek to imagine solutions which benefit both migrants and communities. In Spain, the non-profit organisation Accem established a refugee centre several years ago in an underpopulated rural settlement in response to the increasingly inhospitable environment in many Spanish cities. By 2025, the initiative had not only helped over 1,000 asylum seekers while they waited for their refugee claims to be processed but also provided at least 100 with a long-term home where they have settled permanently, in the process bringing new life to the town.⁷⁰

60 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: Migrants protest in Palermo to demand residence permits](#).

61 The Guardian (2025) [“Far-right thugs” in UK will be swiftly brought to justice, says Keir Starmer – video](#).

62 Kleiderman, A. and Symonds, T. (2025) [Asylum hotel protesters met by counter-demonstrators across UK](#). BBC.

63 Murray, J. (2025) [“You don’t see many locals at anti-migrant protests”: Kent residents work for community cohesion](#). The Guardian.

64 Vertuno, J. (2025) [Protests against immigration raids spread across the U.S.](#) PBS.

65 Bridging Divides Initiative (2025) [Issue brief: Mapping the rise in immigration-related demonstrations in early 2025](#). Princeton University.

66 Wolfson, J. (2025) [The Ice alert app founder sparking fury in Trump officials: “Pam Bondi said I better watch out? Please.”](#) The Guardian; Also Beaumont, H. (2025) [Inside the neighborhood patrols watching for Ice: “They thought they could scare us – but this is LA”](#). The Guardian.

67 Farrell, P. (2025) [Democratic lawmakers, including Brad Lander, among the 15 arrested after anti-ICE protest at New York City immigration holding facility](#). The Independent.

68 Wang, C. (2025) [“To not speak out is to be complicit”: LA faith leaders mobilize amid Ice raids](#). The Guardian; Also The New York Times (2025) [How labor unions came to define the L.A. immigration protests](#).

69 InfoMigrants (2025) [Sant'Egidio offers “holiday” for refugees on Cyprus](#).

70 France24 (2025) [Refugees revive village in “empty Spain”](#).

Lampedusa's "gestures of hospitality" nominated for UNESCO recognition

Every year, Lampedusa, a small Sicilian island with a population of around 6,000, receives tens of thousands of migrants. Located halfway between Italy and the North African coast, it has become famous for its humane and respectful approach to the people who reach its shores – in sharp contrast to the violence and surveillance evident in other border areas of the EU. This is because many in Lampedusa, in the words of its former mayor Giusi Nicolini, see the crisis as “a humanitarian one – not a migrant invasion”.⁷¹

As far back as 2011, when one of the first large-scale movements to Lampedusa took place during the Tunisian revolution, the failure of Italy or the EU to provide adequate assistance meant the crisis was largely handled by the community, faith groups and NGOs.⁷² This has been a recurrent issue for the island, with inadequate assistance and a highly politicised approach to migration again contributing to strained facilities and overcrowding in 2023.⁷³ Though the numbers have fallen since then, the situation has also been alleviated by the arrival of the Red Cross.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, while the pressures of the situation have led to some political tensions,⁷⁵ Lampedusa has remained – in the words of Pope Leo XIV – a “stronghold of that humanity that screamed explanations, atavistic fears and unfair measures intended to crack”.⁷⁶ His remarks, issued in a video address in September 2025, were intended to support the island's nomination for recognition of its “gestures of hospitality” by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage to be protected. If successful, the nomination would give further recognition to the island's unique contribution at a time when its example is more urgent than ever.

71 Nicolini, G. (2023) [Here on Lampedusa, the crisis we face alone is a humanitarian one – not a migrant invasion](#). The Guardian.

72 Council of Europe (2011) [Report on the visit to Lampedusa \(Italy\)](#).

73 Sherlock, R. (2023) [On Lampedusa, there's sympathy for migrants — as long as they don't stay](#). NPR; Also Nicolini, G. (2023) [Here on Lampedusa, the crisis we face alone is a humanitarian one – not a migrant invasion](#). The Guardian.

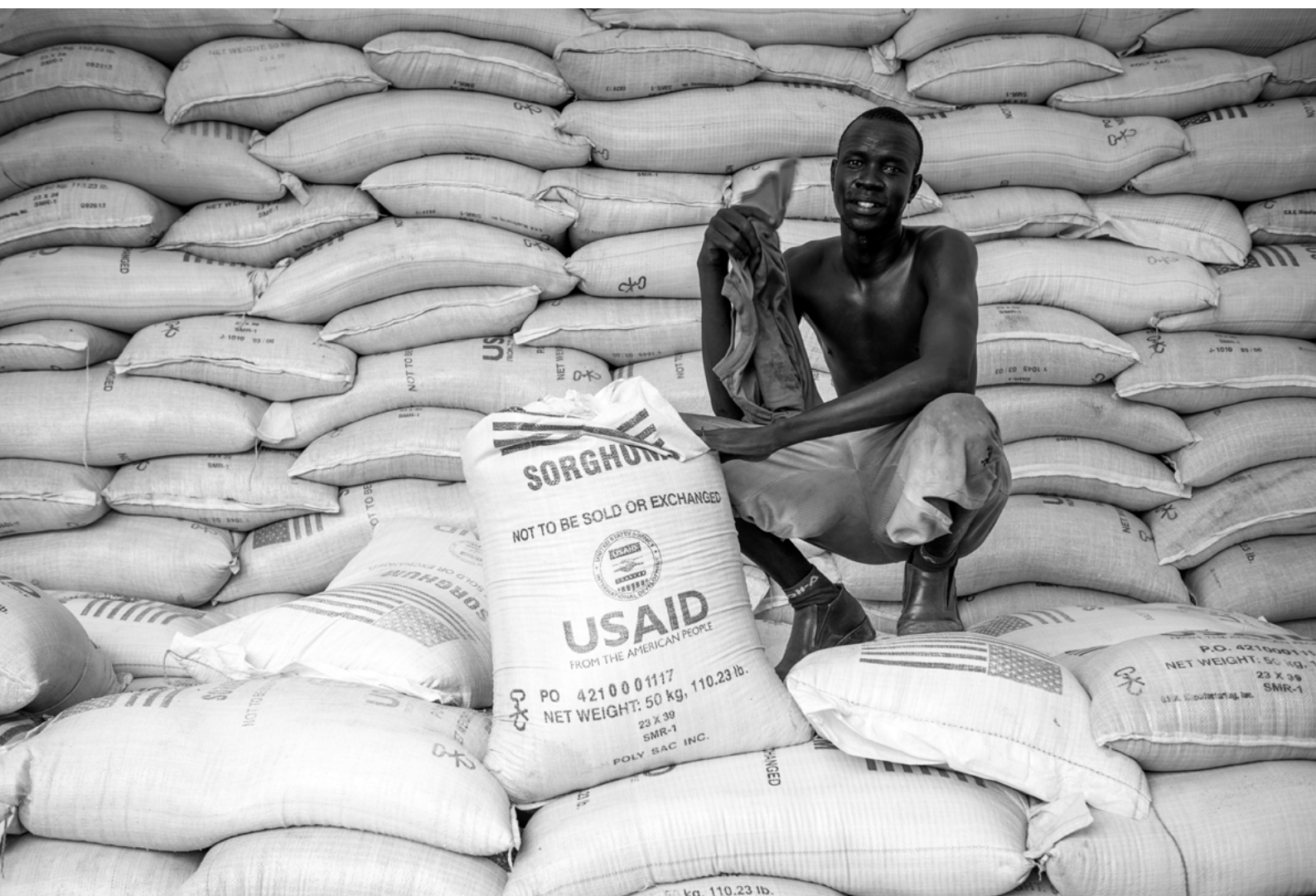
74 InfoMigrants (2025) [Italy: MPs visit Lampedusa, primary entry point for migrants arriving by sea](#).

75 ANSA (2023) [Protest on Lampedusa over rumour of new migrant camp](#).

76 InfoMigrants (2025) [Lampedusa is a “stronghold” against unfair measures, says pope](#).

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Foreign aid cuts can reshape displacement and migration dynamics. The reduction in development aid can also affect the 'root causes' of migration, due to the impact on economic development and exacerbate existing problems like climate change and instability. Photo taken at Kule refugee camp in Gambela, Ethiopia. (See *The end of development aid?* How aid cuts may reshape migration, [p. 233](#)).





The Mixed Migration Review 2025 examines how mixed migration dynamics are evolving amid intensified geopolitical turmoil. One year after the 2024 'year of elections', the world faces profound political shifts, a transforming humanitarian and multilateral system, escalating conflicts and accelerating forces affecting mixed migration including economic inequality, technological advancement and climate crises.

Drawing on feature interviews with leading migration thinkers, essays from established experts alongside those emerging from the Global South, regional and global updates, 4Mi survey data and in-depth personal migrant stories, MMR 2025 explores how this turbulent landscape is reshaping mixed migration worldwide.

This year's report also highlights how political rhetoric is translating into practice and examines the paradox of labour shortages alongside hardline anti-immigration stances – while governments increasingly frame migration as an existential threat and implement hardline border regimes, migration is a continued necessity for both migrants and the countries who receive them. The MMR 2025 also investigates the double-edged impact of technology on migration – from enhanced connectivity to intensified surveillance –

and assesses how cuts to development aid and the erosion of multilateral systems are impacting on refugees and migrants and influencing migration governance. By documenting extreme practices that have become normalised, the review argues that policies once considered fringe are now mainstream across the political spectrum and that we are reaching a dangerous tipping point.

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Through its comprehensive documentation of policy impacts, migrant experiences and emerging trends, MMR 2025 delivers essential insights into the geopolitical shifts of 2025 and their implications for current and future mixed migration dynamics.

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