

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 may 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.

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1. The politicisation of migration

With an unprecedented number of people going to the polls this year, it is not surprising that anti-migrant rhetoric reached a new low in 2024. Perhaps, the most egregious instance of this occurred in the **United States** (US), with former president Donald Trump and other senior members of his campaign team spreading false claims that Haitian immigrants in the town of Springfield, Ohio, had eaten people’s pets. This misinformation only served to exacerbate communal tensions and, reportedly, left many Haitians in the town fearful to leave their homes out of fear of attack.¹ Trump has also weaponised other accusations to frame migrants as a security threat, describing them in the presidential debate with the Democrat candidate Kamala Harris as “millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums.”²

The politicisation of immigration for electoral advantage is hardly unique to the US, however. In Europe, ahead of the European Union (EU) elections, the resurgent far-right in countries such as France and Germany achieved sweeping gains on the back of anti-migrant campaigns. But, while xenophobic sentiments have been leveraged by parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD) for years, there was a marked shift in the willingness of centrist parties to mobilise similar language themselves. In **Germany**, back in October 2023, chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that “we must finally deport on a large scale those who have no right to stay in Germany”³ – a position that has further hardened following a number

of widely publicised attacks by foreigners in the country, including the killing of a policeman by an Afghan national in June 2024 and the deadly stabbing of several people in August by a Syrian asylum seeker. The increasing hostility towards immigration was not only reflected in the AfD’s record gains in the European elections, but also in calls from established parties – such as the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany – for asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Syria to be denied entry to the country.⁴

In **France**, Emmanuel Macron sought to position himself as a sensible moderate between the “extremes” of the left and right-wing: with this in mind, he attacked the progressive-leaning Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) as “totally immigrationist”, a term previously used by the far-right to denigrate Macron’s policies. The attack was used on the basis of the NFP’s proposals to expand rights and protections for asylum seekers.⁵ Studies have demonstrated, however, that efforts by mainstream parties to woo voters by mimicking anti-immigration positions are more likely to entrench support for the far-right.⁶

In **India**, Prime Minister Narendra Modi – whose Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has long targeted the country’s Muslim minority with language presenting them as immigrants or outsiders – appeared to escalate his attacks ahead of national elections, describing them variously as “infiltrators” and accusing the opposition of committing “vote jihad” by mobilising “a certain community” against him. What was notable was that, while this rhetoric previously tended to emanate from his associates, this time it came directly from Modi himself.⁷

1 Rohrlrich, J. (2024) [Racial tensions in Springfield have simmered for months. Trump’s rhetoric now has Haitians there in a full-blown ‘panic’](#). The Independent.

2 Hoffman, R. (2024) [Harris-Trump presidential debate transcript](#). ABC News.

3 AP (2023) [Scholz says that Germany needs to expand deportations of rejected asylum-seekers](#).

4 Nöstlinger, N. (2024) [Migration smashes into German elections after deadly knife attack](#). Politico.

5 Millar, P. (2024) [How France’s far right changed the debate on immigration](#). France 24.

6 May, A. & Czymara, C. (2024) [Mainstream parties adopting far-right rhetoric simply increases votes for far-right parties](#). The Loop.

7 Mogul, R. (2024) [India’s election campaign turns negative as Modi and ruling party embrace Islamophobic rhetoric](#). CNN.

Strikingly, though the BJP won the election, Modi lost the majority he had held before – though this loss of support was likely driven by the country’s economic woes.⁸

A particular flashpoint in India’s deepening communal divisions is the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed in 2019 but only formally implemented just before the elections took place. The CAA provides for an accelerated pathway to citizenship for migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, provided they are either Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Parsi or Jain. Muslims, on the other hand, are not included. The legislation, besides potentially violating the country’s constitutional guarantee of religious equality, poses a further complicating factor in the entanglement of India’s communal domestic politics and its asylum and migration policy.⁹ While the CAA has been justified in humanitarian terms, it is in marked contrast to India’s summary detention and deportation of the predominantly Muslim Rohingya population seeking refuge in the country.¹⁰

Rohingya also found themselves scapegoated in **Indonesia** ahead of national elections there. The number of Rohingya travelling from Bangladesh or Myanmar, though still relatively modest, has increased since November 2023. While originally welcomed in the Muslim-majority country, given their persecution in Myanmar, public opinion has become increasingly hostile, with reported pushbacks by coastguards and mass protests in Aceh.¹¹ This animosity has in large part been sustained by a coordinated online hate campaign targeting Rohingya. While disagreement had occasionally flared up in previous years, these were usually easily managed, but the recent spread of misinformation had escalated tensions to unprecedented levels in the build-up to national elections in February 2024.¹² Analysts feared that the failure of the Indonesian government to effectively challenge these toxic narratives could result in the presence of Rohingya becoming a “ticking time bomb” in future.¹³

In **South Africa**, meanwhile, where the issue of immigration has become increasingly divisive in recent years amidst growing hostility to Zimbabweans and others living in the country, the build-up to national elections was characterised by the deployment of anti-migrant rhetoric from across the political spectrum.¹⁴

This arguably reflects the troubling emergence of an anti-migrant consensus, with no major party appearing to champion their rights. Well before the election season began, in November 2023, the government announced that it would be withdrawing from the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol while it undertook a sweeping reform of its immigration system, including the repatriation of refugees to countries it deems safe. While South Africa has made clear its intention to rejoin the conventions once this process is completed, it will likely opt out of certain clauses so it can restrict the right of refugees to employment, education and citizenship.¹⁵

Citizenship under threat

In February 2024, in response to the rise in irregular migration from Comoros and Madagascar to the French territory of Mayotte, the French government announced its plan to amend the so-called *droit du sol*. This birth citizenship has long been an inalienable right, automatically granting citizenship to anyone born on French soil; however, the amendment will exempt the children of foreigners born in Mayotte, in an apparent effort to reduce the lure of Mayotte as a destination for migrants from Comoros or Madagascar.¹⁶ Despite assurances from the Macron government that it would only be applied in Mayotte, left-leaning critics have warned that it could be a “Pandora’s box” that could see citizenship rights eroded for the children of foreigners elsewhere in mainland France – a concern that appeared to be confirmed by calls from the far-right for it to be extended to the whole of the country.¹⁷ In **Sweden**, meanwhile, the government announced its plan to introduce a programme to pay “foreign-born” Swedish passport holders to emigrate as an approach to reduce its net migration figures: it already has a similar initiative in place to encourage refugees to return to their country of origin voluntarily.¹⁸

These developments are especially troubling given the increasing traction that the concept of “remigration” has gained. In Germany, leaked reports at the beginning of the 2024 of AfD representatives discussing a “master plan” to deport millions of asylum seekers and migrants from the

8 Ellis-Petersen, H. (2024) [Modi loses parliamentary majority in Indian election](#). The Guardian.

9 Hardy, E. (2024) [The role of migration in a year of crucial elections](#). Carnegie Endowment.

10 OCHR (2024) [India must end racial discrimination against Rohingya, cease forced deportation and arbitrary detention, urges UN Committee](#).

11 Ratcliffe, R. & Syakriah, A. (2024) [The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees](#). The Guardian; Human Rights Watch (2024) [Indonesia: Protect newly arrived Rohingya refugees](#).

12 Ratcliffe, R. & Syakriah, A. (2024) [The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees](#). The Guardian.

13 Nugroho, J. (2024) [Rohingya crisis in Indonesia a ‘ticking time bomb’ if political indifference, misinformation continue: analysts](#). South China Morning Post.

14 Human Rights Watch (2024) [South Africa: Toxic rhetoric endangers migrants](#).

15 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Eastern and Southern Africa / Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 4 2023](#).

16 Fabricius, P. (2024) [France plans to terminate Mayotte’s ‘droit du sol’](#). Institute for Security Studies.

17 Willsher, K. (2024) [‘It’s non-negotiable’: French MPs angry at move to restrict citizenship on Mayotte](#). The Guardian.

18 First Post (2024) [Sweden plans to pay ‘foreign-born’ passport holders to leave the country in an effort to cut migration](#).

country were met with condemnation from many mainstream politicians.¹⁹ Yet, since then, far-right parties in Austria and Germany have campaigned explicitly on the concept of “remigration” (a phrase that some believe has served to soften the harsh reality of deportations). Ahead of regional elections in east Germany in September 2024, the AfD campaigned with posters showing a plane in a blue sky with the slogan “Summer, sun, remigration”.²⁰ Though its spread has been noticeable in a number of European countries, the term was deployed in the US by Donald Trump in September when he pledged to “stop all migrant flights”, “suspend refugee resettlement” and “return Kamala’s [Harris, his opponent in the November 2024 elections] illegal migrants to their home countries [also known as remigration]”.²¹ Critics have expressed concerns that this could signal his intent to extend deportations beyond the undocumented migrant population, particularly following comments by his advisor Stephen Miller promising a “turbocharged” denaturalisation programme.²²

2. Border violence and pushbacks

Border violence has long served as the blunt end of migration management, often carried out covertly or with a measure of deniability (for example, through the use of masked or plainclothed vigilantes rather than uniformed security forces). A shocking feature in recent years, however, is the increasing silence that abuses, including pushbacks, appear to inspire from countries and organisations that were once far more vocal in their condemnation. This is certainly the case in the European Union, where reported abuses by border forces in certain countries led, in the past, to official expressions of concern and calls for these practices to end. Now, however, the offending countries are able to carry out these acts with little in the way of consequences, even when major abuses have been exposed. While surveillance has only increased in many respects, protection monitoring of those travelling towards and through the region remains opaque. Many of those who die along the route are buried in unmarked graves; recent research by *The Guardian* found that, in the last decade, at least 1,015 people who

had died along the EU’s borders had been buried without ever being formally identified. The absence of a formal system to support relatives seeking to determine their loved ones’ fate means that many families of migrants are never able to find out what happened to them.²³

For instance, though **Greece** has been accused of carrying out illicit pushbacks for more than two decades,²⁴ the practice has evolved in a number of ways in recent years. Besides increasing in scale – the number of suspected incidents taking place is far greater now, with the organisation Aegean Boat Report claiming that almost 26,000 people were pushed back by the Greek coastguard in 2023²⁵ – it has also reportedly extended to include not only new arrivals intercepted close to the land border or at sea, but also migrants apprehended further inland who have been transferred and then pushed back towards Türkiye.²⁶ Perhaps most fundamental, however, is the increasing impunity with which Greek security forces and armed proxies are now able to operate. The significant condemnation that emerged from the EU from 2015 onwards in response to various reports of gross and systematic human rights abuses being carried out at the border – from theft and humiliation to beatings and abandonment of migrants in the ocean²⁷ – has become notably more muted. While reputable research and media outlets have repeatedly documented the deaths of dozens of migrants who drowned after being thrown into the sea by security forces or masked individuals,²⁸ Greek authorities continue to deny that these abuses are taking place in the face of mounting evidence. In August 2024, a vessel carrying migrants that reportedly failed to stop in response to orders from the Greek coastguard was shot at, with one migrant on board killed by a bullet.²⁹

In this context, it is not surprising that other countries have also been implicated in violence and mistreatment of migrants at their borders, including in the Balkans, since the region became a popular place of transit. **Croatia**, for example, has been accused of egregious abuses at its border for some years, but neighbouring countries appear to be adopting similar tactics as policies of containment have spread eastwards. While **Hungary** has pushed back tens of thousands of migrants into Serbia,³⁰ for instance, **Serbia** has itself been guilty of pushing back migrants into Bosnia Herzegovina and, more recently, into North Macedonia. In February 2024, video footage emerged of dozens of men who had been stripped down to their underwear in near-freezing temperatures and

19 Connolly, K. & Kassam, A. (2024) [Germans take to streets after AfD meeting on mass deportation plan](#). The Guardian.

20 Kassam, A. (2024) [How remigration became a buzzword for global far right](#). The Guardian.

21 First Post (2024) [Trump vows to end migrant “invasion” of US, suspend refugee resettlement programme](#).

22 Dias, I. (2024) [Trump just introduced a new, dangerous immigration proposal](#). Mother Jones.

23 The Guardian (2024) [More than 1,000 unmarked graves discovered along EU migration routes](#).

24 ECCHR (2022) [Analyzing Greek pushbacks: Over 20 years of concealed state policy without accountability](#).

25 Aegean Boat Report (2023) [Annual report 2023](#).

26 Human Rights Watch (2020) [Greece: Investigate pushbacks, collective expulsions](#).

27 Amnesty International (2021) [Greece: Pushbacks and violence against refugees and migrants are de facto border policy](#).

28 Smith, L. & Steele, B. (2024) [Greek coastguard threw migrants overboard to their deaths, witnesses say](#). BBC.

29 Euractiv (2024) [Greek coastguard fires on migrant boat, one dead](#).

30 Kovačević, N. (2024) [Overview of the main changes since the previous report update: Serbia, AIDA and ECRE](#).

forced back across the border. The Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights condemned the footage and identified it as "indicative of a wider, worrying trend"³¹ – but despite this, in June the EU signed a formal agreement with Serbia on migration management.³²

Cyprus has also been accused of pushbacks, primarily of Syrians departing by boat from Lebanon. Cypriot authorities have been accused of intercepting vessels and forcing back hundreds of migrants towards Lebanon, often without food, water or fuel and, in some cases, allegedly at gunpoint – charges that government officials denied.³³ In June, authorities also refused to allow in dozens of migrants stranded in the buffer zone between its territory and Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus, arguing that it could become another avenue for irregular migration.³⁴ Cyprus has also been accused of collaborating with **Lebanon's** coastguards, with the latter reportedly engaging in "pullbacks" of migrant vessels and subsequently deporting Syrians on board across the border from Lebanon into Syria.³⁵ Notwithstanding these abuses, in May 2024 Lebanon received a €1 billion package of financial assistance from the EU. Some of it was allocated to basic service provision towards refugees, IDPs and other vulnerable groups, but the package also included funding to support border and migration management.³⁶

The use of pullbacks is also symptomatic of the increasingly pervasive outsourcing of migration management by the EU to partner countries in North Africa who, in return for various financial and political concessions, intercept migrants departing from their shores towards Europe and forcibly return them to their own territories (in most cases, either to be detained in brutal conditions or violently expelled). This is especially the case with Italy, whose much-vaunted reduction in migrant arrivals during 2024 has been attributed to the EU's agreements with **Libya** and **Tunisia**. Both deals have resulted in an extraordinary uptick in the number of migrants en route to Italy apprehended in the Central Mediterranean.

Border violence is often enabled by a raft of technologies, such as drones and thermal cameras, as well as the hard infrastructure of walls and fences. The latter, in particular, serve symbolic as well as practical functions as a signal

of tightened immigration policies. In the **US**, the most extreme expression of anti-migrant policy is being played out on the southern border between the state of Texas and Mexico. Texas governor Greg Abbott, who over a number of years has overseen the militarisation of the border and the introduction of a variety of harsh preventative measures such as serrated metal buoys, announced that he would be tripling the length of the state's concertina wire fence – including, controversially, at the border with the neighbouring state of New Mexico.³⁷ Coming at a cost of billions of dollars, the extreme violence of Abbott's Operation Lone Star has resulted in the reported injury of hundreds of migrants. Human rights groups have reported, from mid-2023 onwards, a disturbing pattern of "less-than-lethal" violence being carried out against migrants without any provocation. Various reports have documented accounts of US border security firing rubber bullets, gas balls and pepper spray through the wire at groups of migrants, including children, and engaging in verbal and physical mistreatment of apprehended migrants.³⁸

Perhaps the most blatant use of violence, though, continues to take place at the border of **Saudi Arabia**. The government's systematic expulsion of undocumented migrants in the country, carried out over an extended period, is well documented: since 2017, at least 21 million migrants have been deported from the country, including around half a million Ethiopians.³⁹ However, organisations including the Mixed Migration Centre, Human Rights Watch and Mwatana for Human Rights have documented a more recent, even more disturbing pattern of violence at the border. Dating back to August 2022, evidence suggests that more than 10,000 migrants may have been killed as a result of these actions, ranging from large-scale and indiscriminate mortar attacks on groups to point-blank shootings and violence.⁴⁰ While attracting significant attention in the international media, these reports appeared to do little in the way of halting the abuse, with a follow-up report published by the Mixed Migration Centre in June 2024 documenting further intentional killings and maiming of migrants by border guards, in some cases involving the use of heavy weaponry.⁴¹ A key factor in this may have been the somewhat circumspect response of the US and the EU, limited in public to calls for an investigation into the allegations, while the UN's response has been

31 Fallon, K. & Tondo, L. (2024) [Videos show migrants stripped of clothing in freezing temperatures at Serbian border](#). The Guardian.

32 European Commission (2024) [EU signs agreement with Serbia to strengthen collaboration in migration and border management](#).

33 InfoMigrants (2024) [Syrian migrants describe ordeal between Lebanon and Cyprus](#).

34 InfoMigrants (2024) [Cyprus: Migrants stranded in UN buffer zone](#); Wallis, E. (2024) [UN urges Cyprus to start asylum process for migrants in buffer zone](#). InfoMigrants.

35 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Lebanon/Cyprus: Refugees pulled back, expelled, then forced back to Syria](#).

36 European Commission (2024) [President von der Leyen reaffirms EU's strong support for Lebanon and its people and announces a €1 billion package of EU funding](#).

37 Rissman, K. (2024) [Which Mexico are you? New Mexico furious after Texas installs razor wire along its border](#). The Independent.

38 Isacson, A. & Verduzco, A. L. (2024) [Soldiers confronting migrants: Texas's dangerous precedent](#). WOLA.

39 Aduana, G. (2022) [Half a million Ethiopian migrants have been deported from Saudi Arabia in 5 years—what they go through](#). The Conversation.

40 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) [Indifference and impunity: 10 months on, Saudi border killings of migrants continue](#).

41 Ibid.

limited to isolated expressions of concern rather than a concerted push for justice. It has been suggested that the muted response to these widespread, egregious abuses may be rooted in ‘cynical realpolitik’, with Saudi Arabia simply too important geopolitically to be meaningfully held to account.⁴²

The human cost of the EU's border closures

Border closures have increasingly been justified as a proportionate response to the ‘weaponisation’ of migration, as recently enshrined in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (discussed further below). One of the most contentious elements in this new legislation is the permission of states to “apply derogations from the common procedure” where mass migration appears to have been “instrumentalised for political purposes”.⁴³ The provision appears to condone situations such as the continued closure of the Poland-Belarus border, where thousands of migrants have been stranded in deteriorating and life-threatening conditions between the two countries, with **Poland** refusing to grant entry despite their clear humanitarian need. The humanitarian crisis there, beginning in the summer of 2021, has resulted in dozens of deaths and many more disappearances of migrants after being trapped without adequate food, shelter, medical care or clothing in freezing conditions for months.⁴⁴

Despite the ousting of the right-wing Law and Justice party in the October 2023 elections by the more centrist Civic Coalition, headed by Donald Tusk, thousands more pushbacks by Polish border guards have been reported since then.⁴⁵ While Tusk has called attention to the continued crisis at the border in security terms, blaming **Russia** for the so-called “hybrid warfare”, he has made little mention of the humanitarian plight faced by the many migrants still caught in the buffer zone.⁴⁶ In July 2024, the Polish government passed legal amendments exempting security personnel from criminal liability when using firearms to repel “a direct and unlawful attack” – a move condemned by human rights groups as “a licence to kill”.⁴⁷

Despite being in clear violation of international law, the failure of the European Commission to meaningfully condemn the situation at the Polish border suggests the use of pushbacks is becoming increasingly accepted in Poland and in many other countries across the EU where the practice is also carried out, with varying degrees of visibility.⁴⁸ Poland’s actions at the border with **Belarus** appear to have provided **Finland** with a template. Here, faced with a similar uptick in migration that authorities have blamed on Russia, the government passed the ‘pushback law’ (the Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalised Migration) in July 2024. The legislation permits border forces to summarily return migrants who enter Finnish territory from Russia without offering them the opportunity to claim asylum first.⁴⁹ Latvia made similar legal amendments the year before to effectively sanction pushbacks of migrants into Russia.⁵⁰

3. Detention and forced returns

The dynamics of deportations and forced returns are often rooted in a range of factors, from deep-seated issues such as geopolitical rivalries or historical discrimination to recent shifts in policy or public opinion. In some cases, a crackdown may represent the continuation of a long-held approach towards the migrant population or a radical departure from previous policies, triggered by a particular set of events. As with other components of a country’s migration policy, the function can be highly performative – for example, if authorities wish to signal the beginning of a “hostile environment” or deter other potential migrants. Irregular migration has also been used to justify increasingly draconian policies, including the rollback of protections for minors intercepted in the EU. The passage of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum prompted the UN to call for member states to ensure that the rights of children were not undermined, given the apparent weakening of safeguards preventing the detention of underage migrants.⁵¹ Leaked internal documents ahead of the passage of the pact suggest that some countries, led by France, were lobbying for its provisions to explicitly allow child detention, even from birth.⁵²

Libya has been notorious for years for the systematic use of violence, torture, sexual assault and extortion in its

42 Ibid.

43 González Enríquez, C. (2024) [The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: Context, challenges and limitations](#). Real Instituto Elcano.

44 Holt, E. (2024) [Conditions worsen for Belarus migrants stuck in ‘death zone’ on EU border](#). IPS News; Human Constantia (2024) [\[Illegal pushbacks and rights violations have become a widespread tool for managing migration to EU countries\]](#).

45 Holt, E. (2024) Op. Cit.

46 Gera, V. (2024) [Polish activists criticize Tusk’s government for tough border policies and migrant pushbacks](#). AP.

47 Ciobanu, C. (2024) [Poland passes law granting soldiers immunity when using firearms at Belarus border](#). Balkan Insight.

48 Grześkowiak, M. (2024) [Pushbacks from Europe’s borders enter the mainstream](#). Verfassungsblog.

49 ECRE (2024) [Finland adopts controversial “pushback law”](#).

50 Amnesty International (2023) [Latvia 2023](#).

51 OCHR (2024) [Child immigration detention must be prohibited following adoption of EU migration and asylum pact, UN experts say](#).

52 Miñano, L., Maggiore, M. & Hansens, P. (2024) [France led lobbying to detain children in EU migration pact](#).

various detention centres by security forces, militias and smugglers. Many of those being held in these facilities are migrants who have been intercepted at sea by the coastguard and returned to land. Besides providing continued financial assistance to Libya to support these activities, the EU and various member states collaborate directly with the country through surveillance and coordination to ensure migrant vessels are apprehended: according to a report by Lighthouse Reports published at the beginning of 2024, the EU migration agency Frontex had communicated the location of boats on no fewer than 2,000 separate occasions over the previous three years.⁵³ Extraordinarily, it has even been accused of sharing coordinates with a notorious militia, Tareq Bin Zayed, to enable pullbacks to Libya, despite the fact that the group is widely accused of egregious human rights abuses. Interception by its vessels, in the words of one expert, is “more of a kidnapping than a rescue”.⁵⁴

However, while Libya has long been an outlier in the degree of abuse suffered by migrants in the country, this appears to be changing as migrants in **Tunisia** have also been exposed to a dramatic escalation in violence. As in Libya, the EU has been accused of being complicit in these abuses due to the considerable amounts of money it has channelled into funding ‘migration management’ in the country. Particularly disturbing were the recent reports of systematic torture and sexual assault being carried out against migrants in Tunisia’s detention facilities by members of its national guard, who receive funding directly from the EU.⁵⁵ The scale and systematic nature of these abuses have prompted Tunisian opposition groups to file a case against the government with the International Criminal Court, while the EU faces growing pressure to launch a formal investigation into these alleged abuses.⁵⁶

Since the crackdown first began in 2023, hundreds of migrants in Tunisia have also been abandoned at the border with Morocco or Libya, including dozens who have died or disappeared in the process.⁵⁷ While Tunisia is not alone in carrying out these “desert dumps” – **Algeria**, for instance, has carried out expulsions to Niger for years, with thousands of migrants abandoned during the year at ‘Point Zero’, resulting in a number of deaths and disappearances⁵⁸ – its adoption points to a troubling normalisation of this practice in North Africa and beyond, with countries such as **Morocco** and

Mauritania (all recipients of EU assistance to support migration management) also recently implicated in similar abuse.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, **Egypt**, though hosting an estimated 500,000 people who crossed the border from Sudan following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, has also been accused of launching a crackdown against Sudanese in the country.⁶⁰ According to a report by the *New Humanitarian*, authorities have established a covert network of detention facilities where Sudanese are being held before being expelled back into Sudan.⁶¹

Violent expulsions, arbitrary detention and other abuses towards migrants are often motivated and enabled by structural racism. In the case of the **Dominican Republic**, the history of the mistreatment of migrants from neighbouring **Haiti** goes back decades, but has raised further questions since the latter’s descent into civil disorder and gang-orchestrated fighting. Despite the clear dangers in the country, the number of confirmed deportations picked up pace in 2024, with almost 100,000 Haitians (including 5,000 children and adolescents) deported in the first eight months alone. The expulsions, which have frequently been accompanied by degrading treatment, beatings and detention in squalid conditions, appear to have escalated as a result of the government’s announcement, in October 2023, that all visas for Haitian nationals would be suspended, closing off a key pathway for regular migration.⁶² The Dominican president, Luis Abinader, vowed ahead of national elections in May 2024 to build a wall at the border with Haiti and impose checkpoints to prevent an “avalanche” of Haitians from entering the country.⁶³

Both **Pakistan** and **Iran** have offered sanctuary to millions of registered refugees, residency card holders and undocumented migrants from **Afghanistan** for decades, even if deportations have taken place repeatedly throughout this period and have periodically threatened the imposition of tighter restrictions. However, both countries appear to have entered a new phase in their treatment of their Afghan populations. Pakistan, in particular, with the launch of its *Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan* in October 2023, has signalled a substantive policy shift towards what could eventually lead to the return of the large majority of Afghans in the country.⁶⁴ The plan is scheduled to be rolled out in several phases, beginning with the deportation of undocumented Afghans by 1 November 2023 and the introduction

53 Lighthouse Reports (2024) [2,200 Frontex emails to Libya](#).

54 Marsi, F. et al. (2023) [European powers allow shadowy Libyan group to return refugees](#). Al Jazeera.

55 The Guardian (2024) [The brutal truth behind Italy’s migrant reduction: beatings and rape by EU-funded forces in Tunisia](#).

56 The Guardian (2024) [Europe has questions to answer over migrant abuse in Tunisia, say MEPs and activists](#).

57 Lewis, D. (2024) [Exclusive: Migrant expulsions from Tunisia to Libya fuel extortion, abuse, UN says](#). Reuters.

58 Boitoux, C. (2024) [Expulsions in Algeria: 11 migrants died of thirst in desert, Alarm Phone Sahara says](#). InfoMigrants.

59 Lighthouse Reports (2024) [Desert dumps](#).

60 Amnesty International (2024) [Egypt: Authorities must end campaign of mass arrests and forced returns of Sudanese refugees](#).

61 Creta, S. & Khalil, N. (2024) [Inside Egypt’s secret scheme to detain and deport thousands of Sudanese refugees](#). The New Humanitarian.

62 Amnesty International (2024) [President Luis Abinader’s second mandate must prioritize respect for human rights and put an end to racist migration policies](#).

63 Veras, E. (2024) [Haitians looking to escape violence and chaos face hostility in neighbouring Dominican Republic](#). The Conversation.

64 Bahiss, I. (2023) [Pakistan’s mass deportation of Afghans poses risks to regional stability](#). Crisis Group.

of penalties for anyone who offered employment or housing to this group.⁶⁵ By May 2024, at least 600,000 Afghans had left Pakistan and the estimated one million others in this category still in the country face severely circumscribed conditions.⁶⁶ Despite official claims that most returns were voluntary, evidence suggests that the majority were coerced to varying degrees, with Human Rights Watch reporting “widespread abuses” including mass arrests, dispossession and destruction of documents.⁶⁷ In many cases, returnees were forced to divert their assets, leaving them with little to bring back to Afghanistan.⁶⁸ A second and third phase, targeting first the 800,000 holders of government-issued Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs)⁶⁹ and then the estimated 1.3 million holders of UNHCR-issued Proof of Registration (PoR),⁷⁰ have been delayed but are still expected to take place, according to officials.⁷¹

For several years, and against a backdrop of increasing hostility towards Afghans, the Iranian government has conducted systematic expulsions across the border, reaching a total of 651,000, in 2022. Of these, close to half were carried out in the last three months of 2023, in the wake of official warnings of an imminent crackdown.⁷² This was accompanied by the imposition, from December 2023, of a work, travel and residency ban for Afghans in 16 of Iran’s 31 provinces.⁷³ In this regard, Iran’s migration policy appears to be following a similar pattern to Pakistan’s.⁷⁴ The situation of the Afghan population became even more politicised in the build-up to the presidential elections in July 2024, when immigration and border management were key issues.⁷⁵

In the context of a repressive environment towards migrants, the application of concessions or exceptions may be as telling a reflection of a government’s official hostility as its crackdowns. In this regard, an example is **Israel’s** reported recruitment of African asylum seekers – repeatedly described in recent years by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as “infiltrators” – to fight in Gaza in return for permanent residency. Despite being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the country has granted refugee status to very few people over the years, with less than one percent of asylum claims

from Eritrean and Sudanese refugees approved. In this context, the recruitment raises an array of ethical and human rights concerns around the possible exploitation of asylum seekers who are desperate to regularise their status, particularly as it is not known whether any of those who have been recruited have yet received what they had been promised.⁷⁶

Containment and forced immobility can also serve as an insidious alternative to deportation in contexts where authorities are unable to expel migrants due to legal constraints. In **Mexico**, following an apparent entente with the US to prevent migrants from reaching the border between the two countries, security forces have launched a crackdown on migrants transiting through its territory. However, since authorities are now prevented by law from detaining them indefinitely or deporting them en masse, officials are instead opting to move them away from the border by forcibly relocating them to the interior or down towards its southern border with Guatemala. As a result, hundreds of thousands of migrants are effectively trapped in limbo, unable to move on or return.⁷⁷ Besides the threat of depredations from criminal gangs, migrants have been repeatedly exposed to violence and extortion from police officials and, in some cases, abandoned in the desert.⁷⁸

Syria: Forced returns and ‘safe zones’

More than 13 years after the outbreak of civil conflict, **Syria** remains one of the largest displacement crisis in the world, with more than 12 million Syrians either living as long-term IDPs or as refugees in the region – predominantly in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and other nearby states –⁷⁹ and another one million based in Europe.⁸⁰ While the validity of the protection needs of Syrians fleeing the country was widely recognised at first, there appears now to be increasing momentum around the narrative of establishing ‘safe zones’ in Syria, despite the ongoing civil conflict and the well-documented abuses of the government there. For its part, the UN has consistently stated that conditions in Syria are not conducive for a safe and dignified return –

65 Ibid.

66 Butt, R. & Jawad, A. (2024) [Millions of Afghans made Pakistan home to escape war. Now many are hiding to escape deportation](#). The Diplomat.

67 Human Rights Watch (2023) [Pakistan: Widespread abuses force Afghans to leave](#).

68 Bahiss, I. (2023) Op. Cit.

69 Al Jazeera (2024) [Pakistan to start second phase of Afghan deportations](#).

70 Amnesty International (2024) [Pakistan: Government must stop ignoring global calls to halt unlawful deportation of Afghan refugees](#).

71 Ahmed, M. (2024) [Deportation of Afghan migrants to continue, Pakistan government says](#). The Diplomat.

72 Gul, A. (2023) [Taliban: Iran departs almost 350,000 Afghans within 3 months](#). Voice of America; DRC (2024) [Afghans increasingly forced to return from Iran, an overlooked population in dire need of protection](#).

73 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2023) [Afghans banned from 16 provinces in Iran as forced exodus continues](#).

74 D’Souza, S. M. (2023) [An Iranian reversal on Afghan refugees](#). The Diplomat.

75 Ziabari, K. (2024) [Afghan asylum seekers face hostility in Iran](#). Foreign Policy; Motamedi, M. (2024) [Iran presidency still up for grabs as conservatives negotiate pre-election](#). Al Jazeera.

76 Jonah, A. (2024) [Israeli military recruits African asylum-seekers for war in Gaza](#). France24.

77 Isacson, A. (2024) [Why is migration declining at the U.S.-Mexico border in early 2024?](#) WOLA.

78 Isacson, A. (2024) [Weekly U.S.-Mexico border update: Mexico blocks migration, U.S. legislation, migrant removals, nationalities \(26 April 2024\)](#). WOLA.

79 UNHCR (2024) [Syria situation](#).

80 UNHCR (2021) [Syria refugee crisis—globally, in Europe and in Cyprus](#).

a position it continues to hold in the face of those countries that are seeking to undermine this stance.

While ad hoc deportations of Syrians from neighbouring countries have been carried out for years, they have recently become more open and visible, suggesting that returns could soon become more systematic. **Lebanon**, for instance, has ramped up deportations of Syrian migrants in its territory as part of a wider raft of hostile measures announced in May 2024 that targeted the large undocumented population with further restrictions on access to housing and employment.⁸¹ The same is true in **Türkiye**, where the presence of millions of Syrians has become increasingly politicised; in 2023, during the build-up to national elections, the opposition parties campaigned on a pledge to return all of the refugee population to Syria. While, ultimately, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to hold onto power by a narrow margin, tens of thousands of Syrians have still been deported since his re-election.⁸²

Authorities in **Cyprus**, the country in the EU with the largest per capita figures of refugees and asylum seekers, have similarly ramped up deportations and openly publicised this uptick as a success story – in particular, the fact that the pace of removals and returns is now outstripping the number of new arrivals.⁸³ However, in April 2024, the government also took the extraordinary step of suspending applications from Syrian asylum seekers.⁸⁴ Cyprus, like a number of other countries including Denmark, has also called for the establishment of “safe zones” in Syria to facilitate the return of refugees and asylum seekers there.⁸⁵

In many ways, of course, the proposal of safe zones is not new: Türkiye, for instance, has already carved out such an area near its border to provide a degree of legitimacy to its forced returns and pushbacks of Syrian nationals. Yet the fact that the Turkish-designated safe zone is one of the most insecure areas in the country points to the absurdity of pretending that any part of Syria can be a place of sanctuary for returnees. Despite this, the idea continues to gain traction, with reports emerging that the Czech Republic was planning a fact-finding mission to establish whether a safe zone could be established in Damascus or Tartous

(both government-held areas) to facilitate returns from the EU.⁸⁶

Deportations from Türkiye to Syria were also documented in a new investigation by Lighthouse Reports in collaboration with other investigative journalists’ who expose the deportation system that they allege EU knowingly helped to create and sustain. Not only sending Syrians back to Syria but also Afghans back from Europe to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, via Türkiye as a ‘buffer’ country.⁸⁷

4. Policy and legislative developments

Four years in the making, the *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum* was finally passed in April 2024 by a narrow majority of 300 to 270 in the European Parliament. Among other provisions, it contains a controversial measure permitting member states to “apply derogations from the common procedure” (that is, suspend its usual asylum functions) in the context of overwhelming “mass arrivals”, particularly in contexts where migration has been weaponised by another state actor; this appears to legitimise the forced returns and containment evident at the Poland-Belarus and Finland-Russia borders, as discussed above. The pact contains various elements that have been ‘pandering’ to the far right,⁸⁸ including provisions permitting migrants in certain conditions to be detained for up to six months.

Migrant advocacy groups have condemned the pact for undermining fundamental protections, with Human Rights Watch labelling it “a disaster for migrants and asylum seekers”, while the European Council on Exiles and Refugees described the new provisions as “Byzantine in their complexity and Orbán-esque in their cruelty”.⁸⁹ However, Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, continues to advocate against the pact, specifically its provisions around mandatory resettlement quotas for asylum seekers. These tensions were highlighted further following the European Court of Justice’s imposition of a €200 million fine on Hungary for its protracted refusal to accept asylum seekers, deemed to be a serious violation of EU law. In response, in September 2024, officials in Orbán’s administration threatened to bus migrants from the Hungary-Serbia border to Brussels.⁹⁰

81 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Lebanon: Stepped-up repression of Syrians](#).

82 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Syrians face dire conditions in Turkish-occupied ‘safe zone’](#).

83 InfoMigrants (2023) [Cyprus turns tide on migrant arrival trend](#).

84 DW (2024) [Cyprus suspends Syrian asylum applications](#).

85 InfoMigrants (2024) [Cyprus and seven other EU states call for more returns of Syrian refugees](#).

86 Frelick, B. (2024) [The delusion, once again, of a ‘safe zone’ in Syria](#), Human Rights Watch.

87 Lighthouse Reports (2024) [Turkey’s EU-funded deportation machine](#)

88 Barigazzi, J. (2024) [EU backs tough new migration rules, shifting right](#), Politico.

89 Sunderland, J. (2023) [EU’s migration pact is a disaster for migrants and asylum seekers](#), Human Rights Watch.

90 Liboreiro, J. (2024) [EU Commission will use ‘all powers’ to stop Hungary from bussing migrants to Brussels](#), Euronews.

More generally, the EU's prioritisation of security and containment over protection and safeguarding was demonstrated by the continued criminalisation of journalists, activists, NGOs, doctors, rescue teams and others who are accused of facilitating irregular migration by providing essential, potentially life-saving assistance to migrants. During 2023, more than 100 people were prosecuted for aiding and abetting irregular migration in this way, including dozens who engaged in rescues of migrant boats in distress and others who provided food, clothing and shelter. Planned reforms to the EU's *Facilitation Directive*, the criminal legislation that has enabled many of these cases to be brought forward, may make the situation of human rights defenders and humanitarians even more precarious in future.⁹¹

In September 2024, **Germany** announced that it would be imposing security checks at all its land borders to prevent migrants from entering its territory from neighbouring countries. The move, besides raising concerns about racial profiling and other types of discrimination, has also been condemned for undermining the founding principle of freedom of movement within the EU's Schengen Area. There are concerns that other countries could follow suit, leveraging migration-related fears to justify increased border controls.⁹²

In the meantime, a resurgent far-right has not only made significant electoral gains in the European elections in June 2024, but has also secured the largest vote share of any party in **the Netherlands** (in November 2023) and **Austria** (in September 2024). Both open up the possibility of national governments attempting to circumvent their responsibilities under European law. In the Netherlands, the coalition government which includes the anti-migrant Freedom Party has announced its intention to declare an "asylum crisis" – a measure that it hopes will enable it to suspend asylum applications; critics, however, question the legality of a move that is normally only justified in the context of war, major disasters or other genuine emergencies.⁹³ Austria's Freedom Party, meanwhile, campaigned on a raft of anti-migrant pledges including pushbacks at the border and the suspension of asylum claims, making any approved asylum temporary and preventing refugees from accessing a pathway to citizenship over time.⁹⁴ Though extreme, in some respects these positions exist on a continuum that also encompasses countries like France, where, in December 2023, the centrist government passed legislation that

significantly reduced protections for migrants and asylum seekers.⁹⁵

Sweden is preparing to make law a controversial proposal that public sector workers including doctors, social workers, teachers and librarians would be legally required to report undocumented people to authorities. The proposal – which has been dubbed the "snitch law" by some – was among the many measures included in a 2022 deal struck between four right-wing parties in the country. The agreement paved the way for a coalition government involving three centre-right parties with parliamentary support from the far-right anti-immigration Sweden Democrats (SD).⁹⁶

In July 2024, in the US, the government took the extraordinary step of suspending the right to asylum, meaning that the large majority of those apprehended at the border (with the exception of unaccompanied children and trafficking victims) will be summarily deported to their home country or expelled to Mexico whenever the total number of daily encounters at the border reaches 2,500. Only when the total falls below 1,500 will the asylum system be opened again.⁹⁷ Following the announcement, unprecedented numbers of people were deported or returned to their country of origin.⁹⁸ While US President Biden's administration has sought to balance these restrictions with limited options for regular migration pathways (for example, through the creation of Safe Mobility Offices, discussed further in *Resisting the extreme*, on [page 274](#) of this publication), the move prompted widespread condemnation from UNHCR and other organisations as a violation of the right to asylum.⁹⁹

The US has also initiated a new partnership with **Panama**, following the May 2024 election of new president José Raúl Mulino, who ran on a strong anti-migration ticket.¹⁰⁰ Record-breaking numbers of migrants have been travelling from Colombia through Panama's infamous Darién Gap en route to the US, a situation that, in 2023, had already prompted the latter to engage both countries in cooperation to curb irregular migration through the region. Whether the agreement will deliver any substantive impacts, however, is uncertain given that any barriers will likely only push migrants to attempt alternative, and potentially more dangerous, routes north instead or leave them stranded indefinitely in Colombia.¹⁰¹

91 MacGregor, M. (2024) [Criminal charges against migrant rights defenders rising, NGO finds](#). InfoMigrants.

92 Stierl, M. (2024) [Germany's border clampdown threatens the entire European project](#). The Guardian.

93 Cokelaere, H. (2024) [Dutch government announces "strictest asylum policy ever"](#). Politico; University of Leiden (2024) [The Dutch government wants to declare an asylum crisis, but what does that mean?](#)

94 Reuters (2024) [Austria election: An overview of political parties' immigration policies](#).

95 Cossé, E. (2023) [French lawmakers adopt regressive immigration bill](#). Human Rights Watch.

96 Kassam, A. (2024) [Sweden's 'snitch law' immigration plan prompts alarm across society](#). The Guardian

97 Hesson, T. & Rosenberg, M. (2024) [Biden imposes sweeping asylum ban at US-Mexico border](#). Reuters.

98 Gooding, D. (2024) [U.S. Immigration officials deport record number of illegal migrants](#). Newsweek.

99 UNHCR (2024) [UNHCR expresses concern over new asylum restrictions in the United States](#).

100 Zamorano, J. (2024) [José Raúl Mulino sworn in as Panama's new president, promises to stop migration through Darien Gap](#). AP.

101 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) [Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 2 2024](#).

Australia, meanwhile, after seemingly releasing the last asylum seekers detained in its controversial offshore facilities in Nauru in June 2023, resumed transfers there in September 2023 and is now holding more than 100 people again on the island.¹⁰² In November 2023, in the wake of a high court ruling that determined that indefinite detention was illegal,¹⁰³ the Australian government announced the *Migration Amendment (Removal and Other Measures) Bill 2024*. This retrogressive legislation would authorise the incarceration, for up to five years, of former refugees stripped of their status and failed asylum seekers who resisted deportation – a move that could criminalise people even for minor administrative misdemeanours. If implemented, the law could be in violation of international law. Troublingly, the legislation also expands the ability of the government to strip refugee status even to “lawful non-citizens” to expedite their removal. These and other provisions would expose refugees and asylum seekers to significant dangers.¹⁰⁴

Offshore processing: from fringe position to mainstream approach

In the **UK**, the controversial “Rwanda plan”, originally announced in April 2022, was designed to deter prospective migrants from attempting to travel across the English Channel from France, envisioning that migrants entering the UK irregularly would be flown out to Rwanda to process their claim there. Even if their claim was recognised, they would not be able to go back to the UK but would instead be offered asylum in Rwanda. The proposal, in particular its framing of Rwanda as a safe third country despite its poor human rights track record, led to repeated legal challenges from opponents of the policy.¹⁰⁵ To circumvent these, the government passed the *Safety of Rwanda (Immigration and Asylum) Bill* in December 2023, formally designating Rwanda as a safe country, meaning that asylum seekers would need to prove a specific protection concern in order not to be deported there.¹⁰⁶ However, the controversial proposal was almost immediately abandoned by the new UK government following the victory of the Labour Party in national elections in July 2024.¹⁰⁷

Italy also generated controversy when, in November 2023, reports first emerged of a planned agreement with Albania, whereby thousands of migrants intercepted in Italian waters would be taken to detention facilities in Albania while their claims were processed. While Italy would not be outsourcing its asylum responsibilities entirely under the agreement, given that the asylum applications would still fall under Italy’s jurisdiction – unlike the original provisions in the UK’s Rwanda scheme¹⁰⁸ – it has, nevertheless, been criticised as a “costly, cruel farce”¹⁰⁹ for weakening established rights and reducing the rigour of the review process, potentially exposing those with valid protection concerns to the risk of being wrongly denied asylum.¹¹⁰ The decision was subsequently ratified in February 2024; at the time of writing, the centres were scheduled to open in the autumn of 2024, with a holding capacity of 3,000 people at any given time and an annual quota of up to 36,000 asylum claims.¹¹¹ There are concerns that other countries could seek to emulate this approach in time. Even the prime minister of the UK, Keir Starmer, responsible for dismantling the Rwanda agreement, has reportedly expressed interest in the arrangement.¹¹² **Germany** is also reportedly considering options for third-country processing in its own asylum system.¹¹³ In May 2024, a total of 15 EU member states, led by Denmark, called for a comprehensive use of outsourcing to help manage the region’s “unsustainable” levels of asylum claims and irregular migration, suggesting that support for these approaches may be widespread.¹¹⁴

102 Doherty, B. & Karp, P. (2024) [Number of asylum seekers on Nauru jumps as Australia transfers 37 people who arrived by boat](#). The Guardian;

Karp, P. (2023) [Asylum seekers sent to Nauru by Australian government only months after last detainees were removed](#). The Guardian.

103 Hennessy, A. (2023) [Landmark Australian ruling rejects indefinite immigration detention](#). Human Rights Watch.

104 Human Rights Watch (2024) [Australia: Withdraw punitive migration bill](#).

105 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Mixed Migration Review](#).

106 Walsh, P. W. (2024) [Q&A: The UK’s policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda](#). The Migration Observatory.

107 Al Jazeera (2024) [Keir Starmer says scrapping UK’s Rwanda migrant deportation plan](#).

108 Ngendakumana, P. E. (2023) [Italy-Albania migrant deal distinct from UK-Rwanda scheme, Italy’s FM says](#). Politico.

109 Sunderland, J. (2024) [Italy migration deal with Albania is a costly, cruel farce](#). Human Rights Watch.

110 Amnesty International (2024) [The Italy-Albania agreement on migration: Pushing boundaries, threatening rights](#).

111 International Rescue Committee (2024) [What is the Italy-Albania asylum deal?](#)

112 Seddon, P. (2024) [Starmer looks to Italy on how to stop migrant boats](#). BBC.

113 DW (2024) [Germany to examine asylum processing in third countries](#).

114 Liboreiro, J. (2024) [15 EU countries call for the outsourcing of migration and asylum policy](#). Euronews.