Mixed Migration Centre

Mixed Migration Review 2026

Highlights • Interviews • Essays • Data

Migration in the age of polycrisis



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Climate change continues to make itself felt in 2026: an inescapable factor in the age of polycrisis. Glacier retreat, collapse and loss are just one illustration of the wide range of extreme weather events, which also include drought, floods, warming oceans and rising temperatures as the world continues to increase carbon emissions (albeit at a much slower rate than before and they might soon start to fall) when all predictions and recommendations indicate the world needs to dramatically reduce them. (See Essay: *Polycrisis and mixed migration in 2026*, p. 160).



Foreword

We live in the age of polycrisis, where powerful and destructive forces collide with each other and compound one another. These include ongoing and emerging conflicts, wars and prolonged crises, ever more climate shocks, a fractured global order, economic upheaval, and a lack of access to safety, protection and aid for people on the move seeking dignity and safety.

At this sobering moment, the publication of the Mixed Migration Review 2026 is timely and essential reading. Whether refugees, asylum seekers or people seeking better opportunities, those on the move are touched by crises which push them from their homes and onto more treacherous journeys, where safety is scarce and their human rights are routinely violated with impunity, including by authorities.

Many states promised to expand regular pathways for migrants. Eight years ago, UN Member States came together to establish a shared, voluntary framework to improve international cooperation on managing migration. Today, progress on implementing the Global Compact for Migration remains slow. Instead, states have continued to harden their borders and prioritise securitised measures. This has involved, for example, pivoting to high-tech deterrence measures – military-grade drones, thermal and infrared cameras, AI-powered surveillance – aimed at deterring arrivals and keeping migrants and refugees stuck in transit zones far from their borders. There is little evidence that these high-tech measures work. In fact, they force people to make even more dangerous journeys to evade detection.

This year's Mixed Migration Review essays examine the impacts of the era of polycrisis on mixed migration. This includes exploring the deepening protection crisis in which states fail to safeguard basic human rights, safety and dignity of people on the move, instead pursuing the goal of reducing asylum access and turning people away before they can exercise their legal right to claim asylum. The review also examines labour mobility. Wealthy nations need to expand their workforce with a range of skills to grow their economies and support ageing populations. However, at the same time, they remain resistant to migration as they walk a tightrope with electorates which seem to require them to appear tough on migration, while expanding pathways for a select few.

Crucially, this year's review centres the lived experiences of refugees and migrants themselves through interviews, in-depth testimonies, essays and 4Mi data. There are some stark facts and hardships which cannot be evaded: while states are increasingly hostile, the international humanitarian community that has offered aid in the past has been hollowed out by funding cuts. Refugees and migrants must adapt in real time and increasingly depend on other refugees and migrants. This must never be a substitute for a humane protection system that upholds their rights and dignity.

As I write, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is preparing to mark 70 years of supporting refugees and displaced people in pursuit of a dignified life. In 2025, through DRC projects, we reached more than 7.5 million refugees, displaced people, host communities and people at risk of displacement. Amidst a hollowed-out international aid architecture, I am aware that countless families must now navigate the prevailing polycrisis without crucial lifesaving aid. Meeting their needs will test DRC, the entire humanitarian sector and, fundamentally, those responding from within refugee and migrant communities themselves. But our resolve is unwavering and our position remains steadfast.

Upholding fundamental rights and embracing shared responsibility is the bedrock of a just and fair global migration system. Political winds can shift, our values must not. The erosion of the rules-based international order and the assault on international law cannot be the legacy of this era. The polycrisis must not become an excuse for abdication, but rather a catalyst for solutions.

We must actively build a future where protection is guaranteed, rights are non-negotiable and human dignity is preserved, regardless of how or why a person is on the move. I invite you to engage with the critical analysis in this volume as we collectively navigate the challenging road ahead.



Charlotte Slente,
DRC Secretary General

Introduction

In late February 2026, war between the United States and Iran displaced millions within weeks, in a country that already hosted the world's largest refugee population, with many already at risk of deportation to Afghanistan. Sudan, now the world's largest displacement crisis, entered its fourth year of war with famine confirmed and a humanitarian appeal completely underfunded. Haiti's collapse deepened, largely unwatched. The statements and actions by the current US administration continue to shock its traditional allies on the other side of the Atlantic. Russia's war on Ukraine continues with no end in sight. Transport corridors vital for the world economy, like the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, are strategically blocked. Analysts warn that the AI boom might soon cause another financial crisis, while ever more AI experts and the leading AI companies warn of an existential crisis due to AI. The planet keeps warming past thresholds we once described as limits, with Europeans increasingly experiencing the impact, including an estimated 35,000 excess deaths due to back-to-back heatwaves and near-constant wildfires across the continent, while a large part of the world might need to brace itself for the most severe El Niño ever.

The era of polycrisis?

It is commonly accepted that we are living in an era of polycrisis. Responding to that, this edition of the Mixed Migration Review applies a polycrisis lens, looking at the interaction between crises and, from different perspectives, exploring the relation with, or impact on, mixed migration.

The term polycrisis has crept into our vocabulary quickly and, some argue, without a rigorous theoretical framework behind it. Accepting that we are living in the era of polycrisis implies that we are in the midst of genuinely exceptional times. However, is this really the case? Or rather, is it that one part of the world – namely Europe – is simply rejoining history after an unusually long break from crisis? For most of the world, the decades since 1945 were not calm, and forced displacement and mixed migration have always been shaped by crises. It was Europe, under the security umbrella provided by the United States, that lived through several decades of relative calm, able to build welfare states at home and prosper economically, with wars (with the exception of the Balkans war in the 90s) located elsewhere. Perhaps, though, this period has been an anomaly in history. If this is now unwinding, Europe may be returning to normal, where 'normal' sadly means a great many crises at once.

Our first scene-setting essay in this year's Review critically engages with these questions, unpacking the term 'polycrisis' and its emergence, and exploring both the usefulness and limitations of its theoretical basis, in particular for understanding mixed migration dynamics in 2026 (see p. 160). While critically engaging with the term, it is clear that in today's increasingly interconnected world, various shocks and crises are compounding each other. As such, we argue that, despite its limitations, the polycrisis lens does provide us with a useful framework to explore the many ways in which various crises around the world ultimately impact mixed migration dynamics and people on the move.

Crisis narratives: a cautionary tale

In recent times, we have certainly seen the resurgence of crisis narratives, particularly in Europe. In no longer than 15 years, we have witnessed what has been termed a financial crisis, a Euro crisis, a refugee crisis, a Covid-19 crisis, an energy crisis, a cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis. Each exceptional, each met with emergency or ad hoc measures, each followed by another. This tends to elicit a particular kind of response: fast, improvised, temporary and outside the normal rules.

In late July 2026, tens of thousands of migrants entered the Spanish exclave of Ceuta. A Spanish Supreme Court ruling on returns at sea, a viral rumour amplified by a social media campaign with millions of views, a vulnerable bilateral relationship with Morocco and years of accumulated economic pressure combined to produce this situation of sudden mass entry. In response, Italy temporarily suspended Schengen arrangements with Spain; France reinforced its border; 22 leaders demanded emergency talks, several of them aimed at Madrid rather than at the situation, blaming (unfoundedly) Spain's regularisation campaign. The EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, in force since June 2026 and meant to address migration and asylum challenges more structurally, in solidarity between member states and with control, was not referred to nor applied, as discussed in one of the MMR articles this year (see p. 118). Images of Ceuta spread around the internet quickly, offering fuel for Europe's far-right political agenda on migration.

The constant sense of crisis and the political panic surrounding migration – once again, exemplified by Ceuta – contribute to ever-more extreme actions and policies, which brings us, as it does every year, to the

Normalisation of the extreme, a section that has become depressingly easy to fill. Examples are plentiful: from increasingly securitised border enforcement, mounting threats to asylum procedures and rising anti-migrant sentiment, to the spread of externalisation policies and deportations to third countries (see p. 254). In Europe, return hubs in third countries, unthinkable not long ago, are now permitted by law: the June 2026 agreement on returns passed the European Parliament, to chants of "send them home" from one side and "shame on you" from the other.

The climate crisis

While crisis narratives are ever pervasive, the way we respond to the one crisis that most deserves such a definition is striking: the existential threat of climate change, which seems to be handled with the least urgency but is perhaps the main crisis over which an emergency should be declared. In another of the articles about Central America in this year's MMR – *Coffee rust and migration in the Northern Triangle: rural livelihoods caught in global polycrisis* (see p. 86) – we show what this crisis looks like, and how it collides with other crises and, ultimately, impacts mixed migration. The collision of factors like rust, drought, price collapse, weak safety nets and violence, entangled over a decade, has pushed households past the point where recovery is imaginable, and is now, with US development aid withdrawn and border enforcement hardened, leaving many people unable to move at all. Similarly, our 4Mi data also explores how climate and other migration drivers intersect with one another (see p. 168).

Polycrisis and mixed migration

On top of the scene-setting essay on polycrisis, this Review offers five other essays. Daniel Ghezelbash marks the Refugee Convention's 75th anniversary by arguing that what we face is not a refugee or migration crisis but a protection crisis, one manufactured by the states best placed to solve it (see p. 180). Another examines the collapse of foreign aid, in itself caused by polycrisis, not as another item on the pile, but as the removal of the capacity to absorb the impacts of all the other crises (see p. 202). Anna Knoll shows how labour mobility governance is being pulled in opposite directions – with pressures to address labour shortages in ageing societies, while also restricting immigration – and becoming more selective, more bilateral and less predictable (see p. 218). Mustafa Alio and Rez Gardi make the case that adaptation within these crises does not equate to adequate protection, and that a system should not be judged by how much people can endure in the absence of adequate policies (see p. 230). Finally, Chris Horwood explores what the polycrisis means for migration dynamics into the future, exploring different scenarios that could be expected (see p. 242). As always, these reflections sit alongside 4Mi data, thematic articles, interviews with experts, individual and highly personal migrant stories, as well as our Emerging Perspectives essay prize winners for 2026 (see p. 146).

Polysolutions needed to address complexity

To call something a crisis often implies that it is exceptional, temporary and requires emergency measures. However, nothing that shapes mixed migration are those things. Demographic divergence, labour shortages, entrenched inequality, protracted conflict and a warming planet are structural conditions, and so, in terms of the response, it is important to think beyond the notion of crisis. If polycrisis means everything is connected, it can become an argument for doing nothing, since no single intervention will ever be adequate to address systemic issues. That would be the wrong conclusion, though. Complexity is an argument for better, not less, governance – for coherent, multi-sectoral, adequately funded approaches that do not treat migration, climate, inequality and protection as separate pressures. They call, instead, for good, long-term governance addressing systemic issues, rather than emergency measures – responses must involve 'polysolutions', recognising that complex and intertwining crises need coordinated and cross-sectoral approaches.

We should then stop treating the permanent as exceptional and the genuinely existential as background noise. As always, we hope this edition offers food for thought – and some useful evidence for those doing the important work of governing well.



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 programming on mixed migration. MMC has regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, with a global team headquartered in Geneva and based in several countries worldwide.

What is MMC's mission?

MMC is a leading source of independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. 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. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

What is MMC's vision?

Mixed 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 mixed migration responses for people on the move (programming).

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

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (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 MMC does not necessarily reflect that of DRC and vice versa.

Where does MMC work?

MMC focuses on five regions: Eastern and Southern Africa, North and West Africa, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The 35 staff members of MMC are primarily based in offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where we work in close cooperation with regional partners, stakeholders and donors. A small team is also based across Europe. Through MMC's global data collection programme 4Mi, approximately 150 enumerators collect data in over 20 countries across different mixed migration routes globally, conducting approximately 15,000 in-depth interviews with refugees and migrants on the move annually.

For more information on MMC visit mixedmigration.org, follow us on X, on LinkedIn, search @mixedmigration-centre or contact us at info@mixedmigration.org.

Who supports MMC?

The Mixed Migration Review 2026 builds upon the work of the various MMC regional hubs and 4Mi data collection projects, supported by a wide range of donors, including (between mid-2025 and December 2026): Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), Horizon Europe, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Japan International Cooperation Agency, Novo Nordisk Foundation, Porticus, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), the United Kingdom Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Photo credit: Cor Laffra

In the US/Iran war in 2026, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz exemplified the interconnectedness of crises with restrictions on oil tanker movement having significant economic repercussions globally. The conflict has created insecurity regionally and globally, drawing in other countries and groups, including the emboldening of the Houthis (Ansar Allah) in Yemen, who may close the Bab el Mandeb Strait between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, leading to further major disruption of energy transport and trade. Here, an oil tanker is navigating the Strait of Hormuz. (See *Interview with Joost Hilterman*, p. 54 and *Keeping track in the Middle East*, p. 42).

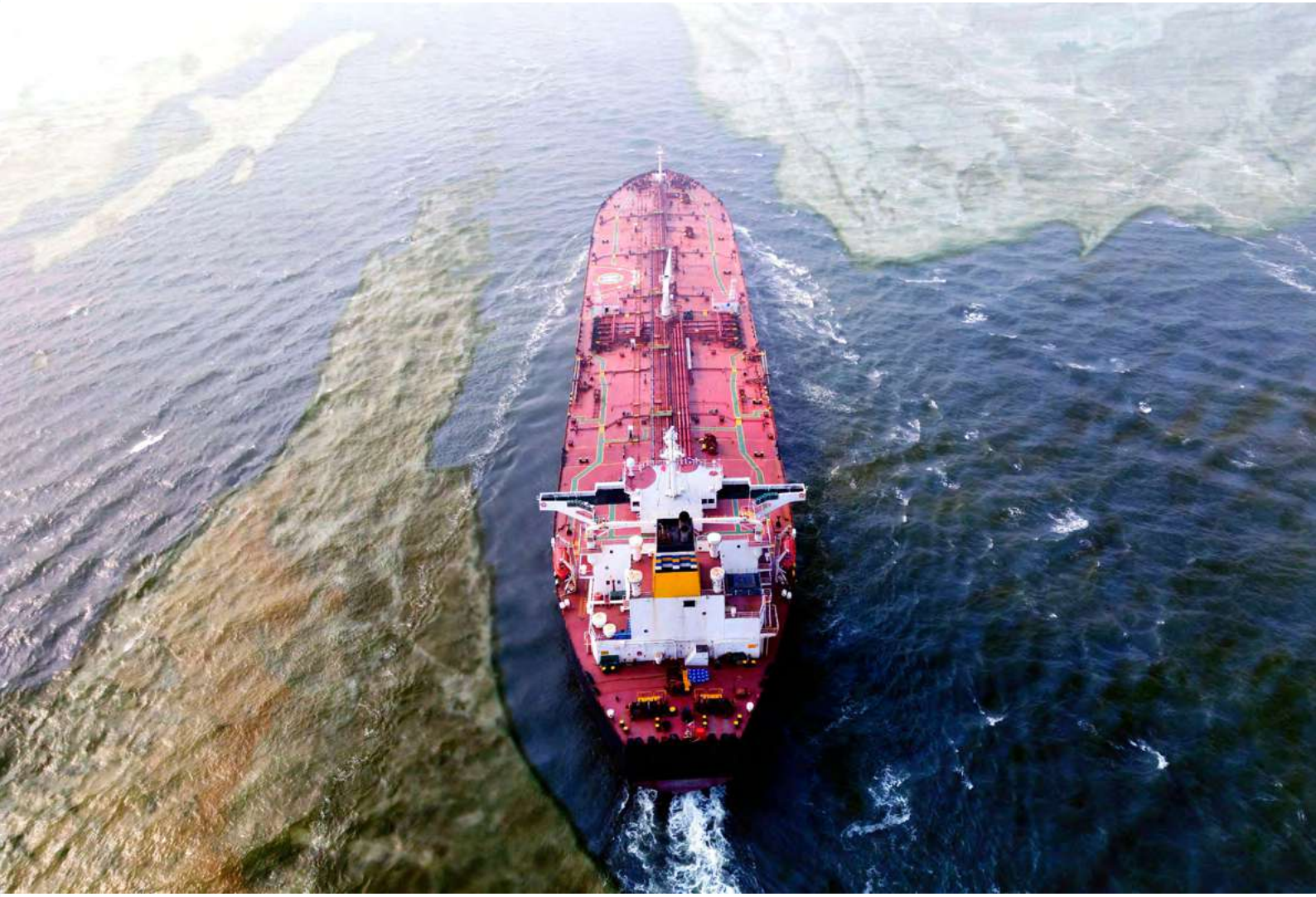


Photo credit: Capital Pictures

Refugees and migrants in a packed dinghy taking on water near an oil tanker in The English Channel. In 2026, the number of crossings has gone down sharply since 2025. Despite the overall annual decline, smugglers have been using larger, overloaded vessels to bypass increased patrols. (See *Keeping Track in Europe*, p. 90).



Section 1

Regions on the move

The first section of this review analyses mixed migration trends and developments across the globe in 2026. 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 a comprehensive overview of noteworthy migration developments from the region from 2026. This is complemented by in-depth interviews with migration experts offering unique regional insights, short articles, as well as first-hand perspectives offered by refugees and migrants on how the era of polycrisis is impacting their daily lives and futures.

Africa



Overview

Peter Grant

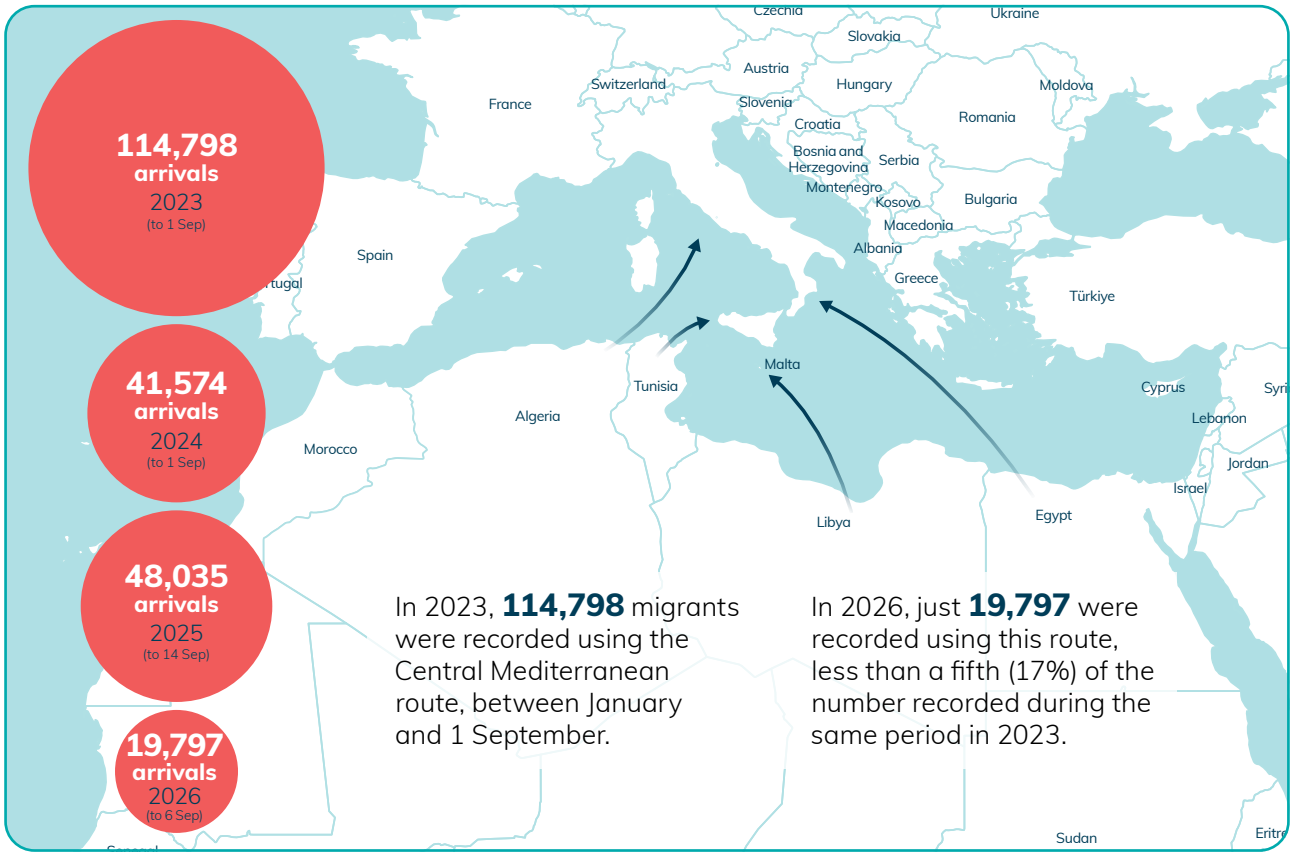
The increasing securitisation of border controls across Africa, supported in many cases by funding from the European Union (EU), has added a further layer of complexity to a mixed migration landscape characterised by labour mobility, conflict-induced displacement and the impacts of climate change. While irregular migration from North and West Africa towards Europe receives the most attention internationally, this is only one component in a context where internal displacement and cross-border movements within the region are still far more prevalent.

Irregular migration from Africa to Europe

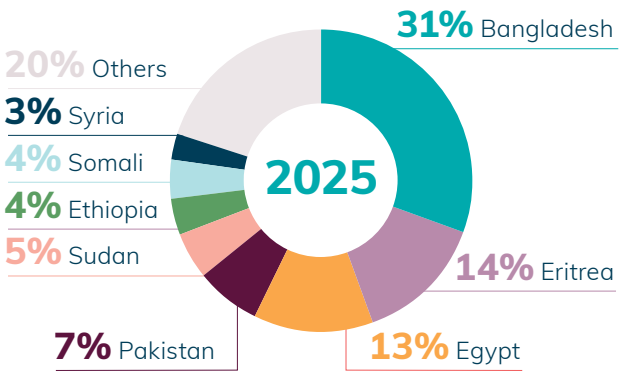
Against a backdrop of increasing surveillance and interceptions by North and West African countries, movements along most routes between Africa and Europe have reduced sharply. At the same time, while some entry points have become more restricted, others have taken their place. While the **Central Mediterranean route** to Italy is still the most popular, maritime arrivals fell by 55 percent between January and the end of July 2026 (16,567) compared to the same period in 2025 (36,545).[1] In the first half of 2026, the most commonly represented nationalities among those who reached Italy were Bangladeshis (29.5%), Somalis (11.4%), Sudanese (9.5%), Pakistanis (8.2%), Algerians (7.7%) and Egyptians (6.4%).[2] In the first seven months of 2026, Libya was the primary embarkation point, accounting for 80.7 percent of arrivals in Italy, distantly followed by Algeria (11.2%) – until very recently, used by only a very small fraction of those attempting to reach Italy. Remarkably, given that Tunisia was the main country of embarkation as recently as 2023 – accounting for well over half of refugees and migrants travelling to Italy – in 2026 it accounted for just 7.7 percent of arrivals.[3] This is, in large part, due to the rise in interceptions and cross-border pushbacks carried out by Tunisian authorities in recent years, making it an increasingly difficult country of departure for refugees and migrants.

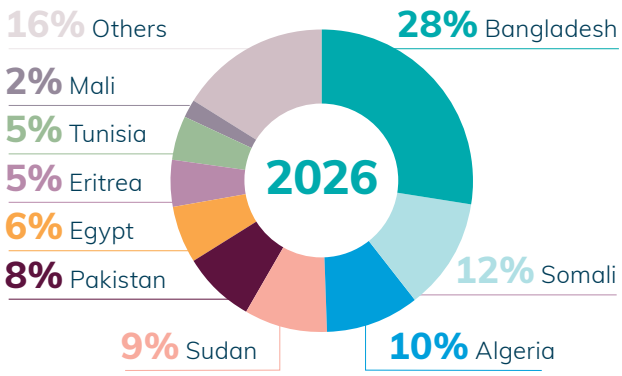
1 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Italy.
2 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Italy.
3 UNHCR (2026) Italy monthly sea arrivals update July 2026.

Graphic 1. Central Mediterranean route: 2023-2026



Most represented countries (Jan – Sep 2025 and 2026)*





Source: UNHCR Situations Europe Sea Arrivals.

*Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Despite less overall movement, however, the Central Mediterranean route became markedly more lethal during 2026, with 872 deaths or disappearances between January and the end of July, compared to 623 during the same period in 2025.[4] Close to half (430) of these fatalities occurred in January, when Cyclone Harry created life-threatening weather conditions and drove a spike in deaths along the route.[5] The exact number of people who lost their lives is not known and may be even higher.[6] Many factors contribute to the high mortality rate, including the overcrowding of boats, the increasing use of poor-quality inflatable boats, and a shift towards longer and more dangerous smuggling routes in response to changing restrictions.[7] That said, a key issue is the rollback of search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean, both as a result of increasingly punitive legislation from the Italian government and an escalation in harassment and intimidation by Libyan

4 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean.
5 ECRE (2026) Mediterranean: Deadly start to the year for people on the move.
6 Pala, M. (2026) Up to 1,000 migrants feared missing in Mediterranean after Cyclone Harry: NGO. Anadolu Ajansi.
7 Carretero, L. (2026) Why the Mediterranean route is becoming more deadly for migrants. InfoMigrants.

coastguards, including several incidents since August 2025 where weapons were discharged or used to threaten crew members and the refugees and migrants they were rescuing.

Until recently, the route between Libya and the islands of Crete and Gavdos accounted for only a small portion of arrivals along the **Eastern Mediterranean route** to Greece. However, it has become increasingly prominent from the early months of 2024 and has risen steadily since then. As of 23 August, 12,144 refugees and migrants had reached Crete and Gavdos in 2026, representing over half of all arrivals registered during the year.[8] A number of factors may be driving this uptick in movement, including displacement and onward movement as a result of the civil war in Sudan reaching its third year and the increasingly difficult environment for refugees and migrants in Egypt. This has also coincided with the consolidation of smuggling networks in eastern Libya and a rise in deterrence-based approaches on other routes, including in the waters separating Greece and Türkiye.[9]

Movement along the **Western Mediterranean route** to Spain (specifically, the Balearics, the enclave cities of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa and the mainland provinces of Andalucía and Murcia) reached a total of 18,987 in 2025, up 8.7 percent from the year before. The number of arrivals continued to climb in the first seven months of 2026, increasing by 42.4 percent from the same period in 2025 (8,725) and not including the much larger number who entered Ceuta at the end of July. The most represented countries along the route are Algeria, Mali and Morocco.[10] While some of this uptick in movement was driven by the large numbers of crossings into Ceuta throughout the first months of the year, the Balearic route from the Algerian coast to the Balearics has also grown into a major pathway into Spain. The development of Algeria as a significant departure point, driven in part by the increase in restrictions in other North African countries such as Tunisia, explains the large share of Algerians now being detected along the Western Mediterranean Route. In total, 268 deaths and disappearances were recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project between January and the end of July 2026 on the Western Mediterranean route – almost 46 percent higher than the total in the same period in 2025 (184).[11] Estimates by the NGO Ca-Minando Fronteras were considerably higher, with 682 deaths and disappearances in the first five months alone – the large majority (507) between Algeria and the Balearics.

Movement along the **Atlantic route** to the Spanish Canary Islands, meanwhile, decreased by 62 percent in 2025 to 17,788 compared to the total in 2024. Numbers continued to fall in the first seven months of 2026 by a further 60.5 percent to 4,675 compared to the same period in 2025.[12] The most represented nations on the route were Senegal, The Gambia and Morocco.[13] While the number of arrivals in the Canary Islands substantially reduced, the death toll in the first seven months of 2026 (344) was virtually equal to the same period in 2025 (346).[14] Ca-Minando Fronteras puts the death toll along the Atlantic route at an even higher figure, with 635 fatalities in the first five months alone.[15] This likely reflects the greater risks involved for those attempting the journey, as increased surveillance along established routes, in particular by Mauritania and Senegal with EU assistance, has forced smugglers to diversify their routes, resulting in longer and more perilous journeys.[16] The continued crackdown against refugees and migrants in Mauritania – beginning in March 2025, in the wake of a migration agreement brokered with the EU – has also resulted in the expulsion of thousands across its borders into Mali and Senegal.

Mixed migration in North Africa

Libya

Campaigns against refugees and migrants have been ongoing in western and eastern **Libya** leading to detention and deportations. According to Amnesty International, in May 2026, evictions were carried out in Tripoli of informal settlements and included Sudanese nationals.[17] Eastern Libyan authorities also announced an entry ban from nationals of five different countries in Eastern Africa including Sudan.[18] Popular hostility towards refugees and migrants has been driven in large part by concerns around border control, sovereignty and the replacement narrative, sharpened by the perception that Western governments have been seeking – whether through resettlement or restrictions

8 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Greece.
9 Aegean Boat Report (2026) From the Aegean to Crete: Why Are Refugee Routes To Greece Changing?
10 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings into the EU down 37% in the first half of 2026.
11 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean.
12 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Spain.
13 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings into the EU down 37% in the first half of 2026.
14 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within Africa: Western Africa /Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.
15 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2026) Monitoreo del derecho a la vida – Primeros 5 meses 2026.
16 UNHCR (2026) Asylum applications and sea arrivals decline, but international protection needs among people arriving in Spain persist.
17 Amnesty International (2026) Libya/EU: Rival authorities intensify xenophobic and racist crackdown on refugees and migrants in Libya as EU seeks to deepen ties.
18 Amnesty International (2026) Libya/EU: Rival authorities intensify xenophobic and racist crackdown on refugees and migrants in Libya as EU seeks to deepen ties.

on onward movement – to contain migrant and refugee populations in Libya.[19] According to Amnesty International,[20] this also helped fuel a wave of xenophobic hate speech and violence across the country. In response to rumours that refugees were going to be resettled in Libya, protests erupted outside UNHCR's offices in Tripoli in June, with Human Rights Watch reporting that authorities intensified their operations against refugees and migrants.[21] In September, there were media reports of further attacks in Tripoli against the headquarters of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

United Nations reported the continuity of abuse and exploitation of refugees and migrants in February 2026 with a report documenting "killings, torture, sexual violence and trafficking". This was illustrated by the discovery in January of a mass grave in eastern Libya in a trafficking compound, along with other survivors who had been subjected to torture.[22] Controlled by criminal groups and militias, many of those subjected to these abuses are reportedly apprehended at Libya's borders or intercepted at sea en route to Europe. Amnesty also reported that Libyan coastguards have been accused of being involved in harassment and intimidation of humanitarian search and rescue vessels .[23]

Tunisia

In a context of tighter border management, increasing interceptions and growing concerns around the criminalisation of humanitarian aid, the situation for refugees and migrants has become more challenging. Thousands of foreign nationals have also been repatriated to their countries of origin as part of a state-led programme of returns that was initiated in July 2025 and officially acknowledged for the first time in May 2025, in parallel to IOM's ongoing programme of assisted returns.[24] For those remaining in **Tunisia**, bans on undocumented foreign nationals accessing work or housing have left many homeless or at risk of eviction.[25] As in Libya, alarmist narratives around migration – including false rumours of resettlement programmes in Tunisia – provoked hate speech and protests outside UNHCR's offices.[26] However, there were also counter-protests against rising racism in the country, including a solidarity march in April.[27]

Regular and irregular migration of Tunisians has also continued. This was brought into stark relief in August 2026 when a boat carrying 15 passengers – all locals from the area – sank off the Tunisian coast, leaving just one survivor.[28] Violent protests broke out in the nearby town of Ben Guerdane, with demonstrators linking the crossings with limited opportunities and poor economic conditions in the region.[29]

Deportations from Algeria to Niger

Refugees and migrants continue to be targeted by expulsions from **Algeria**, with over 34,200 expelled across the border into Niger in 2025 – an unprecedented number – and another 14,600 over a four month period between 18 January and 17 May 2026.[30] While some are Niger nationals, a significant proportion are foreign nationals from Mali, Guinea, and Nigeria who are effectively subjected to pushbacks. Others include nationals of Sudan and victims of "chain deportations" from North Africa who are then forced on to Niger.[31] Expulsions happen on the border between Algeria and Niger, where expelled individuals are forced to walk several kilometres to the town of Assamaka. Many reportedly end up stranded for months there[32] or en route to their countries of origin, with some stuck in camps in the central Nigerien city of Agadez for more than a year despite wishing to return to their country.[33]

Protection concerns for refugees in Egypt

In August 2026, **Egypt**'s new asylum system came into effect. Approved back in December 2024, the registration and approval of refugees in the country will shift from UNHCR to a government-led committee.[34] Human Rights Watch has expressed serious concerns about key aspects of the new framework, including the granting of undefined powers to the committee and protection gaps for asylum seekers. In July, the organisation called for a more phased implementation to ensure the necessary capacity was in place to transition smoothly to the new regime, particularly in light of the existing backlogs

19 Kaderassad, A. (2026) Libya's anti-settlement protests: Demographic fears and migration panic. Libya Observer
20 Amnesty International (2026) Libya/EU: Rival authorities intensify xenophobic and racist crackdown on refugees and migrants in Libya as EU seeks to deepen ties.
21 Human Rights Watch (2026) Libya: Anti-Migrant Rhetoric Fuels Abuses.
22 Mellersh, N. (2026) Mass grave of migrants discovered in eastern Libya, survivors report torture. InfoMigrants.
23 Wallis, E. (2026) EU-funded maritime control center planned in eastern Libya. InfoMigrants; Amnesty International (2026) Libya/EU: Rival authorities intensify xenophobic and racist crackdown on refugees and migrants in Libya as EU seeks to deepen ties.
24 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: North Africa: Quarter 2 2026.
25 Amnesty International (2026) Tunisia: Refugees and asylum seekers trapped in cycle of abuse after authorities dismantle crucial safeguards.
26 Zapti, S. (2026) 'Refugees in Libya' condemns campaign of dehumanization against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Libya. Libya Herald; Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: North Africa – Quarter 2 2026.
27 Jennene, N., (2026) La rue pour briser le silence : mobilisation citoyenne contre le racisme à Tunis. Business News
28 Mellersh, N. (2026) Why Tunisia's youth are dying to reach Europe. InfoMigrants.
29 Habib, H. and Reuters (2026) Search continues in Tunisia as migrant boat sinking sparks protests. Al Jazeera
30 Sanderson, S. (2026) Niger: Nearly 15,000 migrants pushed back from Algeria so far in 2026. InfoMigrants; Alarme Phone Sahara (2026) January to May 2026: Mass deportations from Algeria to Niger continue on a large scale.
31 Sanderson, S. (2026) Niger: Nearly 15,000 migrants pushed back from Algeria so far in 2026. InfoMigrants.
32 Sanderson, S. (2026) Niger: Nearly 15,000 migrants pushed back from Algeria so far in 2026. InfoMigrants.
33 Alarme Phone Sahara (2026) Agadez, Niger, 27 January 2026: Protest by the Ivorian community at the IOM camp.
34 Hamad, S. (2026) Egypt asylum shift deepens 'Fortress Europe' concerns. The New Arab.

in Egypt's asylum system.[35] The new legislation is especially concerning, given the deteriorating protection environment for refugees already in the country, particularly nationals of conflict-affected Sudan.

Since the end of 2025, Egyptian authorities have been carrying out random identification checks and raids, arresting any foreign nationals who were unable to provide residency permits, including those with UNHCR registration or pending immigration appointments (many have been unable to secure or renew the relevant documentation due to administrative backlogs).[36] According to informal estimates by local rights groups, between 3,000 and 5,000 were expelled in the first two months of 2026 alone.[37] In addition to those being held in detention or summarily deported to their home countries without any individualised assessment of their situation, the crackdown has also forced many refugee families into hiding, leaving them unable to access education or employment.[38] Some, out of fear or helplessness, may end up considering 'voluntary' returns simply because remaining in Egypt is no longer seen as a viable option.[39]

Morocco

Authorities carried out extensive apprehensions of refugees and migrants from West, Central and East Africa in the north of **Morocco** during the first half of 2026, particularly from 14 April onwards, with 100 reportedly arrested every day. The majority were relocated from coastal areas to the south and east of the country with the aim of preventing them from embarking towards Europe.[40] There were widespread accounts of targeted abuse and beatings, with some migrants also reportedly sent to the border with Algeria.[41] Concerns have been raised about conditions there, following the discovery of 47 bodies of migrants in the six months between November 2025 and April 2026.[42]

While there had already been thousands of crossings into Ceuta in the first half of the year, continuing the uptick in movements at the border evident in 2025, an unprecedented number of refugees and migrants – some estimates suggested as many as 80,000[43] – crossed over from Morocco over the course of 48 hours at the end of July. Without food or water, many soon returned to Morocco, but in total the crisis resulted in up to 141 deaths[44] and thousands of others stranded, many of them unaccompanied children.[45] Following reports that another attempt was being planned for 15 August,[46] both Morocco and Spain intensified their border security, with hundreds of migrants near the Moroccan side of the border apprehended[47] and reports of Moroccan security forces deploying tear gas and police dogs to disperse crowds.[48] In the aftermath, there was speculation about whether Morocco itself played a role in facilitating the crisis: while a leaked report by Spanish police in early September claimed there was evidence that Moroccan security guards were permissive and had even encouraged refugees and migrants to cross, the Spanish Prime Minister maintained that there was no evidence "whatsoever" of Rabat's involvement.[49] The Ceuta 'crisis' is explored in more detail in this Review (see *Born of crisis, bypassed in crisis: the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum after Ceuta*, p. 118).

The continued cost of the EU's partnership agreements

The "partnership agreements" developed over the years in North Africa by the EU and various of its member states have been repeatedly criticised for perpetuating the political and economic legacies of colonialism.[50] Furthermore, by promoting the interception and surveillance of migrant and refugee populations in exchange for funding, these deals have also been accused of entrenching authoritarianism and human rights abuses.[51] Yet, increasingly, these highly transactional arrangements are also being critiqued for the unintended consequences they have had for Europe. Besides the spiralling costs and heightened political divisions that have come in their wake, there is growing evidence that the architecture of externalisation might be more fragile than it first seemed.

35 Human Rights Watch (2026) Egypt: Refugees, Asylum Seekers Arrested, Deported.
36 Amnesty International (2026) Egypt: Refugees in hiding amid crackdown involving arbitrary arrests and unlawful deportations.
37 Hamad, S. (2026) Egypt asylum shift deepens 'Fortress Europe' concerns. The New Arab.
38 Amnesty International (2026) Egypt: Refugees in hiding amid crackdown involving arbitrary arrests and unlawful deportations.
39 Henish, H. (2026) From Welcome to Repression: How Sudanese Refugees Live in Egypt. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.
40 Hespress (2026) Moroccan authorities intercept dozens of migrants daily along northern coast.
41 McMahon, K. (2026) Morocco launches mass deportations to block Europe migration route. Middle East Eye.
42 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: North Africa – Quarter 2 2026.
43 Gwyn Jones, M. (2026) EU experts on the ground in Ceuta amid fears of fresh migrant influx. Euronews.
44 Aboudari, S. (2026) 'We mourn lives lost': Death toll from Ceuta migrant catastrophe exceeds 140, with mostly young Moroccan victims. The New Arab.
45 Thykjaer, C. (2026) Unprotected minors and alleged illegal returns: NGOs warn of Ceuta humanitarian crisis. Euronews.
46 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Morocco and Spain bolster borders ahead of August 15 social media calls for renewed crossings. InfoMigrants.
47 RFI (2026) Morocco arrests nearly 300 migrants near Ceuta amid renewed crossing fears.
48 Neiman, G. (2026) Ceuta border battles show how EU is funding anti-migrant brutality. EUobserver
49 Burgen, S. (2026) Spain's PM says no evidence 'whatsoever' Morocco behind Ceuta border breach. The Guardian.
50 Corcodel V. (2025) Europe's Refugee 'Crises' and the Colonial Legacies in EU Migration and Asylum Law, in Eklund, H. (ed), Colonialism and the EU legal order; Martins, B.O. and Strange, M. (2019). Rethinking EU external migration policy: contestation and critique. Global Affairs, 5(3), 195–202.
51 Nielsen, N. (2025) EU funding may reach human rights abusers in north Africa, warns leaked document. EUobserver; Pinto, T.N. (2023) Between a rock and a hard place: The EU's transactional approach to migration. Mixed Migration Centre.

This is reflected in the EU's recent announcement that it will be funding the creation of a "maritime rescue coordination centre" in eastern Libya.[52] With increasing movement along the Libya–Crete maritime corridor, departing primarily from eastern Libya, it is perhaps unsurprising that this should become a new area of focus for the EU. Yet the entente, encompassing the provision of training and equipment to eastern Libya's coastguards, will extend the EU-funded policy of interceptions and forced returns already in place in western Libya.[53]

The EU's collaboration with Morocco, meanwhile, underpinned by its bilateral agreement with Spain, illustrates the dangers that accompany a relationship of dependence with another country. Building on years of financial assistance to Morocco, the EU has been working to finalise a new agreement in 2026 that includes, alongside economic and governance support, a specific component on migration management. However, the arrival of up to 80,000 refugees and migrants in July 2026 in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta not only sparked serious in-fighting among EU member states, with Italy suspending free movement from Spain and Madrid responding in kind,[54] but also drew scrutiny to the role that Morocco itself may have played. In the wake of the crisis, even the European Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration acknowledged the shortcoming of the arrangement, admitting that "as long as control depends on the goodwill of one neighbouring state, we remain… vulnerable".[55]

Then, as in the case of Tunisia, there is the price of success. The EU's migration agreement with Tunis has been celebrated for reducing the number of refugees and migrants reaching Italy from Tunisia by as much as 97 percent in the three years since it was brokered in 2023.[56] Yet this drop has been achieved through an increasingly restrictive approach to immigration enforcement that, while reducing departures from Tunisia, may be redirecting movement to other North African countries.[57] The arrangement has also catalysed the emergence of an increasingly difficult environment within Tunisia for refugees and migrants,[58] and has been repeatedly accused by human rights groups of undermining human rights, democracy and the rule of law.[59] Meanwhile, the Tunisian government has itself called for the deal to be amended to be "more balanced, fair, and equitable".[60]

More recently, the EU brokered an agreement with Egypt in 2024. Totalling EUR 7.4 billion in funding, including EUR 200 million specifically earmarked for migration and mobility, the agreement requires Egypt to take action against human smuggling and strengthen its border security.[61] Its provisions include a shared commitment to "continue supporting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and host communities in full respect of international law and in line with national frameworks", as well as cooperation to create "structured, fair and regular migration pathways that benefit Egypt, migrants and European destination countries".[62] Despite numerous human rights violations, the EU approved the transfer of the first tranche (totalling EUR 1 billion) in January 2026. The move was criticised by rights groups who were sceptical, given the treatment of its migrant and refugee populations, that the government had met the necessary benchmarks on democracy and human rights for the payment to be approved.

The uptick in movement along the Atlantic route connecting the West African coast to the Spanish Canary Islands, beginning in late 2019 and peaking in 2024 with 46,843 arrivals,[63] also prompted the EU to focus more of its attention on the development of migration "partnerships" in the region. Mauritania, as the primary country of departure for those attempting the journey, entered into a EUR 210 million agreement with the EU in 2024 to support "migration management". Since then, despite Mauritania's prime minister stating in January 2026 that all African nationals were welcome in the country,[64] the government has

52 Reuters (2026) EU agrees rescue centre in eastern Libya as migrant departures rise.
53 Amnesty International (2026) Thirty-one organisations call on the EU to urgently end abusive migration cooperation with Libyan authorities.
54 Krupa, J. (2026) Italy says it's temporarily suspending EU Schengen arrangement with Spain after 60,000 migrants reach Ceuta – as it happened The Guardian; Moore, H. (2026) Spain imposes border controls against Italy as row over Ceuta migrant influx intensifies. BBC.
55 Knapp, F. (2026) EU can't depend on neighbors for border control, migration chief says. Politico.
56 Amnesty International (2026) EU/Tunisia: Three years on, EU migration cooperation still fueling human rights violations in Tunisia.
57 ICMPD (2026) Refugees and asylum seekers' influx, ICMPD Migration Outlook 2026 p.32.
58 Amnesty International (2026) Tunisia: Refugees and asylum seekers trapped in cycle of abuse after authorities dismantle crucial safeguards.
59 Human Rights Watch (2026) EU: Tunisia Migration Deal Worsening Human Rights Violations.
60 Mellersh, N. (2026) Tunisia proposes revision of its EU migration deal. InfoMigrants.
61 Van Moorsel, J. and Bonfiglio, A. (2024) A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt 'strategic and comprehensive partnership'. Mixed Migration Centre.
62 Van Moorsel, J. and Bonfiglio, A. (2024) A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt 'strategic and comprehensive partnership'. Mixed Migration Centre.
63 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Spain.
64 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa: Quarter 1 2026.

conducted numerous crackdowns, interceptions and pushbacks that have been partly blamed by human rights groups on the EU's involvement.[65] Similar concerns were raised around the EUR 30 million agreement brokered by the EU with Senegal in November 2025.[66]

In all these cases, despite a range of contexts and different stages of partnership development, there is a recurring pattern of uncertainty underlying these agreements. Each has the potential to drive down migration in the short term, but also to drive more crises in future that further undermine the EU and its foundational principles. The partnership model is likely to remain a feature of European policy, with plans reportedly in development to establish so-called "return hubs" in East Africa, with Rwanda and Uganda both rumoured to be under consideration.[67] However, the continued pressures threatening to undermine them demonstrate the need to move beyond narrow securitised arrangements to more expansive and resilient frameworks of cooperation with sending countries, combining border controls with educational opportunities and legal migration pathways.[68]

East Africa and the Horn of Africa

Conflict remains a major driver of both internal displacement and cross-border movement across East Africa and the Horn of Africa. While the civil war in Sudan is still the largest displacement crisis in the world,[69] other longstanding and emerging conflicts are also driving displacement. In **Ethiopia**, despite a 2022 ceasefire between the Federal Government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), ongoing insecurity and environmental shocks have contributed to 1.9 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), with concentrations in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara, along with another 2.8 million IDP returnees.[70] Ethiopia is also contending with the prospect of renewed conflict, as fighting between government forces and the TPLF broke out again in August 2026, forcing hundreds to flee into Sudan.[71] In **South Sudan**, meanwhile, where 1.99 million people are internally displaced and another 658,000 refugees and asylum seekers are hosted,[72] famine and a cholera outbreak are compounding the pressures of insecurity and political divisions on a still fragile peace settlement.[73] Fighting in Jonglei State drove repeated displacement during the year, with women and girls particularly affected.[74]

Climate change and natural disasters remain chronic problems across East Africa and the Horn of Africa, intersecting with conflict and other drivers to exacerbate vulnerability.[75] In **Somalia**, for instance, alongside insecurity, environmental factors such as drought and flooding are driving cross-border movement,[76] with concerns growing about the coming impacts of the "unprecedented" El Niño event during the rainy season in the last months of the year.[77] At the same time, hundreds of Somali nationals have been returning[78] – in many cases, under duress or after prolonged detention – from Libya and other countries in recent months.[79] In **Kenya**, meanwhile, the effects of drought are also uprooting communities, though often only after protracted crop failure and loss of livestock.[80] In both countries, while displacement is usually a significant source of vulnerability, forced immobility can be an even greater threat. Elsewhere, including South Sudan, the primary environmental threat remains flooding and the destruction it inflicts on infrastructure, housing and livelihoods, particularly in the absence of early warning systems or adaptive coping mechanisms.[81]

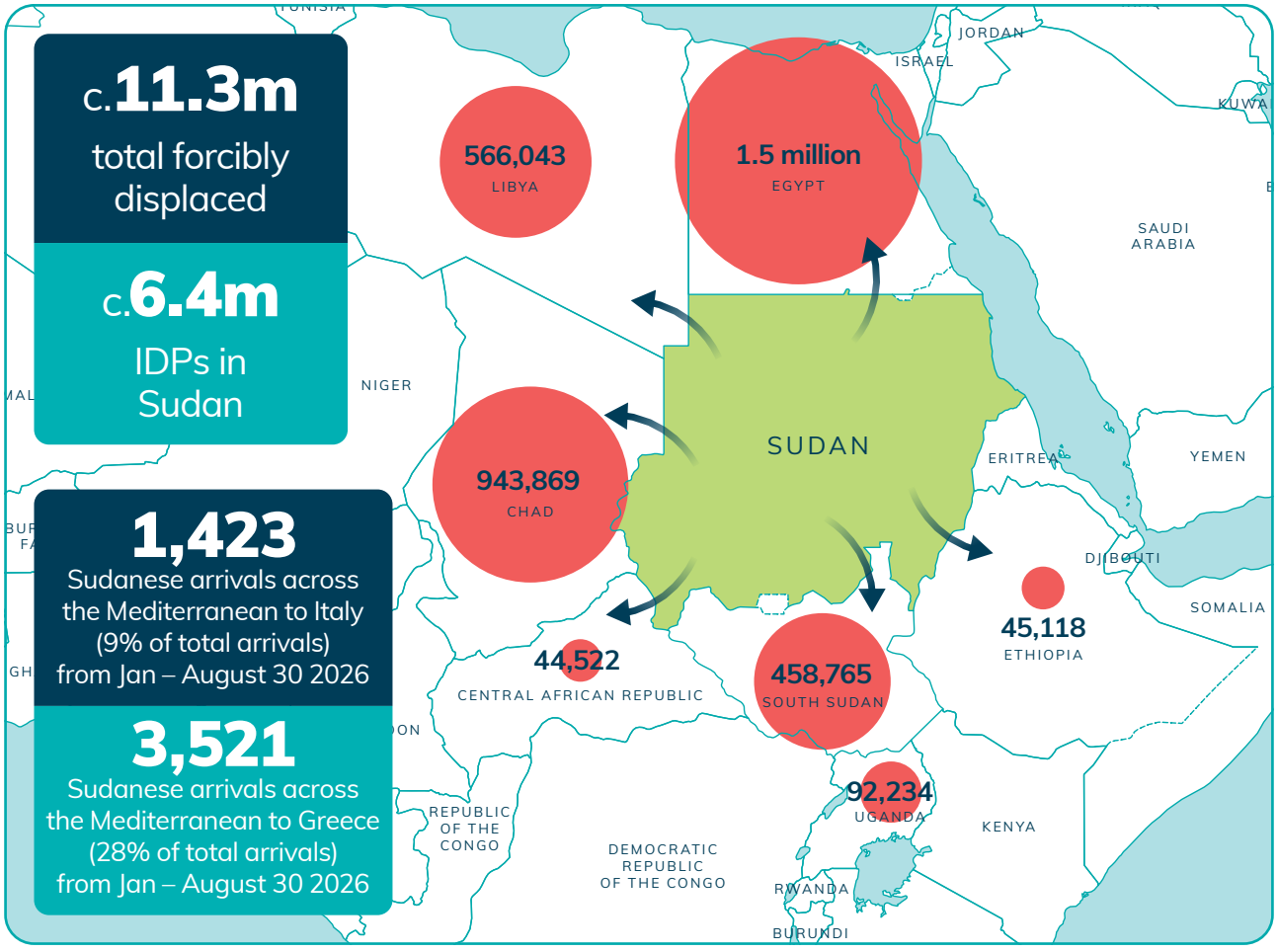
Mass displacement in Sudan continues

Now in its fourth year of civil conflict, **Sudan** is home to the most severe humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world.[82] More than 150,000 people have been

65 Hedgecoe, G. and Macaulay, C. (2025) EU deal fuelling Mauritania's abuse of migrants - rights group. BBC.
66 Statewatch (2025) Exporting carceral migration "management": €30 million from the EU to Senegal for migration control.
67 Amnesty International (2026) EU: 'Return hub' plans in Rwanda and Uganda risk becoming 'cruel black holes' for human rights.
68 Parusel, B. (2026) EU:s migrationspolitiska dilemma i Nordafrika: lärdomar från Ceuta. Sieps.
69 UNHCR (2026) Protection Brief: Gender-Based Violence: Sudan Situation March 2026.
70 UNHCR (2026) Ethiopia: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons as of 31 March 2026.
71 Moges, K. and Nagish, Y. (2026) Hundreds flee fighting in northern Ethiopia as fears rise of return to civil war. BBC.
72 UNHCR (2026) South Sudan Situation: Population Dashboard - 31 July 2026.
73 United Nations (2026) Security Council LIVE: Warnings of famine and collapse as South Sudan's peace deal frays.
74 UN Women (2026) More than 100 women and girls displaced every hour in South Sudan, some going days without food.
75 Brown, O. and Madar, S. (2025) The intersection of mobility, environmental and climate change, and conflict in the East and Horn of Africa. Mixed Migration Centre.
76 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Somalia: Climate change, mobility and conflict dynamics.
77 Cardiff University (2026) Urgent action is needed to protect Somalia from a potentially unprecedented weather event, experts warn. PreventionWeb.
78 Mohamed, N. (2026) Somalia repatriates 129 citizens From Libya. Dawan Africa.
79 Alharathy, S. (2026) Libya, Somalia agree to repatriate detained migrants. Libya Observer
80 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Kenya: climate change, mobility, and conflict dynamics.
81 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) South Sudan: Climate change, mobility, and conflict dynamics.
82 World Health Organization (2026) Sudan: 1000 days of war deepen the world's worst health and humanitarian crisis.

killed so far,[83] with some estimates suggesting the actual death toll could be closer to 400,000.[84] As of the end of August 2026, more than 6.4 million people had been internally displaced and almost 3.7 million others forced into neighbouring countries since the conflict began in April 2023. An additional 273,500 'self-relocated' refugees – those already residing in Sudan when the conflict began – have been displaced since the start of the current crisis.[85] When factoring in the additional numbers of those displaced in Sudan before the outbreak of the conflict, the total reaches around 14 million,[86] including over 8.5 million IDPs.[87] Even as new displacements continue to occur, some Sudanese have been able to return to certain areas of the country where conditions have improved relative to other regions where fighting remains intense. As of August 2026, there were more than 4.9 million returnees (82% of them comprised of former IDPs, the remainder Sudanese returning from abroad).[88] Despite returning, they also continue to face acute challenges, with housing, infrastructure and local economies devastated by the conflict.[89] Humanitarian conditions have deteriorated even further since the outbreak of civil conflict, with almost 34 million people – around two-thirds of the national population – requiring humanitarian assistance.[90]

Graphic 2. Sudan: conflict exodus 2023-2026 (up to September 2026)



Source: UNHCR Situations Sudan

83 Booty, N., Chothia, F. and Chibelushi, W. (2025) A simple guide to what is happening in Sudan. BBC.
84 Kristof, N. (2025) When There's No Debate About Genocide – and No Response, Either. The New York Times.
85 UNHCR (2026) Sudan situation.
86 UNHCR (2026) Sudan: 14 million displaced; hunger and attacks on health continue as war enters fourth year.
87 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (2026) Sudan.
88 IOM (2026) DTM Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (8).
89 IOM (2026) 4 million returns to Sudan at Risk Amid Fragile Conditions, IOM Warns.
90 International Rescue Committee (2026) Crisis in Sudan: What is happening and how to help.

The conflict has been characterised by repeated attacks by both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on civilians in towns and displacement camps, including the protracted siege of El-Fasher in North Darfur by the RSF. Following the city's fall in October 2025, widespread atrocities were committed against residents by RSF fighters, and at least 36,000 people were forced to flee.[91] This pattern has continued into 2026, exacerbated by bouts of severe flooding, with more than 200,000 people displaced in the Kordofan region.[92] Alongside the constant threat of ethnic cleansing, sexual assaults, arbitrary executions and drone attacks, displaced civilians face complex and wide-ranging challenges. Schools and health clinics are routinely targeted, while water supplies and food systems have also been damaged or destroyed, pushing large areas of the country into famine.[93] Yet, as of 27 August, only 41 percent of the funding requested in the 2026 Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan had been allocated.[94]

As for those displaced into neighbouring countries, the largest number of refugees is in Egypt. However, in the midst of an increasingly repressive environment for refugees that has seen thousands deported since the beginning of the year[95] and others forced into hiding to avoid arbitrary arrest,[96] further thousands left during the year as part of a voluntary returns programme.[97] Even before the most recent crackdown, though, critics were questioning the extent to which refugees could be said to be making a choice in the context of widespread intimidation.[98] The situation is also troubling in Libya, where as of August 2026 more than 566,000 Sudanese refugees are currently in the country, amidst increased repatriation operations, intensifying enforcement and the imposition of an entry ban by authorities in eastern Libya. Refugees do not face the same political pressures in Chad, where around 943,900 new arrivals from Sudan are being hosted, but high levels of existing need and reduced international assistance have created acute humanitarian shortfalls among the refugee population.[99] Chad has also reportedly become more difficult for displaced Sudanese to reach as a result of increased RSF activity in the area and border closures in response to clashes.[100] South Sudan has also received, alongside the return of 904,800 South Sudanese refugees previously living in Sudan, 458,800 new arrivals from Sudan.[101]

Camp closures in Tanzania and forced returns to Burundi

In October 2025, amidst reports of arrests and detentions of undocumented Burundians in the second half of 2025,[102] the government of **Tanzania** announced that it would be closing both Nduta Camp and the Burundian section of Nyarugusu, the large camp in the west of the country, by 31 March and 30 June 2026 respectively,[103] with residents of both camps encouraged to return ahead of the deadline. The ensuing demolitions culminated in the closure of Nduta and Nyarugusu at the end of April and July 2026 (a month after their original scheduled deadlines). By then, tens of thousands had been returned to **Burundi**: of the 104,100 UNHCR-registered Burundian refugees who had arrived in Tanzania over the past decade, fewer than 2,200 remained by the end of July 2026.[104] While returns from Tanzania have been ongoing since 2017, with a total of 198,105 Burundians returned between then and January 2026 from Tanzania,[105] the scale and speed of this latest phase of returns prompted widespread concerns that a significant proportion of repatriations would not be safe or voluntary,[106] particularly given the lack of consultation involved. Many Burundian returnees have settled in the border province of Buhumuza, already host to approximately 95,000 Congolese refugees, placing further pressure on a region where housing and livelihoods are already overstretched.[107] Commentators have also highlighted the risk that, without adequate reintegration assistance, return could prove unsustainable for many long-term refugees who have been forced to rely on aid for much of their lives – potentially creating conditions for further displacement in future.[108]

Migration and returns between the Horn of Africa and Yemen

Insecurity, political instability and economic and environmental challenges, combined with a steady demand for lower-skilled labour in the Arabian Peninsula, continue to drive large-scale movement between the Horn of Africa and Yemen, despite the latter's ongoing

91 Mureithi, C. (2025) At least 36,000 Sudanese have fled since fall of El Fasher to RSF, says UN agency. The Guardian.
92 United Nations (2026) Sudan war: 200,000 newly displaced as fighting and floods intensify.
93 OCHA (2026) Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026 (April 2026).
94 OCHA Financial Tracking Services (2026) Sudan.
95 Hamad, S. (2026) Egypt asylum shift deepens 'Fortress Europe' concerns. The New Arab.
96 Amnesty International (2026) Egypt: Refugees in hiding amid crackdown involving arbitrary arrests and unlawful deportations.
97 Abdelrheem, A. and Abushamala, R. (2026) 1,100 Sudanese return home from Egypt under voluntary repatriation program. Anadolu Ajansi.
98 Global Detention Project (2025) Sudanese refugees in Egypt: "Voluntary" Returns Amidst Intensified Detention and Deportation Campaign.
99 De Bray, E. (2026) Chad: Africa's refugee haven struggles with its own stark challenges. United Nations; UNHCR (2026) Sudan situation.
100 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa: Quarter 2 2026; Plett Usher, B. and Otalor, J. (2026) Chad shuts border with Sudan in bid to stop conflict spreading. BBC.
101 UNHCR (2026) Sudan situation.
102 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Updated: Eastern and Southern Africa / Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 4 2025;
103 UNHCR (2025) United Republic of Tanzania.
104 UNHCR (2026) Burundi Situation: Tanzania (United Republic of).
105 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR Appeal: Voluntary repatriation of Burundian refugees from Tanzania and other countries. January - June 2026.
106 De Bray, E. (2026) Concerns raised by Burundian refugees about 'coercive' repatriation from Tanzania. United Nations.
107 SOS Médias Burundi (2026) Buhumuza : the forced return of refugees from Tanzania increases pressure on an already overburdened province.
108 Nkeshimana, T. (2026) How voluntary and safe are Burundian refugee returns from Tanzania? ISS Today.

civil conflict and deepening humanitarian crisis. **The Eastern Route**, as it is known, connecting Ethiopia and Somalia (the two primary countries of origin for refugees and migrants) with the Arabian Peninsula via the coast of Djibouti or Somalia, involves significant risks. Many end up having to stay for protracted periods in Djibouti[109] or Somalia,[110] often in perilous conditions and with limited humanitarian assistance, because they lack the resources to make the maritime crossing to Yemen.

Almost everyone travelling the route uses smuggling services to make the hazardous crossing across the Gulf of Aden.[111] In addition to the risks of the sea crossing itself – evidenced by the capsizing of a boat carrying over 300 people off the coast of Djibouti in March 2026 that left at least nine dead and 45 others missing[112] – the pervasive influence of criminal groups and armed actors exposes refugees and migrants to serious human rights abuses, including kidnapping, torture and extortion, once they reach Yemen.[113] In the context of the ongoing civil war and the wider conflict in the region, refugees and migrants are also vulnerable to death and injury, particularly when residential areas and displacement camps are targeted with attacks.[114] Despite these dangers, this remains the busiest migratory route out of Africa, with at least 110,081 movements recorded in the first seven months of 2026 alone.[115] The challenges migrants and refugees face on arrival in Yemen and in Saudi Arabia are discussed in more detail in this Review (*Keeping Track in the Middle East*, see p. 42).

Ethiopia's Makatet Roadmap: A blueprint for refugee inclusion in the region?

Ethiopia hosts more than 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers, predominantly from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan.[116] Providing them with basic services, education and other forms of support has placed a significant burden on a country already struggling with funding shortfalls and aid cuts. However, the government's innovative Makatet Roadmap, developed in 2025 and officially launched in June 2026, offers a bold alternative to the traditional approach to refugee management.[117] If implemented successfully, it could improve the lives of refugees living in the country.

In line with the principles of area-based programming, the Makatet Roadmap provides a framework to move away from the encampment and siloed refugee assistance that, until now, has run in parallel to mainstream service provision. Instead, it will work towards an integrated system of education, employment and health care provision for citizens and refugees alike.[118] Refugees will also be able to access work permits, business licenses and a biometric ID. This reflects the aspirations enshrined in UNHCR's 50 by 35 *vision*[119] – a target to support more than half of the world's aid-dependent refugees to transition towards self-reliance. The approach is already being applied in places such as Ura settlement, where thousands of Sudanese refugees are benefiting from the same services and support as local residents.[120]

Nevertheless, some challenges remain.[121] Firstly, at a time when international development assistance is dwindling and funding shortfalls are already apparent, there is the question of where the additional resources will come from. Existing government budgets have only factored in costs for Ethiopian nationals, and have yet to reflect the additional funding needed to extend services to refugees. There are also broader gaps and inconsistencies in Ethiopia's protection framework that, if unresolved, will exclude large sections of its refugee population. In particular, after Ethiopia normalised its relations with **Eritrea** in 2018, Eritrean nationals have had their automatic refugee status withdrawn, which means that most no longer have the official refugee status required to benefit from the new system. There are also significant numbers of refugees who previously moved to urban areas without official approval, particularly after the outbreak of conflict in 2020, and are therefore unable to renew their documentation despite being recognised as refugees. As a result, they are also at risk of arrest and are unable to apply for a national ID.[122] These considerations will all need to be addressed if the promise of the Makatet Roadmap is to be realised in practice.

109 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Djibouti: refugee and migrant journeys to Yemen and the Gulf.
110 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Somalia: refugee and migrant journeys to Yemen and the Gulf.
111 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Somalia: Unpacking smuggling networks, services, and costs.
112 IOM (2026) Nine Dead, 45 Missing In First Shipwreck of 2026 Off Djibouti.
113 Negga, M. (2026) Kidnapped and tortured on an infamous migration route to Saudi Arabia. United Nations.
114 Van Moorsel, J. (2026) Impacts of the Middle East conflict on East African refugees and migrants. Mixed Migration Centre.
115 IOM (2026) DTM Yemen – Flow Monitoring Datasets - August 2026.
116 UNHCR (2026) Ethiopia.
117 ENA (2026) Ethiopia Unveils Landmark Refugee Inclusion Roadmap, Setting New Standard For Africa.
118 United Nations (2026) Ethiopia Launches Groundbreaking "Makatet Roadmap", Ushering in an Era of Refugee Inclusion.
119 UNHCR (n.d.) The 50 by 35 vision.
120 Dadi, S. (2026) UNHCR chief hails refugee courage and Ethiopia's inclusion on World Refugee Day. UNHCR.
121 Riggan, J. (2026) Ethiopia Crafts a Roadmap for Refugee Inclusion Amid Global Aid Cuts. MPI
122 Riggan, J. (2026) Ethiopia Crafts a Roadmap for Refugee Inclusion Amid Global Aid Cuts. MPI

West and Central Africa

Conflict, climate change and political collapse have all contributed to a series of displacement emergencies across West and Central Africa. As of September 2025, the region hosted 21.2 million displaced and stateless people, with little prospect of improvement in the near future: projections suggest that, by the end of 2026, the total will have risen to 25.1 million people, including 14.8 million IDPs.[123] The lack of global attention in the region is reflected in the fact that no fewer than three of the Norwegian Refugee Council's ten 'most neglected crises' in 2025[124] were located within the region. This included, in second place, the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo)**, where decades of fighting and the proliferation of as many as 200 armed groups have driven a repeated cycle of violence and displacement, particularly concentrated in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu.[125] Almost two in five (39%) of those displaced or stateless in the region are based in DR Congo.[126]

The Central Sahel

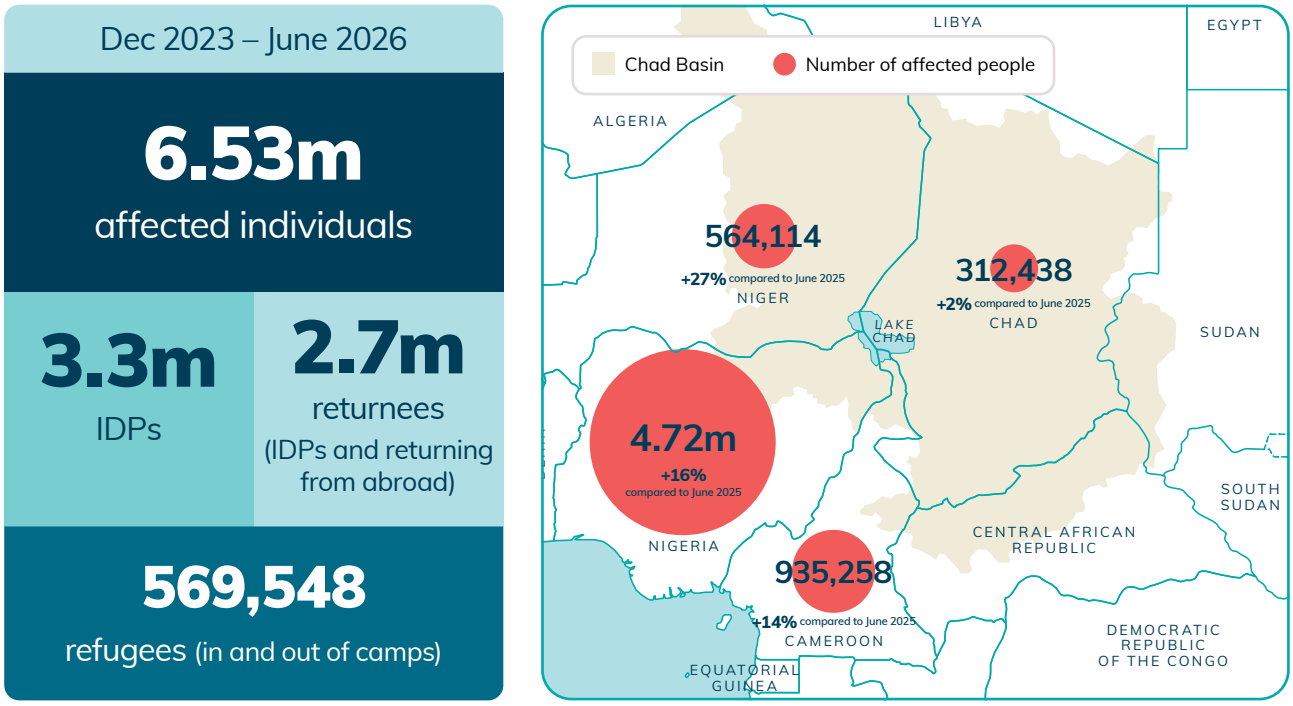
As conflict in the Central Sahel (spanning **Burkina Faso**, **Mali** and **Niger**) intensified, displacement figures have continued to rise, with a total of 4.2 million displaced people in the region as of April 2026 – a six percent increase compared to a year before and double the total of 2.1 million in 2020. Almost three-quarters (72%) of the region's displaced were IDPs, totalling 3 million, with the majority in Burkina Faso (2.1 million) followed by Niger (548,000) and Mali (415,000).[127] Most of the 1.2 million people displaced as refugees as of April 2026 (a similar figure to the previous year) were confined within these countries, too, with significant cross-border movements of refugees between them. However, around 222,000 refugees and asylum seekers – up 26 percent from April 2025 – had moved from these conflict zones to neighbouring countries on the coast,[128] such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin.

The Lake Chad Basin conflict

The Lake Chad Basin is also contending with a compounded displacement crisis driven by violent insurgencies, extreme weather and food insecurity. As of April 2026, extending across the Far North in Cameroon, the western province of Lac in Chad, the Diffa region in Niger and northeastern Nigeria saw the displacement of 3.6 million people, a four percent increase compared to April 2025. The majority of these are IDPs, with most located in Nigeria (2.3 million), followed by Cameroon (510,800) and Chad (220,000).[129] Alongside this, humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate, with 8.2 million people requiring assistance.[130] Violence has risen sharply – the number of security incidents increasing by 80 percent between January 2024 and April 2026 – prompting UNHCR to warn, in July, that the region was being pushed to a "tipping point".[131] In the first half of 2026 alone, an estimated 77,500 people were displaced, largely as a result of terrorist attacks, criminal raids and military operations.[132]

123 UNHCR (n.d.) West and Central Africa.
124 Norwegian Refugee Council (2026) The world's most neglected displacement crises: 10th Edition.
125 Norwegian Refugee Council (2026) The world's most neglected displacement crises: 10th Edition.
126 UNHCR (n.d.) West and Central Africa.
127 UNHCR (2026) Regional trends: Forced displacement in West and Central Africa in 2026.
128 UNHCR (2026) Regional trends: Forced displacement in West and Central Africa in 2026.
129 UNHCR (2026) Regional trends: Forced displacement in West and Central Africa in 2026.
130 UNHCR (2026) Regional trends: Forced displacement in West and Central Africa in 2026.
131 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR warns Lake Chad Basin at tipping point as violence and displacement surge.
132 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR warns Lake Chad Basin at tipping point as violence and displacement surge.

Graphic 3. The impact of armed insurgency and conflict in the Lake Chad Basin (as of June 2026)



Source: IOM West and Central Africa Lake Chad Crisis dashboard

In northeast **Nigeria**, communities have been repeatedly targeted not only by Boko Haram and other extremist groups but also by roving bandits, who kill and abduct locals indiscriminately.[133] The violence has not only exacted an unprecedented death toll, but is also driving the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians in the region.[134] Insecurity in Borno State, described as the "epicentre of the crisis", appears to be spreading to other regions of Nigeria, including the northwest and middle belt.[135] During the first half of 2026, more than 16,000 refugees fled into neighbouring **Niger** to escape violence.[136] **Chad**, meanwhile, is contending not only with its own internal displacement but also large-scale displacement from neighbouring countries, in particular Sudan,[137] where close to 1 million refugees have arrived since the outbreak of civil conflict in 2023, placing further humanitarian pressure on the country.[138] Escalating attacks in May 2026, when an emergency was declared in the country, displaced over 60,000 people in Lac province.[139]

Cameroon is also experiencing a number of simultaneous crises related, in different ways, to conflict-induced displacement, including, as of July 2026, 412,900 refugees (the majority from the **Central African Republic**), 790,800 IDP returnees and 493,400 IDPs in the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions (where conflict is ongoing between government forces and Ambazonian separatists). In terms of the Lake Chad Basin conflict, there are around 125,000 Nigerian refugees and over 510,800 displaced Cameroonians in the Far North, as well as 296,400 returnees.[140] Extreme weather and other disasters have added to this displacement, including a series of fires in February 2026 that – in some cases, accelerated by dry-season winds – spread through displacement camps, leaving thousands homeless.[141]

Increased migration surveillance by Mauritania and Senegal

Thousands of people continue to be displaced by violence in northern and central Mali into **Mauritania**, with Malian nationals accounting for more than 98 percent of the estimated 305,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country as of the end of July 2026. The majority (290,000) are situated in the southwestern border region of Hodh

133 Adegoke, Y. (2026) 'If you started running, they shot you' - inside Nigeria's growing kidnapping crisis. BBC.
134 Humanitarian Action (2025) Global Humanitarian Overview 2026: Nigeria.
135 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR warns Lake Chad Basin at tipping point as violence and displacement surge.
136 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR warns Lake Chad Basin at tipping point as violence and displacement surge.
137 UNHCR (2026) Sudan situation.
138 De Bray, E. (2026) Chad: Africa's refugee haven struggles with its own stark challenges. United Nations.
139 UNFPA (2026) Chad.
140 European Commission (2026) Cameroon.
141 Reliefweb (2026) Cameroon: Fires - Feb 2026.

Chargui.[142] Rising insecurity and reports of violence and abuses have contributed to the displacement of civilians across the border into Mauritania.[143] In May 2026, UNHCR reported that, as a result of deteriorating security conditions at the border and increasing control over civilian movements, the number of crossings had dropped, despite ongoing insecurity in Mali, with some displaced Malians stranded en route.[144]

However, despite the protection needs of many foreign nationals in Mauritania, the government has been carrying out widespread and repeated crackdowns since signing an agreement on migration management with the EU in 2024. Beginning in March 2025, refugees and migrants in its territory have been arrested and deported in large numbers, with one independent estimate suggesting that 18,000 to 20,000 refugees and migrants were expelled over the course of eight weeks in October and November that year.[145] These crackdowns have continued throughout 2026, reportedly including foreign nationals with legal documentation, and have forced many to be increasingly invisible to avoid being deported to Mali and Senegal.[146]

In addition, Mauritanian authorities have intercepted boats carrying hundreds of refugees and migrants on board.[147] Numerous fatalities have been reported during the year, however, including 143 dead or missing on a boat that was found, on 18 July, with only 38 survivors on board.[148] **Senegal**, following the signing of a EUR 30 million agreement with the EU in November 2025,[149] has similarly escalated its migration management.[150] This has included increased maritime surveillance and the interception of hundreds of people heading towards the Canary Islands,[151] further contributing to the marked reduction in movement along the Atlantic route. The EU is also reportedly building two migrant reception centres to detain apprehended migrants, scheduled to open in 2026 and 2027.[152] Senegal is also experiencing a sudden uptick in online hate speech against foreigners, particularly Guinean nationals, at a time when Senegalese nationals in South Africa are reportedly witnessing similar issues against their own community.[153] This development prompted the Senegalese prime minister to issue a public statement in September saying that Senegal "cannot be a country that is open, with citizens living all over the world... while allowing xenophobic rhetoric to flourish here."[154]

Southern Africa

Risks and restrictions along the Southern route

The **Southern route**, stretching from East Africa and the Horn of Africa as well as the Great Lakes to South Africa, remains an important migration corridor for thousands of refugees and migrants, mainly from Ethiopia, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite the rise in xenophobic violence, rhetoric and forced returns in 2026. While not being associated with the same degree of extreme abuse and harm as the Northern or Eastern Routes, overland movements along the Southern route, nevertheless, entail a great degree of risk. This not only includes the threat of abuse and trafficking – with smuggling becoming more entrenched – and the possibility of being stranded en route, but also the risk of detention and deportation at every stage of the journey.[155] Hundreds of refugees and migrants travelling through Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Angola and Zimbabwe, among other countries, were apprehended during the first half of 2026.[156] In December 2025, the national human rights bodies of Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia issued a joint statement, highlighting the increased protection risks along the route and calling for governments to strengthen rights-based mechanisms and legal migration pathways.[157]

Refugees and migrants flee South Africa amidst rising xenophobia

In January 2026, **South Africa** released a revised draft of the White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refuge Protection, with wide-ranging implications for its citizenship, immigration and asylum laws. While it stepped back from earlier proposals to withdraw South Africa from the 1951 Refugee Convention, it nevertheless includes a controversial "first safe country principle" that empowers the government to reject asylum seekers who have transited through other countries before reaching South Africa. However, the legislation overlooks the fact

142 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR Mauritania - Refugee population overview - As of 31 July 2026.
143 Lawal, S. (2026) 'We saw terrible things': Mali refugees tell of atrocities amid attacks. Al Jazeera.
144 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR Mauritania - Hodh Chargui influx - As of 21 May 2026.
145 CRIDEM (2025) L'Union arabe des syndicats dénonce une vague de déportations forcées en Mauritanie.
146 Lawal, S. (2026) Migrants in hiding as Mauritania pushbacks drastically cut Europe arrivals. Al Jazeera.
147 Mohamed, A. (2026) Mauritania intercepts a migrant boat with 161 aboard, including 17 children. AP.
148 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR deeply saddened as 144 people reportedly dead or missing off West Africa.
149 Statewatch (2025) Exporting carceral migration "management": €30 million from the EU to Senegal for migration control.
150 Golovko, E. (2026) Senegal's Expanding Migration Cooperation with the EU. Clingendael.
151 Democrata (2026) Senegal and Mauritania halt the departure of more than 750 migrants heading to the Canary Islands.
152 Courtois, M. (2026) Sénégal : l'Union européenne construit deux centres pour les exilés interceptés ou secourus dans l'Atlantique. InfoMigrants.
153 Diop, M. (2026) Senegalese community lives in fear as xenophobia flares again in South Africa. Dialogue Migration.
154 New Vision (2026) Senegal PM says xenophobic rhetoric must stop.
155 IOM (2026) Migration Along the Eastern Southern Africa Route (January – December 2025).
156 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 2 2026; Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa, Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 1 2026.
157 Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (2025) Joint statement on protection of migrants along the Southern migration route.

that many neighbouring countries in the region – even if they can nominally be classified as 'safe' – do not in practice have adequate functioning asylum systems in place. As a result, many potential asylum seekers could end up unlawfully rejected, and their lives could be put at risk.[158]

In October 2025, the government also announced an 18 month extension for holders of the Zimbabwe Exemption Permit (ZEP), a status previously awarded to undocumented Zimbabwean nationals who had left the country in large numbers from 2008 as a result of political instability: the group is estimated at 178,000, though numbers have likely declined significantly.[159] The government has, however, continued to reiterate that ZEP holders are not currently eligible for permanent residency.[160]

These issues have come into even sharper focus following a surge in xenophobic violence and hate speech, led by vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula and March and March, with reports of foreign nationals harassed, chased and even killed by mobs in townships across the country.[161] In addition to the looting and destruction of foreign-owned homes and businesses, as many as 50,000 people were also displaced as a result of the unrest.[162] Ahead of an unofficial deadline of 30 June issued by these groups for all undocumented foreign nationals to leave South Africa, some 25,000 people were repatriated to Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and other home countries, while thousands of others sought sanctuary in national consulates.[163]

By August, at least 80,000 people had reportedly been deported by the authorities or repatriated by their own governments, with South Africa requesting compensation from receiving countries for costs incurred by the government to facilitate returns.[164] In July, the news agency AFP, drawing on tallies of repatriation figures from different governments, suggested that as many as 160,000 migrants had left the country by then.[165] The violence has prompted condemnations from African governments and human rights groups, with the latter criticising the inadequate response of the South African government to the crisis.[166] The exodus of many migrant workers has also highlighted South Africa's dependence on foreign labour, with farms and factories reportedly struggling to fill the gaps left behind.[167]

The Western Indian Ocean Route

Mixed migration along the **Western Indian Ocean route** to the French overseas department of **Mayotte** has increased over the last few years, primarily through departures from **Comoros** and **Madagascar**. The route has evolved considerably in recent years, encompassing not only Comorian and Malagasy nationals but also growing numbers of people, mainly from Burundi, DR Congo and Somalia, driven by insecurity, terrorism and the lack of tenable livelihoods.[168] In particular, refugees from conflict-affected DR Congo have overtaken Comorians to become the largest group among those claiming asylum in Mayotte, with Congolese nationals accounting for half of all asylum applications on the island in 2025.[169]

The route has remained popular despite the evident dangers of the journey. At least 38 refugees and migrants died attempting to reach the island in the first seven months of 2026, including 21 who drowned after being abandoned by smugglers on a sandbar in March.[170] The risks have been exacerbated by the aggressive policing of the French coastguard, with an investigation by Lighthouse Reports documenting how the use of violent pushbacks and interceptions has contributed to numerous deaths of refugees and migrants.[171]

The impact of French politics on migration management in Mayotte

Irregular migration to Mayotte has become an increasingly sensitive political issue in France, particularly in the build-up to the upcoming presidential elections in 2027. In August 2026, one candidate – former Prime Minister Édouard Charles Philippe – vowed to "completely close the floodgates of immigration" to Mayotte, suspending the 'pull factor' of birthright citizenship (despite restrictions already imposed in 2025), halting asylum applications and family reunification on the island for five years and establishing a French-run detention centre in the region to facilitate

158 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 1 2026.
159 Harris, L.B. (2026) SA Home Affairs launches ZEP audit as numbers decline. CITE.
160 Republic of South Africa (2026) Home Affairs clarifies policy position on Zimbabwe Exemption Permit holders.
161 France24 (2026) 'Chased like dogs': Anti-migrant mobs in South Africa force foreigners to flee.
162 OHCHR (2026) South Africa: UN committee raises alarm over racist killings, displacement and home raids against migrants.
163 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 2 2026.
164 AP (2026) South Africa seeks reimbursement from African countries for migrant repatriations.
165 IOL (2026) How the migrant exodus is crippling South Africa's agricultural sector.
166 HRLRC (2026) Xenophobic violence in South Africa: Government Inaction and African Union Silence Fuel a Human Rights Crisis.
167 Peyton, N. and Hlophe, T. (2026) South African clothing factories struggle after migrant workers flee. Reuters.
168 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route.
169 Boitlaux, C. and Philips, R. (2026) 'Mayotte, I have never heard of it': Congolese migrants flee to unfamiliar destination. InfoMigrants.
170 RFI (2026) Route migratoire vers Mayotte: «Les flux de migrants en provenance d'Afrique s'intensifient».
171 Lighthouse Reports (2026) Caught on camera: French police cause capsize.

deportations.[172] The same month, the current prime minister, Sébastien Lecornu, provoked strong condemnation from Comoros after he suggested that France could make aid to DR Congo and other countries in East Africa conditional on their support in curbing irregular migration to Mayotte.[173]

In some ways, this proposal would not be such a radical departure for the French government: for instance, tougher restrictions around residency rights were built into the EUR 4 billion reconstruction package approved in 2025 in the wake of Cyclone Chido that took place in December 2024. Since its passage, life has become increasingly difficult for the many undocumented foreign nationals living in Mayotte's slums, with over 20,000 removed from the island during 2025.[174] Human rights groups have criticised the uptick in enforcement, arguing that Mayotte's problems are rooted in deep structural inequities that can only be effectively addressed through more investment in areas such as education and basic services.[175]

172 Le Monde (2026) Présidentielle 2027 : Edouard Philippe veut « fermer totalement les vannes de l'immigration » à Mayotte et suspendre le droit du sol.
173 Le Monde (2026) Comoros slams French PM's remarks tying aid to curbing migration as 'unbearably condescending'.
174 Boitlaux, C. and Philips, R. (2026) In the slums of Mayotte, the hunt for undocumented immigrants is on the rise. InfoMigrants.
175 Fondacci, E. and Bochenek, M.G. (2026) Mayotte's Future Depends on Education, not More Restrictions on Migrant Rights. Human Rights Watch.

Photo credit: Joerg Boethling

Burkina Faso, Dori, Malian refugees, mostly Touaregs, in the UNHCR refugee camp Goudebo. They fled due to war and Islamist terror in Northern Mali. Across the wider Sahel, jihadist groups are actively capitalizing on severe water and food insecurity to recruit populations and seize territory. Millions have been displaced in West and Central Africa, with some moving on toward North Africa and Europe. The rising cost of living, poor livelihood options exacerbated by climate and conflict make joining radical militias attractive – especially to poor young men. (See *Keeping Track in Africa*, p. 14).





Discrimination in limbo: a queer Ugandan in Kenya

In 2017, I left Kampala, Uganda, and boarded a bus straight to Nairobi. I had a good life and had never considered leaving my home until I started feeling unsafe because of discrimination I faced for my sexual orientation and gender identification.

Rumours started spreading about my gender expression and my attraction to women, and I was afraid that my family would turn against me. Work had also become very difficult. I used to work as a medical officer, and my personal life was constantly under scrutiny. This was also at the height of the anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments in Uganda.

I knew that Kenya was more open towards LGBTQI+ people, so I felt it would be a safer place for me. Plus, Kenya and Uganda are very close to each other, making the journey very affordable.

When I first got to Kenya, I moved around a bit. I lived with some Kenyan friends I had made back in Uganda, who introduced me to other Ugandan asylum seekers.

I got into Kenya regularly and obtained a three-month visa – I had my passport, my yellow fever certificate and my student ID. When my visa expired, I registered as an asylum seeker – but it took a long time as I didn't come from a war zone like Somalia or South Sudan.

The 'asylum limbo'

After getting my asylum seeker pass, I was told it would expire after six months, during which time I would receive a call from UNHCR to do my Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interview. I was also given a movement pass that would allow me to go to the refugee camp in Kakuma, but I turned that down because I was already settled in Nairobi and could work and care for myself.

Nothing happened in the first six months after registering as an asylum seeker. In fact, it took two years to get my RSD interview. After that, I was given another asylum seeker pass.

In hindsight, I regret applying for asylum, as this has massively restricted my movement. I wish I had just retained my Ugandan passport and stayed in Kenya as a member of the East African Community but at the time I didn't know this was an option.

I was hoping to get all the way to Canada, where I could continue my studies and live freely as a queer person, but I'm stuck in this asylum seeker limbo. My Ugandan passport has expired and I have no other documents to travel with.

I did try other avenues to move, like the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP) programme that helps resettle qualified refugees in Canada, but my lack of refugee status prevented that.

Here, the resources and job opportunities are very limited. In the beginning, I tried to work in the medical field, as I did back home, but not speaking the local language made it practically impossible. I started making some handcrafted jewellery and selling it at local markets, which allowed me to earn some money.

Discrimination and community support

It feels like we, as displaced LGBTQI+ people, are constantly encroaching on the limited space available to the host queer community: discrimination is also a big issue in Kenya. As a displaced Ugandan, people automatically assume that I'm queer, because there's no war in Uganda. The Kenyan government also keeps us stuck in this kind of limbo: yes, they encourage integration, but queerness is still outlawed in the country, which means we exist in a grey area where we aren't being resettled and we aren't being integrated.

This is upsetting, as things were better when I arrived. The community was more welcoming. Now, the economic and political situation has worsened and there aren't enough resources for everyone, so we are seen as nuisances rather than human beings.

What makes this even worse is the fact that a lot of aid and support programmes stopped due to a lack of funding. For example, the EMPP stopped years ago and we also no longer get financial support from the international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which used to give us a monthly allowance.

In my case, I was able to stay afloat with my job, but many displaced people aren't so lucky. Many of us have to turn to sex work when resources are scarce.

Help within the displaced LGBTQI+ community is crucial. Just as I received help when I first got here, I also started to help other displaced queer people navigate the system. I take them to the RSD office, help them write emails to caseworkers and volunteer as a peer educator, sharing information on HIV/AIDS prevention.



A complex path ahead

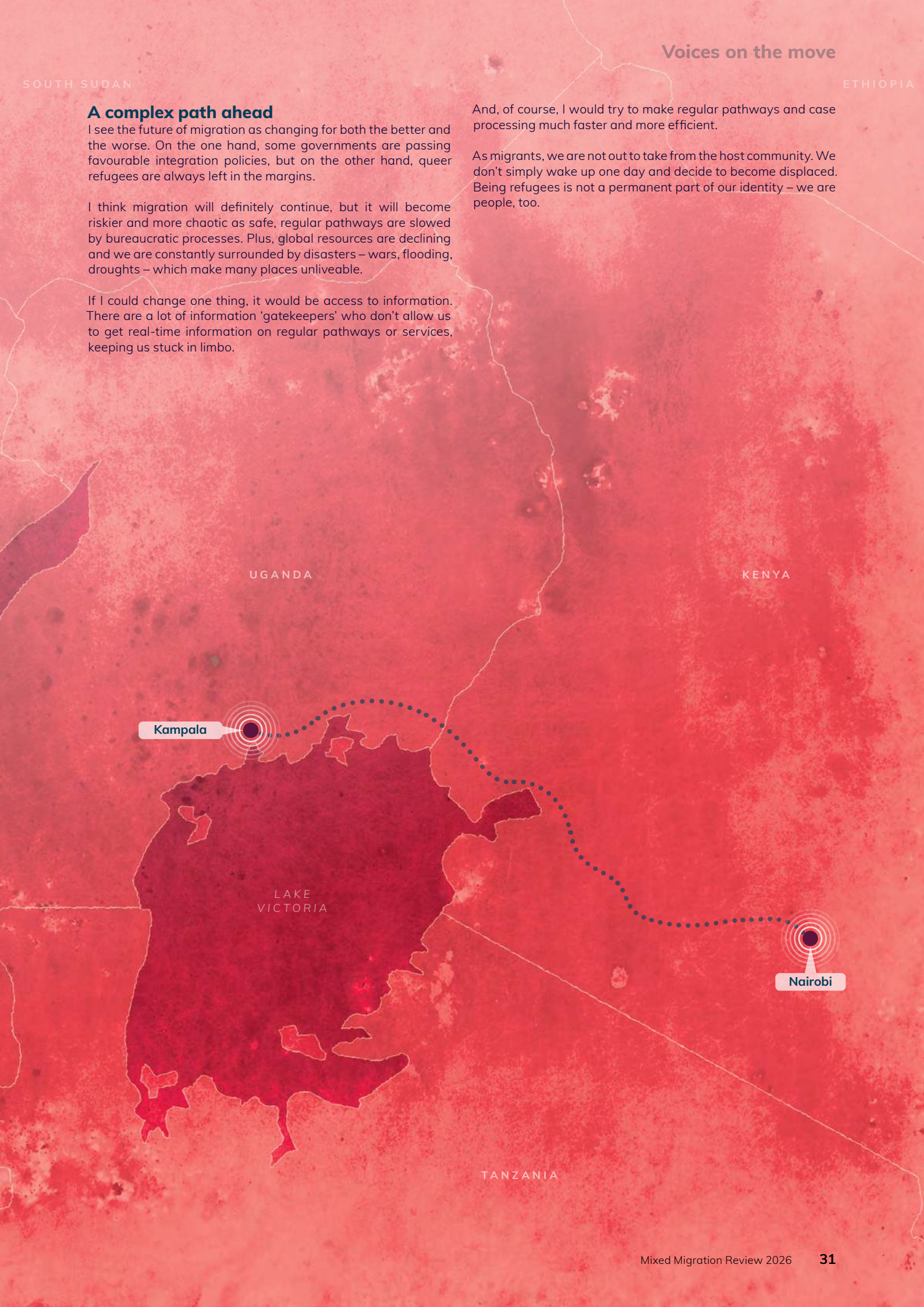
I see the future of migration as changing for both the better and the worse. On the one hand, some governments are passing favourable integration policies, but on the other hand, queer refugees are always left in the margins.

I think migration will definitely continue, but it will become riskier and more chaotic as safe, regular pathways are slowed by bureaucratic processes. Plus, global resources are declining and we are constantly surrounded by disasters – wars, flooding, droughts – which make many places unliveable.

If I could change one thing, it would be access to information. There are a lot of information 'gatekeepers' who don't allow us to get real-time information on regular pathways or services, keeping us stuck in limbo.

And, of course, I would try to make regular pathways and case processing much faster and more efficient.

As migrants, we are not out to take from the host community. We don't simply wake up one day and decide to become displaced. Being refugees is not a permanent part of our identity – we are people, too.



Renewed hostilities in northern Ethiopia: mixed migration consequences

Five years after MMC assessed the mixed migration consequences of the Tigray war, northern Ethiopia is seeing a resurgence of active hostilities.[1] This time the regional alignments are different, the Red Sea is in turmoil, aid budgets have collapsed and drought is setting in.[2] What could this mean for mixed migration and displacement, for the more than 1 million refugees Ethiopia already hosts and for Ethiopians on the move?

Back to hostilities, but with different players

In January 2021, a few months into the previous war in Tigray, MMC looked at the likely mixed migration consequences of that crisis.[3] The main conclusion was that mass internal displacement and involuntary immobility, rather than large-scale cross-border movement, would be the most likely and most numerous outcomes. That turned out to be largely right. With the recent resurgence of clashes, it is worth asking the same questions again now.

The renewed fighting builds on years of instability. Amhara has seen armed violence between federal forces and Fano militias since 2023,[4] when the government also declared a state of emergency in the region.[5] In Tigray, recovery since the 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement has been slow,[6] with limited reconstruction and high unemployment, especially among demobilised youth.

After months of rising tension and clashes[7] near the Sudanese border[8] in early August 2026, armed opposition groups in Tigray, Amhara and Afar formed an alliance and launched an offensive on 23 September.[9] Fighting has since spread along the Tigray–Amhara and Tigray–Afar boundaries,[10] and towns have changed hands in both directions.[11] On 1 October, Ethiopia closed its embassy in Asmara and expelled Eritrean diplomats, and Eritrea cut diplomatic ties.[12]

The key difference with 2020–2021 is Eritrea's position. Then, Eritrean forces fought alongside the Ethiopian federal army in Tigray. Now, according to the International Crisis Group (or Crisis Group), Eritrea is "quietly aligned with its former enemy" in Tigray.[13] The Ethiopian government accuses Eritrea, as well as Sudan and Egypt, of backing the armed opposition groups. All three deny this.[14] How does this change the situation for people on the move?

A region where every crisis touches the next

This is not only an Ethiopian crisis. As Crisis Group's Alan Boswell wrote in July, "the Horn of Africa is combustible".[15] He describes two loose blocs forming around the war in Sudan, with Eritrea, Egypt, Djibouti and Somalia, among others, on one side, and Ethiopia among those aligned with the United Arab Emirates on the other.[16] Sudan's war is the main destabiliser, and the risk is "a belt of interconnected wars stretching from Yemen in the east to Chad in the west". Ethiopia and Sudan's army-led government accuse each other of supporting each others' armed opponents, and Crisis Group warns of the risk that the two wars could merge.[17]

Then there is the sea. Ethiopia, a country of some 120 million people, is landlocked and depends on Djibouti for around 90 percent of its trade.[18] Access to the sea,

1 Horwood, C. and Frouws, B. (2021) Mixed migration consequences of the Tigrayan crisis. Mixed Migration Centre.
2 Frouws, B. (2026) Across Bab el-Mandeb strait, Yemenis flee as migrants arrive. Mixed Migration Centre.
3 Horwood, C. and Frouws, B. (2021) Mixed migration consequences of the Tigrayan crisis. Mixed Migration Centre.
4 International Crisis group (2023) Ethiopia's Ominous New War in Amhara.
5 ACLED (2023) Fact Sheet: Crisis in Ethiopia's Amhara Region.
6 Rift Valley Institute (2026) Peace and Instability: Tigray Since the Pretoria Agreement.
7 AFP (2026) Tigray refugees flee into Sudan after deadly violence on Ethiopia border. Al Jazeera.
8 Sudan Tribune (2026) Ethiopian refugees killed as border clashes spill into Sudan camps, official says.
9 International Crisis Group (2026) Arresting the Dangerous Descent Back into War in Northern Ethiopia.
10 Ali, M. (2026) How the fighting in Ethiopia spread beyond Tigray, in maps and charts. Al Jazeera.
11 DeAngelo, M. (2026) Ethiopia War Security Review, September 30, 2026. Critical Threats Project.
12 Salad, A. (2026) Eritrea Severs Diplomatic Ties with Ethiopia After Embassy Closure. Dawan Africa.
13 International Crisis Group (2026) Arresting the Dangerous Descent Back into War in Northern Ethiopia.
14 Al-Nour, A.A. and Khayal, M. (2026) Ethiopia blames regional rivals as risk of conflict spillover rises. Al Jazeera.
15 Boswell, A. (2026) As the Horn of Africa Nears Boiling Point, Time for Urgent Diplomacy. International Crisis Group.
16 Boswell, A. (2026) As the Horn of Africa Nears Boiling Point, Time for Urgent Diplomacy. International Crisis Group.
17 International Crisis Group (2026) Arresting the Dangerous Descent Back into War in Northern Ethiopia.
18 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2026) Houthi Leverage over the Red Sea Escalates Threats for Africa.

and specifically the Eritrean port of Assab, has been an openly stated government ambition[19] and Eritrea regards access to it from Ethiopia as a red line. This dispute over sea access has been one of the main drivers of deteriorating relations between the two countries in recent years,[20] so the closure of the Ethiopian embassy in Asmara did not come out of the blue. Since the change in territorial control of Yemen's west coast and the Bab el-Mandeb strait in September,[21] weekly transits through the strait have fallen to around 25 vessels, compared with around 80 before October 2023. Ethiopia has seen fuel prices rise by 63 percent since April, while food prices in Sudan have risen by around 40 percent.[22] Some of the fighting in Afar is now close to the road between Addis Ababa and Djibouti, Ethiopia's economic lifeline.[23]

Polycrisis, not just fighting

The resurgence of war is happening on top of other shocks. A July analysis in The Conversation warned of a "major, multi-country polycrisis" in the Greater Horn: a strengthening El Niño and failed rains, higher food and fertiliser prices because of the war in Iran, conflict in almost every country of the region, and a "devastating aid cliff".[24] These shocks, they argue, "are not simply additive but multiplicative".

Meanwhile, UNHCR's Ethiopia operation was 25 percent funded at the end of September.[25] Since late 2025, around 800,000 refugees in Ethiopia have been receiving 40 percent food rations, under 1,000 calories a day.[26]

What could it mean for mixed migration?

As in 2021, it helps to look at the different groups affected by the current resurgence of hostilities, because the consequences will be different for each.

Internal displacement and involuntary immobility

Ethiopia already had around 1.9 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) before this escalation, including some 750,000 in Tigray who were never able to return after the 2022 Ethiopia-Tigray cessation of hostilities agreement (the Pretoria Agreement).[27] Due to this new outbreak of violence, local organisations estimate that around 150,000 people have been displaced in Afar alone in recent weeks, although no UN figure is available yet and humanitarian access is severely restricted.[28] As in 2020–2021, internal displacement is likely to be the largest consequence of this war by far. And, for many, the outcome will be no movement at all. People without money, with closed roads and front lines all around them, and with aid unable to reach them, become involuntarily immobile, trapped in dire situations. They are the least visible and often the most vulnerable.

Refugees already in Ethiopia

Ethiopia hosts 1,129,183 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan.[29] For the Eritreans among them, some 170,000 people,[30] the change in regional alignments is particularly worrying. Several of their camps, in Afar (Asayita, Berhale) and in Amhara (Alemwach), are in or close to the areas now affected.[31] In 2020-2021, Eritrean refugees in Tigray were caught between the warring parties, and two camps, Hitsats and Shimelba, were destroyed. This time, with Ethiopia and Eritrea openly hostile, the risk is that Eritrean refugees face suspicion because of their nationality. Human Rights Concern-Eritrea has warned of the risks of arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, trafficking and forced return.[32]

Meanwhile, Sudanese refugees, some 101,000,[33] fled one war only to find themselves next to another, while still waiting for registration in some locations.[34] This is not new for them. In 2024, thousands of Sudanese refugees fled the Kumer and Awlala camps in Amhara[35]

19 Boswell, A. (2026) As the Horn of Africa Nears Boiling Point, Time for Urgent Diplomacy. International Crisis Group.
20 Soliman, A. and Demissie, A.A. (2025) De-escalation is needed to prevent Ethiopia and Eritrea from going to war. Chatham House.
21 Frouws, B. (2026) Across Bab el-Mandeb strait, Yemenis flee as migrants arrive. Mixed Migration Centre.
22 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2026) Houthi Leverage over the Red Sea Escalates Threats for Africa.
23 DeAngelo, M. (2026) Ethiopia War Security Review, September 30, 2026. Critical Threats Project
24 Maxwell, D., De Waal, A., Kuol, L., Fitzpatrick, M. and Hailey, P. (2026) Africa's Greater Horn region is facing a looming polycrisis fueled by conflict, prices, climate and disease. The Conversation.
25 UNHCR (2026) Ethiopia Funding Update 2026.
26 Dawit, K. (2025) "We're Making Impossible Choices": WFP Ethiopia Cuts Rations as Funding Dries Up. The Reporter Ethiopia.
27 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR Ethiopia | Refugees and IDPs statistics | August 2026.
28 Al Jazeera (2026) Fighting in Ethiopia intensifies: What's the latest?
29 UNHCR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Ethiopia.
30 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR Ethiopia | Refugees and IDPs statistics | August 2026.
31 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Where to next? Eritrean displacement amidst shrinking spaces of refuge.
32 Plaut, M. (2026) Escalating Ethiopia–Eritrea tensions place Eritrean refugees and civilians at grave risk.
33 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR Ethiopia | Refugees and IDPs statistics | August 2026.
34 DG ECHO (2026) Ethiopia - Sudanese asylum seekers fleeing to Ethiopia – ECHO Daily Flash of 9 February 2026).
35 Passilly, A. (2024) Sudanese refugees trapped in Ethiopian forest call for 'immediate evacuation'. The New Humanitarian.

after attacks by militias and bandits, and many ended up stranded in a nearby forest. The ongoing violence makes an already insecure situation worse. For both groups of refugees, if caught up in the conflict, the options are likely to be limited, ranging from staying where they are, further displacement within Ethiopia or – likely to a limited extent – seeking safety in other neighbouring countries.

The fighting also comes at a delicate moment for refugee policy. In June 2026, Ethiopia launched the Makatet Roadmap,[36] an ambitious 10-year plan to move from camps towards integrated settlements, giving refugees access to work and national services alongside host communities. Renewed hostilities, economic strain and pressure on public budgets could make it harder to implement. It will be important that these commitments are not rolled back in the face of greater internal challenges.

Eritreans in Eritrea and on the move

Eritrea is preparing for possible escalation. In February 2025, the government called up reserves and reportedly restricted people under 50 from leaving the country.[37] Indefinite national service has long been the main reason Eritreans leave, and a new war will add to that. But the routes out of Eritrea are narrowing.[38] The traditional first countries of refuge, Ethiopia and Sudan, are both insecure, and the border with Ethiopia might once again become a front line. This is likely to mean fewer, more dangerous and more expensive departures, with more reliance on smugglers, rather than a large and visible outflow. While, back in 2016, Eritreans were among the top nationalities of arrival in Italy, their arrivals have since dropped to relatively low numbers. As of the end of August, arrivals of Eritreans in Italy stood at 1,185, and it is unlikely these numbers will suddenly rise again because of the current hostilities.[39]

Ethiopians seeking refuge across borders

In 2020–2021, more than 60,000 Ethiopians fled to Sudan. Sudan still hosts around 63,000 Ethiopian refugees[40] and, in August, camps near the border were hit during fighting on the Ethiopian side.[41] With Sudan itself at war, it is no longer an obvious place of safety. Djibouti is the other neighbour within reach of Afar. It is a small country which is now already receiving thousands of Yemenis[42] fleeing across the Bab el-Mandeb as a result of recent fighting and shifts in territorial control along Yemen's west coast,[43] with a UNHCR operation only 27% funded.[44] So far, there are no reports of significant refugee arrivals from Ethiopia in Djibouti, Kenya or Somaliland. But if the fighting in Afar intensifies, Djibouti could face pressure from both sides at once and will struggle to cope.

The Eastern route

The so-called Eastern route out of the Horn of Africa, towards Yemen and onward to Saudi Arabia, is where the new conflict potentially links to one of the largest irregular migration corridors out of Africa. In the first quarter of 2026, IOM found that 35 percent of Ethiopians exiting Ethiopia came from Amhara and another 35 percent from Tigray, with 22 percent from Oromia.[45] In other words, around 70 percent came from the two regions now most affected by the fighting. In 2026, the route has already been busier than ever,[46] with 122,258 arrivals in Yemen between January and August 2026. Most people (88%) say they leave for economic reasons.[47] About a fifth cite conflict directly. But the war might deepen those economic pressures or add conflict as an additional driver.

So, could we expect more people on the Eastern route? It is plausible, but not certain. To reach Djibouti, many Ethiopians transit through Afar, where the situation remains volatile and the onward journey leads into a Yemen where the coast has just changed hands (even though this may rapidly change again). Two things could happen at once: more people wanting to leave, and fewer able to do so safely. That could mean shifting routes, towards Somaliland and Puntland to cross the Gulf of Aden from there, which could involve higher smuggling fees and greater risks.

36 United Nations in Ethiopia (2026) Ethiopia Launches Groundbreaking "Makatet Roadmap", Ushering in an Era of Refugee Inclusion.
37 Borkena (2025) Eritrea Mobilizes Military Reserves, Imposes Travel Restrictions Amid Rising Tensions with Ethiopia.
38 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) 4Mi Data Explorer: Drivers of migration.
39 UNHCR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Europe Sea Arrivals - Italy.
40 UNHCR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Sudan.
41 Sudan Tribune (2026) Ethiopian refugees killed as border clashes spill into Sudan camps, official says.
42 AFP (2026) UN warns of rising Yemen displacement as thousands flee to Djibouti. Al Jazeera.
43 Frouws, B. (2026) Across Bab el-Mandeb strait, Yemenis flee as migrants arrive. Mixed Migration Centre.
44 UNHCR (2026) Djibouti Funding Update 2026 (as of 30 September 2026).
45 IOM (2026) Migration along the Eastern route - Report 63 | January - March 2026, Publication: 12 August 2026.
46 Frouws, B. (2026) Across Bab el-Mandeb strait, Yemenis flee as migrants arrive. Mixed Migration Centre.
47 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) 4Mi Data Explorer: Drivers of migration.

Looking ahead

Five years ago, MMC concluded that most consequences of the Tigray war would be internal and regional, not a large movement out of the region, let alone towards Europe. That is likely to be true again. But the context is much harsher. The neighbouring countries are themselves at war or under strain, the Red Sea is a conflict zone, drought is setting in, and the humanitarian system has far less capacity than it had in 2020.

That means the main concern should not be how many people might move onwards, but the protection of those who are already displaced, stranded or trapped. That includes Ethiopians caught near the front lines, refugees in Ethiopia, and Eritrean refugees in particular, who now find themselves in a country potentially at war with a government they fled. As Crisis Group puts it, "it is not too late to avert a return to costly, bloody war".[48] For the people on the move in this region, much depends on whether that happens.

48 International Crisis Group (2026) Arresting the Dangerous Descent Back into War in Northern Ethiopia.



Interview

Border violence and migration politics: realities of the polycrisis

Within the polycrisis discourse, climate, conflict and economic uncertainty are often in the spotlight, while the weaponisation and politicisation of borders, spaces and movement are routinely neglected, argues **Ahlam Chemlali**.

Dr Ahlam Chemlali is a postdoctoral researcher and co-director of the Centre for Coercion and Accountability (CECA) at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Denmark, where she works on migration governance, border externalisation and its human consequences, specifically in North Africa and the Mediterranean region.

Polycrisis is often used to describe overlapping global shocks: climate, conflict, economic instability, democratic backsliding, etc. Where do border violence and death fit into that picture? Are they symptoms of the polycrisis or are they policy choices that predate and will outlast it?

They're both, but the emphasis matters. Border violence and, especially, migration politics have become part of the compounding polycrisis. Whether it be in conflict, climate change or economic instability, they're all drivers for migration – or migration becomes a by-product. But border violence itself is not simply a symptom of the polycrisis; it is a policy choice that predates it and will likely outlast it. What the polycrisis provides is a justification – a red thread across regions where anti-migrant sentiments are growing. That's where you have narratives of loss of control of borders and the need to fortify borders, which justify hard migration policies. And that's also where you have border control and border violence becoming part of a policy or a reaction to these polycrises. So, in a sense, it's not fringe reactions; it also becomes part of mainstream political reactions to what's happening. We know from history that when you have economic instability and political crisis, scapegoating migrants is a go-to solution for politicians, and we are seeing this in multiple places at the moment, globally.

You spent years in Tunisia interviewing not just migrants, but smugglers, gravediggers, forensic experts and coast guards. What did that range of perspectives teach you about how death at the border becomes normalised or even bureaucratised?

Talking to a variety of actors – not just migrants but also people who work on the borders, whether it be smugglers or border guards – broadened my spectrum and gave me different perspectives. But it was really eye-opening to me to find death and violence becoming integral and routine. It was going on across all the actors. It could be the coast guards who experienced death with the interceptions at sea, or the fishermen who have become unexpected frontline workers as

> **"... border violence itself is not simply a symptom of the polycrisis; it is a policy choice that predates it and will likely outlast it. What the polycrisis provides is the justification."**

they find bodies in their fishing nets, or the volunteers in southern Tunisia, like in Zarzis, a small fishing village which has become a dead zone, where there are migrant cemeteries. So, in many ways, death and violence have descended into the ordinary. They have become routine and something everyone is in touch with, in some way.

What do you think of the newly applied EU pact on asylum and migration? Do you have any views on where that's going and what it might or might not achieve?

It is a continuation of what we've been seeing for a while now, even though it's been proclaimed as a new system and a new way of working. I'm thinking particularly about the return hubs and the offshore centres in so-called 'safe' third countries. It is very much a continuation of externalisation, which has been a pillar of EU migration policy for the past three decades, outsourcing migration management and border control to third countries – from Türkiye to Tunisia, and now we're also seeing Egypt and Mauritania. I think this new pact and the adoption of the return regulation is really going to accelerate this process in many ways. It will carry more of the risk that we've already documented. Death and violence have also been outsourced and pushed further away from European borders.

> **"We know from history that when you have economic instability and political crisis, scapegoating migrants is a go-to solution for politicians, and we are seeing this in multiple places at the moment, globally."**

Do you think this is a victory for the anti-migrant right in the EU? Although they've dressed it up with appropriate language and even mentioned the protection and rights, ultimately, it's a tool for deterring and punishing migration.

Yes, it is definitely a deterrence tool. We've seen this before, with externalisation policies framed in a kind of humanitarian language and packaged as partnerships that would help rescue migrants and dismantle smuggling systems. But, in reality, we've seen the opposite. It's a policy that, by now, is well documented not to work. It's very expensive, it's inefficient and it causes a lot of harm. What's interesting is that what was considered fringe just five, 10 years ago, such as the Rwanda deal that both Denmark and the UK pursued, is now very much mainstream. And the fact that this kind of policy has become normalised is a success for the far right.

At the moment, in Denmark, you have a left-leaning government that has quite a strict migration policy, in contrast to Spain, where they also have a socialist, left-leaning leadership which has decided to take a very different approach to migration.

They are diametrical opposites. Spain has regularised, or at least received applications from almost a million people. Their prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, has been outspoken that migration is not a problem, but part of a solution. On the other side, you have Denmark and Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who has become a hardliner on migration and is pushing for asylum camps outside of Europe, even aligning herself with Giorgia Meloni in Italy. You have, really, two poles at the moment across Europe which are pulling in opposite directions with very different approaches to migration.

> **"... externalisation policies [have also been] framed in a kind of humanitarian language and packaged as partnerships that would help rescue migrants and dismantle smuggling systems. But, in reality, we've seen the opposite."**

Do you think Mette Frederiksen would have won the election if she'd taken a more open migration policy?

I think it's a combination of factors. I do think that it is a deliberate political strategy for the Social Democrats to be hard on migration – to not appear weak – which is how the far right portrays the left and the centre on this issue. So that has been a key approach for the Social Democrats for years now. Their argument is, if they don't do it, then the far right will do it, so it's better that we do it.

Your PhD thesis looks at people living and dying in transit. Can you explain what you mean by transit – not as a temporary state, but as a prolonged condition people are made to inhabit?

Transit is a very interesting term, and it's also interesting how it's being used in different ways, politically and policy-wise. First, it's not a neutral concept. So, when the EU talks about transit regions in North Africa, whether Morocco, Libya or now, increasingly, Tunisia, it also legitimises specific policies. For instance, it justifies externalisation and deportation agreements, by creating the idea that people are just

crossing en masse across these transit regions, when in reality people are stuck there for years and are in a permanent limbo condition.

That's what I wanted to look into in the PhD – what this so-called space of transit looks like on the ground and in everyday life. Of course, people are also moving, but people are also increasingly stuck. So it is a paradox to call it a transit country. It's also instrumentalised politically. President Kais Saied in Tunisia uses the transit label to negotiate economic and trade deals with the EU and the EU, in turn, justifies the deal they made in 2023 by categorising Tunisia as a transit country.

> **"... what was considered fringe just five, 10 years ago, such as the Rwanda deal that both Denmark and the UK pursued, is now very much mainstream. And the fact that this kind of policy has become normalised is a success for the far right."**

You've argued that constant physical risk can feel more tolerable to migrants than the uncertainty of being stuck. What does this tell us about how we should be measuring the human cost of externalisation policies beyond death counts?

In my own work, I developed the concept of 'felt externalisation' as a way to measure what is actually felt and what policy metrics miss. It captures what I call the ripple effects of externalisation, the harm and suffering that unfold far from the actual border, what takes place in camps deep inside the country or in urban spaces where there is no border guard and no state. There's this abandonment of people who live in a legal vacuum or no-man's-land because Tunisia has no national framework on migration or asylum. So people are very much just left to themselves. What I encountered several times with many of the migrants, both men and women, I met over the years is that the uncertainty, the waiting and the feeling of being in limbo, of living a life on hold, was far worse than what they had experienced in Libyan detention centres where they had been exposed to systematic torture and violence. I had an encounter in Medenine, a marginalised, very poor region in southern Tunisia, where migrant women who had been in Libyan detention and crossed the Mediterranean were brought after being intercepted by the Tunisian Coast Guard. They were housed in these shelters from IOM and UNHCR, but they had been there for two or three years. They described themselves as living dead and that this was not a life, that Tunisia was a hidden hell. Many of them actually wanted to go back to Libya to cross again. When I heard it for the first time, I found it hard to believe. Why would you want to go back to a place where you were tortured, kidnapped and raped? But they explained that it was even worse to be stuck in these shelters with their asylum cases rejected or pending for years. That really made me think a lot about the effects and impacts of these policies: how do we measure waiting, limbo or uncertainty? This is a kind of slow violence that is not physical but structural: it will confine you and make you feel like you don't have any control over your life or future. It is a very felt consequence, which is how I developed the concept 'felt externalisation'.

Given that the migration routes are so perilous and the impact on people is so harsh, did you come across migrants who just wanted to go home?

There was a moment, in Tunisia especially, after Kais Saied's infamous speech in 2023 about the Great Replacement theory and how black migrants, especially black women and mothers, were recast as this hyper-fertile demographic threat, which intensified xenophobic migrant attacks and violence. People were expelled from their homes and there was really nothing for them. In the aftermath of that, many considered returning, especially the Ivorian community there, because that is the biggest migrant community in Tunisia and they have a long history there. They often come to settle and work or study. But then, realising that reality had shifted in Tunisia and that there was no security anymore, many of them decided to go back. There was a lot of repatriation in the following months because of the increase in violence and attacks on migrants from various West African countries.

Do you think there's a risk that framing the situation as a polycrisis lets policymakers treat border deaths as an unfortunate by-product of turbulent times rather than a foreseeable outcome of specific policies? And how do you push back on that in your own work, if you do?

That's a good question. I think we have seen that way of thinking for a while, blaming the landscape or the environment, saying that the Sahara or the Mediterranean kill people by definition, because it's a sea or it's a desert, so it's an inherent risk. We see this in other settings, such as at the US-Mexico border, where the Sonoran Desert becomes a hostile landscape. In reality, though, it's policies that weaponise these landscapes into hostile terrain. I try to push back against this idea that it's these spaces that kill, or that they are even elements of the 'polycrisis'. Take climate change, for example. I met many who arrived in Tunisia because their harvest had failed for the third year in a row, with no options left, compounded by economic instability. But what really kills people at sea are the policies at sea. The EU-funded Libyan and Tunisian Coast Guards are intercepting or even pushing people into their deaths and many policies have removed rescue boats or prevented rescue ships from operating at sea. There's the legitimation of authoritarian leaders amid conflict

and rising authoritarianism, and these very policies create a lot of this violence and a lot of these deaths.

When it's so clear that migrants are needed in the workforce in so many countries around the world, why is the issue of migration experiencing such controversial salience and resistance?

I think that's the interesting ongoing paradox in migration. It was refreshing to hear Pedro Sánchez frame migration as part of a solution, especially demographically, as Europe will, in the near future, be lacking a workforce in several sectors. Spain is also very pragmatic. It's not just humane or moral. There is an economic incentive to do that. To do otherwise is actually counterintuitive. In Denmark, for example, there are Syrian, Afghan and Iranian refugee women who are ready to work as nurses or carers, but the state would prefer to import nurses from Nepal or the Philippines. The state will go a long way to avoid looking weak to the far right. In that logic, a Filipino nurse is preferable to a Syrian one, which is absurd.

Finally, looking at aspects of the global polycrisis and trends in relation to migration and asylum, do you think things will get better or worse? Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Unfortunately, these days I'm a pessimist, though I'd love to be an optimist. Looking at the situation, we're not going in the right direction, at least politically; the people currently in charge aren't pulling the right way. Still, I'm hopeful: you could call me a pessimistic hopeful, or a hopeful pessimist!

> **"I try to push back against this idea that it's these spaces [seas, deserts, etc.] that kill or that they are even elements of the 'polycrisis'. ... what really kills people at sea are the policies at sea."**

Leaving Niger for Burkina Faso: searching for security



I come from Dosso, a small village in Niger. I worked there cultivating millet, rice and beans. Farming became difficult because there was no rainfall. The situation kept getting worse. I wasn't planning on leaving until armed bandits attacked our village. I wanted to stay in Niger and continue farming.

The bandits killed many people and stole money and livestock. I no longer felt safe there, so I fled to Niamey, our capital, where I hoped to be able to find work, but unfortunately it didn't happen. Eventually, I decided to leave Niger because some friends said I could find work in Burkina Faso and I thought going there could offer both safety and a chance to improve my situation.

The journey to Burkina Faso

I initially planned to go directly to Burkina Faso. However, I was told that the border had become dangerous because of the presence of armed groups. I changed my route and, instead, passed through Benin and Togo before reaching Burkina Faso. This was a longer journey, but I didn't want to take any risks.

I have now been in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, for three months.

The journey to get here was expensive, as we had to pay bribes at every checkpoint and border crossing. These were handled by a smuggler who coordinated the journey between the driver and the authorities. The border between Niger and Benin remains closed so we had to use a smuggler to cross by pirogue [a small, flat-bottomed boat]. I didn't think I would ever need to use a smuggler because I thought we'd just get a normal bus and travel to Burkina Faso. Not having much money made the journey more difficult, but I was able to rely on other migrants who supported me with buying food and water.

Money is the biggest challenge

Without money, you can't buy food or water. There are days when it's difficult to eat. I also don't have a place to stay, so I sleep on the street like many other migrants. I came to Burkina Faso to hopefully find a job and start earning some money, but it hasn't happened yet. The local people, though, are good; there is no discrimination towards migrants, and I have good relationships with them.

My goal is to reach Gaoua, where most of my friends live and work at gold mining sites. That's what I hope to do as well, but right now I have no money to make the journey there. I also don't have a residence permit to stay in Burkina Faso; I only have my Nigerien ID card, but people have been telling me that you don't need a permit to work in the gold mines.

I feel safer in Burkina Faso than in Niger. Back home, we were always worried about bandits attacking our village, whereas that doesn't happen here. In Burkina Faso, seeing the army on the streets makes me feel safer and, so far, I haven't experienced any security problems.

We help each other

Even though right now I have no money, I receive help from other migrants and from my friends, and sometimes from Burkinabe people. They share food and water and give me money if I need help. They also give me information on routes and work opportunities. So far, I haven't been in contact with any NGOs or other organisations for support.

I also try to help other migrants when I can by sharing food, water and money. We try to help each other because many of us are facing the same difficulties. When people are travelling together, they often share what they have. Without one another's help, the whole journey becomes much harder.

My longer-term goal is to reach Adjamé in Côte d'Ivoire, but right now I don't have enough money for the journey. What I want most is to find work and earn money to support myself and maybe my family. I also want to live somewhere peaceful, where I don't feel in danger, where I can focus on building my future.

No alternatives or opportunities

Migration is already very difficult, and I don't think that will change soon. You leave your home because of violence, then during the trip you face many problems. People leave because they feel they have no other choice or alternative: if one route becomes too dangerous or difficult, they will look for another, just as I had to travel through Benin and Togo instead of taking the direct route to Burkina Faso.

Reaching your destination does not mean the challenges are over. You still need to find work, food, and a place to stay. For me, having access to work would make the biggest difference, because it would allow me to pay for my basic needs and rely less on others. I also think it is important for people to hear migrants' stories and understand why they move.



The Middle East

Overview

Peter Grant

While the Middle East has contended for years with some of the largest displacement crises in the world, the outbreak of conflict in Iran and Lebanon risks creating new patterns of insecurity and upheaval in the region. In Gaza, too, a ceasefire brokered in October 2025 has not brought an end to the mass displacement of almost the entire Palestinian population. Even in Syria, where millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned home since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, many others are still unable to do so due to the continued challenges the country faces. In the Gulf, meanwhile, the brunt of repeated Iranian attacks has been borne disproportionately by its marginalised migrant workforce.

Iran conflict

On 28 February 2026, around nine months after the end of previous hostilities in June 2025, the US and Israel launched joint air strikes against Iran. The ensuing attacks have not only created massive upheaval within Iran itself, with knock-on effects in neighbouring countries due to cross-border displacement, but also brought conflict and instability to the wider region.[1] In addition to Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Iran and its armed allies, including the Houthis in Yemen, have carried out attacks against a number of states including Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman.

Displacement in Iran

The outbreak of the conflict against **Iran** has led to the displacement of up to 3.2 million Iranians and numerous Afghan refugees and migrants in the immediate aftermath.[2] In response, many moved towards border areas, while others migrated to Tehran despite the repeated attacks being carried out against the capital.[3] In the central and southern provinces, meanwhile, where much of Iran's military and industrial hardware is situated, population numbers steadily reduced.[4]

In addition to thousands of Afghan nationals who have left Iran in the wake of the conflict, with many facing increasing hostility and scapegoating, thousands of Iranians had crossed into neighbouring countries as of 7 September.[5] Notwithstanding the fact that some of this movement appeared to be temporary, with many Iranians crossing into Iran from neighbouring countries during the same period (though it is not known how many of these were returnees from the cohort who had left after 28 February), this movement raised concerns in neighbouring countries and even as far as Europe about the possibility of large-scale displacement.[6] However, despite reports that Türkiye was considering the creation of a buffer zone to contain arrivals, a drop in the number of Iranians crossing into the country in the wake of the conflict was attributed to increased exit restrictions imposed by Iranian authorities. While the majority of those internally displaced after the initial outbreak of conflict had returned by early July, some 123,600 residential properties and 24,400 commercial units had been damaged,[7] more than 3,400 civilians killed and over 33,000 injured in the fighting.[8]

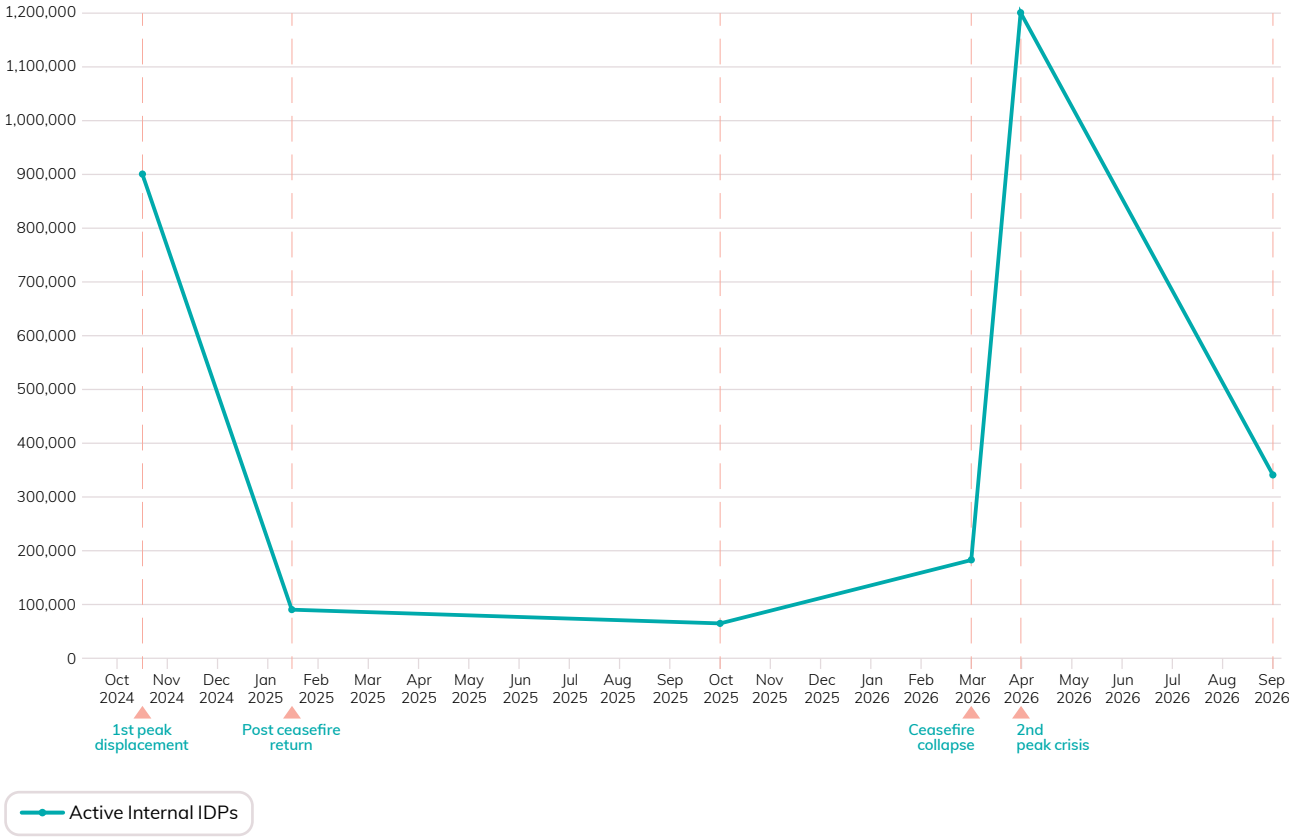
Conflict in Lebanon

In parallel to the conflict with Iran, in response to attacks by Hezbollah on 2 March, **Israel** carried out large-scale aerial bombing against the group in southern **Lebanon** before launching a land invasion. Israel's military campaign has led to the devastation of housing, schools, and clinics, in the process displacing more than 1 million people and killing hundreds of civilians, including foreign migrant workers (see Emerging perspectives essay: *Polycrisis without protection: migrant responses*

1 Middle East Council on Global Affairs (2026) A Region at Capacity: War, Displacement, and the Limits of Humanitarian Response in the Middle East.
2 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR: Up to 3.2 million Iranians temporarily displaced in Iran as conflict intensifies.
3 Rowe, F., Cabrera, C. and Pietrostefani, E. (2026) Where Iranians are going under fire – a real-time picture of displacement. The Conversation.
4 Rowe, F., Cabrera, C. and Pietrostefani, E. (2026) Where Iranians are going under fire – a real-time picture of displacement. The Conversation.
5 Latifi, A.M. and Rahimi, F. (2026) Afghans in Iran are fleeing bombs, and Iranian crackdowns. The New Humanitarian; UNHCR (2026) Middle East Situation.
6 Eshanova, Z. (2026) Fears of Iranian refugee influx grow in Central Asia as war intensifies. RFERL; Cokelaere, H. (2026) EU fears Iran war will put new migration rules to the test. Politico.
7 OHCA (2026) Islamic Republic of Iran: Humanitarian Update No. 06 | As of 30 June 2026.
8 OHCA (2026) Islamic Republic of Iran: Humanitarian Update No. 06 | As of 30 June 2026.

in Lebanon, p. 148).[9] As of 23 July, there have been 4,329 confirmed fatalities and 12,233 injuries since the outbreak of the conflict, including 349 fatalities and 229 injuries since a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah was reached on 19 June.[10] While the number of internally displaced increased from 183,000 at the start of March when the conflict resumed to almost 1.21 million by mid-April, amounting to a fifth of the country's population, the total had fallen to 360,100 by 29 July, with around 821,000 people having returned to their communities.[11]

Graphic 1. Lebanon internal displacement and returns 2024-2026



Source: IOM DTM Lebanon

Nevertheless, as of July, when the UN Human Rights Council condemned the "devastating and disproportionate toll" communities were still suffering as a result of the violence,[12] thousands of civilians were still unable to return. This is due not only to the thousands of air strikes that Israeli forces have continued to carry out against targets in Lebanon,[13] but also to the controversial issuance of blanket "evacuation orders". At times covering as much as 14 percent of Lebanon's territory, these directives have effectively rendered whole towns inaccessible to their residents.[14] The UN Human Rights Council again highlighted that evacuation should only be an "exceptional and strictly temporary measure" and not deployed "to depopulate and occupy areas".[15] Large areas of southern Lebanon have been designated by Israeli forces as a "buffer zone" which has been used to justify the destruction of entire settlements near the border and the occupation of as much as 6 percent of Lebanon's territory, including valuable offshore gas reserves.[16] While talks between Israel and Lebanon in early August raised hopes that more displaced Lebanese could return,[17] reports also emerged accusing Israel of deliberately starting wildfires in forested areas of southern Lebanon which have destroyed villages and swathes of productive farmland.[18]

9 OHCHR (2026) Deaths and displacement in Lebanon (2–22 March 2026); Salhani, J. (2026) 'Food is unifying': How Lebanon's migrants are feeding the war-displaced. Al Jazeera
10 OCHA (2026) Lebanon: Flash Update #46 - Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon (as of 23 July 2026).
11 MSF (2026) What to know about the crisis in Lebanon; IOM (2026) Lebanon — Mobility Snapshot - Round 110 - 30 July 2026.
12 United Nations (2026) Thousands prevented from returning home to southern Lebanon.
13 The Times of Israel (2026) Lebanese PM says Israel has bombed Lebanon nearly 3,500 times during ceasefire.
14 OHCHR (2026) UN report on deaths and displacement in Lebanon.
15 United Nations (2026) Thousands prevented from returning home to southern Lebanon.
16 Zafirov, M. M. (2026) Israel and the new reality of buffer zones. Atlantic Council; Gowayed, H. (2026) Israel's War of Displacement in Lebanon. Arab Center Washington DC; Durie, A.M. (2026) Is Israel's 'buffer zone' inside Lebanon an attempt to grab gas reserves? Al Jazeera
17 Le Monde (2026) More than 800,000 displaced Lebanese returning home after war, says UN.
18 Christou, W. (2026) Israel deliberately starting wildfires in southern Lebanon, firefighters say. The Guardian.

Gaza and the West Bank

In response to an attack by the nationalist political and military organisation Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023, resulting in the deaths of up to 1,200 people and the abduction of 251 others, including children, the Israeli government initiated a massive military operation in Gaza, with the stated objective of dismantling Hamas and rescuing the hostages. However, the conflict quickly evolved into a more far-reaching and indiscriminate offensive which has displaced around 90 percent of the population, in many cases multiple times, and exacted a catastrophic toll on tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians. At the same time, the conflict has contributed to an increasingly hostile environment in the West Bank, where Palestinian communities have been subjected to an uptick in violence and evictions.

Gaza's crisis continues despite ceasefire

As of 5 August 2026, according to the Palestinian health ministry, 73,381 men, women and children had been killed and 174,231 injured as a result of the conflict in **Gaza**.[19] Of these, 1,245 were killed and 4,121 others injured since a ceasefire was agreed on 10 October 2025, with the Israeli military continuing to carry out numerous aerial assaults in Gaza, including the targeting of civilian infrastructure such as temporary schools.[20] While the "second phase" of the ceasefire was announced on 30 July 2026, with Hamas agreeing to disarm its forces in return for an end to Israeli attacks and the withdrawal of Israeli forces, air strikes continued in the days after with even greater intensity.[21] Among other targets, residential housing and medical warehouses were destroyed in these assaults.[22] In addition, civilians are also at risk of killings and torture at the hands of Hamas-affiliated forces[23] and Israeli-backed armed gangs.[24]

Independent estimates have suggested that the true death toll could be significantly higher: while the health ministry's figures mean that more than one in 10 of the population have been either killed or wounded as a direct result of the fighting, if indirect fatalities due to hunger and disease are also included then the total number is likely to be much greater.[25] The humanitarian situation in Gaza has shown little sign of improvement since the formal lifting of Israel's blockade, with continued restrictions on fuel and equipment impairing the provision of life-saving assistance and the operation of basic infrastructure such as water wells.[26] The widespread destruction of health facilities and the absence of adequate sanitation has contributed to mass outbreaks of chickenpox, scabies and lice among the population.[27]

Territorial rezoning threatens to create lasting division and displacement in Gaza

In addition to the damage or destruction of the majority of homes in Gaza since the conflict began, a further barrier to return for the estimated 1.7 million people still displaced is the fact that around 70 percent of Gaza's territory remains off-limits to Palestinians due to the creation of vast Israel-controlled exclusion zones[28] separated by a continuously shifting 'yellow line'. While the arrangement was originally established as a temporary buffer area, Israeli forces remain entrenched in the area. This situation has paved the way for the proposed creation of an internationally managed 'green zone', where any future reconstruction would be concentrated, and a 'red zone' (currently under Hamas control) which would be largely excluded from aid and development assistance.[29] The controversial Board of Peace set up by US president Donald Trump to replace the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has also endorsed a plan to create "Hamas-free humanitarian zones" where Palestinians would be transferred into temporary facilities overseen by multinational forces.[30]

With almost all of the civilian population currently concentrated in the 'red zone', including Gaza City and other major urban centres, the apparent aim of this configuration is to encourage the mass resettlement of the Palestinian population from Gaza's densely populated coastal strip.[31] Critics have argued that these proposals risk creating lasting ghettoisation in Gaza itself, in effect forcibly displacing large numbers of Palestinians

19 Younis, J. and Altawell, L. (2026) Israel kills 4 more Palestinians in Gaza as death toll reaches 73,381. Anadolu Ajansi.
20 OCHA (2026) Humanitarian Situation Report | 3 July 2026.
21 Al Jazeera (2026) Palestine weekly: Israel kills dozens in Gaza after Hamas disarmament deal.
22 Al Jazeera (2026) Palestine weekly: Israel kills dozens in Gaza after Hamas disarmament deal.
23 United Nations (2026) Palestinians face systematic abuse by Israeli settlers and Hamas alike: Independent investigators.
24 Humaid, M. (2026) Civilians under fire by gangs in Gaza: What happened in Maghazi? Al Jazeera.
25 The Watson School of International and Public Affairs (2025) The Human Toll of the Gaza War: Direct and Indirect Death from 7 October 2023 to 3 October 2025.
26 United Nations (2026) Middle East: Civilian death toll climbs in Gaza, Lebanon and West Bank as UN chief demands 'the fighting must stop'.
27 IMEMC (2026) Gaza records 9,300 contagious skin infections in two weeks.
28 OCHA (2026) Humanitarian Situation Report | 3 July 2026; Hayom, I. Middle East Eye (2026) 'Board of Peace' to launch 'Hamas-free' camps as Israel tightens grip on Gaza.
29 Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2025) US plan in Gaza: Forced ghettoisation, annexation, mass detention, resource plunder.
30 Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2026) Board of Peace's exclusion of UNRWA role in Gaza, attempt to undermine UN mandate and Palestinian refugee rights; Middle East Eye (2026) 'Board of Peace' to launch 'Hamas-free' camps as Israel tightens grip on Gaza.
31 Graham-Harrison, E. (2025) US military planning for divided Gaza with 'green zone' secured by international and Israeli troops. The Guardian.

while undermining any prospect of a just political settlement.[32] The Israel-backed Green Rafah project, announced in August 2026, is a case in point. Focused on the provision of temporary housing and an intensely securitised environment for anyone entering the area, the proposal has been condemned by Palestinian activists who fear that it sets a troubling blueprint for the reconstruction of Gaza.[33] Instead of reconstructing the existing fabric of the territory, the creation of self-contained and heavily controlled enclaves risks creating a permanent landscape of segregation and disempowerment. At the same time, a post-conflict 'master plan' has been proposed which focuses on the real estate opportunities offered by its devastated beachfront, with little reference to Gaza's ancient cities and millennia of heritage.[34]

Displacement expands to new areas in the West Bank as more settlements approved

Since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza, violence in the West Bank has also escalated dramatically, with 1,122 Palestinians killed in the **West Bank** since October 2023, including 76 in 2026 as of 24 July.[35] The majority of these attacks have been carried out by the Israeli military or residents of illegal settlements[36] who, in many cases, have carried out their attacks as part of a wider programme of intimidation and harassment to uproot Palestinian communities permanently from their territory.[37] These attacks, in addition to reports of beatings, sexual assault, abductions and sieges by masked assailants,[38] have also involved the systematic destruction of vital assets including agricultural equipment, irrigation systems, wells, electricity networks and other infrastructure essential to their survival.[39] The aim of these attacks is to force Palestinians permanently from their homes, with families in communities such as Jalud and Qusra subjected to prolonged sieges over the summer in what one former prime minister of Israel described as a "concerted and meticulous attempt at ethnic cleansing".[40] Troublingly, settlers appear to have expanded their operations during 2026 from the territory known as Area C – about 61 percent of West Bank territory originally earmarked by the international community for eventual Palestinian control and where, until recently, the majority of violence occurred – to Areas A and B, the 'islands' of territory under partial control of the Palestinian National Authority. Many residents, having already been displaced there as a result of previous attacks on their communities, are now contending with an uptick in activity as settler groups seek to establish 'outposts' in key locations there.[41]

Their campaign of intimidation is enabled by widespread impunity for the perpetrators, with attacks often carried out in the presence of Israeli security forces. In addition, the approval of numerous new settlements in the West Bank by the Israeli government[42] emboldens their activities elsewhere. The announcement of 13 new settlements in July 2026, further fragmenting Palestinian territory, was hailed by Israel's far-right finance minister Bezalel Smotrich as "a revolution in settlement expansion".[43] This culminated the following month with the settlement of Ganim, an area first evacuated in 2005 as part of Israel's disengagement plan, with the official endorsement of the minister himself; a process that has already resulted in the demolition of nearby homes and threatens to cut off access between surrounding Palestinian communities.[44]

The Israeli government also continued its longstanding programme of evictions in the West Bank, concentrated particularly in Eastern Jerusalem and Area C. In the neighbourhood of al-Bustan, for instance, demolitions of Palestinian properties continued in 2026 as part of a planned redevelopment of the area into a biblically-inspired park, The King's Garden.[45] Israeli authorities also carried out numerous confiscations and evictions elsewhere in the West Bank, destroying agricultural infrastructure and leaving families homeless.[46] Israeli authorities have long maintained a policy of selectively withholding planning approval – for instance, in 2025 just seven percent of new housing approvals were

32 Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2025) US plan in Gaza: forced ghettoisation, annexation, mass detention, resource plunder.
33 Mansour, M. (2026) Israel's 'Green Rafah' plan aims to fragment Gaza, experts say. Al Jazeera
34 Haddad, M. and Mansour, M. (2026) Map shows what would happen to Gaza under the US 'master plan'. Al Jazeera.
35 UNRWA (2026) UNRWA situation report #231 on the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.
36 United Nations (2025) Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the occupied Syrian Golan (A/RES/80/81) – General Assembly Resolution.
37 NRC (2026) West Bank: Settler violence forces Palestinians from their homes into worsening conditions.
38 Saifi, Z., Diamond, J. and Theophilos, C. (2025). Savage beatings and dying trees: How West Bank settler violence is impacting Palestinians' olive harvest. CNN; CBC (2026) Palestinian man says Israeli settlers sexually assaulted him in front of his family; United Nations (2026) Palestinians face systematic abuse by Israeli settlers and Hamas alike: Independent investigators; Knell, Y. (2026) Israeli settlers besieging Palestinian families in West Bank village. BBC.
39 OCHA (2026) Humanitarian Situation Report 3 July 2026.
40 Golan, M. (2026) Settlers Besiege Palestinian Family in West Bank Town for Over Two Weeks, Despite IDF Presence. Haaretz; Graham-Harrison, E. (2026) Israeli troops force families from homes amid settler terror campaign in West Bank. The Guardian.
41 Beaumont, P. and Kiersezenbaum, Q. (2026) Israeli settler attacks shift focus to West Bank areas under direct Palestinian rule. The Guardian.
42 Khalil, S. and Moench, M. (2025) Israel approves 19 new settlements in occupied West Bank. BBC.
43 Al Jazeera (2026) Israel's Smotrich declares 'revolution' in West Bank settlement expansion.
44 Altawell, L. (2026) Israeli occupiers reestablish illegal Ganim settlement near Jenin in West Bank after 21 years. Anadola Ajansi.
45 Knell, Y. (2026) 'They destroyed the future': Palestinian anger at rise in Israeli demolitions in East Jerusalem. BBC.
46 B'Tselem (2026) Demolitions and confiscations in communities facing expulsion.

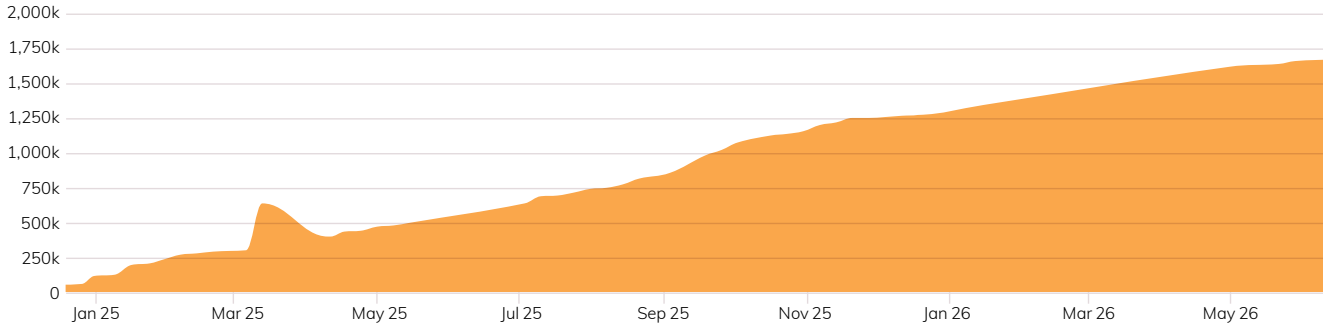
for Palestinians, despite them constituting around 40 percent of the population as a whole[47] – and often framed construction in Palestinian communities as "illegal" as a pretext for their demolition. In the first seven months of 2026 alone, around 700 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 170 in East Jerusalem were destroyed for lacking official permits.[48] This continued in August with the destruction by Israeli authorities of dozens of homes near Jenin.[49] Israeli forces have also continued to destroy the homes of relatives of anyone accused of attacking Israelis, a policy amounting to collective punishment.[50] As of August, around 3,800 Palestinians, including a significant proportion of children, had been displaced during 2026 as a result of Israeli demolitions and settler attacks.[51]

The Israeli military has also imposed significant restrictions on refugees in the West Bank, including residents of camps in Jenin, Tulkham and Nur Shams. Since January 2025, 33,000 refugees from these areas have been displaced and unable to return due to the imposition of 'closure areas' which severely constrain their ability to enter or leave. On 29 July, Israeli authorities again extended these restrictions until 20 August (Jenin) and 30 September (Tulkham and Nur Shams),[52] despite previous calls from the United Nations for these to be lifted.[53]

Syria

The ousting of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 ushered in a new chapter for **Syria** and its longstanding crisis, more than 13 years after the outbreak of civil war. Prior to his fall, almost 13 million people were either internally displaced or living as refugees, the majority within the region. Since then, more than 3 million Syrian IDPs and refugees have been able to return home,[54] though ongoing insecurity, lack of services and continued governance challenges mean that a safe and dignified return for many is still not possible. The situation is further complicated by the knock-on effects of conflict in Lebanon. Despite these difficulties, neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan, where millions of Syrians are still based, as well as Germany and other host countries in Europe, have become increasingly vocal in their call for large-scale returns in the near future.

Graphic 2. Number of Syria returnees since December 2024 (cross border returns)

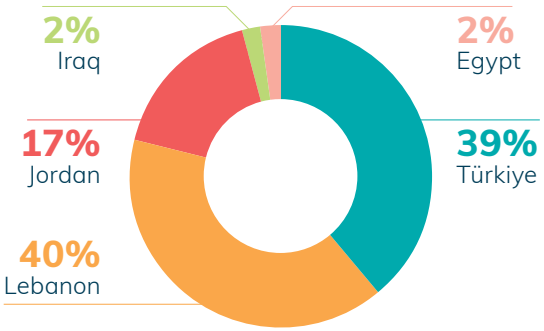


Graph indicates cumulative returns.

1,682,041
cross-border returnees
December 2024 – June 2026

1,958,968
IDP returnees as of June 2026

Breakdown by country of return



Sources: UNHCR Operational Data Portal Syrian Arab Republic; UNHCR Comprehensive Overview of Refugee Returns Dashboard; UNHCR Comprehensive Overview of IDPs and IDP Returns Dashboard.

47 Knell, Y. (2026) 'They destroyed the future': Palestinian anger at rise in Israeli demolitions in East Jerusalem. BBC.
48 OCHA (2026) Humanitarian Situation Report | 7 August 2026.
49 Arnaout, A.R. and Altawell, A. (2026) Israel begins demolition of 26 Palestinian buildings near Jenin to pave way for illegal settlement. Anadola Ajansi.
50 Al Jazeera (2026) Israeli raids, arrests continue as UN warns West Bank at 'breaking point'.
51 Knell, Y. (2026) Israeli settlers besieging Palestinian families in West Bank village. BBC.
52 OCHA (2026) Humanitarian Situation Report 7 August 2026.
53 Petra (2026) UN Urges Israel to Lift Movement Restrictions in West Bank Refugee Camps.
54 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR's Salih urges global solidarity as Syria reaches pivotal moment for return and recovery.

The challenge of return

As of August 2026, around 1.77 million Syrian refugees, including well over 400,000 in 2026 alone, had returned to their home country.[55] Of these, 40 percent were from Lebanon (706,128), 39 percent from Türkiye (695,836), and 17 percent from Jordan (294,313), with smaller numbers from Iraq (41,734), Egypt (27,970) and other countries (6,772).[56] This is despite the fact that conditions within much of Syria remain extremely difficult, characterised by the lack of basic services, badly damaged housing and little in the way of assistance to support immediate or long-term development needs.[57] The situation remains complex and rapidly evolving: while returnees may to some extent be choosing to do so voluntarily on the basis of improved perceptions of the situation in Syria itself, particularly in certain parts of the country,[58] many returns are driven in large part by the increasing legal and social pressures they face in host countries.[59] This includes, since 2 March 2026, the ongoing hostilities between Israeli forces and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. While 153,087 arrivals from Lebanon had been detected in Syria as of 27 April since the conflict began, by 10 August an estimated 29,467 had returned to Lebanon, leaving a total of 123,620 arrivals: of these, the majority (99 percent) were Syrians, with a small minority (less than one percent) of Lebanese nationals.[60] In many host countries, refugees continue to find themselves in a limbo between remaining and returning when neither is a readily available option. In **Jordan**, for instance, while the reception of refugees has been relatively open compared to some other countries, full integration has not been an option for most Syrians yet return has continued to be out of reach, leaving refugees in a situation where they are 'permanently provisional'.[61]

In addition, as of August 2026, two million IDPs had returned, with almost half of these concentrated in Aleppo (507,000) and Idlib (436,400).[62] However, around 5.54 million remain displaced across the country, including almost a quarter (24%) in formal IDP camps.[63] Returns have also been postponed by renewed outbreaks of insecurity or fighting in different parts of the country. In August 2026, for instance, reports emerged that thousands of Syrian Kurds had had to postpone their return due to attacks by armed groups.[64] Even in a best-case scenario, it could take years before all the country's displaced can return safely, sustainably and with dignity.[65] With the country requiring an estimated USD 216 billion in funding for reconstruction and some 15.6 million people still in need of humanitarian assistance, United Nations officials have emphasised that large-scale returns must be rights-based and take place within a broader context of improved governance, security and rule of law.[66]

Realising a durable solution for Syria's displaced

One potentially promising strand in facilitating Syria's recovery is the government's proposed Syria Without Camps programme. With the stated aim of resolving the internal displacement crisis by the end of 2027 and providing the estimated 1 million Syrians still living in tents with alternative housing solutions,[67] the initiative has already garnered a USD 1.5 billion grant from Saudi Arabia, interest from the World Bank and UNHCR.[68] The proposal comes at a crucial moment for Syria, against a backdrop of dwindling humanitarian assistance, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees warning that without concerted international support a "historic opportunity" for Syria and the wider region to recover will be lost.[69] By August, there were already reports of convoys of displaced families returning voluntarily under the programme.[70]

Importantly, the policy seeks to move away from emergency camp-based humanitarian programming to longer-term development, focused on the provision of services, shelter and livelihood training in areas of return. This will be crucial

55 UNHCR (2025) Syrian Arab Republic - UNHCR operational update - Dec 2025; UNHCR (2026) Comprehensive Overview of Refugee Returns: Syrian Arab Republic as of 13 August 2026.
56 UNHCR (2026) Comprehensive Overview of Refugee Returns: Syrian Arab Republic as of 13 August 2026.
57 International Rescue Committee (2026) Millions of Syrians are returning home to communities lacking water, electricity and other essential services, new IRC research finds.
58 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Return and reintegration in Syria: home under strain.
59 International Rescue Committee (2026) Millions of Syrians are returning home to communities lacking water, electricity and other essential services, new IRC research finds.
60 IOM (2026) Syrian Arab Republic — Emergency Mobility Tracking and Cross Border Monitoring Situation Update — Round 19 (10 August 2026).
61 SWP (2026) Dauerhaft provisorisch – Syrische Flüchtlinge in Jordanien.
62 UNHCR (2026) Comprehensive overview of IDPs and IDP returns dashboard: Syrian Arab Republic as of 13 August 2026.
63 UNHCR (2026) Comprehensive Overview of Refugee Returns: Syrian Arab Republic as of 13 August 2026.
64 Al-Monitor (2026) Return of displaced Syrian Kurds to hometown suspended after violence.
65 UNHCR (2025) Coming home: One year into Syria's transition.
66 OHCHR (2026) Syria has historic opportunity to transform displacement into recovery, needs global support: UN expert.
67 Daily Sabah (2026) Syria, UN step up efforts to implement 'Syria Without Camps'.
68 Rebuilding Syria (2026) Syria Finalising Transfer Details for USD 1.5 Billion Saudi Grant Tied to 'Syria Without Camps' Initiative; Arab News (2026) Syria, World Bank discuss banking, economic reform agenda; UNHCR (2026) UNHCR's Salih urges global solidarity as Syria reaches pivotal moment for return and recovery.
69 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR's Salih urges global solidarity as Syria reaches pivotal moment for return and recovery.
70 Asharq Al-Awsat (2026) 106 Families Return to Hama Countryside Under Syria's 'No Camps' Initiative.

to ensuring the sustainability and impact of the programme: simply closing displacement camps, without ensuring viable conditions for return, will provide no durable solution for those currently displaced.[71] Indeed, concerns have been raised about how feasible it would be to realise these plans in practice, given the complex and wide-ranging needs returnees face besides housing, including safety, reintegration and economic security. In practice, this may mean adopting a more phased approach to closures, beginning first with the smallest and most vulnerable camps.[72]

Increasing pressures in host countries

Following years of increasing restrictions towards Syrian refugees in host countries, the end of the Assad regime in Syria has given added impetus to governments pushing for large-scale returns of Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, where Syrians have long experienced social discrimination, legal uncertainty and the constant threat of harassment by security forces,[73] authorities sought to encourage returns by suspending exit taxes and overstay penalties until June 2026.[74] Syrian refugees have already been acutely affected by previous economic and political emergencies in the country, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the catastrophic 2020 port explosion in Beirut and protracted inflation. The outbreak of fighting in the south of the country, initiated by Israel in response to attacks by the armed group Hezbollah, has similarly left them vulnerable. In addition to numerous conflict-related deaths and injuries,[75] the war has left many Syrians with no choice but to leave Lebanon.[76] While the economic contribution of Syrians to the Lebanese economy has often been undervalued, their mass departure could leave Lebanon with serious labour shortages in agriculture and other vital sectors.[77]

While **Türkiye** hosts the largest Syrian population of any country, the number of Syrian refugees resident there has fallen by almost 39 percent between 2021 and 2026.[78] The government is reportedly working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to develop a comprehensive voluntary returns strategy which will extend beyond the journey itself to encompass pre-departure preparation and post-arrival integration.[79] Ahead of this, Turkish authorities have passed a number of measures which appear to have been designed to pressure Syrians to return, including the rescinding of free health care for refugees.[80] At the same time, however, the departure of significant numbers of Syrians since the end of 2024 has also highlighted their importance to the Turkish workforce as labour shortages have emerged in their wake.[81] In June 2026, the government announced it would be exempting the more than 2 million Syrian nationals with temporary protection status from work permit requirements.[82] The move will enable Syrian workers – the majority of whom have been forced to work irregularly because they lacked the relevant documentation – to enter formal employment.

Beyond the Middle East, host governments in Europe have also become increasingly vocal in their calls for returns of Syrian refugees. In **Germany**, home to the largest Syrian population outside the Middle East, Chancellor Friedrich Merz has stated that up to 80 percent of the country's Syrian refugees could leave in the next three years.[83] **Sweden**, meanwhile, host to the second largest Syrian population in Europe, has made the return of Syrian nationals with criminal convictions a precondition of its provision of humanitarian aid to Syria.[84] From the beginning of 2026, the government has also been offering anyone with a residency permit, including refugees and non-EU immigrants, a one-off payment of USD 37,000 to return voluntarily to their countries of origin.[85]

Migrant workers in the Gulf

Most of the Gulf states remain heavily dependent on foreign workers, predominantly from South and Southeast Asia as well as the Horn of Africa, for key sectors such as construction and domestic work. Despite this reliance, however, migrant labourers continue to be marginalised within their host countries, often subjected to exploitation or forced to work long hours in potentially life-threatening conditions. In particular, recent research by Human Rights Watch has documented the hazards they face from working in extreme heat, with limited protections in place to mitigate these threats.[86]

71 Arab News (2026) Syrian leader receives UN refugee chief in Damascus.
72 Al-Estiklal (2026) Closing Camps and Rebuilding Syria: A Realistic Goal or an Impossible Challenge?
73 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review 2023: Regional issues through regional perspectives.
74 El Zein, Y. (2026) Over 600,000 Syrian Refugees Have Left Lebanon. Nobody Knows the Economic Cost. WIRED.
75 Access Center for Human Rights (2026) Statement 2: Syrian Refugees Remain Acutely Vulnerable During Times of Crisis.
76 El Zein, Y. (2026) Over 600,000 Syrian Refugees Have Left Lebanon. Nobody Knows the Economic Cost. WIRED.
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78 Daily Sabah (2026) Syrian refugee population in Türkiye declines 38.5% in 5 years.
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84 Wallis, E. (2025) Sweden and Syria announce cooperation for returns of migrants convicted of crime. InfoMigrants.
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86 Human Rights Watch (2026) Gulf States: Migrant Workers' Heat Protections Fall Short.

Their exploitation is enabled to a large extent by the persistence of *kafala*, a so-called system of sponsorship which has entrenched inequalities between workers and their employers, leaving them with little recourse in the event of abuse or wage theft. Despite the continued passage of incremental reforms – such as **Kuwait's** introduction of amendments allowing migrant workers to transfer employers in the first year in the event of mistreatment,[87] or **Oman's** inclusion of migrant workers on its Sick and Extraordinary Leave Insurance Scheme[88] – the underlying principles of the system, privileging the preferences of employers over the needs and rights of their workforce, have persisted.

Impacts of the Iran conflict

The vulnerability of migrant workers in the Gulf is especially evident at times of crisis. This was the case during the Covid-19 outbreak, when their poor living conditions and lack of labour protections left them exposed not only to viral infection, but also to dismissal and deportation.[89] In this regard, the conflict in Iran and its impact in the wider region, including a series of drone and missile attacks against Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, among other countries, resulted in a 'pandemic redux'[90] where many migrant workers have reportedly been abandoned by their employers without pay or access to services.[91] Migrant workers whose services were no longer needed were forced to return home on 'long leave', often without due process and with backpay still owed them.[92] At the same time, other migrants found themselves unable to leave due to flight shutdowns[93] or the refusal of employers to cover their travel costs.[94] Furthermore, the official protections provided to the citizen population have also in many instances been withheld from the migrant workforce.[95] In **Bahrain**, for instance, migrant workers have been excluded from a national welfare programme to compensate for wage losses in the wake of the conflict, despite many having contributed to the emergency fund for years.[96]

These inequalities are starkly illustrated by the disproportionate number of migrants among conflict-related fatalities in the region, particularly in the early days of the fighting. Of the 23 civilians killed between 28 February and 23 April across the Gulf, 21 were nationals of foreign countries, including India (8), Bangladesh (4), Pakistan (4), and Nepal (1).[97] There are manifold factors driving their increased vulnerability: in addition to a lack of safety information from employers, migrant dormitories are often poorly protected and workers themselves more likely to be compelled to continue working for their economic survival, regardless of the risks involved.[98] In some cases, as with workers at the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s** gas refineries, their workplaces were specifically targeted with aerial attacks.[99] As many as 20,000 seafarers, the majority from the Philippines, India and other Asian countries, were stranded in the Strait of Hormuz at the peak of the conflict. By the beginning of August, 6,000 were still reportedly trapped: in addition to the psychological toll, at least 17 had been killed in Iranian strikes on their vessels.[100]

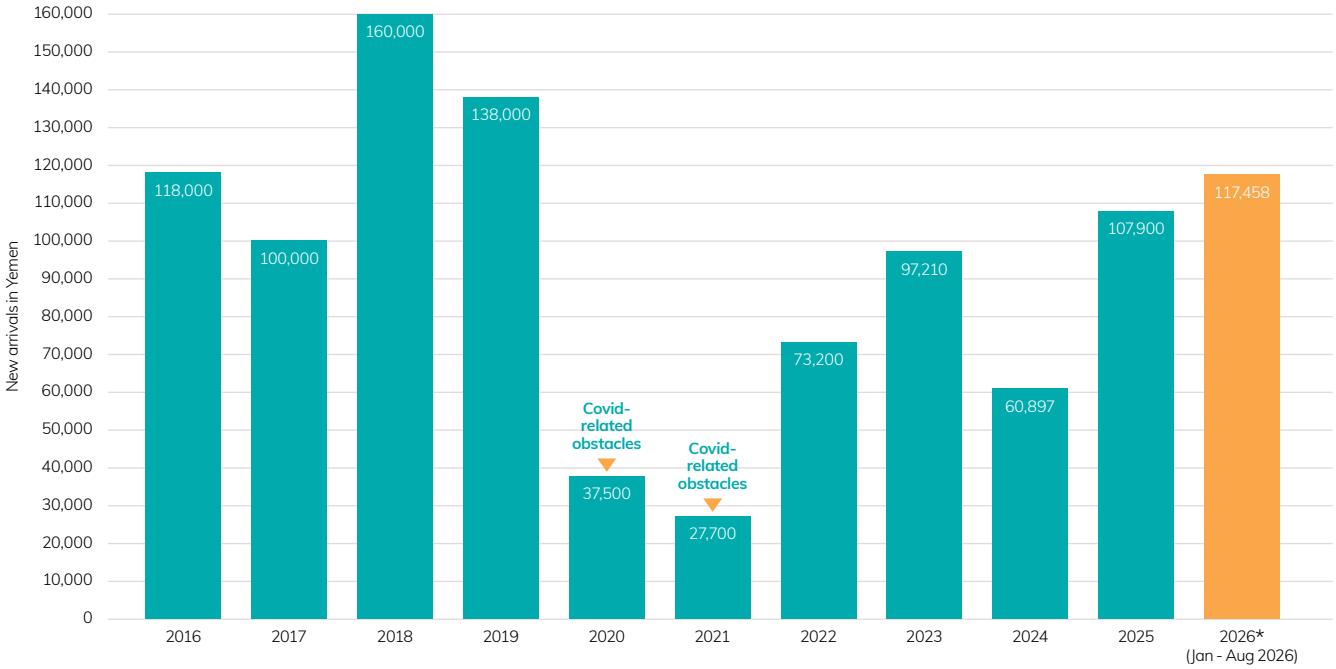
These pressures have been accompanied by increasing repression from authorities, including arbitrary mobile phone searches, restrictions on social media use and other forms of surveillance.[101] In an effort to control information about the impacts of the conflict in their territories – part of a longstanding pattern of 'reputation-laundering'[102] by Gulf states keen to project an image of safety and stability – hundreds of migrants were reportedly arrested in the first weeks of the conflict for sharing content or expressing their views online.[103] In the UAE, there were reports of Pakistani workers being detained and deported solely on account of their Shia faith,[104] with some reports suggesting that thousands of Pakistanis had been expelled as part of an anti-Shia crackdown on supposed security grounds.[105]

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89 Mixed Migration Centre (2020) Mixed Migration Review: Mixed migration and cities.
90 MRRORS (2026) For migrant workers, sheltering in place is as pointless as social distancing.
91 Human Rights Watch (2026) Gulf Countries: Conflict, Hardships Leave Migrants in Limbo.
92 MRRORS (2026) Forced exits, unpaid wages, and uncertain future.
93 Bali, M. and Burhan, B. (2026) Nepali security guard killed in Abu Dhabi shows risks faced by 'trapped' migrant workers. ABC.
94 MRRORS (2026) Migrant Workers in Bahrain Bear the Brunt of the War's Fallout.
95 MRRORS (2026) For migrant workers, sheltering in place is as pointless as social distancing.
96 Human Rights Watch (2026) Bahrain: Migrant Workers, Harmed by Conflict, Get No Aid.
97 Wehrey, F. and Johnson, C. (2026) The Iran war Is a Stress Test for Gulf states. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
98 Equidem (2026) Protect Migrant Workers on the Frontlines of Conflict in the Middle East; Bali, M. and Burhan, B. (2026) Nepali security guard killed in Abu Dhabi shows risks faced by 'trapped' migrant workers. ABC; Ullah, A. (2026) 'If I don't work, I go hungry': The migrant workers risking their lives to keep the Gulf running. Middle East Eye.
99 Acharya, P. (2026) In the crosshairs of someone else's war. MRRORS.
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102 Human Rights Watch (2026) Gulf States: Repression of Migrant Workers During Conflict.
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Yemen

Protracted civil conflict, climate change and a lengthy economic crisis have left over 22 million people in **Yemen** – more than half of the total population – in need of humanitarian assistance, a figure that includes 5.2 million IDPs, 329,000 migrants and 63,000 refugees and asylum seekers.[106] Despite these difficult conditions, the country continues to experience significant incoming movements from the **Horn of Africa**, with at least 110,081 arrivals in the first seven months of 2026.[107] Almost all these migrants and refugees originate from Ethiopia or Somalia: the majority depart from the coast of Djibouti, followed by Somalia, with smaller numbers leaving from Oman. Many, however, become stranded for extended periods en route in Djibouti or Somalia,[108] where they are exposed to considerable protection risks.[109] The difficulty of the route itself means that almost everyone travelling it has to engage smuggling services, exposing them to other risks, including abuse and trafficking.[110] Humanitarian or protection assistance for migrants and refugees along the route is very scarce: what little there is appears to come predominantly from local communities, with NGOs and UN agencies playing a more limited role.[111]

Graphic 3. Ten-year summary of movements of migrants and refugees to Yemen from mainland Africa



Source: IOM DTM Yearly Eastern Route Report 2025; IOM DTM Yemen – Flow Monitoring Registry Dashboard

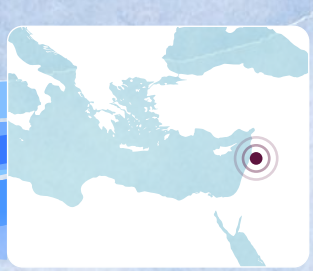
The journey across the Gulf of Aden, heavily controlled by criminal gangs, is highly dangerous and frequently proves fatal. In March 2026, for instance, a boat believed to be carrying over 300 people capsized off the coast of Djibouti, resulting in the deaths of at least nine people on board and the disappearance of 45 others.[112] However, the dangers for migrants and refugees continue even once they reach Yemen, with many subjected to kidnapping, torture and extortion by human traffickers.[113] In the context of the ongoing civil war, as well as the wider conflict in the region, migrants, refugees, and IDPs are also at risk of death and injury in the fighting, with residential areas and displacement camps reportedly targeted with attacks.[114] While most arrivals intend to travel on to Saudi Arabia or Oman, in practice many end up stranded in Yemen for extended periods, in desperate conditions, with some ultimately opting to return to their home countries.

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112 IOM (2026) Nine Dead, 45 Missing in First Shipwreck of 2026 off Djibouti.
113 Negga, M. (2026) Kidnapped and tortured on an infamous migration route to Saudi Arabia. United Nations
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Arrests and deportations in Saudi Arabia

While foreign workers play an important role in the Saudi economy, the authorities regularly carry out large scale round-ups and deportations targeting those lacking documentation. Tens of thousands of Ethiopians have been expelled from Saudi Arabia during 2026,[115] including 26,400 recorded in the first quarter of the year alone – more than double the total in the same period of 2025.[116] Thousands are also detained in prison, in many cases for short periods before their removal, but in some cases for extended periods. While an amnesty brokered by the Ethiopian government in June resulted in the release of 1,655 incarcerated Ethiopian nationals,[117] at least 65 and possibly as many as 200 Ethiopian nationals are currently being held on death row as a result of non-violent drug-related offences.[118] As of the end of July 2026, at least 17 Ethiopian nationals had been executed on these charges: many of these cases involve instances of migrants bringing hashish or qat (a mild stimulant, legal in both Ethiopia and Yemen) across the border, having been manipulated or coerced by smugglers into doing so.[119]

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Crisis upon crisis:
Syrian refugees in Lebanon

I'm a 41-year-old man from the countryside of Homs, Syria, and I've been in Lebanon since 2012. Lebanon was never meant to be my destination. It was simply the nearest place when Syria became impossible. It's not home, but after 14 years, it's hard to call it temporary. My children speak with a Lebanese accent. My daughter and youngest son have never seen Homs, and my oldest was only two when we left.

In 2011, the conflict reached our area in Syria. My younger brother, in his early twenties, disappeared at a checkpoint. We still don't know what happened to him. Before the war, I worked in construction and farming. Work wasn't steady and life was hard, but hardship alone didn't make us leave.

Fleeing Syria

We decided to leave after a shell landed near our street and injured my oldest son, who was only two. We packed clothes and documents and left, thinking it would only be for a few weeks.

We crossed into Lebanon through the Bekaa Valley. My memories of that night are hazy. At first, we stayed near Arsal in an informal settlement with people from our area. Later, we moved between rented rooms in the Bekaa.

In 2015, I moved to southern Lebanon for construction work. We rented a small place with two rooms and a kitchen. It wasn't good, but it gave us some stability. I worked in construction or farming whenever work was available, and my wife cleaned houses when she could.

After 2019, everything became harder. The Lebanese pound collapsed, prices increased and wages lost their value. Lebanese people were struggling, too, and anger towards Syrians grew. Before, people would say, 'You are refugees, God help you.' Later, more began saying, 'You are taking our bread.' I understand that people are tired, but this situation is not our fault.

Displaced again

The 2024 war between Israel and Hezbollah displaced us again. After the ceasefire, we returned because our belongings, my tools and my work were still there. But when fighting resumed in March 2026, we fled again with blankets, our documents, a small gas bottle and two bags. We came to Sidon because shelters were opening there. At first, we stayed in a school turned into a shelter with Lebanese and Syrian families. In the beginning, people shared what they had. Later, tensions grew as everyone became exhausted. Toilets were overcrowded, children fought and people worried about aid and space.

Looking back, maybe I would have made different choices if I had known we would be displaced again in 2024 and 2026. Perhaps, I would have kept more documents with me, left Syria earlier or moved elsewhere in Lebanon. But I made those decisions with the information I had at the time.

It feels like displacement keeps repeating. My son is now 16 and wants to work because he sees me struggling. My wife is exhausted. Since March, our bags have stayed half-packed.

Uncertain legal status

I was registered with UNHCR years ago but I no longer have valid residency in Lebanon. I renewed it before but eventually it became too difficult and expensive. The same applies to my wife.

My children attended school here for some years but places are limited, transport costs money and we need documents we don't have. Sometimes they miss months of school. My two younger children were born in Lebanon and we have hospital and school papers for them, but they are not always enough.

Without documents, you think carefully before travelling anywhere, visiting a hospital or even reporting problems to a landlord or employer.

CYPRUS

The two sides of return

I think about returning to Syria all the time. I miss my mother, my home and the feeling of belonging somewhere. After the regime fell in late 2024, many Syrians felt hopeful. Some people returned and managed. Others told us conditions were still very difficult. I believe both.

Our house in Homs is badly damaged. My mother still lives there with relatives and tells me, 'Come! At least we are in our own country.' I understand her. But I do not want to take my children back so they can be poor and hungry there instead of poor and hungry here.

Also, if I can't register my children in school, what future will they have? My daughter has asthma. Here, I know which pharmacy might let me take medicine on credit. In Syria, I no longer know who could help us. Many of my neighbours are gone; some abroad, some dead, some still missing.

For me, return means having a roof, work, school, healthcare, documents and safety. If those things existed, I would go. I just don't want to take my family from one unstable place to another.

Assistance and mutual aid

Over the years, we received food, cash assistance, school support and occasional medical help. It was never enough to live comfortably but it helped. In recent years, that support has become smaller.

The most recent time we were displaced, we received mattresses, hygiene items, food parcels and sometimes hot meals. The municipality and organisations helped in the shelter but the needs are much greater than the aid. People need rent assistance, home repairs, medicine, transport and legal documents.

Despite the tensions, people still help one another. I repaired a leaking tap and a broken door in the shelter. A Lebanese man shared diesel for a generator one night. Women cooked together and my son carried water for older people. That is how we survive when official help is not enough.

Organisations come and go, but the person beside you is there at midnight. The problem is that they are also poor, afraid and tired.'

Harder times ahead

People move because they can't survive where they are. Restrictions may delay movement but they don't stop fear or hunger. All I want is a legal and safe place where I can work and my children can study. If that is Syria, I will return. If it's Lebanon, we need legal papers and permission to work. If another country offered a safe and legal path, I would consider it. Right now, every option is difficult. We're trying our best to stay hopeful but every time we stand up, something knocks us down again. We're just tired human beings who want a normal life.



Interview



‘Metastasised’ conflicts, regime change and power struggles in the MENA region

Having endured polycrisis for a long time – including older and newer conflicts which seem far from resolution – the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will continue to produce mixed migration movements of people seeking safety and opportunities across borders, **Joost Hiltermann** believes.

Joost Hiltermann was the programme director for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group for 10 years. For the past year, he has been a special advisor to Crisis Group’s MENA program.

The many countries that make up the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, seem to epitomise the state of polycrisis more than any other part of the world. With its extremely complicated intersecting conflicts and tensions, is it especially bad now? Or has it always been in this state of multiple crises?

Historically, the region or its various components have gone through many tumultuous periods. But I think that, especially since the popular uprisings of 2011, the so-called Arab Spring, some of these crises have come to intersect more than they had in the past. However, that is just one aspect, or one dimension. The other one is that the original conflict in the region, or the first conflict in modern times, was the Israeli-Palestinian one. That conflict has increasingly metastasised throughout the region, with Israel being militarily involved in seven or eight countries or territories in the past year, for example, as well as various other conflicts being linked to the original Israeli-Palestinian one, be it Lebanon, Syria, Yemen or Iran.

Do you think President Trump and, perhaps, the West generally have underestimated the Iranian regime’s resolve and strategic ability? How was the risk of the Strait of Hormuz missed?

Well, I cannot tell you the Trump administration’s thinking, but if they didn’t take the Strait of Hormuz risks into account, that to me is entirely unbelievable, because it has been long on the cards. The Iranians have long threatened to control and close the waterway. And we, as analysts, were very well aware of the potential that Iran had in taking the world economy by its throat, essentially through the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and, through its alliance with the Houthis, also of the Bab-el-Mandeb – that narrow passage at the entrance of the Red Sea leading to the Suez Canal – which hasn’t quite happened yet but could be next if the situation escalates further. So, on the one hand, the Trump administration has underestimated Iran’s resilience and the importance they attach to dignity and respect and, on the other hand, it has overestimated US power.

I think the United States is a declining power. I think somebody like President Obama was aware of that and tried to adjust, I'm not saying successfully, but tried to at least acknowledge and respond to that in some way by saying there are certain real limits on what the United States can do and therefore should do. I think the Trump administration, or certainly Trump himself, initially came up with this notion of 'never mind, we may be a superpower, but we need to take care of our things at home first'. That sort of played into this notion that American power should be projected inwards, not outwards. But now he has changed his mind and we really see what the limitations of American power in the world are.

> **"On the one hand, the Trump administration has underestimated Iran's resilience and the importance they attach to dignity and respect and, on the other hand, it has overestimated US power."**

Is it actually limitations of American power, or is it just that warfare and technology have come to a point where there is no response to fast-moving drones being fired from the cliffs on the Iranian side of the Straits of Hormuz? Perhaps, there isn't any power in the world that would be able to open the Straits of Hormuz if Iran didn't want them to at this time?

Exactly. And that's why you need negotiations and an agreement with mutual guarantees because of mutual interest. But that is not the course that the Trump administration has chosen to pursue. That is something they will have to reckon with. New technologies come into play, so they need to update themselves. Drone warfare is not something the US is good at. Then, you have the asymmetric warfare which Iran and its local regional proxies have long been fighting against Israel and the United States, and for which there is no response by conventional weaponry. I mean, there is a response. You can try to destroy Iran with nuclear weapons if it comes to that but, short of using nuclear weapons, you cannot prevent a power like Iran from closing the Strait of Hormuz just by shooting or using a drone against a commercial vessel. It's that simple.

Israel and Iran and Israel and Lebanon: what is your view of the situation, and do you see it resolving or not?

It's tempting to always say that we just need new leaders in place but that's easier said than done. And of course, nobody's forever. Even the Trump administration will eventually go. Netanyahu may not survive the next elections. In Iran we've already seen a change at the top but that doesn't seem to have changed the policy because the regime is still ensconced and firmly in place. I would say that Iran, until now, has shown a readiness to negotiate but not to bend in negotiations. But Iran did settle for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and it did adhere fully to the JCPOA until the Trump administration pulled the United States out of it. I have more faith in Iran in this sense than I do in Trump and Netanyahu and, in their cases, for different reasons.

> **"I think the United States is a declining power... President Obama was aware of that and... tried to at least acknowledge and respond to that in some way by saying there are certain real limits on what the United States can do and therefore should do."**

I think for Trump – and he says it repeatedly – the main issue is to not have Iran become a nuclear power, even if he doesn't quite understand what that entails. But for Netanyahu it goes a little bit further in that he thinks that Iran will always want to be a nuclear power as long as this regime is in place and that, therefore, you need to have a regime change. Trump has mentioned regime change but he's not seriously pursuing it. There's a divergence there. But, as long as these two agendas exist as policy, it is very hard to see how this can resolve itself. The one thing I will say is that Trump is also somebody who, in the end, is willing to negotiate. Of course, he puts military power behind it, that's understood. As long as they continue to negotiate, there is a possibility of a deal.

Beyond these conflict zones, are there many other parts of MENA that experience polycrisis in the definition we're using? What are the main displacement outcomes in the region?

For a long time, we have already had two very clear movements of populations: one caused by conflict and the other caused by lack of economic opportunities. Essentially, migrants as opposed to refugees. However, these people get mixed together, of course, when they go on a boat and when they land, and are often misclassified when they arrive. So there are these two dimensions to the overall movement of people inside the region – both from the region and into the region, like North Africa or Saudi Arabia – trying to make their way northwards and cross the Mediterranean.

I live in southern Italy, so I see newcomers here from the African subcontinent on a regular basis. I can imagine that desertification, droughts, repressive regimes, whatever, are pushing a lot of people out. I just came back last night from Iraqi Kurdistan and I know that, in the case of Iraq, people have lost hope that they can ever make a real future at home. And so young people leave. It's always fight or flight. You join a militia or you find a way out. Or, if you're lucky and have the right connections, you find government employment and then you don't have to do much for a salary. But even

the salaries in Iraqi Kurdistan, just to give one example, are not secure because the Kurdish government is dependent on the Iraqi budget, and there's a conflict between Erbil and Baghdad. So the money doesn't come all the time and people don't get paid.

Another example, Palestinians don't want to leave their land but some do want to leave. But there's a huge reluctance, because they see that there's an express Israeli design to make them want to leave. Then you have situations like Sudan, where you have essentially a war that at times verges on, or turns into, genocidal-type killings. And people are fleeing, of course, internally in the first place but then into Egypt and then onwards across the Mediterranean if they can make it. I think the magnitude of mobility has gone up region-wide. It hasn't stopped.

Syrian refugees have stopped now, of course. That is one point of light. Not all Syrians have gone back home from Lebanon but quite a few people have. They can't always find their old homes. They may be destroyed or inaccessible, or people might not have the property deeds or whatever. There might even be a risk of revenge or another reason why they cannot return. But a lot of Syrians have gone back because the situation in Lebanon was not good. On the other hand, the one million people who went to Germany, for example, I doubt very much that they will go back for any length of time because they may be doing better in Germany today, even if they miss their homeland. Anyway, there are lots of reasons, but that is what the polycrisis is all about.

Of course, leaving one's country of origin is just the start of the journey considering the uncertain outcomes in the region.

Yes. Let's look at the example of Palestinians from Gaza. Many Palestinians tried to get out and went to Egypt. But in Egypt, they're totally restricted in what they can do, like going to school. So, it's a miserable existence and it means they have no ability to leave, even for Europe. And of course, young people will just go in a boat but families don't do that in most cases.

> **"A lot of Syrians have gone back because the situation in Lebanon was not good... the one million people who went to Germany... I doubt very much that they will go back for any length of time because they may be doing better in Germany today, even if they miss their homeland."**

The situation in Gaza is beyond desperate but the situation for Gazans in Egypt is also really bad. And then Gazans in, say, Qatar – which has been very good in many ways towards the Gaza crisis – can't get residency. People cannot get a driver's license – they cannot do this, cannot do that. It becomes extremely difficult to live there.

> **"The situation in Gaza is beyond desperate but the situation in Egypt for Gazans is also really bad... Gazans in... Qatar... can't get residency. It becomes extremely difficult to live there [as a Palestinian]."**

You cannot leave the country because you cannot get a visa that allows you to return. The risks for families are huge; you just don't know where you land. In the past, it was better: for example, Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza could find jobs in the Gulf. There, they were not treated as citizens or even as residents but they were allowed to stay. They could work and remit their salaries to their families back home in Palestine. And that worked very well as a system. It enriched the West Bank and Gaza. These other countries in the region, though, don't accept refugee status for anyone. That's not a term they use. There is no such thing as asylum. People are there at the mercy of the rulers and that's a way to keep them quiet, not to protest, just to do the jobs that they are allowed to do – if they are even allowed to take on jobs – and to just get by. That's the situation.

The six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council have not been welcoming historically to their Palestinian neighbours, including in the last two or three years. Why is that?

First of all, it's true they didn't open their doors to Palestinians. Only Qatar accepted injured people from Gaza. All of them have strictly maintained the broader Arab consensus, which refuses the mass relocation or displacement of Palestinians outside of the Palestinian territories. But on those occasions that they have received Palestinians, they have essentially warehoused them. They're very well treated in terms of food and lodging but they're given no rights. There's no pathway to citizenship, not even to residency. They're there on a temporary basis. Their stay can be renewed, but you may have to go every month, or every six months in some cases, to renew your permit. It's a very uncertain existence. And, certainly, it would make you comply with anything that you're told to do. That is what the Gulf kingdoms are like. That's what they do to protect themselves from the arrival of large numbers. They attract workers from India who are not Muslims. Why? Because they can keep them on a short leash. They can send them right back. They cannot send Palestinians back easily because there is a lot of popular sentiment in favour of Palestinians.

The regimes don't like Palestinians but the people do. There's a huge region-wide, even worldwide, sympathy for the Palestinian cause. But the regimes don't share that at all. They pay lip service to it. They say the right words but they don't mean one word of it. Now, why don't the Gaza people want to leave despite the misery of life? Because they're afraid Israel will not allow them back in. They don't want to be moved from their homeland by Israel. Of course, if you're under bombardment or if you're seriously injured and you need care, people go. But they always insist that they need to be able to go back. Except nobody can guarantee that, which makes it a very difficult choice for most.

Do you think geopolitical tensions and the rising populism that we're seeing now in many parts of the world are causing people to think twice about migrating?

Hope springs eternal! People still want to go to the Global North because they have relatives there who say, 'Come'. The situation is getting tighter but those relatives may not care about the rise of the global right or the populist right. They may see that the atmosphere is worsening but as long as they're working and making a living, they're doing better than their relatives back home. I don't have a sense that people are saying, 'No, we're no longer going to the Netherlands or Germany or England because the mood there is too bad'. I haven't heard that, but I have also not done any specific research on that.

"Why don't the Gaza people want to leave despite the misery of life? Because they're afraid Israel will not allow them back in. They don't want to be moved from their homeland by Israel."

How do you see the future? Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Well, the current war – which is the largest war the region has seen and which is continuing in stops and starts – could broaden and draw more countries and peoples into it. In that case, of course, it is going to generate new mixed migration. That's inevitable. Secondly, what these conflicts do is to draw away resources for the very important twin concerns of good governance and tackling climate change. There will be more pressure on people to leave because they cannot make a living or the situation becomes intolerable. I think it really depends on how this conflict continues and, hopefully, ends. If it ends and if there is an overall settlement, which is very difficult to imagine at the moment, the pressures could go down. But I think the more likely scenario is that they will increase.

"What these conflicts do is to draw away resources for the very important twin concerns of good governance and tackling climate change. There will be more pressure on people to leave because they cannot make a living, or the situation becomes intolerable."

Across Bab el-Mandeb strait, Yemenis flee as migrants arrive

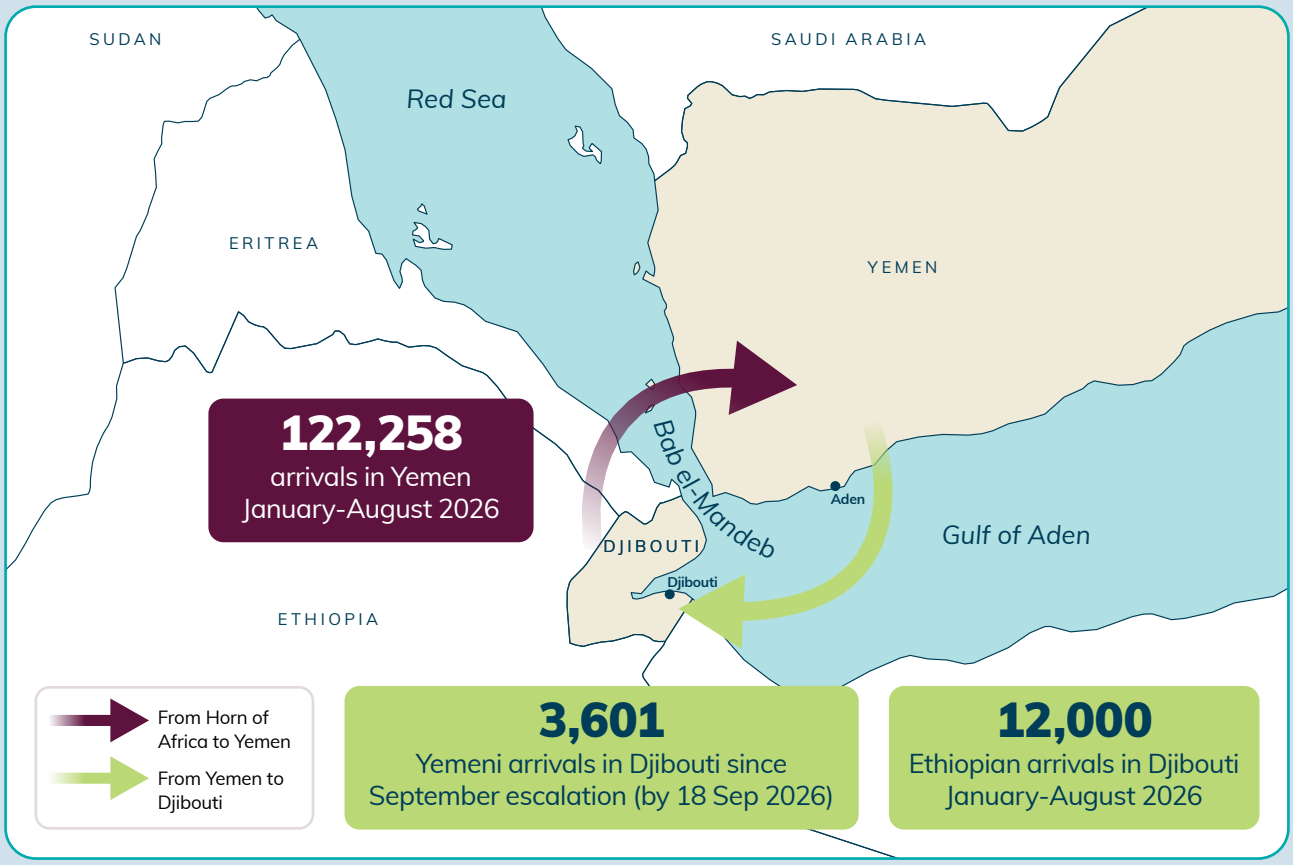
As fighting reaches Yemen's Red Sea coast, thousands of Yemenis are crossing to Djibouti. Meanwhile, Ethiopians were crossing the other way in record numbers, right up to the escalation. We saw the same in 2015 and 2016. What does a two-way corridor tell us about aspirations, geopolitics and a humanitarian response running on empty?

Two movements at the same water's edge

When the world looks at the Bab el-Mandeb strait between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, it mostly sees oil tankers and cargo ships. Since the blockade of the strait in July[1], and certainly the recent shift in territorial control since mid-September of Yemen's Red Sea coastline and the islands in the strait, the debate has been about shipping, insurance and oil prices.[2]

That focus is understandable, but it misses something. The narrow stretch of water between Yemen and Djibouti is not only a chokepoint for global trade. It is also one of the busiest irregular migration corridors in the world and, right now, people are crossing it in both directions. In the second week of September, more than 3,000 Yemenis arrived in Obock and Khor Angar on Djibouti's northern coast, many of them women and children.[3] From that same coast, boats carrying Ethiopians have left for Yemen every month for more than a decade. One group is fleeing a war. The other is heading straight into it.

Figure 1. Map of Bab el-Mandeb Strait



This map is for illustrative purposes and does not imply MMC endorsement of territorial boundaries or political status.

1 Feng, E. (2026) Amid U.S.-Iran war Houthis declare a blockade of another key straight: Bab el-Mandeb. NPR.
2 Al Jazeera (2026) Houthis control key shipping route after gains along Yemen's Red Sea coast.
3 Ali, F. (2026) Thousands flee to Djibouti amid renewed Yemen fighting. Al Jazeera.

Already one of the most dangerous routes in the world

For more than 10 years, on average, some 100,000 people a year, overwhelmingly Ethiopians, have crossed from Djibouti and Somalia to Yemen with smugglers, aiming to reach Saudi Arabia for work. In 2025, IOM recorded around 108,000 arrivals in Yemen.[4] It is by far the largest irregular route out of Africa, in many years, much larger than the Mediterranean routes combined that attract most political attention.

It is hard to imagine things getting worse on this route. 2025 was the deadliest year on record, with over 900 people either dying or going missing.[5] Among those interviewed by MMC, people on the move through Yemen reported facing serious risks: 78 percent reported risks of physical violence and 84 percent cited smugglers as its likely perpetrators.[6] On this route, people also report higher rates of deception by smugglers compared to other routes.[7] At the Saudi border, Human Rights Watch[8] and MMC documented in 2023[9] how Saudi border guards killed hundreds of Ethiopians. And in July 2026, Human Rights Watch reported[10] that Saudi Arabia had executed at least 17 Ethiopians this year on drug charges, with at least 79 more facing imminent execution, in one case a man forced by his smuggler to carry qat – a stimulant drug illegal in Saudia Arabia – across the border. As MMC wrote in 2024,[11] an attack on a commercial vessel in the Red Sea tends to receive more attention than the drowning of hundreds of migrants off Djibouti or Yemen. That is still true.

A regional war reaches the strait

This year, the Red Sea's many rivalries came together. Since the war between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran on the other began in February, the Strait of Hormuz has been largely closed, making the Bab el-Mandeb even more important for the region's energy exports. In mid-September, with the shift in territorial control of Mocha and Dhubab along Yemen's West Coast and the island of Perim (Mayyun)[12], UNHCR reports[13] that more than 100,000 people were newly displaced within days, in a country that already had 5.2 million internally displaced people.[14] What does this mean for people on the move?

Busier than ever before the escalation

Neither the regional war nor the earlier blockade announcement slowed migration to Yemen. Between January and August 2026, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix recorded 122,258 arrivals[15] from the Horn of Africa in Yemen. In eight months, the route has already passed the long-term annual average and the total for all of 2025.[16] In June, IOM linked higher arrivals in Abyan to the suspension of security campaigns against smuggling networks.[17]

Figures for September are not yet available at the time of writing. Most boats from Djibouti land on the Gulf of Aden coast, in Lahj and Abyan, rather than on the Red Sea coast where the fighting took place. It is therefore too early to say whether the escalation will reduce crossings, shift landing points or change little. The experience of 2015 and 2016 suggests the last option should not be ruled out.

And now, the other direction

Movement the other way has suddenly grown much larger. It consists of two very different groups. The first are Yemenis fleeing the fighting. By 18 September, UNHCR had recorded 3,601 new Yemeni arrivals in Djibouti.[18] Others could not leave at all[19] because a fuel shortage kept boats from sailing. UNHCR is preparing for 10,000 or more people, and arrivals have also been reported in Somaliland and Puntland.[20]

4 IOM (2026) East, Horn and Southern Africa – Migration Along The Easter Route – Report 62 (January – December 2025).
5 IOM (2026) Regional Migrant Response Plan (MRP) for the Horn of Africa to Yemen and Southern Africa, 2026
6 MMC (2026) 4Mi Data Explorer.
7 MMC (2025) Smuggling dynamics on the Eastern Route through Yemen.
8 HRW (2023) Saudi Arabia: Mass Killings of Migrants at Yemen Border.
9 MMC (2023) Murderous border controls: mass killings of Ethiopian migrants along the Saudi Arabian-Yemen border.
10 HRW (2026) Saudi Arabia: New Executions of Ethiopian Migrants.
11 Bonfiglio, A. and Frouws, B. (2024) Crossing the Red Sea. Zenith.
12 Al Jazeera (2026) Houthis control key shipping route after gains along Yemen's Red Sea coast.
13 UNHCR (2026) Yemen: Escalating Conflict Drives New Displacement and Refugee Arrivals in Djibouti.
14 AFP (2026) UN warns of rising Yemen displacement as thousands flee to Djibouti. Al Jazeera.
15 IOM (2026) Yemen – Flow Monitoring Registry Dashboard.
16 IOM (2026) East, Horn and Southern Africa – Migration Along The Eastern Route – Report 62 (January – December 2025).
17 YemenOnline (2026) African Migrant Arrivals to Yemen Rise Sharply In June.
18 MEE (2026) Yemenis seek safety in Djibouti as African migrants continue arriving in Yemen.
19 AP (2026) Yemen fuel shortage hampers migrants trying to flee Djibouti. Sowetan.
20 UNHCR (2026) More help urgently needed as thousands arrive in Djibouti fleeing Yemen.

The second group is less visible but has been there all along: Ethiopians crossing back from Yemen, many of them stranded, unable to continue their journey onwards to Saudi Arabia, out of money, or having survived – and now fleeing – detention and abuse. Between January and August 2026, IOM recorded 11,898 Ethiopians returning from Yemen to Djibouti, almost all leaving from Ras al-Arah in Lahj and landing in Obock; 1,628 in August alone.[21]

A response running on empty

Djibouti, with a population of little more than 1 million, already hosts over 36,000 refugees and asylum-seekers.[22] The authorities and the people of Obock have responded with great generosity, but IOM has warned that "if it continues at this rate, we'll not be able to manage."[23] Markazi refugee camp near Obock, set up in 2015 for Yemenis fleeing the previous escalation, was designed for 5,000 people and already housed 2,700 Yemeni and 1,500 Eritrean refugees before this month's arrivals.[24] UNHCR's Djibouti operation is only 15 percent funded for 2026, its Yemen operation 18 percent.[25] Agencies describe "deep funding pressures" following US and UK aid cuts.[26]

The same organisations are also meant to support Ethiopians moving in both directions along the Eastern Route, the 132,300 migrants stranded in Yemen in 2025, and some 65,000 Somali and Ethiopian refugees and asylum-seekers in Yemen who now face renewed risks.[27] When budgets are this thin, a new emergency does not come on top of existing work. It competes with it.

We have been here before

When the war in Yemen escalated in 2015, the same thing happened. In May 2016, MMC's predecessor, the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, published *Pushed and Pulled in Two Directions*,[28] documenting how more than 86,000 people fled Yemen to the Horn of Africa while simultaneously one of the highest numbers of Ethiopians and Somalis in years kept travelling towards Yemen. In 2016, arrivals in Yemen reached a record of around 117,000, with the country at war.[29]

This bi-directional movement was strikingly visible in Obock at the time. On one side of the road was Markazi camp, for Yemenis who had fled the war. On the other side was IOM's Migration Response Centre, assisting Ethiopians on their way to Yemen, or with voluntary return for those who changed their plan. The Yemeni refugees interviewed at the time could not believe it. Why would anyone want to go to the place they had just escaped from? Ten years on, the camp is filling up again and the same question is still worth asking.

What a two-way corridor like this tells us

Migration is rarely a simple one-directional process, and one route can be characterized by different, complex and sometimes even contradictory migration dynamics. For a Yemeni family from Mocha, Djibouti might be the nearest place of safety. For a young Ethiopian, Yemen is not a destination but a dangerous passage on the way to find work in Saudi Arabia. The same sea is an escape route for one and a transit route for the other and, for the Ethiopians crossing back, a way out of a war and danger they entered in search of an economic lifeline.

Aspirations and needs to migrate are strong. Most Ethiopians on this route are aware of the drownings, the kidnappings and the killings at the border. However, pushed by a combination of systemic poverty and economic insecurity, armed conflict, generalised violence and insecurity, a lack of rights and freedoms, and personal, family and societal reasons, they go anyway, many feeling like they do not have much choice.[30] Record arrivals in a year of regional war and a declared blockade underline that. Wherever there is strong demand to move, smugglers will be ready to meet it. Insecurity in Yemen has never deterred the movements from the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

This is what polycrisis looks like on the ground. As we argue in the Mixed Migration Review 2026, polycrisis is not a backdrop but a mechanism. A war between states impacts local conflict, which changes who controls a strait, which pushes people across a sea into a country whose response capacity had already been hollowed

21 YemenOnline (2026) More than 1,600 Stranded Ethiopian Migrants Return From Yemen To Horn Of Africa In August.
22 UNHCR (2026) More help urgently needed as thousands arrive in Djibouti fleeing Yemen.
23 Faisal, A. (2026) Thousands flee to Djibouti amid renewed Yemen fighting. AL Jazeera.
24 UNHCR (2026) More help urgently needed as thousands arrive in Djibouti fleeing Yemen.
25 UNHCR (2026) More help urgently needed as thousands arrive in Djibouti fleeing Yemen.
26 Faisal, A. (2026) Thousands flee to Djibouti amid renewed Yemen fighting. Al Jazeera.
27 MMC (2026) Impacts of the Middle East conflict on East African refugees and migrants.
28 RMMS (2016) Pushed and Pulled in Two Directions. MMC.
29 MPI (2019) On the Move in a War Zone: Mixed Migration Flows to and through Yemen.
30 MMC (2026) 4Mi Data Explorer.

out by aid cuts. Each crisis makes the others harder to manage.

The Bab el-Mandeb is now at the centre of global diplomacy, security and economics. So far, that attention has been about ships, oil and trade. But the people crossing the strait in small boats, in both directions, deserve more attention and support.

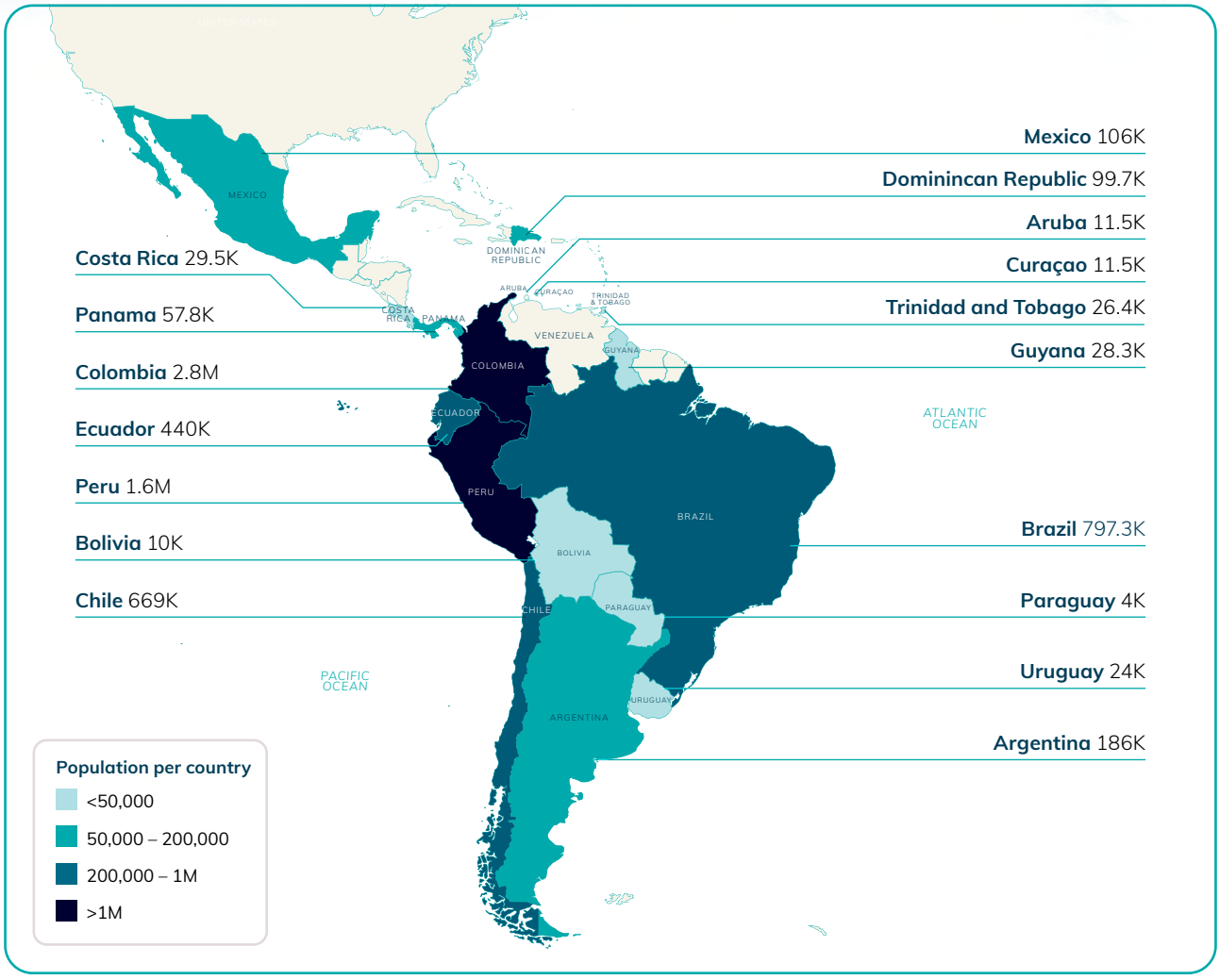
The Americas

Overview

Peter Grant

From increasing asylum restrictions and visa bans to forced returns and third-country deportations (the expulsion of a foreign national to a country other than their own), the situation for millions of migrants and refugees across the Americas has become far more challenging. While this shift is especially vivid within the US itself, where many temporary protection holders have been rendered "illegal" and thus deportable after their status was cancelled, migration patterns and protection needs are also being reconfigured across the entire region. Against a backdrop of humanitarian aid cuts and the apparent erosion of solidarity, the large-scale northwards movement evident before 2025 has been replaced by immobility, reverse migration, and forced returns.

Graphic 1. Major locations of Venezuelans in Latin America as of August 2026



Source: R4V MAP: Venezuelan refugees and migrants

Declining solidarity in Latin America

Latin America's mixed migration landscape continues to be dominated, more than a decade on, by the Venezuela crisis and the displacement of almost 7 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees across the region. During this time, the emphasis on solidarity and protection that characterised the initial response in many countries has given way to increasing restrictions and exclusion. Patterns have reversed and diversified, creating new pressures in Latin America and the Caribbean. Many of these changes have affected not only Venezuelans, who make up the largest displaced population, but also the growing numbers of migrants and refugees from countries such as Cuba and Haiti.

Barriers to return for Venezuelans

The largest Venezuelan populations are in Colombia (2.84 million), Peru (1.63 million), Brazil (797,300), Chile (669,400) and Ecuador (440,500), though significant populations are dispersed across the region[1] and beyond, including an additional 987,600 in the **United States (US)** and 602,500 in **Spain**.[2] The number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Latin America specifically has remained largely unchanged over the past year, with a total of 6.98 million as of August 2026 compared to 6.91 million in November 2025.[3] This is despite the marked shift in immigration policies embraced by some countries, not to mention an event with wide-ranging implications for Venezuela and its displaced diaspora – the abduction in early January 2026 of sitting President Nicolas Maduro by the US and his transfer to a penal facility in New York. This extraordinary development had the potential to drive a number of possible outcomes, from large-scale returns to a further round of mass displacement.[4] Yet, in practice, migration patterns remained markedly unchanged in the immediate aftermath. While some cross-border movements occurred both ways, these were on a similar scale to what would have been expected before Maduro's fall.[5]

While Venezuela has been promoting a media campaign encouraging citizens abroad to return,[6] with the government reporting in May (without specifying the timeframe) that 28,000 people had been repatriated,[7] many Venezuelans wishing to do so have been prevented from taking a flight back as they lack a passport or government-issued ID. This is a particular challenge for those in Chile or the US, where there are currently no consulates to apply for the necessary paperwork – a predicament that may force some to attempt to return irregularly instead.[8] At the same time, while the possibility of family reunification and experiences of discrimination in their host countries are encouraging some Venezuelans to consider return,[9] the majority remain hesitant about returning when the country's political and economic future remains uncertain. A survey carried out in February 2026 by the Observatory of the Venezuelan Diaspora found that only 11.4 percent expressed a desire to return imminently, with another 9.4 percent wishing to do so but not immediately. While this came to roughly the same proportion as those who intended to stay permanently in their host countries (19.3%), most of the remainder would only consider returning once conditions had improved.[10] These concerns about the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis were only reinforced by two earthquakes on 24 June which left 4,734 people dead, 16,740 injured and displaced more than 17,900 from their homes.[11] In the meantime, given the continued uncertainty, it is important that regularisation efforts and humanitarian support for displaced Venezuelans in the region are reprioritised.[12]

Crackdowns and restrictions across the region

The environment for migrants and refugees from Venezuela and other countries appeared to have become more challenging due, in part, to the election of politicians who have specifically campaigned on an anti-immigration platform. In **Colombia**, host to the largest Venezuelan population in the region, the newly elected President Abelardo de la Espriella announced the beginning of a crackdown in August, focusing first on foreign nationals with criminal convictions and then those lacking legal documentation. Echoing the nativist rhetoric of the current US administration with his commitment to "Colombians first, Colombians second, Colombians third", he vowed not to "accept any illegal immigrants, no matter where they came from".[13] This represents a major shift in position from the right-wing's

1 R4V (2026) R4V Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Region - August 2026.
2 R4V (2026) Refugees and Migrants From Venezuela.
3 R4V (2026) R4V Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Region - August 2026; R4V (2025) R4V Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Region - November 2025.
4 Frouws, B., Forin, R. and Tomasi, S. (2026) Venezuela after Maduro: mixed migration implications of a sudden regime rupture. Mixed Migration Centre.
5 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 1 2026.
6 Sulbarán, P. (2026) Many Venezuelans Want to Go Home. But They Can't Get Passports. The New York Times
7 SWI (2026) El Gobierno de Venezuela asegura que 28.000 migrantes han regresado al país.
8 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 2 2026.
9 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Experiences and expectations of return migration to Venezuela.
10 Efecto Cocuyo (2026) La mayoría de la diáspora venezolana descarta regresar en el corto plazo, según estudio del ODV.
11 OCHA (2026) Earthquakes in Venezuela: Situation Report #21 (14 July 2026).
12 Chaves-González, D. (2026) Tras Maduro, un enfoque mesurado de la migración venezolana es más esencial que nunca. Migration Policy Institute.
13 Dom, E.A. (2026) New Colombian president orders immigration raids, vowing deportations of migrants without legal status. Euronews.

well-established support for displaced Venezuelans, rooted in opposition to Venezuela's leftist regime. However, while not focusing on a specific nationality, the move will likely impact disproportionately on Venezuelans, who make up around 95 percent of Colombia's migrant population[14] and include over 527,000 without documentation.[15] The announcement provoked an immediate backlash from opposition leaders and community representatives, who accused De la Espriella of xenophobia and perpetuating negative stereotypes about migrants and refugees.[16]

The inauguration in March 2026 of a new president, José Antonio Kast, in **Chile** has also ushered in a more restrictive immigration agenda prioritising border security and returns. On his first day in power, a range of new policies were announced including bolstered border security with fences, ditches, and the deployment of 3,000 additional guards, the creation of detention facilities and the exclusion of undocumented migrants from public services and other benefits.[17] Kast also suspended a regularisation programme established by his predecessor which would have benefitted as many as 182,000 undocumented migrants,[18] 91 percent of them Venezuelans,[19] and championed the creation of a "humanitarian corridor" connecting Chile, Peru, Ecuador and other countries in the region to enable the return of Venezuelans to their home country.[20] However, critics of the proposal argued that, in practice, it would lead to bottlenecks and protracted immobility if migrants and refugees became stranded en route.[21] While the government has carried out multiple deportation flights since then, repatriating nationals of countries including Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Peru, Venezuelans have so far not been included, despite accounting for as many as 65 percent of undocumented foreign nationals in the country.[22] As Chile and Venezuela do not have diplomatic ties, Chile is currently unable to transfer them to Venezuela, though the government has reportedly been making efforts to resume relations with Caracas as a precursor to returns.[23]

In May 2026 **Costa Rica** ushered in a new president, Laura Fernández, who has also made immigration central to her policies. Her government has committed to stronger border restrictions and explicitly linked these tighter policies to national security, raising concerns of that this could entrench xenophobic narratives linking migrants and refugees with crime.[24] Shortly afterwards, however, in August, the government announced that it would be renewing a regularisation pathway which would allow nationals of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, who had previously applied for asylum between 2014 and 2026 but still had a decision pending, to register for a two-year renewable residency permit.[25] But many potential beneficiaries are likely to struggle to secure this in practice due to the documentation requirements,[26] with Venezuelans and Nicaraguans in particular both unable to return to their countries or secure the necessary paperwork from consulates abroad. **Peru** also appears to be heading towards a more restrictive immigration environment after an uptick in arrests and detentions, beginning late 2025, and the election of a new government under President Keiko Fujimori[27] that has pledged to remove all foreign nationals with criminal convictions.[28]

The Caribbean

Emigration from Cuba increasingly focused on Latin America

Political instability and protracted economic recession in **Cuba** continue to drive hundreds of thousands of people to leave the country irregularly. Independent demographic estimates produced in late 2025 suggested that as many as 2.75 million people had left Cuba since 2020.[29] This is despite the fact that the exceptional welcome Cubans enjoyed for decades in the US – the primary destination for the large majority of those who left – has been steadily weakened since 2017. This process culminated in the decision in January 2025 by the current US administration to revoke the Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and

14 Pannell, A. (2026) Colombia's new president faces backlash over 'inhumane' deportation policy. Al Jazeera
15 Dom, E.A. (2026) New Colombian president orders immigration raids, vowing deporations of migrants without legal status. Euronews.
16 Pannell, A. (2026) Colombia's new president faces backlash over 'inhumane' deportation policy. Al Jazeera
17 Infomigra (2006) Las 7 propuestas migratorias del nuevo presidente de Chile Jose A. Kast.
18 Mercopress (2026) Chile's new government freezes migrant legalization, eyes deportations.
19 Stang, F. (2026) Migrantes venezolanos en Chile: de la celebración a la incertidumbre. CIPER Chile.
20 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 1 2026.
21 El Ciudadano (2025) Corredor humanitario en Chile: experta en migración cuestiona propuesta de Kast y advierte vulneración de derechos.
22 Laborde, A. (2026) El Gobierno de Kast informa que 2.180 venezolanos irregulares han salido voluntariamente de Chile desde el triunfo electoral del mandatario. El Pais.
23 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 2 2026.
24 Rolz, I. (2026) Borders, police, and a mega-prison: three measures defining Laura Fernández's "iron-fist" in Costa Rica. The Voice of Guanacaste.
25 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 2 2026.
26 The Tico Times (2026) Costa Rica Opens Legal Status Path For Thousands of Foreigners.
27 Phillips, A. (2026) Keiko Fujimori declared winner of Peru's presidential election weeks after vote. BBC.
28 Bueno, O. and Tomasi, S. (2026) Venezuelans in the Americas face uncertainty in light of political changes at home and in exile. Mixed Migration Centre;
29 The Economist (2025) Cuba is heading for disaster, unless its regime changes drastically.

Venezuelans (CHNV) humanitarian parole programme, followed by the announcement of a travel ban later in the year and the introduction of new visa restrictions in early 2026. These amendments have left more than 600,000 Cubans in a state of legal uncertainty, including 110,900 nationals enrolled on the CHNV programme and 500,000 others without permanent status, including Form I-220A holders.[30]

However, this move does not appear to have dented the drivers of emigration in Cuba itself, with the population continuing to fall during the year[31] and an estimated 137,600 Cuban nationals applying for international protection worldwide, making them the second largest group in the Americas and the eighth largest in the world.[32] The fact that US sanctions have only intensified since 2025 has contributed, paradoxically, to more attempted departures even as the administration escalates the deportation of Cuban nationals from the US. While more than 2,000 were returned directly to Cuba between February 2025 and April 2026, the majority – between 4,353 and 6,000 from January 2025 to March 2026, depending on the source – were deported to Mexico, with much smaller numbers also transferred to African third-countries such as **South Sudan**.[33]

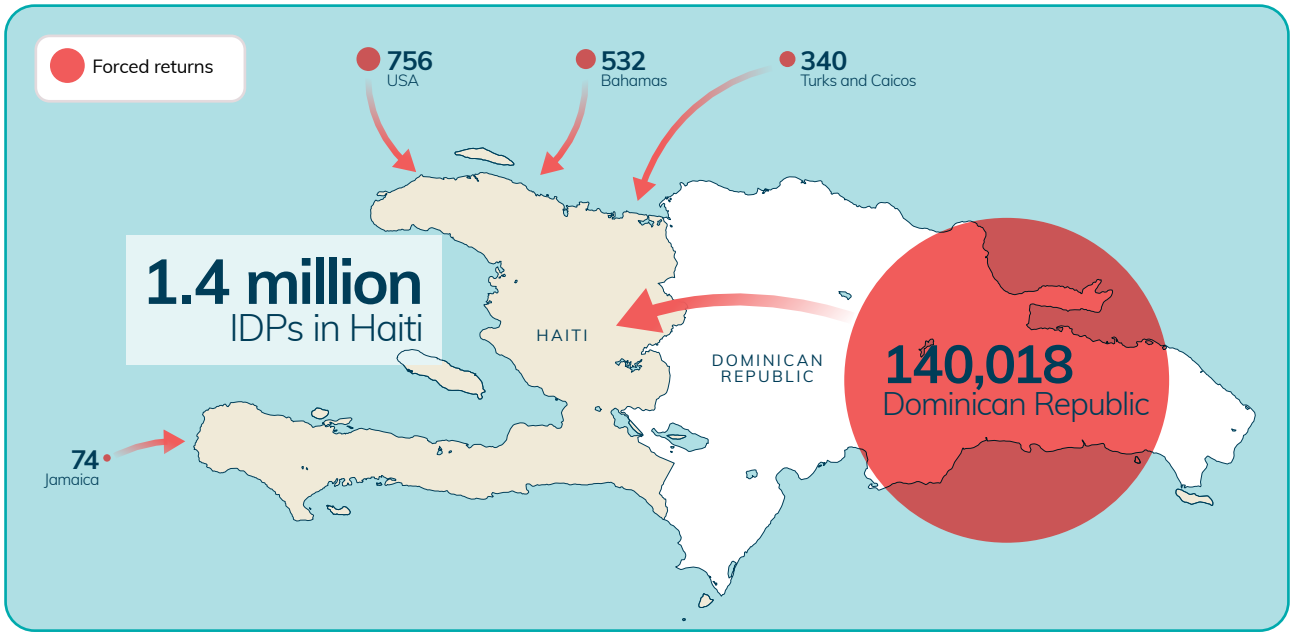
The increasingly hostile environment within the US, as well as the massive fall in entries at its southern border, has led to a dramatic reconfiguration of migration patterns among Cuban migrants and refugees. Many are now opting to move instead to countries within Latin America, particularly Costa Rica, Brazil, and Uruguay, attracted to varying degrees by relatively stronger protection frameworks, economic opportunities or the presence of an established Cuban community. This development has also contributed to a shift in transit movements. While most Cubans previously flew into Nicaragua and then travelled northwards, increasing numbers are now opting to fly to **Guyana** and either stay there or move on to **Brazil**, with others also entering there from Venezuela.[34] This is not to say that Cubans are not still choosing to move northwards: for instance, while the number of Cuban nationals crossing into **Honduras** fell from 64,000 in 2024 to 19,000 in 2025, this still exceeds the total number of arrivals in Brazil (6,400) and **Uruguay** (1,250) during 2025.[35] Nevertheless, as described by IOM, "these trends show that Latin America is no longer just a corridor for Cuban migrants, but is increasingly becoming their intended home".[36]

Displacement and returns to Haiti

Haiti continues to be gripped by one of the most acute humanitarian and security crises in the world, driven by widespread criminal attacks, the collapse of formal institutions, and life-threatening shortages of essentials such as food, medicine, and fuel. As unrest has spread from Port-au-Prince, where 90 percent of the capital is now controlled by gangs, unprecedented numbers of people have been left displaced across the country, with almost 1.47 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as of May 2026, as well as 166,000 returnees who also face specific vulnerabilities.[37] Insecurity has spread to previously unaffected areas, uprooting communities that until recently had served as sanctuaries for Haitians escaping violence elsewhere.[38] While some are situated in overcrowded displacement sites, the majority (85%) of IDPs are hosted by local communities, themselves contending with hunger, illness and lack of access to basic services.[39] Civilians are also living with the constant threat of mass killings, kidnapping and sexual assault, with rival gangs routinely using extreme violence to control local populations.[40]

30 Müller, C. (2026) Cuban mixed migration: US fuels departures and restricts access. Mixed Migration Centre.
31 Newman, E. (2026) Population in Cuba continues to decline. Radio Habana Cuba.
32 UNHCR (2026) Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2025, p.38.
33 Müller, C. (2026) Cuban mixed migration: US fuels departures and restricts access. Mixed Migration Centre.
34 Müller, C. (2026) Cuban mixed migration: US fuels departures and restricts access. Mixed Migration Centre.
35 IOM (2026) Cuban Migration Dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean — A Regional Snapshot (January 2025 – February 2026).
36 IOM (2026) More Cubans Are Choosing to Stay in Latin America, New IOM Data Shows.
37 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (2026) Haiti.
38 IOM (2026) Haiti's Displacement Crisis Hits Record 1.5 Million Amid Escalating Violence.
39 IOM (2025) Displacement in Haiti Reaches Record High as 1.4 Million People Flee Violence.
40 OHCHR (2026) Recent killings stark reminder of persistent violence in Haiti.

Graphic 2. Haiti – forced returns (Jan-June 2026) and internal displacement



Source: IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Haiti

Despite these conditions, host countries continue to deport Haitians at unprecedented rates, with almost 200,000 people deported to Haiti in the first eight months of 2026.[41] This large and poorly-managed returns process creates further pressures in a country where reintegration remains highly challenging and returnees are at risk of being specifically targeted by gangs.[42] The large majority of returnees come from the **Dominican Republic**, with 140,018 Haitians forcibly returned in the first half of 2026, an 11 percent increase compared to the same period in 2025.[43] Dominican authorities have long been criticised for the brutality and racism accompanying these returns, with children, pregnant women and stateless persons among those forcibly removed.[44] Deportations from the US, while smaller in number, are also gathering pace. In addition to the hundreds of Haitian nationals transferred to third-countries such as Mexico since 2025,[45] the current US administration has also forcibly returned hundreds of Haitians to Haiti, including 756 in the first half of 2026 alone – an increase of 66 percent from the same period in 2025.[46] These numbers could increase significantly following a Supreme Court ruling in June that approved the termination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS)[47] for Haitians in the country, reversing a previous court ruling which delayed its implementation. The decision removes protection from more than 330,000 Haitians in the US, leaving them at imminent risk of being detained or expelled from the country.[48] Authorities carried out the first deportation flights in late August, with a number of US-born children on board.[49]

The response of other Caribbean nations to displaced Haitians has been mixed. While countries such as **Aruba**, **Curaçao**, and **Trinidad and Tobago** have recently announced general regularisation programmes for undocumented migrants and refugees already present in their territories, without restrictions on specific nationalities,[50] Haitian nationals continue to be apprehended and deported from various Caribbean member states including the **Bahamas**, **Jamaica** and **Turks and Caicos**.[51] Haiti has also been excluded from recent agreements to promote greater freedom of movement within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). This was highlighted in January 2026 when **Saint Kitts and Nevis**, one of a number of Caribbean countries that has agreed to receive a small number of expelled third-country nationals (apparently following negotiations with Washington), stipulated that, while any deportees should be nationals of a CARICOM country, Haitians and anyone with a violent background should be excluded.[52]

41 Dhulia, D.V. (2026) Nearly 200,000 forced deportees received by Haiti, UN says. DW.
42 US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2026) Haiti Is Not Safe: Country Conditions 2026.
43 IOM (2026) Haiti — Monthly monitoring of forced returns from abroad to Haiti (June 2026).
44 Amnesty International (n.d.) Stop Racist Migration Policies in the Dominican Republic.
45 Third Country Deportation Watch (2026) Mexico.
46 IOM (2026) Haiti — Monthly monitoring of forced returns from abroad to Haiti (June 2026).
47 American Immigration Council (2026) Temporary Protected Status (TPS): An overview;
48 Villarreal, A.(2026) Haitians face arrest and deportation after US removes TPS protections. The Guardian.
49 Charles, J. and Maxineau, G. (2026)ICE sends second deportation flight to Haiti in a week. There are kids aboard. The Miami Herald.
50 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 2 2026
51 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (2026) Haiti — Monthly Monitoring of Forced Returns from Abroad to Haiti (June 2026).
52 Canada–Caribbean Institute (2026) St. Kitts and Nevis agrees to take US migrants, but says no Haitians allowed.

Shifting migration patterns in Central America and Mexico

Long waits and legal limbo for asylum seekers and deportees in Mexico

Mixed migration patterns in **Mexico** have changed significantly as a result of shifts in US immigration policy. Since the beginning of US president Donald Trump's second administration in 2025, cross-border movements have dwindled to only a small fraction of previous levels. While the total number of deportations has in fact decreased due to the fall in new arrivals, the composition of those who have been removed includes a much larger proportion of long-term residents,[53] including many who are infirm or who arrived as children and have not set foot outside the US for decades.[54] Even with the benefit of citizenship, Mexican returnees may face profound challenges around social integration and economic survival,[55] with some also facing a heightened risk of extortion by criminal groups.[56]

Foreign migrants and refugees face additional challenges around lack of documentation, language barriers and discrimination. While the aftermath of the closure of the border saw a significant "reverse" southwards,[57] some have ended up stranded in Mexico, unable to move on. At the same time, as the underlying drivers of insecurity, gang violence and poverty have not dissipated, others have continued to arrive – but increasingly with Mexico as their final destination, rather than the US. This is reflected in the fact that while cross-border movements into the country reduced by 87.5 percent in 2025 compared to 2024, the number of asylum applications received (70,500) remained roughly the same as the year before[58] – a situation that suggests more people are instead seeking the 'Mexican dream'.[59]

Tellingly, around half of the asylum claims in 2025 were registered in the province of Chiapas, a situation that reflects the increasing containment of migrants and refugees in the south of Mexico.[60] While the number of migrants in northern border cities such as Ciudad Juarez has dwindled,[61] the southern city of Tapachula, once popular as a place of transit, has now become a place of enforced stay for tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers. As of 15 June 2026, Mexico had received at least 18,487 expelled non-Mexican nationals since the beginning of Trump's second term on 20 January 2025,[62] making it the largest single receiving country of third-country deportees from the US. While asylum seekers who had filed a claim were previously able to move freely and work in Mexico while their claims were processed, since 2023 applicants have been required to stay put until a decision is reached. Given the country's current backlog, asylum seekers may end up waiting for a year or more before their case is reviewed. In the meantime, they are forced to remain there indefinitely as conditions have deteriorated in the wake of aid cuts.[63] Those deported to Tapachula, including both foreign nationals from countries such as Cuba and Venezuela, as well as Mexican citizens – who, though not impacted by the same restrictions as asylum seekers, share many other challenges on arrival – are left to contend with extreme trauma, destitution and lack of documentation. Many end up caught between the threat of repeated detention, on the one hand, and vulnerability to criminal gangs on the other.[64]

However, reports emerged in August 2026 that the US had also been sending thousands of Mexican deportees to third countries, with 2,284 sent to Guatemala and 37 to Honduras[65] in the year to date.[66] According to Guatemalan authorities, Mexican deportees did not remain there indefinitely but were transferred across into Mexico within 24 hours. Given that Mexico accepts the return of all its nationals from the US, the arrangement may be intended as a deterrent or to provide a loophole to send Mexican asylum seekers via a third country[67] when a direct return to Mexico would be blocked by the US courts.[68]

53 Forum (2026) Current status of DACA: Explainer.
54 Linthicum, K. (2026) Homeless and stateless: Deportees from U.S. are trapped in Mexico. Los Angeles Times.
55 Soffer, V. (2025) Mexican migrants struggle to reintegrate after being deported. UdeMnouvelles.
56 Campa, A.J. (2026) Mexicans deported from the U.S. return to find hometowns controlled by narcos. Los Angeles Times.
57 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Mixed Migration Review 2025: Migration in the context of political turmoil, p. 177.
58 UNHCR (2026) Let's be home for those who can't return to theirs.
59 Dahl, M.H. (2025) For those deterred by Trump, can the American dream become the Mexican dream? The New Humanitarian.
60 UNHCR (2026) Let's be home for those who can't return to theirs.
61 Guillen, B. (2026) The border withstands the first year of Trump: 'The shock is over'. El Pais.
62 Third Country Deportation Watch (2026) Mexico.
63 Reidy, E. (2026) "City of forced waiting": Stuck at Mexico's southern border. The New Humanitarian.
64 WOLA (2026) "Scared, traumatized, destitute, and physically vulnerable": Report illuminates the invisible crisis of thousands stranded in southern Mexico by U.S. "mass deportations" and Mexico's response.
65 Third Country Deportation Watch (2026) Honduras.
66 Gutiérrez, E. and Carranza, P. (2026) Guatemala ha recibido a 2,284 mexicanos deportados de EE. UU.: Arévalo dice que permanecen menos de 24 horas y descarta "tercer país seguro". Prensa Libre.
67 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2026) U.S. quietly deporting Mexican migrants to Guatemala and Honduras, angering Mexico. CBS.
68 Lopez, M.S. (2026) Mexico Rejects US Deportations of Its Migrants to Guatemala and Honduras. The Rio Times.

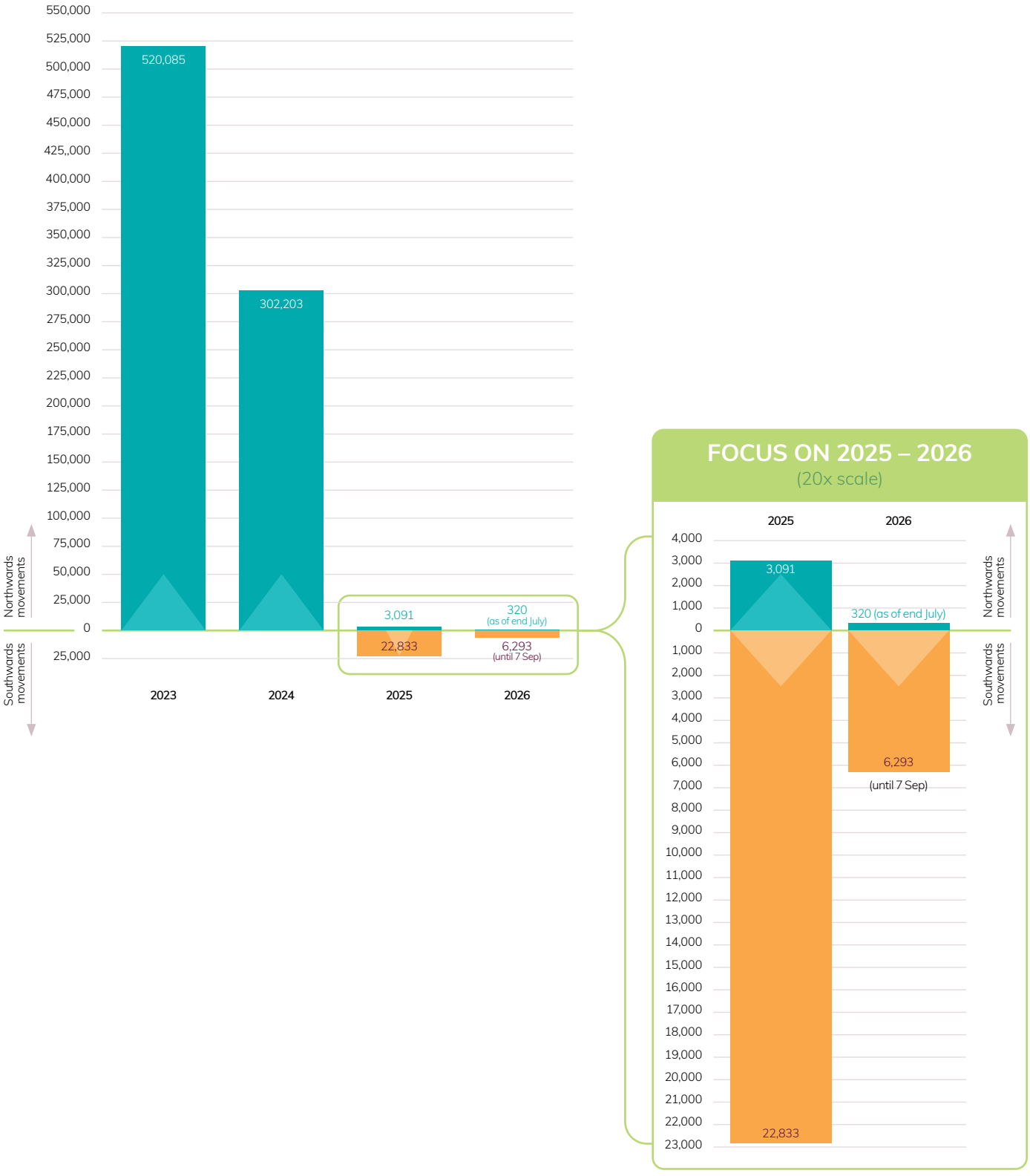
Shifting migration patterns in Central America

Since January 2025, mixed migration patterns through Central America have been profoundly reconfigured. Before then, irregular movements through the region were almost all headed northward, with the majority ultimately aiming to reach the US–Mexico border. However, since the virtual closure of the US border and the imposition of increased restrictions by countries such as Mexico and Panama, this relatively linear movement has been replaced by diverse and intersecting movements, including protracted transit, "reverse" migration southwards and forced returns or "self-deportations" to Central American countries from the US. Immobility is also a growing challenge, with thousands of migrants and refugees either deported to Mexico and Central America or stranded there en route, without the resources or documentation to proceed elsewhere.[69] Northwards migration, meanwhile, once the dominant form of movement in the region, has stalled: in Honduras, for instance, cross-border movement in the first half of 2026 reportedly fell by 75 percent compared to the same period the year before.[70] At the same time, aid cuts have left humanitarian assistance at a fraction of previous levels, undermining the provision of food, shelter, and critical health care.

This situation is particularly evident at the Darien Gap connecting Colombia and Panama, until recently one of the busiest migration routes in the world. Despite the many dangers of the route, from extreme weather and illness to wild animals and criminal groups, more than half a million (520,085) crossings into Panama were recorded in 2023, with numbers then falling significantly the following year to 302,203.[71] However, since then numbers along the route have fallen precipitously, with only 3,091 in the entirety of 2025 – the majority (2,637)[72] of these in the first two months of the year – and 320 in the first seven months of 2026.[73] This extreme drop in numbers is largely attributable to the closure of the US border and increased restrictions by Panamanian authorities. In the aftermath, the route also saw an uptick in "reverse migration" as large numbers of migrants and refugees, stranded further north, attempted to return to Colombia through the Darien or through other, equally dangerous pathways, such as the Pacific route running along the southern coast of Panama[74] or following the northern coast through the Caribbean. Monthly detected crossings south from Panama to Colombia during 2025 peaked in April at 3,013 and then declined steadily to 1,244 by December.[75] This trend continued into 2026, with 3,527 entries documented between January and April – less than half the total during the same period in 2025 (7,306).[76]

69 Riggirozzi, P. and Cintra, N. (2026) How Immigration Crackdowns and Aid Cuts Are Reshaping Migration Across Central America. Migration Policy Institute.
70 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 2 2026;
71 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Mixed Migration Review 2025: Migration in the context of political turmoil, p. 177.
72 Government of Panama (2026) Cuadro no. 001 tránsito irregular de extranjeros por la frontera con Colombia por región según orden de importancia: Año 2026.
73 Government of Panama (2026) Cuadro no. 001 tránsito irregular de extranjeros por la frontera con Colombia por región según orden de importancia: Año 2025;
74 Collins, J. (2026) On the Pacific coast, a perilous reverse migration route surges, only to disappear. The New Humanitarian.
75 UNHRC (2026) Panama: Reverse flow monitoring | 2025.
76 IOM (2026) Global Overview of Migration Routes (Jan – April 2026).

Graphic 3. Crossings through Panama's Darién Gap, 2023 – 2026



Source: Micracion Cuadro No.001; Direccion de operaciones y control migratorio: situacion del flujo norte sur 2025; Direccion de operaciones y control migratorio: situacion del flujo norte sur 2026.

Despite border closures, drivers of migration and displacement remain

A recurrent critique of recent developments in US asylum and immigration policy is that migration has not stopped as a result, but simply been redirected – in most cases, to countries already struggling with humanitarian crises of their own. In sending countries, the underlying problems of political instability, gang violence and climate change have shown no sign of dissipating, with the knock-on effects of forced returns and border restrictions creating further vulnerability.

- **Honduras** continues to be in the grip of a protracted internal displacement crisis rooted in widespread insecurity, weak governance and gang violence, as well as the threat of natural disasters. According to UNHCR, as of June 2026, at least 423,845 people – amounting to 4.5 percent of the total population – had been internally displaced as a result of violence at least once in their lives.[77] In addition to the impact of massive aid cuts in 2025 that left the country with just 11 percent of the requested humanitarian funding for the year,[78] Honduras has also received 55,000 deported nationals from the US (many of them resident there for years) and hundreds of expelled third-country nationals, predominantly Mexicans.[79]

- **Ecuador**, over the course of a few years, has become one of the most dangerous countries in the region, with rising homicide rates and an estimated 132,000 people displaced by violence during 2025.[80] Despite hosting a large refugee population, international assistance has also dwindled[81] and approximately 100,000 Ecuadorians have pending asylum applications abroad.[82] While 9,351 Ecuadorians were deported from the US in 2025 and a further 4,074 from the US, Mexico and Panama between January and April 2026, with an estimated 357,000 Ecuadorians still living irregularly in the US, the total numbers could continue to rise. Ecuador has also signed an agreement with the US to receive 300 third-country nationals – though, as of July 2026, US judges had issued 18,262 removal orders there.[83]

- In **Nicaragua**, the political repression that has driven hundreds of thousands of citizens to flee the country since 2018 has not abated.[84] However, in the US, the revocation in March 2025 of the protection of more than 93,000 Nicaraguan nationals under the CHNV programme has left many at risk of forced return.[85]

- In **Guatemala**, meanwhile, though conditions are safer than many other countries in Central America, it is nevertheless the case that the tens of thousands of deportees – 55,000 in 2025, the vast majority from the US – require complex integration support to ensure a sustainable return process.[86]

- **Colombia**, meanwhile, is contending with its largest internal displacement crisis in more than a decade, triggered by a spike in hostilities which has increasingly seen entire rural communities targeted with threats, violence and stay-at-home orders by armed groups who left an estimated 155,000 people in 2025 unable to leave their homes for weeks.[87] Surveys by the Mixed Migration Centre with Colombian migrants and refugees in a selection of countries across Central and South America found that 62 percent of respondents – including 71 percent of those from rural areas specifically – had left the country due to violence, conflict or insecurity.[88] By the end of 2025, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 394,000 people had been displaced during the year as a result of conflict and violence, with a total IDPs population of 7.2 million.[89] These trends have continued into 2026, with the Ombudsman's Office reporting that, between January and July,[90] 17,892 people had been impacted by major displacement events and 72,827 confined due to violence.

77 UNRIC (2026) Honduras: 4.5% of people internally displaced due to violence.
78 Norwegian Refugee Council (2026) The world's most neglected displacement crises.
79 Third Country Deportation Watch (2026) Honduras.
80 IDMC (2026) Ecuador.
81 Norwegian Refugee Council (2026) The world's most neglected displacement crises.
82 UNHCR (2026) Operational Update December 2025 - In Review
83 CEDA (2026) Human Mobility in Ecuador.
84 United Nations (2026) Nicaragua continues to weaken political freedoms, UN warns.
85 Schacher, Y. (2025) Setting the Record Straight on CHNV. Refugees International.
86 Migration Policy Institute (2026) Guatemala Faces New, More Complex Reintegration Challenges As Returnee Profiles Begin To Shift.
87 Norwegian Refugee Council (2026) The world's most neglected crises: 10th edition.
88 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Understanding the motivations and aspirations behind Colombian emigration.
89 IDMC (2026) Colombia.
90 Defensoría del Pueblo (2026) Dinámicas de Movilidad Humana Forzada en Colombia.

These different crises and inflection points, besides being rooted in their own specific internal dynamics, risk being exacerbated by the current US administration's immigration policy. Though the complex interplay of restrictions and border controls is not new, the almost total closure of legal pathways, the rollback of protections and mass deportations of long-term US residents also risk creating further instability in countries where these conditions have already contributed to displacement and migration.

The United States

As outlined throughout this section, the ongoing crackdown on immigration that began in January 2025 with the start of Trump's second term has had wide-ranging impacts not only within the US, but across the region. The government has in effect closed its southern border, launched unprecedented immigration raids across the country, annulled or suspended legal protections for vulnerable groups, and created a vast and shadowy system of detentions, deportations and third-country removals. These measures have come at a profound human cost and through aggressive legislative reforms which have attempted to push the limits of the country's constitutional framework.[91]

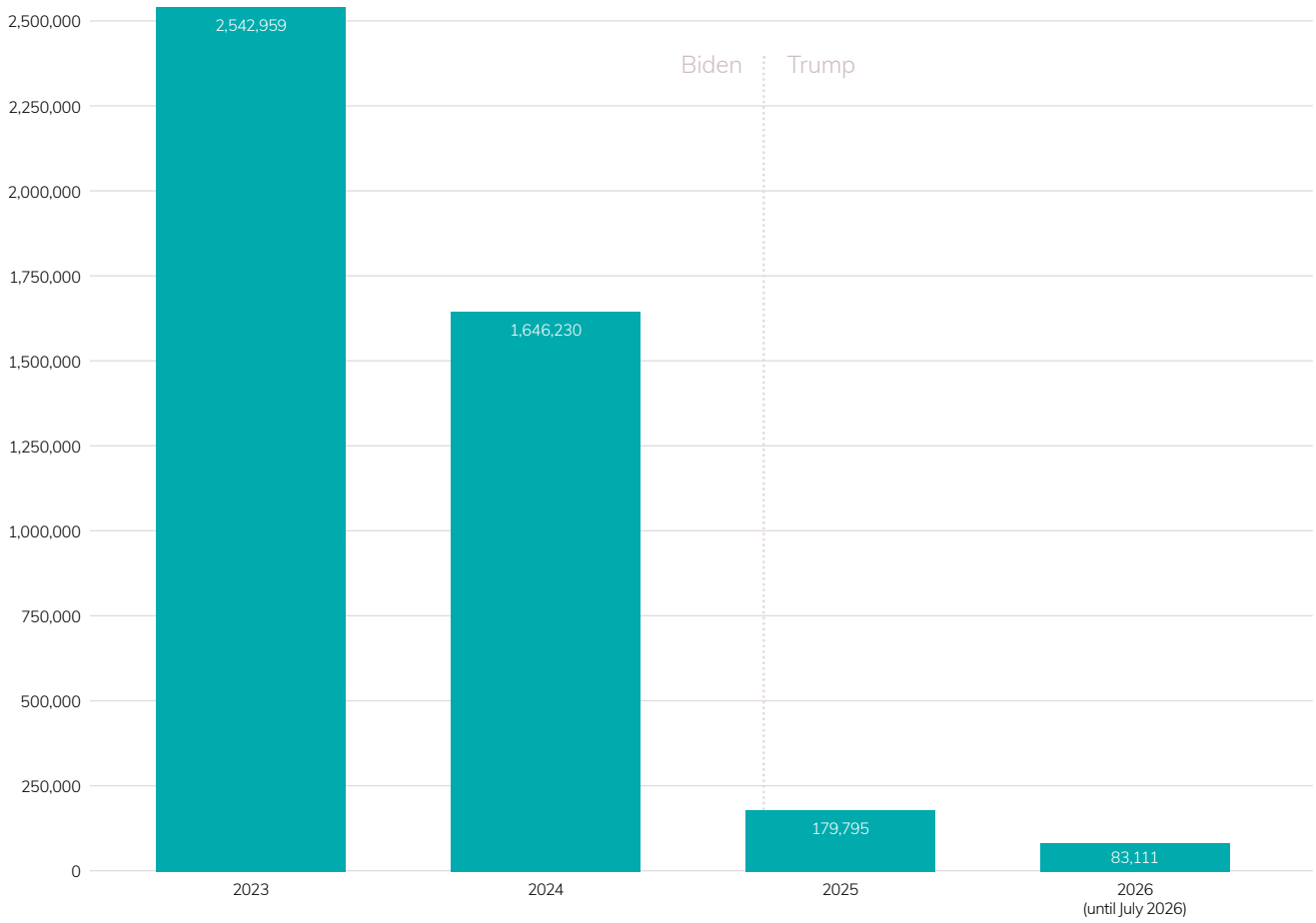
Border crossings remain low but deaths continue

Since January 2025, numbers have declined significantly from previous levels, with encounters at the southern border falling from 1,114,035 in the first seven months of 2024 to 125,771 and 83,111 in the same period of 2025 and 2026 respectively. To some extent this comparison is skewed by the fact that almost half (61,455) of the encounters in 2025 occurred in January alone, falling subsequently to a low of 7,822 in June 2026 before rising again. May 2026 was the highest full monthly total under the current administration, at 13,538, though still far lower than the total the same month in 2024 (170,716).[92] This reduction has been achieved through a combination of measures, including the suspension of asylum at the border, the immediate removal of most migrants and refugees intercepted at the border, tighter entry restrictions further south in countries such as Mexico and Panama, as well as the additional deterrent effect that the administration's immigration policies appear to be having on migrants and refugees in the wider region.[93]

In addition, the current administration has continued to militarise the border itself, drawing on tens of billions of dollars of funding to further expand the existing fencing and floating barriers, including the construction of a "smart wall" which incorporates sensors, cameras and other technologies.[94] The ongoing works have prompted widespread protests in Texas[95] and Arizona around the destructive impact of the construction on the local environment, with the government forced to suspend operations at Big Bend national park as a result.[96] At the same time, the number of deaths at the border increased during 2026, with 73 bodies detected in Arizona in the first seven months of 2026 compared to 59 in the same period the previous year. While lower than the total in the first seven months of 2024, when 98 bodies were discovered, the number of deaths has remained remarkably high given the fall in interceptions since 2025.[97] One explanation for this is that, while numbers have reduced, significant numbers of migrants and refugees are still attempting to cross through more remote areas where the threat of dehydration, hypothermia, or heat stress is higher.[98]

91 Chishti, M. and Putzel-Kavanaugh, C. (2026) The Trump Administration's Immigration Policies Encounter Resistance In the Courts. Migration Policy Institute.
92 US Customs and Border Protection (2026) Southwest Land Border Encounters.
93 Suh, S., Gest, J., and Nunez, L. (2026). The Trump Effect: US Immigration Policy and Transit Migrants in Central America. Journal on Migration and Human Security, 0(0).
94 NBC News (2026) Trump's $46B 'smart wall' races ahead at the border despite low crossing numbers; Greene, C. (2026) What's the Status of Trump's border Wall? A Key Campaign Promise, Over a decade On. Time.
95 Main, D. (2026) Protesters occupy 200-year-old tree at US-Mexico border to stop its destruction: 'She's our Statue of Liberty'. The Guardian.
96 Nowell, C. (2026) Trump administration pauses border construction in Big Bend national park. The Guardian.
97 Humane Borders (2026) Migrant Death Mapping.
98 Lazcano, A. (2026) Arizona migrant deaths rise despite historically low crossings. Border Report.

Graphic 4. Southwest land border encounters 2023 – 2026



Source: Southwest Land Border Encounters by Month

Arrests and detentions

It is difficult to develop a clear picture of current immigration patterns in the United States due to the fact that the Department of Homeland Security has refused to release official data since January 2025,[99] with further concerns that government figures have frequently been manipulated or inflated for political ends.[100] At the same time, the impacts of immigration enforcement have become more visible as a result of high-profile raids at homes, businesses and schools and the White House's deployment of viral memes and deportation footage to celebrate removals. While apprehensions within the US accounted for only around 30 percent of arrests under Biden, with the remainder occurring at the border, under Trump this proportion has risen to around 80 per cent.[101] Instead, the majority of deportations under Trump are taking place in the US interior, in many cases focusing on long-standing residents who in some instances arrived in the country as minors and have remained there for decades since.

Targeting cities across the US, in many cases those governed by Democratic representatives, these highly militarised operations have frequently proved deadly: as of July 2026, at least seven civilians had been killed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during Trump's second term, including three US citizens.[102] The most provocative of these was the so-called Operation Metro Surge, beginning in December 2025 in Minneapolis and subsequently spreading to other areas of Minnesota. Launched on the pretext of a crackdown on welfare fraud that the Trump administration had previously sought to associate with Minnesota's Somali community, the subsequent operation rapidly devolved into a "manufactured crisis" which saw local communities "terrorised" by thousands of ICE agents, who were accused among other abuses of racial profiling, arbitrary detentions and the killing of two protestors.[103]

99 Joffe-Block, J .and Parks, M. (2026) DHS acknowledges the noncitizen numbers it touted on voter rolls were inflated. NPR.
100 Santana, R. (2026) As Trump pushes deportations, immigration data becomes harder to find. AP.
101 Schwartzapfel, B. and Flagg, A. (2026) Trump's ICE Has Detained More People Than the Population of Atlanta. The Marshall Project
102 Reuters, (2026) The people killed by U.S. immigration agents during Trump's second term.
103 Human Rights Watch (2026) "A Manufactured Crisis": Minnesota Communities Terrorized By The Federal Government.

The outrage caused by these crackdowns ultimately led the government to scale back its operations in the early months of 2026. From May, however, following the appointment of a new Secretary of Homeland Security in March, the number of arrests had started to climb again, peaking in July and August with monthly totals of around 50,000 people[104] – the highest to date under the second Trump administration. ICE has reportedly shifted to a strategy of low-visibility to carry these out, moving away from high-profile raids and instead working with local police officers to apprehend people through traffic stops, airport arrivals, and immigration check-ins.[105] With the passage of a bumper USD 70 billion package in additional government funding for immigration enforcement, including USD 38.5 billion specifically for ICE, it is now "the wealthiest law enforcement agency in American history".[106] In total, from January 2025 to the end of August 2026, almost 660,000 arrests have been carried out.[107]

Concerns have also been growing about conditions in detention, prompted by soaring deaths in facilities. In 2025, a total of 32 people died – the highest number in two decades – from a range of conditions including heat failure, stroke and respiratory failure, as well as four suspected cases of suicide.[108] This disturbing trend has continued during 2026, with 26 reported deaths in ICE custody between January and the end of August, suggesting 2025's 20-year record could be surpassed again.[109] This uptick in deaths is not a reflection of the higher numbers being detained, with detainees now more than twice as likely to die in detention since Trump took power compared to the average over the preceding 15 years.[110] These high mortality rates have been blamed on abusive conditions, institutional neglect and inadequate health care in detention centres.[111] Testimony from those detained in the Fort Bliss facility in Texas, for instance, has documented violent beatings,[112] sexual assault, psychological abuse and intimidation from officers, as well as crowded and unsanitary conditions which exposed them to disease.[113] Some commentators have suggested that the systematic and sadistic mistreatment of detainees, including reports of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation and force-feeding, amounts to torture.[114]

Forced returns and third-country deportations

On one level, when returns at the border are factored in, the number of deportations under Trump are lower than those under Biden. For instance, independent data collated by a Mexican investigative agency found that the number of Mexicans removed in 2025 was significantly lower than each of the previous four years. However, this is largely due to the fact that border crossings – comprising the majority of those who were then turned back, usually shortly after entering the US, under Biden – have fallen sharply since 2025.[115] The impact of the current administration's policies on the country's immigrant population has been profound. Through a combination of deportations and the decision by significant numbers of foreign nationals in the US to "self-deport" due to the increasingly hostile environment, there were 2.3 million fewer undocumented migrants and 0.6 million fewer regularized migrants in July 2026 compared to January 2025 – the first reduction in the US's migrant population in almost a century.[116]

Compared to before, those deported under Trump are much more likely to be long-term residents uprooted from families, businesses and local communities. As a result, returnees may end up deported to an unfamiliar home country, with younger generations in particular potentially lacking fluency in the language or acceptance from other nationals. Deportations have also been notable for the widespread violation of basic rights and due process, with migrants and asylum seekers moved repeatedly between facilities and reportedly forced to sign documents authorising their return.[117] In June 2026, the US appeals court also overturned a lower court ruling which blocked the expansion of fast-tracked deportation procedures beyond the border, paving the way for the administration to carry out mass deportations with little respect for procedural safeguards.[118] While there continue to be numerous shocking incidents of unaccompanied children,[119] pregnant women and other

104 Ainsley, J. and Strickler, L. (2026) ICE arrested 50,000 people in August, continuing record pace. NBC News.
105 Doyle, K. (2026) ICE arrests surge as public outrage declines. ACLED.
106 Ainsley, J. and Strickler, L. (2026) ICE arrested 50,000 people in August, continuing record pace. NBC News.
107 Schwartzapfel, B. and Flagg, A. (2026) Trump's ICE has detained more people than the population of Atlanta. The Marshall Project
108 Singh, M., Murphy-Marcos, C. and Simmonds, C. (2026) 2025 was ICE's deadliest year in two decades. Here are the 32 people who died in custody. The Guardian.
109 National Immigration Project (2026) Mourning Those Who Have Died In ICE Custody.
110 Hesson, T., Cooke, K. and Tsvetkova, M. (2026) Death rate in ICE immigrant detention centers more than doubles under Trump, Reuters analysis finds. Reuters.
111 Human Rights Watch (2026) Dying in Detention: Rising Deaths in an Expanding US Immigration Detention System.
112 Gassama, H. (2025) Detained Immigrants Detail Physical Abuse and Inhumane Conditions at Largest Immigration Detention Center in the U.S. ACLU.
113 Human Rights Watch (2026) "You're Only Getting Out Deported or Dead": Abusive US Immigration Detention at Ft. Bliss.
114 Levine, J. (2026) ICE's tactics look increasingly like torture. The Guardian.
115 Fisher, S. (2026) More Mexicans were deported annually under Biden than by Trump. Los Angeles Times.
116 Dinan, S. (2026) Trump cuts migrant population by nearly 3 million; total U.S. population likely to drop. The Washington Times.
117 Isacson, A., Torres, J.C., Hildegardo, J. and Guzmán, G. (2026) Banished to the South: The Human Cost of Deportation - "Mass deportation". WOLA.
118 Al Jazeera (2026) US appeals court says Trump can proceed with fast-track deportation efforts.
119 Villarreal, A. (2026) Trump administration targets children amid push to 'deport at all costs'. The Guardian.

vulnerable groups being deported,[120] equally troubling is the administration's arbitrary removal of legal residency for individuals it wishes to deport for political reasons. One example is the prolonged detention of an Iranian man, woman and their teenage son, all permanent residents with no criminal records, who had their green card revoked and, as of August 2026, had been held for months: the reason given is that the man's mother was a spokesperson for the students who besieged the US embassy in Tehran in 1980.[121]

The Trump administration has deported hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals, with ICE claiming that 350,000 people were expelled between October 2025 and mid-July 2026.[122] While the majority of these end up deported to their home countries, the use of third-country deportations has become a marked feature of the current administration's policy. As of August 2026, the US has developed bilateral agreements with more than 30 different countries and deported more than 22,000 people under these arrangements, the majority to Mexico (19,000) and Guatemala (1,460) but also to countries including **DR Congo**, **Central African Republic** and **South Sudan** which have ongoing humanitarian and security crises and are manifestly not safe for third-country nationals.[123]

Graphic 5. Third-country deportations from the US (2025-Sept 2026)

Country	Total (known)	Nationalities (known)
Africa		
Burundi	12	Angola, Cameroon, Mauritania, Sudan
Cameroon	46	Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, plus one stateless person
Central African Republic	92	Afghanistan, Armenia, Cameroon, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, Eritrea, Georgia, Honduras, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Nicaragua, Russia, Serbia, Somalia, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Türkiye, Uzbekistan
Democratic Republic of the Congo	15	Colombia, Ecuador, Peru
Equatorial Guinea	66	Angola, Brazil, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Georgia, Ghana, Jamaica, Mauritania, Senegal, Uganda
Eswatini	32	Cambodia, Chad, Cuba, Ethiopia, Haiti, Jamaica, Laos, Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Vietnam, Yemen
Ghana	56	Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone
Liberia	20	Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, Eritrea, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela
Rwanda	23	Cambodia, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Liberia, Pakistan, Somalia, Trinidad, Uganda
Sierra Leone	43	Ghana, Guinea, Senegal
South Sudan	8	Cuba, Laos, Mexico, Myanmar, Vietnam
Uganda	8	Angola, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Togo

120 Wheeler, S. (2026) US Ramps Up Deportation of Pregnant People. Human Rights Watch.
121 Epstein, K. (2026) Iranian academic writes of US detention 'hell' over link to 1979 hostage crisis. BBC.
122 Barr, L. (2026) ICE says over 350,000 individuals removed so far in fiscal year 2026. ABC News.
123 Third Country Deportation Watch (2026) Banished by bargain: Monitoring the human cost of the U.S. government's forced third country transfer agreements.

Country	Total (known)	Nationalities (known)
Americas		
Belize	8	El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua
Costa Rica	624	Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, France, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iran, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Mauritania, Nepal, the Republic of Congo, Romania, Russia, Senegal, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Yemen
Ecuador	121	Cuba, Venezuela
El Salvador	~252	Venezuela
Guatemala	3,045	El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua
Guyana	6	Afghanistan, Cuba
Honduras	568	Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru
Mexico	~20,000	Mainly Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, others
Nicaragua	116	Colombia (11), Cuba (19), Ecuador (17), El Salvador (6), Guatemala (11), Honduras (22), Nigeria (5), Peru (7), Venezuela (6), plus one or two each from Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, India, Iran, Mexico
Panama	360	Afghanistan, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Honduras, India, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, Paraguay, Russia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan
Paraguay	38	Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador
St. Kitts and Nevis	3	Belize, Jamaica
St. Lucia	6	Cuba, Indonesia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, New Guinea
Asia		
Palau	3	Vietnam
Uzbekistan	~137	Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia
Europe		
Kosovo	2	Unknown
Moldova	30	Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia
Poland	50	Ukraine (sent on across the border into Ukraine)

Overall – 25,000 third-country deportations (80% going to Mexico)

Source: USCRI Third Country Deportations Tracker; Third Country Deportation Watch

Many of those deported have no prior connections to these countries and were not even warned they would be sent there. Reports emerged in August 2026, for instance, that a group deported to **Equatorial Guinea** – including immigrants from countries including **Egypt** and **Jamaica** who had arrived in the US when they were children – were being held by armed men in a disused hotel and prevented from leaving.[124] Dozens of nationals from Cuba,

124 Bregel, E. (2026) U.S. deportees assaulted, threatened at gunpoint in Equatorial Guinea, three say. Tucson.

Eritrea, and other countries have similarly been stranded without documentation in the Central African Republic, despite the dangers there.[125] Throughout August, nationals from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Cuba continued to be sent to a number of receiving countries in sub-Saharan Africa.[126] These deportations have no compelling logistical justification behind them, particularly given the small numbers being transferred to specific countries and the high costs involved. Instead, critics believe they are intended primarily as a deterrent, creating a "border spectacle" to spread fear.[127]

From the rollback of asylum to a drop in legal migration: The latest US policy restrictions

While US immigration policy on the ground is increasingly characterised by militarised raids and mass deportations, what the administration has achieved at a legal and policy level has been equally dramatic. The current administration has pushed through a number of key amendments which together undermine the basic principles of asylum and protection enshrined in international law. These include:

- **Further rollback of TPS:** While the administration announced the cancellation of many TPS programmes early in 2025, some of these were stalled by lower court injunctions which challenged the legality of protections being revoked en masse. However, a Supreme Court ruling in June 2026 that approved the administration's authority to cancel TPS[128] for Haiti and Syria not only led to the removal of their status, but also set a precedent for others to lose their designation too, as happened to Ethiopia, Myanmar, Somalia, and South Sudan in August.[129] Consequently, out of 1.3 million TPS holders who were living and working legally in the US when Trump took power in 2025, more than 1 million have been stripped of their status and are therefore eligible for deportation.[130]

- **Restrictions on legal immigration:** In December 2025, the administration announced an "expanded travel ban" to take effect 1 January 2026, barring or restricting access to temporary and immigration visas to 39 countries. A similar policy, also taking effect on January 2026 and continuing until a judge struck it down as unlawful in August, suspended visa applications from 75 countries.[131] Other measures include the introduction of new student vetting rules which could reduce foreign student enrolment by 9.5 per cent[132] and the imposition of a USD 100,000 levy on H1-B highly skilled visas in September 2025. The latter measure, after being struck down by a court in June 2026, was reimposed in August at a higher rate of USD 103,265.[133] At the beginning of 2026, projections by the National Foundation for American Policy suggested that legal migration to the US could reduce by between a third and a half – amounting to 1.5 to 2.4 million people – by the end of Trump's term as a result of his administration's policies.[134]

- **Higher numbers of visa revocations:** The administration claimed in August 2026 that it had revoked 175,000 visas to date[135] for a range of alleged offences including fraud, violent crime and drug use. These in principle related to specific individuals with criminal convictions, though some involved incidents of political speech, including students who spoke out about the conflict in Gaza.[136]

- **Further restrictions on the ability to claim asylum:** In August 2026, the administration announced that it was planning to revoke up to 200,000 business and tourism visas belonging to people who had subsequently claimed asylum in what would be, if implemented, "the biggest

125 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2026) Men from Cuba and other countries describe being deported by the U.S. to a dangerous African nation: "We cannot leave". CBS.
126 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2026) ICE deports Afghans and others to Africa, expanding "third country" deportations. CBS.
127 Candiz, G. and Basok, T. (2026) 'The farther away, the better' is the problematic logic behind U.S. third-country deportations. The Conversation.
128 USCIS (2026) Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Somalia.
129 Gooding, D. (2026) TPS Dealt New Legal Blows: Full List of Communities Facing Deportation. Newsweek; Drenon, B. (2026) Trump administration can target Ethiopians for deportation. BBC.
130 Im, C. and Hennen, M. (2026) Second Trump administration has ended Temporary Protected Status for most immigrants who had it. Pew Research Center.
131 Al Jazeera (2026) US judge strikes down Trump immigrant visa ban affecting 75 countries.
132 Marcus, J. (2026) Foreign student enrollment to fall 10% at US colleges thanks to Trump's agenda, report says. The Independent.
133 Wiessner, D. (2026) Trump administration moves to impose more than $100,000 fee for H-1B worker visas. Reuters.
134 Anderson, S. (2026) Trump and Miller slashing legal immigration by 33% to 50%. Forbes.
135 Gedeon, J. (2026) US state department has canceled more than 175,000 visas since Trump's return to office. The Guardian.
136 US Department of State (2026) State Department revokes more than 175,000 visas.

mass revocation of visas in US history".[137] Administration officials have justified this on the grounds that entering on a short-term visa to apply for asylum amounts to "fraud":[138] however, since the cancellation of humanitarian pathways such as CBP One for the suspension of asylum claims at the southern border, this is now the only available means for people to seek asylum in the US. If it happens, the revocation will narrow further the possibility of applying for asylum in the US.

- **Erosion of birthright citizenship:** The current administration has also been seeking to remove automatic citizenship for those born in the US, beginning with the attempted denaturalisation of 348 foreign-born US nationals. However, in June 2026 the Supreme Court ruled against the administration, maintaining that those born on US soil had a constitutional right to citizenship, including the children of temporary or undocumented residents.[139] Trump vowed to challenge the ruling and subsequently issued an executive order limiting birthright citizenship in August that was blocked by a court the following month, with the judge ruling that it "was almost certainly unconstitutional".[140]

137 Lee, M. (2026) US set for largest mass visa revocation in history targeting up to 200,000 foreigners, officials say. AP.
138 Saad, N. (2026) US to revoke visas of short-term visitors seeking asylum. BBC.
139 Debusmann, B. and Epstein, K. (2026) US Supreme Court upholds birthright citizenship in blow to Trump. BBC.
140 Murphy Marcos, C., Popat, S., Campbell, L. and Konotey-Ahulu, O. (2026) Trump threatens to abolish birthrights citizenship through Congress after supreme court rules against him - as it happened. The Guardian

From Venezuela to Chile: a future for our kids



I'm a mother of four from Venezuela and I've been here in Santiago, Chile, since November 2025. I left with my husband and our children out of fear. We voted against the government and were branded as traitors.

We even appeared in photos that the government had access to, so it became very dangerous for us to stay. Two of our relatives were taken away and, sadly, we never heard from them again. We feared the same would happen to us. We packed up and fled and chose to go to Chile. Chile is a more progressive country and it has good opportunities for my children's education and well-being. Here, they can have more stability.

The treacherous journey to Chile

The journey to Chile was long and difficult. We travelled through Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. At the border between Ecuador and Peru, we had money and valuables stolen from us. That border is what traumatised me the most. People there go as far as carrying out kidnappings and you have to hand over your valuables no matter what.

There are also lots of smugglers who approach you and say they're going to help you, but they just end up robbing you.

After crossing the border, we went by lorry to Lima – it took about eight days. Once we got to Lima, we went by bus to Tacna. From Tacna, we walked for about 13 hours to Arica, with the children. It was exhausting, our feet were practically bleeding and we were severely dehydrated.

Looking out for the kids

We received some help along the way. In Lima, an NGO helped us buy tickets to Tacna, and in Tacna, they gave us food.

We also received a lot of help from other migrants and we helped others whenever we could. I shared milk with a young woman who needed to feed her baby. We all tried to help each other out and especially we made sure that the children had food in their tummies, even if it meant that there was only water left for us adults.

The Chilean border guards found us in the desert because we were basically stranded. We were moving more slowly than the rest of our group because of the children and the fact that we were helping a pregnant young woman and her disabled father. So we couldn't keep up and were left behind.

The guards took us and handed us over to the Carabineros, who took us to the police. As soon as we got to Santiago, we explained why we had left Venezuela. They took us seriously and gave us 90 days to stay in the country. We spent the first ten or so sleeping in a public square.

That period was very tough, but there were lots of people who came up to us and helped us with food; even the homeless people on the street helped us quite a lot.

The police said they would call us in April. They didn't, though, so I've been looking after the children, registering them for school and healthcare. We still haven't received a response, so I try to do my best. The thing is, today and tomorrow I have meetings at the children's schools and on Friday I'll do my best to get to the office early to ask about my case.

The future

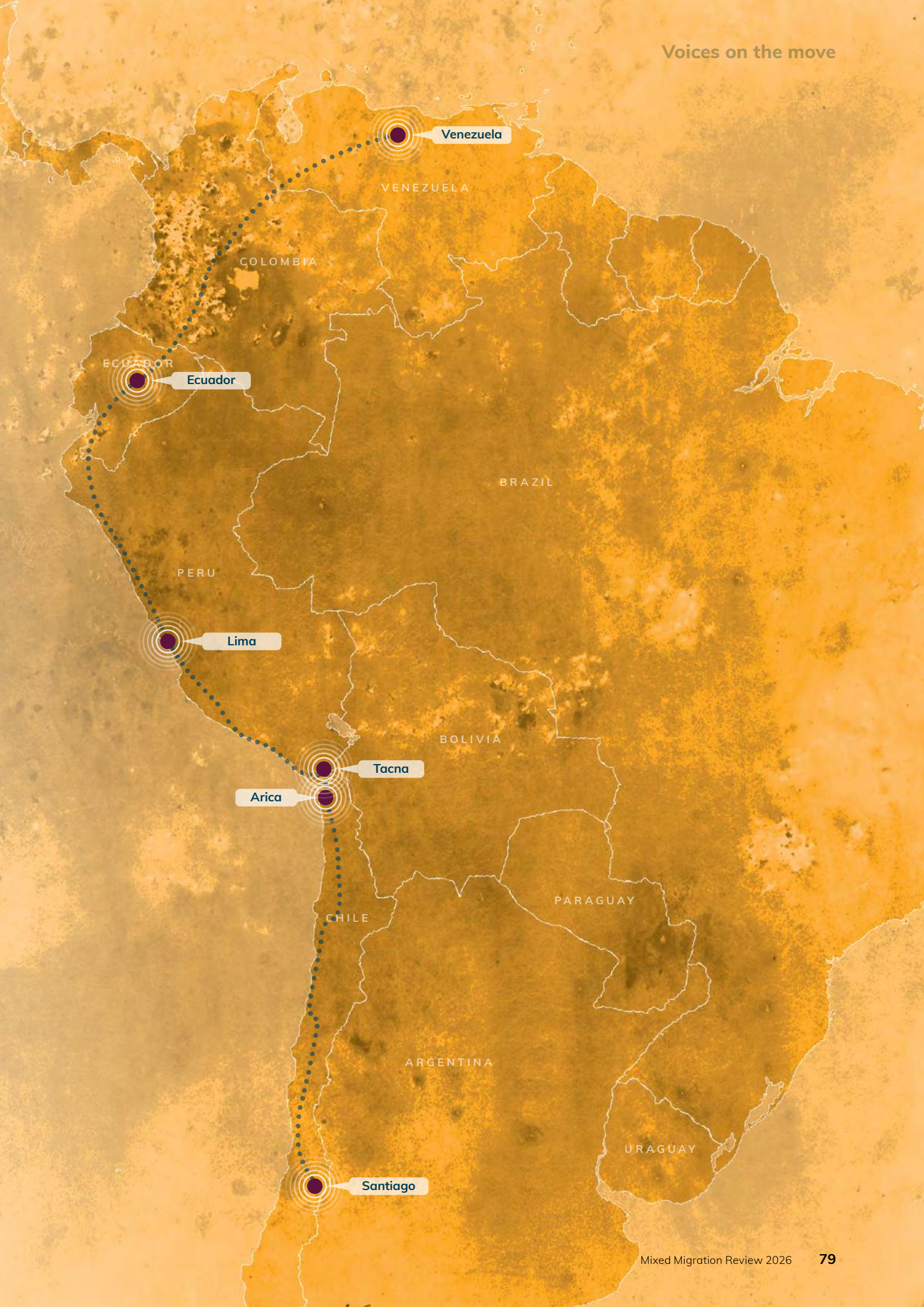
My intention is to stay here so my children can keep studying and attending health centres. But if the situation gets too tough, I'll sadly have to go to Brazil, because I can't go back to Venezuela – it's too risky.

Now, we've managed to get a flat and are a bit more settled, even though the beginning was very tough, as we were homeless and living on the streets. So far, I've done some odd cleaning jobs but I've now had to stop to look after the kids and also to sort out my paperwork so I can get a permanent contract. My husband is the one who's working right now.

Fear and hope

Things are definitely getting worse for migrants looking for a genuine opportunity to rebuild their lives, or for those who migrate as a way out of danger. There is so much discrimination against migrants. I wish governments would allow us to have more stable jobs so that we can provide stability for our children. That's all we really want. I don't regret a single thing, because it was a decision my husband and I discussed, and because it's all about giving our kids a better life.

At the end of the day, when a family like mine migrates, it's not because we want to travel and explore new countries but because there really is a need to leave our homeland. It's not easy to abandon everything, but we do it out of fear and hope. It's all about giving our kids a better life.


Venezuela
VENEZUELA
COLOMBIA
ECUADOR
Ecuador
BRAZIL
PERU
Lima
BOLIVIA
Tacna
Arica
PARAGUAY
CHILE
ARGENTINA
URAGUAY
Santiago

Interview



No way in, no way out: the racialisation of borders and the politics of exclusion

When it comes to increasingly politicised and securitised borders, such as the one between the US and Mexico, who gets to cross – and who is left behind? Haitian-American activist **Guerline M. Jozef** discusses the erosion of migration multilateralism, the US crackdown on migration and asylum policies, and the racialisation of mobility, with emphasis on her native Haiti.

Guerline M. Jozef, a Haitian-American activist, is co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit Haitian Bridge Alliance, the only Black-led, women-led and Haitian-American-led organisation serving migrants at the US-Mexico border. It has offices in Tapachula, Tijuana and San Diego, focusing on people of African descent in migration and beyond.

Do you think geopolitical tensions and rising populism have led to the erosion of traditional migration multilateralism, making international frameworks increasingly difficult to enforce?

Absolutely. As we've seen in the past few years, policies around the world have impacted the way people access safety and protection in the context of human rights and mobility. When we look specifically at the Americas, where we have people traversing five to 10 different countries in search of safety and protection, we can clearly see how it has indeed eroded access to protection in the US, throughout South and Central America and around the world. The same is happening in Europe, with migrants coming from several African countries. We always say, in the context of borders or accessibility, this mainly affects the most marginalised communities. Because, if you have the right passport, the right complexion, the right amount of money, the status and the class, borders and other hurdles do not apply to you.

Is there a risk that the global polarisation and debate around immigration may end up with worse outcomes for migrants and refugees rather than better?

We strongly believe that polarisation of everything right now impacts people's mobility. Indeed, there is a rise in right-leaning politics in the US and around the world when it comes to migration and immigration. We are even seeing that in places like South Africa, where movements are emerging to push out non-South Africans from other African countries, who fled their

> **"If you have the right passport, the right complexion, the right amount of money, the status and the class, borders and other hurdles do not apply to you."**

homes in search of safety and protection. That is a classic example where we witness people channelling their anger into attacking non-citizens instead of really addressing the social and economic issues.

There are a few reasons for this. One is that, when you are hurting, you look for something to blame and push away from you. Unfortunately, the false narrative, misunderstanding and misconception of immigrants and migrants mean people in mobility end up at the receiving end of all those different policies. Even when it comes to ethnic groups within the same 'racial structure', it's the most vulnerable amongst them who continue to take the brunt of the system.

Donald Trump's second presidential term has resulted in a 50-year low in migrant encounters, effectively shutting down asylum processing and triggering a massive surge in detentions and deportations at the US-Mexican border. What are your thoughts on this?

Since 21 January 2025, the new government has dismantled every avenue for people to seek safety and protection at the US–Mexico border. As well as the travel and visa bans, the US border has been officially shut down, which has created extreme situations, forcing people to stay in inhumane conditions because they can no longer access a safe final destination – which once meant the United States. We see that here [in the US] and throughout Europe as well. Even in the Middle East, a lot of people are being pushed out based on their nationality, ethnicity or family background.

Would you agree that the previous border management was chaotic and unsustainable, even if the current shutdown is also not acceptable?

I wouldn't say it was chaotic, but there was a lack of willingness to create a system which would allow a more orderly way to process people into safety and protection. For example, at the tail end of the first Trump administration and at the beginning of the Biden administration, we saw an increased number of people showing up at the US–Mexico border. Then, there was a systematic, calculated effort in Mexico, specifically in Tapachula, to warehouse migrants so that they couldn't leave the area – almost like a state prison. Then, we saw how the decision on the Mexican side to allow all people to leave at the same time after being held in 'concentration camps' inside Tapachula for over two years meant they immediately ended up at the US-Mexico border in Del Rio, Texas. That became an image of the chaotic and disorderly realities, or should I say mis-realities, at the US-Mexico border.

However, all those different factors could have been avoided if proper systems were put in place, if authorities listened to the realities of people who told them there was a problem and we needed to find solutions to that, together. Remember, we saw the creation of CBP One as an example of how we can better manage migration when people come together and when a humane approach is taken. We saw orderly processing of people seeking safety and protection at the US-Mexico border, where people were given a date and an opportunity to present themselves at a specific port of entry. They had a rendezvous and background checks, which all happened in an orderly way. But, when those in power create policies to push migrants deeper into inhumane conditions, that's when we see potential 'chaos and mismanagement', because people don't have any other way to follow the rules and do it the right way. This is a clear example of what is possible and how to counter the beliefs of chaos and mismanagement, because it is possible and it has proved a successful way to give people the safety and protection they need.

> **"... the creation of CBP One [was] an example of how we can better manage migration when people [human rights advocates, government entities and those who are impacted] come together and when a humane approach is taken."**

The CBP One process has now been closed down by the Trump administration. What are your views?

It has not only been dismantled but it has been used against the community it was designed to protect. Again, as we always say, you can use your power for right and good, or you can use your power for wrong and evil. The same CBP One that was created to provide a humane pathway, a parole for people, is now being used against those same people under the guise of CBP Home, which is pushing people to register so they can self-deport, but without the proper understanding and falling prey to more dangerous outcomes. At the end of the day, it always goes back to the intention and the willingness to build humane processes for protecting people rather than detering and criminalising them. What we are seeing currently in the US when it comes to migration and their intention around migration is deeply worrisome. It is based on cruelty. It is inhumane. It is difficult for anyone to witness how the deportation machine has become the norm, where every single avenue has been

dismantled and is being used with the intention of allowing people to die.

> **"What we are seeing currently in the US when it comes to migration and their intention around migration is deeply worrisome. It is based on cruelty. It is inhumane... the deportation machine has become the norm, where every single avenue has been dismantled and is being used with the intention of allowing people to die."**

The current narrative from the White House supports this: on its new website, the US administration portrays migrants as 'aliens' – as if the US had some sort of flying saucers picking up people from one side of the border and dropping them on the other side. Those are extreme, problematic narratives which create division within communities and really depart completely from an idea of welcoming humanity.

We hear that Border Patrol agents are turning people away immediately when they come across them, not even giving them access to legal processes or a hearing at all. Doesn't this contravene US international refugee commitments?

Absolutely! The United States is violating its own policies. And we, along with several other partners, allies and organisations, have continued to push back and fight against those illegal actions – from birthright citizenship to the termination of Temporary Protected Status [TPS] for 1.3 million people from Haiti and 17 other countries, all the way to voting rights. We see a lot of pushback, and the Haitian Bridge Alliance specifically has 11 different litigation cases [taking place] on behalf of impacted communities from Haiti, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua and other countries. We support and represent people who came under the parole programme for Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela (CHNV). We have several litigations in court right now which are pushing back against those obviously illegal executive orders and policies put in place by the US government.

Last year, the Trump administration tried to end the TPS for Haitians in particular, but in February this year, just before it was coming into effect, the move was blocked by the federal court. Are you optimistic that they will hold fast to that federal court ruling?

I want to give some background before responding. Some people fail to understand that TPS is based on current country conditions. As long as the country conditions continue to deteriorate and haven't made any progress, it is critical and necessary that protection is in place for people from those countries. Currently, 17 countries are eligible for TPS due to their extraordinary conditions. Haiti is a classic example. Since 2021, after the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, with the backing of the international community, the US embassy started to operate at about 10 percent. So, 90 percent of the US embassy hasn't been operational in Haiti due, according to the State Department, to extreme conditions on the ground which make it impossible for them to function properly there. In addition, they have completely closed the consular portion in Haiti. From 2021 to 2025, Haitians who needed to renew their passport and their visas had to go to a third country such as Barbados.

So, on the third day after the Trump administration came into power, they not only terminated TPS for Haiti, but they also tried to reduce the stipulated 18 months that Haiti already had down to 12 months. So we took them to court. We filed a lawsuit with litigation and we were able to win that, allowing Haitians to continue with the process. Then, we started our yearly campaign to redesignate and renew TPS for Haiti, and we addressed all three branches of government. The priority was the executive branch, President Trump and his cabinet, including the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). They were firm in their unwillingness to even consider the fact that Haiti currently deserves TPS, despite the fact it is critical for them to renew and redesignate TPS for Haiti based on the country's conditions.

Unfortunately, because of that, the next step was the judicial approach. Through the different litigations we were able to make a case in District of Columbia (Washington DC), in New York and in California – three different cases on behalf of TPS for Haiti. In the DC case we won a positive ruling from Judge Reyes which then allowed for the termination of TPS not to take effect on 3 February [2026], enabling people to continue to live in the United States under TPS protection. We are still in that case right now. On 29 April, we went to the Supreme Court, where we had amazing community engagement, with our deeply committed legal team and some of the plaintiffs inside the courthouse. The US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit subsequently rejected the administration's emergency bid to overturn Judge Reyes' stay, temporarily keeping the protections active. It was a great victory for us.

Since this interview was conducted, on 25 June 25, 2026, the US Supreme Court issued a 6-3 decision which overturned the lower court's block. The Supreme Court's ruling officially cleared the way for the administration to move forward with the cancellation of the TPS programme for Haitian and Syrian holders, while the core litigation continues. Following this decision, DHS officially wound down TPS for Haitian nationals by the final termination date of 2 September, 2026. Many of Guerline Jozef's answers to subsequent questions anticipate exactly this occurrence.

What will be the impact on Haitians in the US if, in the end, Judge Reyes' stay is overturned?

It will be huge. But those of us who have come here in the last few years seeking safety and protection due to the conditions in Haiti can absolutely not be sent back. We must be protected because it is impossible for Haiti to receive us. To be clear, there is absolutely no way that Haiti can receive even one or two or three people, let alone about half a million people. We are currently talking about half a million people of Haitian descent in the United States who are either under TPS or are undocumented and whose lives depend heavily and solely on the TPS, due to the country's current conditions. That's why we continue to push not only to get the protection for the people here, but to create a better life in Haiti so people don't have to flee.

It is extraordinary that DHS are trying to argue that Haiti is fit for repatriation – the scale of lawlessness and human rights abuse and the dire conditions there are just getting worse, it seems.

They are getting worse, for sure. According to the latest report we received, an estimated 1.4 to 1.7 million people are currently internally displaced. That is, people from places like Cité Soleil, Arcahaie and several other areas outside Port-au-Prince. There are some pockets of communities in Haiti where people are living a normal, everyday life but the majority of places in Port-au-Prince, in Jérémie and in other areas have been taken over by armed groups. And it's not gangs as we know them here in the US. It is completely different. These are armed groups who are purposely terrorising entire communities. And the killings, the human rights violations and the inhumanity of it all are deeply political. These violent groups have been able to not only occupy 80 percent of the west of the country but have also successfully cut off access to other places around Haiti, which hugely impacts the entire country because the heart of Haiti is in Port-au-Prince.

> **"To be clear, there is absolutely no way that Haiti can receive even one or two or three people, let alone about half a million people."**

We want to highlight that conditions in Haiti are also dire because of the lack of access to education and food. We are facing potential famine for the first time in a very long time, because there is nothing being produced currently in Haiti. Everything is being imported. That is also due to the international system and, in particular, to some US foreign policies which completely destroyed the rice industry in Haiti under President Clinton. Again, it's not about having a Republican or a Democrat government in the United States, it's the fact that both Republicans and Democrats have participated deeply in the destabilisation of Haiti that makes it what it is today.

In what ways specifically have they destabilised Haiti?

They are responsible for the complete dismantling of the agriculture industry, the rice industry and the national pork and poultry industry. The US had excess amounts of those products in the country and needed a place to dump them. It made sense for the United States to create that strategy, so now we have a country which is almost completely dependent on international support to feed itself. In addition to what's happening, we really want to highlight that many of those things are deeply rooted in US foreign policies towards Haiti and the international community, which continue to create ecosystems which enable the armed groups. Haiti is not used to these groups and finds it impossible to combat this new violence, because the country doesn't know how to handle it.

> **"... in other Latin American countries... such as Argentina... governments create pathways to welcome European people so they can, in a way, help 'bleach out' their populations."**

For the last few years, the Dominican Republic has been forcibly repatriating many thousands of people of Haitian descent. You've often talked about the racial aspects of immigration policy, suggesting an inherent discrimination against Haitians. Can you elaborate?

The majority of people in the Dominican Republic do not see themselves as black. Therefore, their prejudice against Haitians is deeply racist, deeply ethnic. And yes, in the United States and around the world, we see that anti-black racism is at the root of multiple policies, including, for example, dismantling the refugee system and only welcoming white African people from South Africa. They're the only group of people [offered protection in the USA] under false pretences: a completely fabricated 'racist push' in South Africa. They [the Trump administration] call it racist because they say that black South Africans are killing white South Africans, which we know is completely false. But at the end of the day, we have a president who said that he did not want people from countries such as Haiti and, essentially, all black African countries, but he will welcome people from Norway who have blonde hair and blue eyes. [Trump] has proved through his new regulation around refugee resettlement, that by creating a false category, he is able to not just welcome people, but actually settle them into the USA. Now, it has been proved that there was absolutely no [legal] basis for

that, and some of those [white South Africans] have actually decided to go back home because they were never in danger.

This is anti-black racism, and it's happening globally – we also see it in Europe, in the Middle East, in the Americas. Haiti and the Dominican Republic have a long history of violence and anti-black racism, which is apparent in the Dominican Republic's willingness to welcome non-black immigrants to support the 'whitening' of the population. This happened in other Latin American countries, too, such as Argentina, where governments create pathways to welcome European people so they can, in a way, help 'bleach out' their populations.

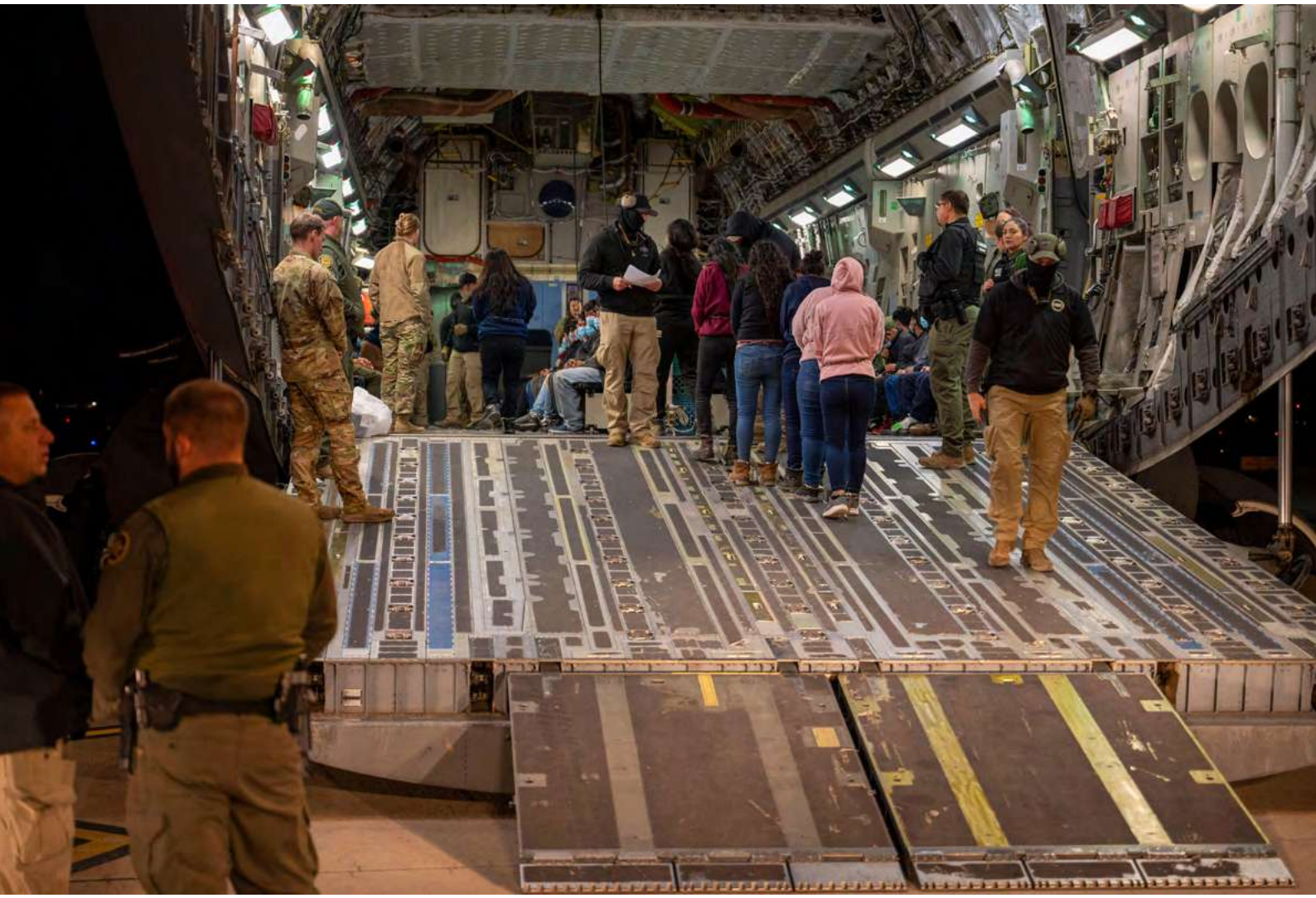
Despite the current situation, I get the sense that you are very proud of your country and hold out hope.

Yes, very much so. At the end of the day, we say that right now Haitians cannot be safe at home or anywhere in the world. Yet, we continue to rise, we continue to flourish, we continue to exist and we continue to lead in so many aspects. Even as Haiti is in a dark, inhumane and violent space, Haiti and Haitians continue to bring hope to the world.

“Haitians cannot be safe at home or anywhere in the world. Yet, we continue to rise, we continue to flourish, we continue to exist and we continue to lead in so many aspects. Even as Haiti is in a dark, inhumane and violent space, Haiti and Haitians continue to bring hope to the world.”

Photo credit: US Air Force Photo

US Customs and Border Protection agents guide undocumented migrants on to a US Air Force C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft for deportation. The removal flights were at the direction of President Donald Trump and this image is taken of the first time deportations used military aircraft for the purpose (2025). Up to August 2026, (fiscal year 2026), according to statistics posted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), US immigration authorities removed more than 350,000 individuals from the US. (See *Keeping Track in the Americas*, p. 62 and *Interview with Guerline M. Jozef*, p. 80).



Coffee rust and migration in the Northern Triangle: rural livelihoods caught in global polycrisis

Researchers typically describe the relationship between climate change and migration as complex and indirect and are wary of claiming that climate breakdown directly drives people en masse from their homes. Yet, when climate impacts converge with the other pressures of a polycrisis, their influence on the decision to leave can become explicit, and climate may be the tipping point.[1] This article examines coffee production in the Northern Triangle of Central America where, in recent years, several of these pressures have combined and amplified one another. The result has been a sharp rise in migration among those able to leave and involuntary immobility for those who cannot. Coffee offers a clear illustration of intersecting crises in which pathogens and a changing climate play a central role, and in which climate justice is plainly denied.

The changing migration context

For decades, irregular migration across the United States' southern border was dominated by Mexicans. Over the past 15 years, that has shifted towards Central Americans: between 2013 and 2021 the share of Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalans rose from roughly 35 percent to 43 percent.[2] Numbers for all nationalities have since fallen dramatically under the Trump administration's hardened border policy and expulsion enforcement since early 2025.

What made this shift between 2013 and 2021 distinctive was the change of profile of those leaving. Rather than young individuals seeking opportunities in the US, whole households and communities with no prior migration history were on the move. Across the Northern Triangle, rural livelihoods were failing as never before. Some farmers moved short distances; others crossed borders intending to reach the US.

A region built on coffee

Coffee is central to this story. In the upland rural areas of the Northern Triangle it has long been one of the few reliable sources of cash income, both for smallholders and for landless labourers who depend on harvest work. In Guatemala alone, more than half a million people rely directly on the coffee harvest for employment.[3] For households who grow maize and beans for their own consumption, coffee earnings have paid for the things subsistence farming cannot: school fees, medicine, transport and debt repayments.

This dependence on a single crop sits within a wider environmental vulnerability. Much of the region overlaps with the Central American Dry Corridor, which runs along much of the western coast between the northwestern border of Guatemala to northern Costa Rica, repeatedly described as "ground zero" for the impacts of global warming in Central America.[4] The area is highly exposed to climate variability and climate change, which compound the existing vulnerabilities of those who make their living from agriculture.[5]

1 WFP, IDB, IFAD, OAS, and IOM. (2017). Food security and emigration: Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.
2 Nuñez-Neto, B. (2022). Testimony on Securing and Ensuring Order on the Southwest Border. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.
3 Markham, L. (2017) Drought And Climate Change Are Forcing Young Guatemalans To Flee To The U.S. HuffPost
4 Othering & Belonging Institute. (n.d.) Climate Refugees Spotlight: The Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador)
5 USDA and CATIE (2023) Assessment of Agricultural Resilience Under Climate Change and Its Relation to Food Insecurity and Migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

Figure 1. Map of Central America with the Northern Triangle Countries



Source: Congressional Research Service I GAO-21-104366

The rust outbreak

Beginning in 2012, a major outbreak of roya, also known as coffee leaf rust, caused by the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix*, swept through upland plantations in Central America. Rising temperatures and humidity were widely blamed as global warming pushed conditions favourable to the fungus further up the mountainsides, into altitudes where the pathogen had previously not thrived. This 'rust' causes defoliation and reduces bean quality, with yield losses ranging from 35 percent to over 75 percent in severe cases.[6]

In 2012, the outbreak caused roughly USD 1 billion in crop losses and an estimated 100,000 job losses across the region, with some estimates suggesting as many as 255,000 people lost employment income.[7] In Honduras, researchers documented crop failures across consecutive seasons in vulnerable areas, tied to the same outbreak of coffee rust.[8] A peer-reviewed study of smallholder farmers in eastern Guatemala found households lost an average of 71 percent of coffee production in their worst rust year.[9] By 2016, some 3.5 million people across the region required humanitarian assistance, mainly due to the impact of climate change, including the impact of coffee rust.[10] Clearly, for vulnerable smallholders already facing compounding crises, the coffee rust outbreak was an additional, insuperable hardship.[11]

Compounding shocks

Coffee rust did not strike in isolation. The outbreak coincided with the 2012 to 2013 collapse in global coffee

6 Avelino, J., et al (2015) The coffee rust crises in Colombia and Central America (2008–2013): impacts, plausible causes and proposed solutions. Food Security, 7 (2), 303–321
7 Mallén, P.R. (2014) Coffee Rust Has Claimed $1B In Losses And 250,000 Jobs In Central America, US Fears Increase Of Migration. International Business Times.
8 Reichman, D.R. (2022) Putting climate-induced migration in context: the case of Honduran migration to the USA. Reg Environ Change. 2022;22(3)
9 Markham, L. (2017) Drought And Climate Change Are Forcing Young Guatemalans To Flee To The U.S. HuffPost
10 Markham, L. (2017) Drought And Climate Change Are Forcing Young Guatemalans To Flee To The U.S. HuffPost
11 Seay-Flemming, C. (2018) Beyond Violence: Drought and Migration in Central America's Northern Triangle. New Security Beat

prices, which fell by 55 to 65 percent from their early 2011 levels.[12] Growers faced damaged harvests and depressed prices for whatever they salvaged. At the same time, recurrent drought and erratic rainfall hit the maize and beans that households grew for their own consumption, leaving communities highly food insecure.[13] Farmers who had borrowed to replant, or against future harvests, fell into debt and deeper poverty.

Government response and support

Losses from coffee rust can be limited through pruning, shade management, resistant varieties and fungicides. But all of these require money, technical advice and time, which the poorest growers lacked and which their governments, particularly in Guatemala and Honduras, did little to provide.

Comparing national responses shows that the same biological and environmental shock need not have led to the same outcome. Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala all declared states of emergency, but these declarations mobilised very different resources. In Costa Rica, the declaration unlocked national funds which allowed the agriculture ministry and the national coffee institute to distribute USD 3.7 million worth of fungicides to smallholders.[14] This acted as a safety net, easing the pressure on farmers to abandon their livelihoods and migrate. In Guatemala and Honduras, weak institutional support had already left farmers more exposed to coffee rust in the first place. With little help forthcoming and rural poverty deeply entrenched, migration became a vital adaptation strategy for many.[15]

Migration as adaptation

The migration took many forms. Seasonal, temporary and permanent movement, both internal and international, was increasingly used to diversify household income and offset climate losses.[16] In eastern Guatemala, household migration nearly doubled, and it did so both in communities without a strong history of migration as well as those with one, suggesting that a tipping point had been reached.[17]

The erosion of rural livelihoods also had wider consequences. It lowered the perceived cost and risk of growing narcotic crop production and accelerated movement into towns and cities.[18] In the Northern Triangle, rapid unplanned urbanisation, a large youth population and the scarcity of formal jobs became closely linked to forced gang recruitment. As gangs have become more entrenched, violence has become endemic – itself a powerful migration driver.[19] Here, climate impacts intersect with and reinforce existing violence and vulnerability.

A case of climate injustice

For farming families, multiple crises have hit at once, indicating a polycrisis, where each crisis has reinforced the other as they have played out.[20] From the climate side, rising temperatures have allowed coffee rust to reach altitudes once safe from the pathogen, and continued global failure to cut carbon dioxide emissions will only deepen the impacts on smallholders in Honduras and Guatemala.

The United States illustrates this injustice starkly. It has among the highest per capita emissions in the world and has withdrawn from its emissions commitments, yet it consumes between one third and just over 40 percent of Guatemalan and Honduran coffee exports, respectively.[21] The country least exposed to the consequences of climate change is both a principal driver of the warming and the principal market for the crop that warming has undermined.

The present configuration

Recent studies find climate-related factors are increasingly cited as a primary reason for leaving Central America while remittances remain a critical lifeline for those who remain. But three recent US policy

12 Rosenberg, A. (2013) Here's who benefits from falling coffee costs, CNBC
13 WFP, IDB, IFAD, OAS, & IOM. (2017) Food security and emigration: Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.
14 Avelino, J., et al (2015) The coffee rust crises in Colombia and Central America (2008–2013): impacts, plausible causes and proposed solutions. Food Security, 7 (2), 303–321
15 Othering & Belonging Institute. (n.d.) Climate Refugees Spotlight: The Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador)
16 Ruiz-de-Oña, C., Rivera-Castañeda, P., and Merlín-Uribe, Y. (2019) Coffee, Migration and Climatic Changes: Challenging Adaptation Dichotomic Narratives in a Transborder Region. Social Sciences, 8 (12)
17 Dupre, S.I., Harvey, C.A. and Holland, M. B., (2022) The impact of coffee leaf rust on migration by smallholder coffee farmers in Guatemala, World Development, Elsevier, vol. 156(C).
18 Wrate, J. et al. (2023) Cocaine Everywhere All at Once: How Drug Production Is Spreading Into Central America, Europe, and Beyond OCCRP
19 Runde, D.F. & Schneider, M.L. (2019) A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle CSIS
20 Tooze, A. (2022). Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. Financial Times.
21 Rubinstein, A. (2026) Fresh Crop Coffees Begin Arriving as U.S. and European Buyers Look Beyond Brazil. StoneX

shifts have reshaped the migration context in the region.[22] First, the previous US administration's "root causes" approach, which aimed to reduce out-migration by supporting rural livelihoods at its origin, earmarked significant levels of support for the region. Whatever the impact on out-migration, the second Trump administration has abandoned this approach and terminated its funding. Second, the closure of USAID and cuts to other international assistance programmes have removed much of the external support for climate-affected rural communities – precisely the buffering capacity that Costa Rica's example showed to be effective. Third, hardened US border enforcement and Mexican containment have sharply reduced the ability to move north into the US at all.

This contrast with the recent migration dynamics is just the start. An estimated 700,000 Central Americans left their homes and headed north in the financial year 2019; today irregular crossings at the US southern border have fallen to historic lows.[23] Yet, out-migration from the Dry Corridor is documented as continuing through 2025 to 2026.[24] The steep fall in arrival numbers of irregular migration at the US's southern border reflects suppressed movement, not reduced pressure at origin.

Instead, migration in the region is being reshaped. There is growing evidence of involuntary immobility, with migrants stranded, particularly in Mexico.[25] Internal rural-to-urban migration continues. And some migrants are returning home either by choice or by deportation. Others are moving southwards instead of northwards, seeking refuge closer to home. In 2025, the number of migrants going south through the Darien Gap was double that going north.[26] Some are seeking to settle in countries like Mexico and Costa Rica, and a small number make it to Canada and Europe.[27] Households face the same or worsening stresses, but with a key adaptation channel closed, they must either find alternatives or stay put.

Coffee remains a central source of income for many communities in Central America. Coffee rust has not disappeared, but its role has changed – it is now a chronic background stressor rather than the acute, rapid-onset shock of 2012-13. However, a changing climate continues to act as a central factor in polycrisis, combining with price collapse, drought, debt, weak state support and violence to create a tipping point[28] which has driven many coffee-dependent households to migrate, and which leaves many wanting to migrate today.[29] The combination of mounting pressure to leave and shrinking opportunity to do so poses particular challenges for Central American governments, and above all for the families who feel compelled to move yet have few places to go or to seek sanctuary.

22 Huber, J., Madurga-Lopez, I., Murray, U. et al. (2023) Climate-related migration and the climate-security-migration nexus in the Central American Dry Corridor. Climatic Change 176, 79.
23 Strauss Center (UT Austin) (2020) Migrant Caravans in Mexico (Fall 2019 – Spring 2020) Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs Policy Research Project Report Number 217
24 International United Nations Watch. (2026) Dry Corridor Climate Crisis Drives Drought and Displacement Across Central America
25 MPI (2026) How Immigration Crackdowns and Aid Cuts Are Reshaping Migration Across Central America
26 MPI (2026) How Immigration Crackdowns and Aid Cuts Are Reshaping Migration Across Central America
27 MPI (2026) How Immigration Crackdowns and Aid Cuts Are Reshaping Migration Across Central America
28 Huber, J. et al. (2023). Climate-related migration and the climate-security-migration nexus in the Central American Dry Corridor. Springer, vol. 176(6), pages 1-22, June.
29 International United Nations Watch (2026) Dry Corridor Climate Crisis Drives Drought and Displacement Across Central America.

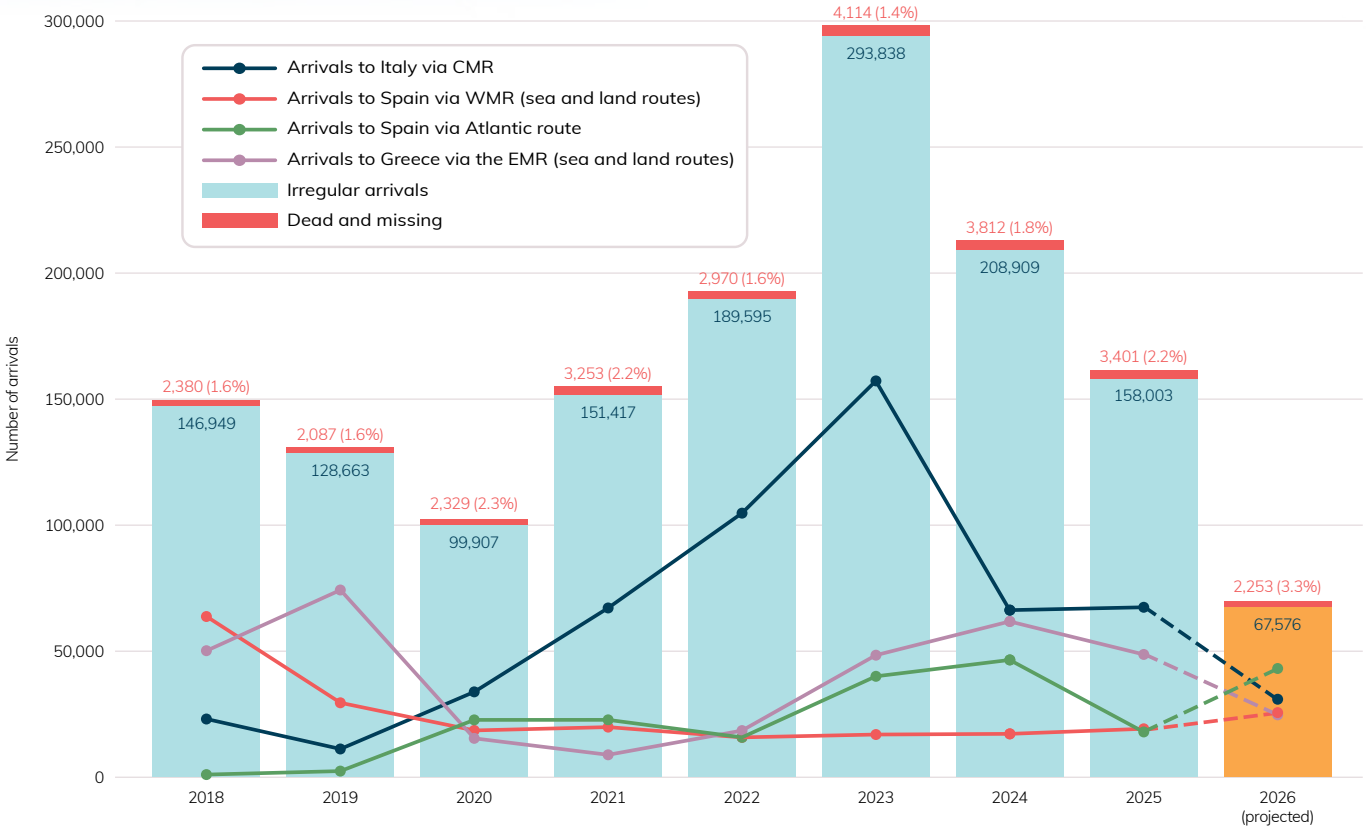
Europe

Overview

Peter Grant

As implementation of the European Union (EU) Pact on Migration and Asylum begins, bringing with it the promise of a harmonised approach to migration management, the situation for migrants and refugees in Europe remains uncertain. The number of irregular entries into the union continued to fall in 2026, totalling 37 percent fewer arrivals in the first seven months compared to the same period in 2025, with drops registered across every major route with the exception of the Western Mediterranean.[1] Yet at the same time, irregular migration into Europe has become increasingly lethal, with more deaths and disappearances despite the fall in registered arrivals,[2] with smugglers in some cases pursuing longer or more dangerous routes in response to restrictions.

Graphic 1. Irregular arrivals to Europe 2018 – 2026[3]



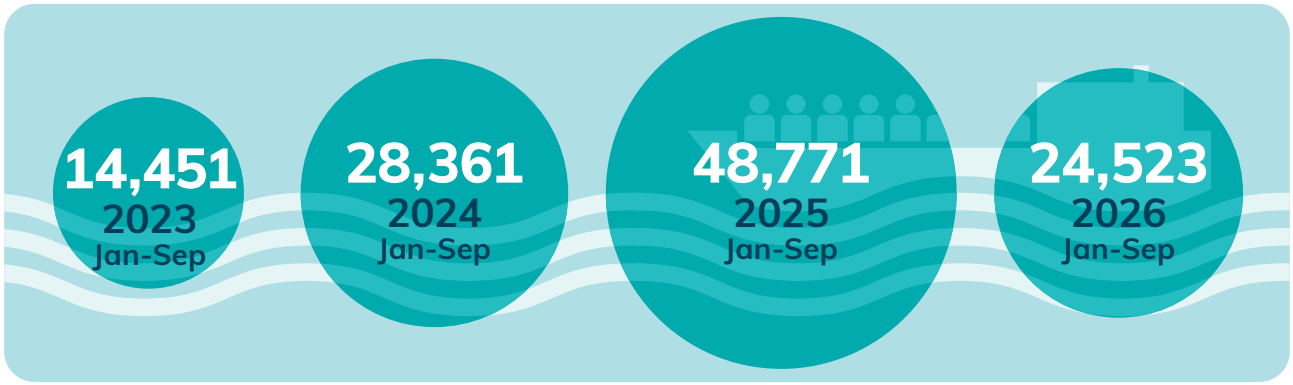
Source: UNHCR Operational Data Portal Europe Sea Arrivals; IOM Missing Migrants Project

1 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Preliminary data show irregular border crossings into EU down 37% in first seven months of 2026.
2 IOM (2026) Migration Routes Grow Dangerous Even as Irregular Arrivals Fall in 2026, new IOM Data Show.
3 As 2026 data only runs through August, Sep–Dec arrivals were estimated per route using two methods: (1) applying each route's average historical Sep-Dec/Jan-Aug ratio (2018–2025) to 2026's actual Jan–Aug total, and (2) applying the 2025-to-2026 Jan-Aug growth rate to 2025's actual Sep-Dec total. The two estimates were averaged (50/50) to produce the final Sep-Dec 2026 prediction, which was then added to the actual Jan–Aug 2026 figures to give the full-year prediction. These are estimates assuming historical patterns hold, not forecasts of specific future events.

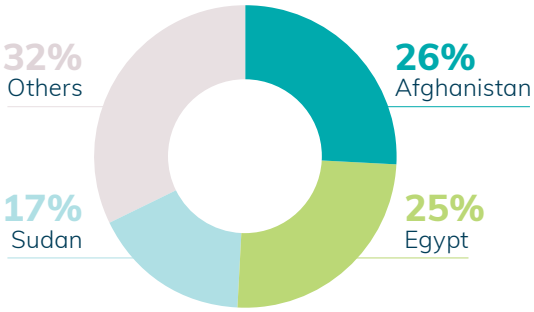
Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece and Cyprus

With arrivals to **Greece** having decreased by over 21 percent to 48,771 in 2025, the majority (41,696) by sea, numbers continued to fall in the first seven months of 2026 to 19,506 – 25 percent lower than the total in the same period of 2025 (26,126).[4] The majority of arrivals entered through **Crete** (predominantly from Libya) and Evros (through the land corridor between Türkiye and Greece), while the most pronounced drop in movement was along the various maritime routes between Türkiye and the Greek islands.[5] The most represented countries of origin during the first half of 2026 were Bangladesh (29.1%), Sudan (28.4%), Afghanistan (10.3%) and Egypt (8.7%).[6] The two primary sending countries, Bangladesh and Sudan, have seen their relative share increase significantly compared to the first half of 2025,[7] due in large part to the growing prominence of the North Africa route from Libya. A similar trend was evident in **Cyprus**. While arrivals in 2025 (2,442) were already 60 percent lower than in 2024, this trend persisted in the first seven months of 2026, totalling just 828 – down 61 percent from the same period in 2025.[8] As of the end of July 2026, the most represented countries of origin among arrivals were Somalia (22.1%), Sudan (18%), and Syria (14.5%).[9]

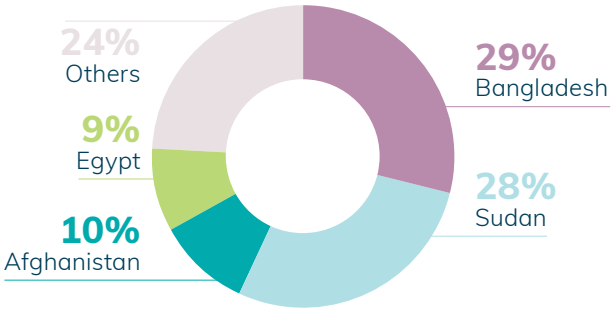
Graphic 2. Eastern Mediterranean route 2023-2026: four-year comparative data on arrivals



Most represented countries of origin in the first half of 2025

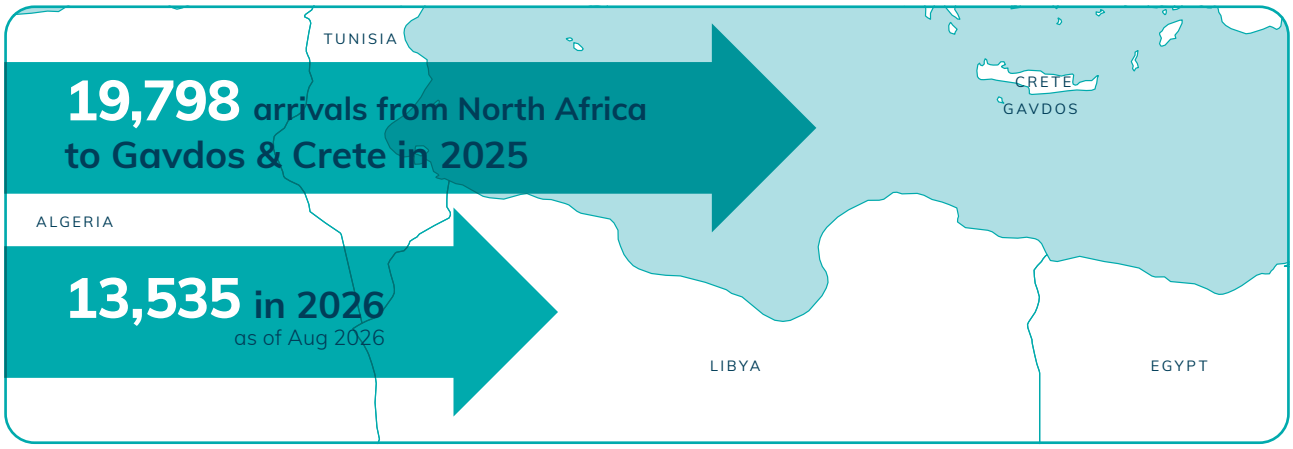


Most represented countries of origin in the first half of 2026



4 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Greece.
5 Karagiorgas, I. (2026) Migrant flows to Greece down 34% in 2026, maritime affairs minister says. Euronews; UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Greece.
6 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Greece.
7 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Mixed Migration Review 2025: Migration in the context of geopolitical turmoil, p.177
8 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Cyprus.
9 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Cyprus.

Sea routes from North Africa to Gavdos and Crete



Sources: UNHCR Operational Data Portal Europe Sea Arrivals; UNHCR IOM Migrant and Refugee Movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea in 2024

Despite the reduction in the number of arrivals along the Eastern Mediterranean route, the number of deaths and disappearances has increased, with 374 recorded fatalities in the first seven months of 2026 – significantly higher than the 205 detected in the same period in 2025.[10] Many of the most deadly incidents involved journeys originating from North Africa on their way to Crete,[11] including the capsizing of a boat off the coast of Crete on 21 February which resulted in the death or disappearance of 30 people on board, followed by another incident which resulted in at least 22 fatalities.[12] One reason for the high death toll among migrants travelling from Tobruk to Crete is the sheer length of the route, spanning some 300 kilometres of open sea, and the absence of search and rescue operations in the area – meaning any vessels that run adrift have a very low chance of being retrieved.[13]

In the meantime, there also continue to be concerns about the alleged brutality of border practices in the Eastern Mediterranean, including a longstanding pattern of violence, abuse and assault.[14] A recent report by the humanitarian organisation Collective Aid estimated that more than 82,000 refugees and migrants were prevented from accessing asylum in 2024 and 2025 due to Greek pushbacks and Turkish interceptions in the Mediterranean.[15] Furthermore, in February 2026, at least 15 migrants were killed off the coast of the island of Chios after colliding with a coastguard vessel.[16] While authorities attributed the accident to dangerous manoeuvres carried out by the migrant dinghy,[17] this was contradicted by testimony from those on board suggesting that the coastguard vessel had been to blame, prompting widespread criticism and the launch of a criminal investigation.[18]

Greece implements an array of new restrictions

The Greek government has announced a number of legislative measures which roll back migrant and refugee rights in the country even further. The Promotion of Legal Migration Policies law, passed in February 2026, mandates a lifelong ban on anyone entering Greece irregularly from ever legalising their status – meaning, in the words of the Minister of Asylum and Migration, "Whoever is illegal right now will remain illegal, and when they are located they will be arrested, imprisoned for two to five years and repatriated." The law also bars unaccompanied minors in schooling from accessing residence permits when they turn 18.[19]

Perhaps the most draconian aspect of the legislation, however, is its raising of misdemeanours (such as facilitating illegal entry, exit or stay) to the status of felonies, with potential penalties of up to 10 years in prison and fines of EUR 60,000 for anyone working for

10 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean.
11 IOM (2026) Migration routes grow dangerous even as irregular arrivals fall in 2026, new IOM data show.
12 Giuffrida, A. (2026) More than 600 people have died trying to cross Mediterranean in 2026, UN says. The Guardian; InfoMigrants (2026) Death toll of migrants in the Mediterranean nears 1,000 in 2026.
13 Carretero, L. (2026) Why the Mediterranean route is becoming more deadly for migrants. InfoMigrants; Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Greece: 79 migrants reach Crete in small boats. InfoMigrants.
14 Mellersch, N. (2026) Greek border pushbacks: Frontex reports describe abuse, masked men and a climate of impunity. InfoMigrants.
15 Collective Aid (2026) From Survivors to Suspects: The Criminalisation of Migration in the Aegean - Aegean Border Violence Patterns 2024 and 2025.
16 Wallis, E. (2026) Greece: At least 15 migrants dead after boat collision off Chios. InfoMigrants.
17 Papanikolaou, N. and Ireland, O. (2026) Collision with Greek coastguard boat leaves 15 migrants dead. BBC.
18 ECRE (2026) Greece: Collision between Coast Guard vessel and migrant boat leaves at least 15 dead.
19 ERCE (2026) Greece: Collision between Coast Guard vessel and migrant boat leaves at least 15 dead —.

organisations listed on the government's NGO registry.[20] A joint statement by more than 70 refugee and migrant rights groups condemned the policy as an attempt "to intimidate civil society".[21] It represents the latest of many setbacks imposed on NGOs and activists by the Greek government, which is by some margin the most litigious of any EU member state: out of 110 individuals who faced prosecution across the EU in 2025 for acts of solidarity, 49 involved cases brought by Greece.[22] This has continued into 2026, with the government issuing a European arrest warrant in February against a Norwegian humanitarian worker on charges of human trafficking.[23]

The government also announced proposals in June 2026 to revise its current migration framework to allow unaccompanied children to be held in detention facilities on arrival.[24] Under new rules, amended to align with the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, asylum seekers will also be provided with free legal assistance to warn claimants about the risks of criminal detention in the country, with lawyers incentivised to encourage them to leave, with a EUR 250 bonus for every client who opts to return.[25]

An increasingly hostile environment in Cyprus

Beginning in December 2025, authorities in Cyprus carried out a series of raids across the country to identify undocumented migrants, arresting hundreds in the process. Against a backdrop of growing anti-immigration sentiment, driven in part by the far-right, these operations continued into the summer, with hundreds apprehended in separate incidents.[26] The government also deported thousands to their home countries, with more than 4,000 returned in the first half of the year.[27] Asylum applications in the first half of 2026 were 92 percent lower than the same period in 2022.[28] The government also stripped asylum protection from 95 people, the majority of them Syrians, who had broken the law.[29]

More broadly, the government is reportedly preparing to undertake the first forced returns of Syrians since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024.[30] While asylum processes for Syrians were suspended in April 2024, since their resumption in early 2025 many have had their applications rejected. This situation is reflected more broadly in the widespread rejection of asylum cases in general: in 2025, out of 9,827 people who received decisions, 8,362 (85%) had their claims rejected.[31] Additionally, between December 2024 and July 2026, as many as 5,000 have also left under a process of assisted returns, with returnees receiving financial payments of EUR 1,500 to EUR 2,000 per person (with additional benefits if international protection has already been granted), while one family member is allowed to remain for a two-year period to work in Cyprus.[32] However, rights groups have previously highlighted that many of those opting to leave have been pressured to do so, putting into question how voluntary these returns are in practice.[33]

EU Pact on Migration and Asylum comes into force

Following several years of negotiations, the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum came into force on 12 June 2026, with EU President Ursula von der Leyen promising it would bring "more secure external borders, solidarity between Member States, and more efficient procedures for asylum and return".[34] According to the European Commission, the Pact combines a number of key elements: "secure external borders" (through enhanced border checks and accelerated return procedures), "firm and fair asylum procedures" (including faster processing and harmonised regulations to prevent secondary movement), "EU-wide standards for reception facilities" (to ensure dignified conditions throughout the EU and to speed up access to labour markets), a reciprocal system of "solidarity and responsibility" to ensure the costs of hosting refugees are shared equitably, and "strong safeguards" to protect fundamental rights at the border.[35]

Yet a number of challenges lie ahead in its implementation. Human rights groups have highlighted with concern various provisions which

20 ANSA (2026) 56 NGOs ink statement condemning Greece's proposed amendments to immigration code. InfoMigrants; Cossé, E. (2026) Greek Immigration Bill Demonizes Civil Society. Human Rights Watch.
21 Statewatch (2026) Greece: Criminal law used to target civil society organisations.
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23 Nielsen, N. (2026) Greece moves to arrest Nordic aid worker supporting migrants. EUobserver.
24 Neos Komos (2026) Greek NGO blasts govt plans for unaccompanied child asylum seekers.
25 Psaraki, N. (2026) 'Not for €250, not for €250 million': Greek lawyers reject bonus for persuading asylum seekers to leave. The Press Project.
26 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Cyprus immigration crackdown leaves three severely injured after plunging from buildings. InfoMigrants; Cyprus Mail (2026) Police arrest 52 migrants in crackdown on illegal stay and employment; KNews (2026) Surprise crackdown catches 47 illegal workers across Cyprus; KNews (2026) Police arrest 19 migrants residing illegally in Cyprus; Cyprus Mail (2026) 40 illegal migrants arrested.
27 Santos, A. (2026) Cyprus intensifies migration enforcement operations. Infomigrants.
28 Philenews (2026) Cyprus strips asylum from 95, mostly Syrians, in migration crackdown.
29 Cyprus Mail (2026) State gets tough on asylum seekers breaking law.
30 Philenews (2026) Cyprus strips asylum from 95, mostly Syrians, in migration crackdown.
31 ECRE (2026) AIDA country report on Cyprus – Update on 2025.
32 Cyprus Mail (2026) State gets tough on asylum seekers breaking law.
33 Statewatch (2025) €1,500 and a one-way ticket: how Cyprus deports Syrian refugees with EU support; Charalambidou, N. (2025) Nothing 'voluntary, safe or dignified' about returns of Syrians from Cyprus. Border Criminologies.
34 European Commission (2026) Pact on Migration and Asylum enters into application on 12 June.
35 European Commission (2026) Pact on Migration and Asylum enters into application on 12 June.

could undermine the right to asylum, in particular the use of the designation of a 'safe country of origin' based on the arbitrary criteria that its nationals have an asylum recognition rate of 20 percent or lower. Despite the fact each asylum seeker should be granted proper consideration of their individual circumstances, this amendment enables governments to subject applicants from these countries to accelerated procedures on the basis of their nationality, despite the specific protections risks a person might face.[36] At the same time, the expanded scope of 'safe third countries' means that governments can make arrangements with other countries to send asylum applicants there instead, even if asylum seekers have never set foot there and with the added risk in some contexts that they will receive little or no support.[37] Other areas of concern include the so-called "Crisis Regulation", enabling governments to effectively suspend asylum in the event of a "mass arrival" – for instance, as outlined in a recent EU briefing, the prospect of large-scale displacement from a conflict zone such as Iran or Sudan.[38] In addition, a 'solidarity mechanism' permits countries to contribute to the operational costs of migration management, including programmes outside the EU, in lieu of accepting refugees for resettlement. This in effect allows them to choose investments in "border fences, barbed wire, and surveillance" over the provision of asylum.[39]

The pact also contains provisions that specifically seek to strengthen rights and protections, particularly around children's access to education and reduced waiting periods for asylum seekers before they can work: it could have the potential, if properly implemented, to support a more harmonised and rights-based approach to migration management across the EU.[40] However, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles has accused member states of implementing the pact's provisions selectively, cherry picking the most punitive elements within the new framework while ignoring protection responsibilities and safeguards.[41] The organisation has also expressed concerns that the 'returns regulation' developed to implement key provisions of the pact could enable governments to undertake more surveillance and invasive raids along the lines of what is already happening in the United States.[42]

In the wake of its passage, the most tangible development has been around the potential development of so-called 'return hubs' where expelled foreign nationals can be transferred to, either as their end destination or before being sent on to their country of origin or another third country.[43] Shortly after the passage of the new legislation, an open letter was signed by 19 member states,[44] countries including Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands,[45] which mooted Ethiopia.[46] Uganda, Rwanda and Uzbekistan[47] as possible locations, with work scheduled to start in 2026 and operations to begin in 2027. EU candidate countries in the Balkans, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, are also reportedly under consideration.[48] Yet not all member states are enthusiastic about these plans, with the Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez calling them a "mirage" while French president Emmanuel Macron questioned whether "these are the fundamental principles on which our Europe was built".[49] The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights also expressed serious reservations, highlighting the "considerable human rights risks" the proposals would present.[50] Furthermore, even with the pact now in place, in practice significant legal and logistical hurdles to the realisation of return hubs remain.[51] Many member states have been quick to announce their plans, individually or collectively, to establish facilities along these lines.

Another area of contention is the implementation of a revised Common European Asylum System under the pact, including the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation, legislation that reconfigures and expands the provision of the Dublin Regulation. Under its provisions, asylum

36 Human Rights Watch (2026) Questions and Answers: The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.
37 Human Rights Watch (2026) EU: Harmful Migration, Asylum Pact in Full Effect.
38 Santos, A.P. (2026) EU briefing examines readiness for potential refugee movements linked to Sudan, Iran conflicts. InfoMigrants.
39 Human Rights Watch (2026) Questions and Answers: The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.
40 OHCHR (2026) The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: A renewed opportunity to uphold human rights in migration governance; Human Rights Watch (2026) Questions and Answers: The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.
41 ECRE (2026) ECRE Statement on Pact Implementation.
42 ECRE (2026) European Parliament approval of the Return Regulation.
43 European Council (2026) Council and Parliament reach deal on returns of illegally staying third-country nationals.
44 Neiman, G. (2026) 19 EU leaders back foreign deportation centres for rejected asylum seekers. EUobserver.
45 Stier, H. (2026) EU-Asylsystem: Fünf Länder planen Abschiebezentren.
46 Ethiopia Today (2026) Ethiopia named as target for controversial EU 'return hubs'. ND Aktuell.
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48 Bami, X. and Guerrero, M.M.(2026) 'Return hubs' for migrants anticipated in Balkans for 'era of deportations'. Balkan Insight.
49 Rueckert, P. (2026) EU to migrants: 'Go back to where you've never been'. Truthdig.
50 Santos, A.P. (2026) Council of Europe: Externalized asylum policies must align with international human rights law. InfoMigrants.
51 Bertuzzi, L.and Genovese, V. (2026) Europe's obsession with return hubs may not live up to the hype. Euronews.

seekers who enter the EU and then seek asylum in another member state can be returned to their point of entry. Since its passage, Germany has attempted on this basis to return asylum seekers to Italy, something that the Italian government has strongly opposed because their arrival predated the signing of the pact.[52] Other countries, such as Austria, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland, have also either begun transfers or announced their intention to do so. Though the discussions have so far focused on only a handful of transfers, the potential numbers involved could be substantial in future: notwithstanding its suspension of the Dublin Regulation since December 2022, Italy received more than 24,000 transfer requests during 2025 from other EU member states.[53] Nevertheless, the development has not only stoked divisions with Italy as opposition members have criticised Meloni for a potential "boomerang" of returned asylum seekers – a charge the Italian Prime Minister has denied[54] – but also among EU member states. As a sign of further trouble to come, Italy responded in August with figures claiming that German NGOs were responsible for bringing an estimated 22,500 people to shore in Italy since October 2022, arguing that the German government owed it compensation as a result.[55] Other major migration entry points such as Greece and Spain could also be liable to returns in future. These various developments illustrate how the apparent consensus behind the pact is in reality far more fragile than the EU's positive messaging would suggest. It also remains to be seen in the coming months and years how effectively the new system navigates the legal, ethical and administrative obstacles which will likely accompany the implementation of return hubs and other so-called innovative solutions around migration. As for the underlying goal of deterring potential migrants and smugglers, which the pact's more punitive provisions clearly aspire to, some commentators have questioned whether it will achieve this in practice without an accompanying expansion of safe and legal pathways to Europe for those in need of protection.[56] Interviews by the Mixed Migration Centre with migrants and smugglers have highlighted both the limited impacts that restrictions have on their desire to migrate and the ability of smuggling networks to adapt through the development of alternative routes.[57] The pact's first major test, with the arrival of around 80,000 migrants and refugees in the Spanish enclave of **Ceuta** at the end of July, was deeply discouraging: instead of the strong externalised border and inter-state cooperation promised in the text, the situation quickly devolved into recrimination and a tit-for-tat imposition of border controls by Italy and Spain, as well as allegations that Morocco may have played a role in facilitating the cross-border movement.[58]

The Western Balkans

According to Frontex data, the number of migrants and refugees travelling through the Western Balkans fell to a total of 12,525 in 2025, down 42 percent from the year before.[59] This trajectory continued in the first seven months of 2026, with the total (4,910) 26 percent lower than the same period in 2025.[60] The most represented countries in the first half of 2026 were Türkiye, Afghanistan and Egypt.[61] However, various organisations active along the route have questioned the extent to which these figures reflect actual movement on the ground. The International Rescue Committee, for instance, reported that the number of migrants and refugees the agency supported in Italy fell only by 27 percent during 2025, a markedly smaller reduction than the Frontex figures reflect.[62] This may suggest that a significant volume of movement is not being detected.

52 Sanderson, S. (2026) Diplomatic stand-off between Germany and Italy over Dublin migrant transfers. InfoMigrants.
53 Ghazzi, C.A. (2026) Sweden plans to send migrants to Italy, France and Spain reject Dublin transfers. Euronews.
54 ANSA (2026) No boomerang, new EU migrant pact protects Italy Meloni tells Schlein.
55 Schad, V. (2026) Italy demands compensation from Germany over migrant arrivals. Euronews.
56 Forin, R., Frouws, B. and Bruschi, G. (2026) The EU Migration and Asylum Pact is now in force – but the data suggests it may not work as intended. Mixed Migration Centre.
57 Forin, R., Frouws, B. and Bruschi, G. (2026) The EU Migration and Asylum Pact is now in force – but the data suggests it may not work as intended. Mixed Migration Centre.
58 Frouws, B. (2026) Ceuta: a test of Europe's new migration pact – and a familiar failure. Mixed Migration Centre; France24 (2026) Spain declassifies intelligence reports into Ceuta migrant rush.
59 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings down 26% in 2025, Europe must stay prepared.
60 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Preliminary data show irregular border crossings into EU down 37% in first seven months of 2026.
61 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings into the EU down 37% in the first half of 2026.
62 International Rescue Committee (2026) IRC Italy monitoring report 2025: Profiles and needs of people arriving to Trieste from the Balkan route.

Violence along the route, despite growing EU involvement

The EU continues to focus considerable resources into bolstering border management in EU candidate countries such as **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)**, with November 2025 bringing in the first deployment of Frontex personnel in the country.[63] Reports in August 2026 even suggested that Balkan countries such as BiH and **Serbia** might potentially be under consideration as locations for so-called return hubs, given that much of the necessary infrastructure for receiving and detaining migrants has already been built there.[64]

Tighter border controls in Western Balkans may have driven growing numbers of migrants and refugees to use smugglers for their journey through the region.[65] Increasingly, as organised criminal networks have embedded themselves in the route, those who attempt the journey without engaging their services may be at risk of attack.[66] These networks are also facilitating "hybrid smuggling" for nationals from a variety of countries, including China, Türkiye, Bangladesh, India, Cuba and Jordan, who are able to enter the Balkans legally with visas before continuing their journey towards Western Europe illicitly. Criminal and smuggling organisations are not the only perpetrators of violence along the route. A recent report by Al Jazeera highlighted the ongoing abuse that refugees and migrants attempting to cross the border from Bosnia and Herzegovina into **Croatia** suffered at the hands of security guards there, including beatings and theft.[67]

Similar reports emerged in July 2026 of detained migrants in **Bulgaria** being subjected to brutal mass beatings after two escaped from a holding camp. Since the Pact on Asylum and Migration came into force, the number of people held there – predominantly migrants and refugees intercepted at the EU's external borders – has swelled. The beatings came in the wake of extended protests against the poor conditions in the camp.[68] This violence is not an isolated phenomenon: in November 2025, a Frontex investigation into the deaths of three Egyptian boys of hypothermia near the border with Türkiye at the end of 2024 found Bulgarian authorities responsible, with its officials ignoring distress calls and even obstructing a rescue team from reaching them.[69]

Central Mediterranean route to Italy

Maritime arrivals in **Italy**, after remaining largely unchanged between 2024 (66,617) and 2025 (66,316), fell by 55 percent in the first seven months of 2026 (16,567) compared to the same period in 2025 (36,545).[70] In the first half of 2026, the most represented countries of origin among arrivals were Bangladesh (29.5%), Somalia (11.4%), Sudan (9.5%), Pakistan (8.2%), Algeria (7.7%), and Egypt (6.4%).[71]

Despite the reduction in movement, the route became significantly more deadly during 2026, with 872 deaths or disappearances in the first seven months of the year, compared to 623 during the same period in 2025.[72] Almost half (430) of these fatalities occurred in January, when the arrival of Cyclone Harry brought unprecedented weather conditions, resulting in a sharp rise in deaths among those journeying to Italy.[73] The precise death toll remains uncertain, with some sources suggesting that hundreds may have drowned over the space of a week:[74] the NGO Mediterranea Saving Humans put the total as high as 1,000.[75] Even after the cyclone ended, numerous fatalities occurred, with at least 53 migrants believed to have died after a boat capsized off the coast of Libya in early February.[76] In the summer months of 2026, however, the number of deaths was considerably lower than the previous year. Overall, a number of factors may have contributed to the rising number of fatalities, including longer journeys in response to border restrictions and the use of poor quality, frequently overcrowded inflatable boats by smugglers.[77]

The continued restrictions on search and rescue operations may also be a factor. NGOs such as SOS Méditerranée and Sea-Watch have been impaired not only by limited resources but also, increasingly, by their hostile treatment at the hands of the Italian government. According to a July 2026 report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, Italian authorities have filed no fewer than 19 criminal investigations against search and rescue NGOs since June 2025.[78] In August 2026, after carrying out a rescue and subsequently being threatened by armed men on board an unidentified Libyan vessel,

63 ANSA (2025) 100 Frontex officers arrive in Bosnia to boost border patrols. InfoMigrants.
64 Bami, X. and Guerrero, M.M.(2026) 'Return Hubs' for Migrants Anticipated in Balkans for 'Era of Deportations'. Balkan Insight.
65 Lungarotti, L. and Durocher, J. (2025) The end game: risking everything on the Western Balkans route. Forced Migration Review 75.
66 Kocani, D. (2026) Legal entry, irregular exit. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.
67 McMahon, K. (2026) Assaulted, robbed: Refugees abused on Bosnia-Croatia border. Al Jazeera.
68 Siviero, T. and Todorov, S. (2026) Refugees, Migrants Tell of 'Merciless' Mass Beatings at Bulgarian Detention Centre. Balkan Insight.
69 Mellersh, N. (2025) Frontex confirms Bulgarian authorities responsible for deaths of three Egyptian minors. InfoMigrants.
70 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Italy.
71 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Italy.
72 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean.
73 ECRE (2026) Mediterranean: Deadly start to the year for people on the move.
74 Croft, A. (2026) Deadliest January on record for migrants after 699 killed while fleeing homes. The Independent.
75 Pala, A. (2026) Up to 1,000 migrants feared missing in Mediterranean after Cyclone Harry: NGO. Anadolu Ajansı.
76 InfoMigrants (2026) Libya: 53 believed dead in latest migrant boat tragedy.
77 Carretero, L. (2026) Why the Mediterranean route is becoming more deadly for migrants. InfoMigrants.
78 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2026) Search and rescue NGOs in the Mediterranean continue to face legal action.

the organisation Sea-Watch had one of its boats impounded for 45 days and was fined EUR 7,500.[79] These penalties were imposed under the punitive provisions of the Piantedosi Decree, passed by Italy in 2023 and a major impediment to humanitarian rescue in the Central Mediterranean. While the ruling was challenged by a group of NGOs in court, more than three years on the European Commission has yet to issue a ruling.[80]

Meloni pushes hardline policies on immigration as political pressure increases

The Italian government, building on a raft of draconian asylum and immigration policies in recent years, put forward further restrictions in February 2026. The proposed new legislation, signed off by the Council of Ministers but not yet approved by Parliament as of August 2026, would allow for the implementation of a 30-day naval blockade – extendable for up to six months – in the event of "exceptional migratory pressure that could compromise the secure management of borders", as well other threats such as terrorism, infiltration or a global public health emergency. The bill was condemned by NGOs as a further assault on their search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean, exacerbating the already repressive environment for humanitarian actors. Other provisions include restrictions on family reunification, faster deportation procedures for foreign nationals convicted of certain crimes, the potential rollback of protections for unaccompanied migrant children, and the imposition of limits on unrestricted access to repatriation centres.

The government has also been promoting its controversial 2023 agreement with Albania to establish offshore processing facilities there as a model to be replicated across the EU.[81] After opening its facilities in October 2024, it was soon forced to suspend its operations in response to repeated legal challenges from Italian and European courts. By March 2025, the government decided to reconfigure them as centres for rejected asylum seekers to be transferred before being returned to their countries of origin. Since then, as of June 2026, around 620 rejected asylum seekers have been transferred to one of the facilities in the country, Gjader, despite credible reports of inadequate conditions and social isolation.[82] While Italy's arrangement with Albania was originally an outlier, it has since been increasingly embraced as a potential pathway for other EU member states.[83] The approval in December 2025 by the EU of various reforms to its migration framework, ahead of the planned implementation of the Pact on Asylum and Migration in June 2026, has paved the way for the creation of similar 'return hubs'.[84] Many previously contested issues, such as the concept of 'safe countries' enshrined in the offshore deportation model, have now been consecrated into European law.[85] While organisations such as Amnesty International have called on the EU to refrain from replicating the Albania model,[86] the European Commission is now actively encouraging member states to adopt "innovation solutions" that exploit the new powers granted them.[87]

These developments come at a time when Meloni faces increasing political pressure not only from her traditional opposition on the centre-left, but also from an insurgent far-right movement. In March 2026, a national referendum on a proposed programme of judicial reforms was defeated by a 54 percent majority in a blow for the government's efforts to constrain legal challenges by the judiciary, particularly relating to legal cases around immigration.[88] This was followed by the launch in June of Futuro Nazionale (FN), a political movement which positions itself as the voice of the "true right". Its emergence has been interpreted as a sign that the country's right-wing is entering "a new phase of fragmentation", illustrated by FN's promotion of a petition on "Remigration and Reconquest" that garnered the 50,000 signatures required to receive a parliamentary debate. Besides triggering major demonstrations both for and against the proposal, the threat of being outflanked appears to have pushed Meloni to adopt a more aggressive tone on immigration, including her adversarial response towards Spain in the wake of mass arrivals in Ceuta in August.[89]

79 Sea-Watch (2026) After gun threat and discovery of corpses: Italy detains Sea-Watch 5.
80 MSF (2026) Three years, no decision: EU inaction while Italy's rules obstruct sea rescues.
81 Duso, L. (2026) Italy to propose Albania-like migrant centres at the EU level. Euronews.
82 Rommen, R. (2026) EU lawmakers say they were blocked from fully inspecting Italy's migrant detention centre in Albania. Euronews.
83 ANSA (2025) Meloni says Albania model 'part of path' followed by EU. InfoMigrants.
84 Ionta, N. (2025) Italy: Albanian centres set to become the EU's first 'return hubs'. Euractiv.
85 Arnieri, R. (2026) Italy and the New EU Migration Regulation: Convergence, Power, and the Limits of Control. Fondazione Giangiacamo Feltrinelli.
86 Amnesty International (2026) Italy: Extraterritorial migration detention and human rights obligations: The agreement with Albania.
87 Nielsen, N. (2026) Amnesty demands EU stops 'outsourcing asylum' and accuses Meloni of authoritarian tricks to push Albania deal. EUobserver.
88 Rainsford, S. (2026) Referendum defeat leaves Italy's Meloni looking more vulnerable. BBC; Al Jazeera (2026) Italy's Meloni concedes referendum defeat, calling it 'a lost opportunity'.
89 Leali, G. and Barigazzi, J. (2026) A new rival is forcing Italy's Meloni back to her far-right roots. Politico.

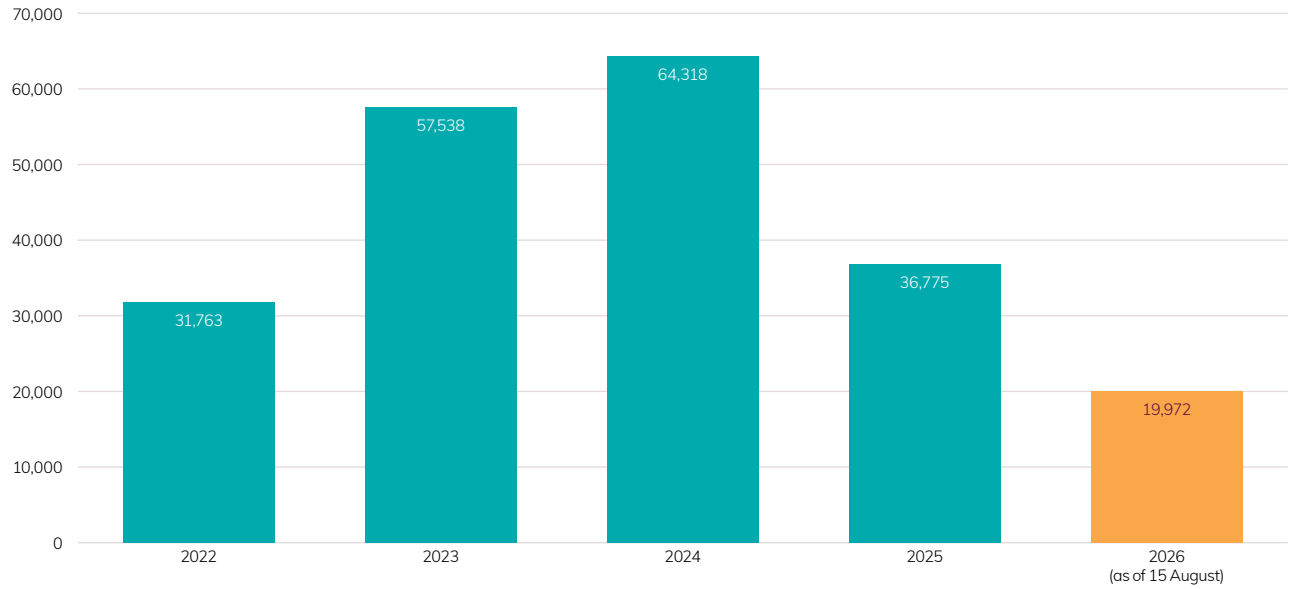
Labour migration pathways continue, despite official rhetoric

Despite Meloni's official anti-immigration rhetoric, it is notable that her government – as well as those of other countries with similar stances such as Greece – continues to recognise the importance of labour migration and pursue it through bilateral agreements with sending countries. For instance, the so-called *Decreto Flussi* or Flow Decree, allocating annual quotas for foreign nationals to work regularly in Italy, was recently extended from 2026 to 2028 with up 497,550 permits allocated for this period,[90] even if in practice only a fraction of these end up being actually issued.[91] Despite being motivated by self-interest, this approach nevertheless benefits Italy economically while offering a legal migratory pathway for non-EU nationals to live and work in the EU. This, however, is now emerging as a line in the sand separating Meloni's government from the FN. As part of its commitment to 'remigration' and its target of reducing Italy's foreign population from 12 to 4 percent, the latter has proposed ending the Flow Decree.[92]

Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes to Spain

Entries into **Spain** fell significantly in 2025, dropping 43 percent from the total in 2024 (64,318) to 36,775, in large part due to a dramatic decline along the Atlantic route. This reduction continued in the first seven months of 2026, with a total of 17,097 arrivals, down almost 16 percent from the same period in 2025 (20,300).[93] Among arrivals, the most represented countries of origin for Spain in the first half of 2026 were Algeria (31.5%), Morocco (20.2%), Mali (10.4%), Senegal (8.6%), Guinea (7.2%) and Gambia (6.7%).[94] However, the picture was very different along different routes, with migration movements evolving in response to changing conditions.[95]

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

Having increased by almost nine percent from 17,475 in 2024 to 18,987 in 2025, movement along the **Western Mediterranean route** continued to rise in the first seven months of 2026 to 12,422 arrivals – up 42 percent from the same period in 2025 (8,725) – with the majority either heading to Ceuta or the Balearics.[96] Even before the crisis in August 2026, arrivals in Ceuta in the first months of 2026 reportedly left the temporary reception centre

90 Santos, A.P. (2025) Explainer: Italy's 2026-2028 'Flow Decree' (Decreto Flussi). InfoMigrants; Dubois, L. (2026) Italy and Germany's censure of Spain's migrant amnesty is 'hypocritical'. The Irish Times.
91 Action Aid (2026) Decreto Flussi – I dati inedita.
92 Robert Lansing Institute (2026) Roberto Vannacci's Futuro Nazionale: From Coded Fascist Symbolism To The Normalization Of Far-Right Radicalism.
93 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Spain.
94 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Spain.
95 Macías Bradshaw, M. (2026) «Cuando se cierra una ruta, se abre otra»: así ha cambiado el mapa de los flujos migratorios hacia España este año. 20 Minutos.
96 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Spain.

there "on the brink of collapse".[97] Along the **Atlantic route**, on the other hand, having fallen by 62 percent in 2025 (17,788) compared to the total in 2024 (46,843), the first seven months of this year saw a further decline of 60 percent to 4,675 (compared to 11,575 in the same period of 2025).[98] The composition of arrivals also varied significantly between routes: Algeria, Mali, and Morocco were the most common nationalities along the Western Mediterranean route, on the Atlantic route they were Senegal, Gambia, and Morocco.[99]

The death toll associated with irregular migration into Spain increased substantively in 2026. Along the Western Mediterranean route, 268 deaths and disappearances were recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project between January and the end of July 2026 – almost 46 percent higher than the total in the same period in 2025 (184)[100]. While this is broadly in line with the growth in movement between the two years, along the Atlantic route the total in the first seven months of 2026 (344) was almost identical to the same period in 2025 (346), despite the marked fall in the number of arrivals during this time.[101] Movement along the route has diversified, partially in response to restrictions, and in the process has led to more extended and hazardous journeys.[102] It is also the case that IOM's figures are likely to be minimum estimates,[103] with other organisations putting the death toll along both routes considerably higher: according to the NGO Ca-Minando Fronteras, 1,317 people died in the first five months alone,[104] around five times higher than the total of 340 (181 along the Western Mediterranean route and 159 along the Atlantic route) estimated by IOM during the same period.[105]

Spain announces mass regularisation of undocumented migrants

In January 2026, Spain announced its plans for an amnesty scheme to regularise hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants through the provision of a one-year residency and work permit. The first mass regularisation programme of its kind in more than two decades, the programme will be open to anyone who, as of the end of December 2025, has been resident in Spain for at least five months. The proposal, originating in a 2021 popular petition that attracted more than 700,000 signatures, had spent more than a year in limbo before the government fast-tracked it through an amendment to circumvent a vote in parliament.[106] By the beginning of July almost 1.2 million people had applied to the scheme, more than twice the 500,000 initially expected.[107]

The government has justified the amnesty in both humanitarian and economic terms, presenting it as an "act of justice" and a necessary pivot for a country facing labour shortages and an ageing population.[108] While it has been condemned by right-wing parties for offering a pull factor to other refugees and migrants, research on the country's previous mass regularisation drive found that it did not create a "magnet effect" but instead expanded tax revenue while lowering informal employment. Nevertheless, the programme is in sharp contrast to the increasingly restrictive migration policies being implemented across much of Europe and, as such, has served as a lightning rod for criticism from other member states with strong anti-migration agendas.[109]

Unprecedented migration into Ceuta

Though Spain has experienced previous incidents of mass arrivals at Ceuta, its exclave bordering Morocco, nothing compares to the scale and intensity of what occurred in the summer of 2026. On 30 July tens of thousands of migrants and refugees appeared at the border, climbing the fence or swimming across into Ceuta. The Spanish government subsequently estimated that 72,000 people managed to cross into its territory,[110] though other estimates suggest that the number may have been as high as 80,000.[111] Finding themselves without food or water, many arrivals left shortly after, and by 4 August Spanish authorities were reporting that the large majority – around 70,000 people – had returned to Morocco.[112] However, some sources have suggested that some returns may have been summary and unlawful, while Spanish judicial associations have warned against "mass denials" of asylum without claims

97 Carretero, L. (2026) Ceuta migrant center overwhelmed as arrivals from Morocco increase. InfoMigrants.
98 UNHCR (2026) Europe Sea Arrivals: Spain.
99 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings into the EU down 37% in the first half of 2026.
100 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean: Western Mediterranean.
101 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within Africa: Western Africa /Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.
102 UNHCR (2026) Asylum applications and sea arrivals decline, but international protection needs among people arriving in Spain persist.
103 Grant, P., Forin, R. and Frouws, B..(2025) Uncounted & Unknown: Tracking deaths & disappearances on the Atlantic & other irregular migration routes. Mixed Migration Centre.
104 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2026) Monitoreo del derecho a la vida – Primeros 5 Meses 2026.
105 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean: Western Mediterranean; IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026). Migration within Africa: Western Africa /Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.
106 Thykjaer, C. and Blackburn, G. (2026) Spain finalises amnesty measures to give legal status to up to 500,000 immigrants. Euronews.
107 Al Jazeera (2026) Spain immigration scheme sees 1.2 million apply for legal status; Hedgecoe, G. (2026) Spain approves plan to give around 500,000 undocumented migrants legal status. BBC.
108 Hedgecoe, G. (2026) Spain approves plan to give around 500,000 undocumented migrants legal status. BBC.
109 Rennolds, N. (2026) 22 EU leaders call for emergency talks over Ceuta migrant crisis. Euronews.
110 Krupa, J. (2026) Spain says 70,000 out of 72,000 migrants that entered Ceuta in mass border crossing have returned to Morocco – as it happened. The Guardian
111 Gwyn Jones, M. (2026) EU experts on the ground in Ceuta amid fears of fresh migrant influx. Euronews.
112 Krupa, J. (2026) Spain says 70,000 out of 72,000 migrants that entered Ceuta in mass border crossing have returned to Morocco – as it happened. The Guardian

being assessed on an individual basis.[113] Hundreds of those still in Ceuta as of mid-August carried out protests calling for asylum.[114]

However, the crisis has also exacted a heavy humanitarian toll, with more than 140 crushed to death or drowned during their attempt.[115] Meanwhile, thousands of others were left stranded, including at least 1,500 unaccompanied minors registered in the system, though as many as 4,000 other children may be as yet unidentified.[116] Amidst reports of destitution, sexual assaults and disease outbreaks, local authorities were left scrambling to establish facilities to house an estimated 1,800 homeless migrants.[117] To relieve some of this pressure, authorities were reportedly planning to relocate around 500 migrant girls to the mainland.[118] While Morocco has called for the repatriation of unaccompanied children, some of whom have anxious families awaiting their return, it is also the case that many do not have a safe place to stay back in Morocco and by law require an individual assessment before any decision is made.[119] Consequently, the management of young unaccompanied migrants in the coming months will likely be a major litmus test of Spain's response to the crisis.[120] Despite calls from the European Commission and the right-leaning Spanish parliament for all irregular migrants to be sent back, the government maintained its legal obligations to protect unaccompanied children[121] even as it worked to process and return other foreign nationals still there.[122] The national government announced plans in mid-August to relocate 500 unaccompanied girls to the mainland, but as of early September had yet to do so. Authorities in Ceuta, led by the centre-right People's Party, have reportedly favoured the deportation of all those who entered irregularly back to Morocco.[123] Other representatives of the People's Party on the mainland have also opposed the resettlement of minors in mainland Spain, arguing that it would "legitimise the invasion".[124]

In response to rumours of another mass attempt planned for 15 August, Morocco and Spain both strengthened their border security, with hundreds of migrants apparently heading to the border with Ceuta also rounded up.[125] Reports suggested that some of those arrested were racially profiled and that Moroccan security forces used tear gas and police dogs to break up gatherings.[126] Given the role that platforms such as TikTok are believed to have played in mobilising migrants to attempt the crossing, the EU engaged in discussions with major tech platforms to promote better monitoring of misinformation on social media in future.[127] These efforts appear to have been successful, with Meta and other organisations removing most mentions of the planned attempt on its websites.[128]

Border crisis at Ceuta highlights wider tensions within Europe

The Ceuta crisis was, first and foremost, a tragic loss of life, but this has arguably been overshadowed by the protracted psychodrama which has played out across Europe in its wake. Governments, commentators, and political groupings have all imposed their own narratives on what happened and why, in the process highlighting deep-seated tensions among EU member states, the growing tendency for migration events to be weaponised for political gain and the underlying insecurity of Europe's current architecture of 'partnership agreements'.

The blame game began almost immediately, led by Italy and Denmark, whose leaders sought to contrast their own stance on migration with Spain's progressive policies. A joint letter, signed by 22 EU member states, identified Spain's recent regulation programme as a "pull factor" in the crisis and alluded to the possibility of establishing "temporary border

113 Thykjaer, C. (2026) Unprotected minors and alleged illegal returns: NGOs warn of Ceuta humanitarian crisis. Euronews; Iustel (2026) Los Jueces rechazan las «denegaciones en masa» de las solicitudes de asilo en Ceuta y recuerdan que se deben estudiar «caso a caso».
114 Latona, D. and Cardona, M. (2026) In Spain's Ceuta, hundreds of migrants stage protest and demand asylum. Reuters.
115 The New Arab (2026) 'We mourn lives lost': Death toll from Ceuta migrant catastrophe exceeds 140, with mostly young Moroccan victims.
116 Thykjaer, C. (2026) Unprotected minors and alleged illegal returns: NGOs warn of Ceuta humanitarian crisis. Euronews.
117 Bathke, B. (2026) Ceuta: Government to set up emergency shelters for 1,800 migrants. InfoMigrants.
118 Bathke, B. (2026) Ceuta: Spain plans to transfer 500 migrant girls to the mainland as EU backs repatriation of unaccompanied minors. InfoMigrants.
119 Anido, L. (2026) Devolver a menores migrantes no es automático: lo que la Comisión Europea omite sobre su propia ley. Publico.
120 Cherti, M. (2026) Ceuta's crowds have gone, but its unaccompanied children are still waiting. University of Oxford.
121 Neiman,G. (2026) Spain to care for lone migrant children, as EU Commission joins far-right calls to send them back. EUobserver.
122 InfoMigrants (2026) Madrid prend des mesures pour accélérer le renvoi des migrants encore présents à Ceuta.
123 Muñoz Morillo, M. (2026) Spain ignores EU and prepares urgent transfer of 500 migrant girls from Ceuta to mainland Euronews; Santos, A.P. (2026) Ceuta: Thousands of migrants remain, as authorities call for additional help. InfoMigrants.
124 Reuters Connect (2026) Spain's conservative leaders oppose relocation of migrant minors from Ceuta, citing "invasion".
125 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Morocco and Spain bolster borders ahead of August 15 social media calls for renewed crossings. InfoMigrants; RFI (2026) Morocco arrests nearly 300 migrants near Ceuta amid renewed crossing fears.
126 Neiman, G. (2026) Ceuta border battles show how EU is funding anti-migrant brutality. EUobserver.
127 Shelton, J. (2026) EU holds talks with big tech over Ceuta misinformation. DW.
128 Gwyn Jones, M. (2026) EU experts on the ground in Ceuta amid fears of fresh migrant influx. Euronews.

controls" in the bloc.[129] Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, went so far as to impose border controls with Spain,[130] despite the fact that Ceuta is governed by a specific regime which restricts onward movement, meaning irregular entries to the exclave cannot travel freely to mainland Spain or other parts of Europe.[131] The Spanish government subsequently imposed similar measures on Italy in retaliation.[132]

While critics of Spain's regularisation policy have sought to correlate its regularisation programme with events at Ceuta, there is little to support these claims. In addition to the time lag between the two – the amnesty scheme started in April and closed at end of June, a full month before events in Ceuta – the only beneficiaries were migrants already resident in Spain, most of whom were from Latin America rather than Morocco.[133] Spain has maintained tight border security in the midst of its regularisation programme, detaining and deporting new arrivals in the Canary Islands at the same time.[134] It is also the case that Spain's regularisation drive is not quite as anomalous as its critics would make out, with countries such as Italy having in effect achieved similar outcomes over the years through its labour migration drives.[135] What was perhaps more relevant – though its content was significantly misrepresented online – was a Spanish Supreme Court ruling on 29 July that anyone arriving in Ceuta by water could not be summarily returned to Morocco but would need a more detailed assessment first.

At the same time, the crisis has also prompted speculation about the role Morocco may have played. The last large-scale border crisis, in May 2021, was widely seen to have been triggered by the breakdown in relations between Morocco and Spain after the leader of the Polisario Front, the Western Sahara independence movement, received medical treatment in Madrid. The mass entry of around 9,000 migrants and refugees in a matter of days appeared to have been enabled by the inaction of Moroccan security guards in reprisal.[136] The disagreement between the two countries, while subsequently resolved, has not disappeared altogether. Commentators have pointed to continued tensions between Morocco's monarch, Mohammed VI, who has invested considerable efforts in strengthening his ties with US president Donald Trump, and Spain's left-leaning Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.[137] In particular, the crisis occurred shortly after the Spanish government's efforts to end several years of estrangement with Algeria, Morocco's rival, with talks in July.[138] Some commentators have expressed scepticism that events at the border could have played out as they did without the tacit consent of Moroccan authorities, citing testimony and footage of migrants being encouraged to cross by Moroccan border guards.[139] More than a month on, the exact role played by Morocco was still being contested: the leak of a Spanish police report in early September suggesting that authorities there had helped facilitate the crossing was denied vociferously by Sánchez, who said there was no evidence "whatsoever" that Morocco had aided or abetted the crossings.[140]

Spain, at least initially, chose to place the blame on smugglers rather than Rabat, despite the fact that most of those attempting to cross the border did so independently, without the involvement of smuggling rings.[141] To some extent, this explanation (like many other others surrounding the crisis) risks blurring cause and effect. Those who sought to exploit the crisis once events were unfolding – an assortment of actors including, besides Meloni, far-right Spanish activists, tech entrepreneur Elon Musk, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, the Russian military, and Donald Trump – are not by definition responsible for organising it in the first place, even though some commentary has questioned whether geopolitical considerations informed Morocco's

129 Hernandez-Morales, A. (2026) Ceuta crisis: 22 EU leaders gang up against Spain's Sánchez over his migration policy. Politico.
130 Krupa, J. (2026) Italy says it's temporarily suspending EU Schengen arrangement with Spain after 60,000 migrants reach Ceuta – as it happened. The Guardian
131 Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación (2026) Ceuta, Melilla and the integrity of the Schengen Area.
132 Moore, H. (2026) Spain imposes border controls against Italy as row over Ceuta migrant influx intensifies. BBC.
133 Courtois, M. (2026) Fact checked: The Spanish regularization campaign did not drive the 60,000+ arrivals in Ceuta. InfoMigrants.
134 EFE (2026) Un juez activa la expulsión de 85 de los 119 ocupantes del último cayuco de El Hierro.
135 Financial Times (2026) Italy and Germany's censure of Spain's migrant amnesty is 'hypocritical'.
136 Mixed Migration Centre (2021) Mixed migration review: Reframing human mobility in a changing world, p.22.
137 Financial Times (2026) The king who outfoxed Pedro Sánchez.
138 Knipp, K. (2026) What's behind the Algeria-Morocco rivalry? DW.
139 Andersson, R. (2026) The right's exploitation of the Ceuta migrant 'crisis' almost guarantees that it will happen again. The Guardian; Kammermann, Z., Kuntz, K., Petter, J. and Ramadan, D. (2026) »Es war ein Spiel, und wir sind einfache Leute – wir sind drauf reingefallen«. Der Spiegel.
140 Burgen, S. (2026) Spain's PM says no evidence 'whatsoever' Morocco behind Ceuta border breach. The Guardian.
141 Moreno, S. (2026) Los migrantes marroquíes organizan su viaje irregular a Europa de manera cooperativa sin mafias organizadas. Público.

response once the crisis was underway.[142] Indeed, the implicit supposition that the events at Ceuta were ultimately organised by a centralised power arguably overlooks the increasing influence of social media to mobilise migratory movements of its own accord.[143]

This is particularly the case in the context of Ceuta, where the drivers of mass migration are fundamentally rooted in deep-seated structural factors, including Morocco's struggling economy, high youth unemployment and inequality, as well as the profound socioeconomic disparities separating the two sides of the border.[144] The retraction in 2022 of visa-free movement from Morocco into Ceuta[145] – an important economic lifeline for many local Moroccans – made matters worse. In this context, a few viral videos, amplified by far-right accounts, were sufficient to lay the foundation for an international crisis. The Ceuta crisis demonstrates how the emerging battlefield of 'information warfare' will likely represent a potent challenge to border security in future.[146]

Nevertheless, given the scale of what occurred, it is easy to overlook the fact that the situation was swiftly managed. While images of Ceuta were easily exploited to conjure panic around an "invasion",[147] the emergency was largely resolved and the majority of arrivals allowed to return to Morocco within the space of 48 hours[148] – an outcome that might, in different circumstances, have been celebrated as proof of the effectiveness of the EU's border security and its partnership with Morocco. Yet the response to the crisis, in particular the lack of solidarity from other EU member states, has highlighted the continued fragility of European unity[149] and the underlying weakness of its external "partnerships".[150] While the EU subsequently announced that it would be increasing its financial assistance for Morocco's border management,[151] this does not address the inherent vulnerability of a model that is permanently reliant on the continued goodwill of another country.[152] In this regard, the recent failure of other member states to demonstrate solidarity with Spain may only have exposed Europe to further risks in future.[153]

Germany

A major electoral victory for the far-right

Since the election of Chancellor Friedrich Merz in 2025, **Germany** has made a major pivot away from its established asylum and immigration policies, particularly those put forward under former chancellor Angela Merkel. In response to growing support for the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), Merz has implemented a more restrictive approach, with increasing deportations, tighter asylum laws, and a shift at the EU level from an emphasis on humanitarian protection and shared responsibilities to stricter border controls and accelerated returns.

These efforts, however, have failed to woo over right-leaning voters and may instead have only helped normalise the far-right's position. Recent polls suggest that the AfD's popularity is on the rise at the same time as Merz's approval ratings have continued to fall.[154] This was illustrated in September 2026 with the AfD's shock victory in state elections in Saxony-Anhalt, where it gained the most votes of any party, though at the time of writing had not yet been able to form a coalition to secure the majority needed to be in power.

The implications of the win – the first time the far-right has come so close to securing power at the state-level since World War II – has caused shockwaves across Europe, given the growing popularity of similar movements in many other member states. Among other measures, the AfD (a keen proponent of remigration) has proposed that the foreign workforce should be replaced by a combination of pro-natalist policies to increase the birth rate among ethnic German families, financial incentives (in parallel

142 Kassam, A. (2026) 'Morocco feels emboldened': Trump's influence in spotlight after Ceuta disaster. The Guardian; Gomez, J. (2026) Ceuta: more migrants leave but residents still in shock. Far-right leader visits. Euronews; Torcu, D. (2026) How the Ceuta border crossing incident immediately played into the hands of Spain's far right. The Conversation; The Times of Israel (2026) Israel's UN envoy sparks Spain spat with accusation of 'colonial enclaves' in Africa; Down, A. (2026) Russia-linked accounts spread far-right narrative online during Ceuta migration crisis, analysis finds. The Guardian.
143 Cherti, M. (2026) The Ceuta migrant crossing didn't need a mastermind. Bloomberg.
144 Bassou, A. (2026) The July 2026 Ceuta Crisis: Structural Conditions, Circumstantial Amplifiers, and Triggering Factors. Policy Center for the New South; Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Barriers to employment and education for young migrants in Morocco; Bouoiyour, J. (2026) Ceuta crisis: 'Morocco does not just need a new development plan, but a new social contract'. Le Monde.
145 Al Monitor (2022) Spain partially reopens enclaves to Moroccan workers.
146 Temsamani, S. (2026) Beyond border control. The Arab Weekly.
147 Financial Times (2026) An overdue show of EU solidarity with Spain.
148 Luhnow, D., Hinshaw, D. and Stancati, M. (2026) The Spanish Border Chaos Illusion: Europe's Borders Are Finally Working. Wall Street Journal.
149 Mellersch, N. (2026) Ceuta: A test of the EU's new migration strategy and its internal solidarity. InfoMigrants.
150 Knapp, F. (2026) EU can't depend on neighbors for border control, migration chief says. Politico.
151 Vasques, E. and Bertuzzi, L. (2026) Exclusive: EU to boost funding for Morocco's migration management after Ceuta crisis. Euronews.
152 Frouws, B. (2026) Ceuta: a test of Europe's new migration pact – and a familiar failure. Mixed Migration Centre.
153 Hobbs, C. (2026) Alone at the border: Ceuta and Europe's solidarity failure. ECFR.
154 Blue News (2026) New poll setback for Germany's CDU and Merz.

with deportations of foreign-born residents) to encourage the "return" of Germans living abroad, and funding to encourage businesses to replace workers with "culturally alien" backgrounds with AI and automation.[155] Merz has focused on the issue of labour migration as his entry point to attack the AfD, highlighting that the "ethnic cleansing" of one in six skilled workers in Germany who had a foreign passport would bring the economy to a standstill.[156] It remains unclear to what extent this line of argument will land with a growing body of the electorate for whom the distinctions between the foreign skilled trades Merz celebrates and the failed asylum seekers whose removal he has championed no longer seem to apply.

An uncertain future for Syrians in Germany and beyond

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, there has been a question mark about the future of those Syrian nationals currently living in Europe, particularly Germany, where by far the largest population of any member state is based. Amidst the large-scale return of refugees from host countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon and Türkiye, governments in Europe are also increasingly wondering out loud whether Syrians in Europe can also be returned. For instance, Merz said in March 2026 that he envisioned as many as 80 percent of Syrian refugees leaving Germany in the next three years.[157] In Germany, increasing numbers of Syrian nationals have had their refugee status revoked, while Syrians make up the largest nationality among the growing number of voluntary returns in 2026.[158] Germany, like its neighbour **Austria**, has also recently been seeking to promote more departures through a mix of forced and voluntary returns, including through the use of financial incentives.[159]

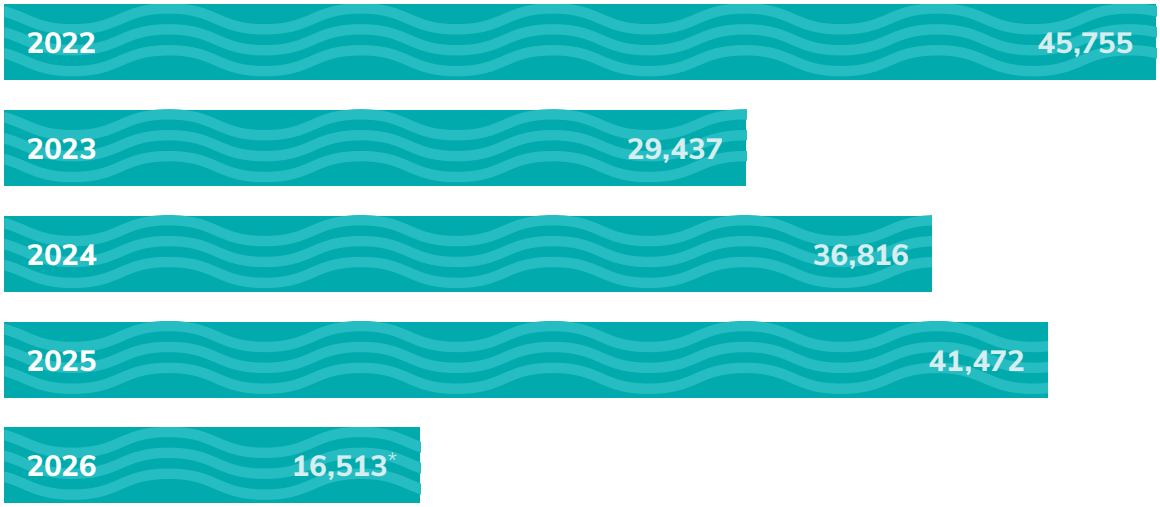
Other countries appear to be paving the way for more returns, at least of undocumented Syrians, with **Denmark** and **Sweden** tying their development assistance to Damascus to preconditions around the return of Syrians without legal residency or convicted of a crime.[160] Both countries argue that conditions in Syria have sufficiently improved to the degree that it is safe for Syrians to return. However, while some areas in the country are showing some improvements, this is by no means universal and UNHCR continues to ask authorities not to forcibly return Syrians, given the continued risks.[161] Importantly, many of the large-scale returns of Syrians within the Middle East are reportedly being driven more by "push" factors such as poverty, harassment and shrinking humanitarian assistance, rather than a straightforward desire to return.[162]

The English Channel

The number of migrants and refugees entering the **United Kingdom (UK)** from **France** in 2025 rose to 41,472, almost 31 percent higher than the previous year (36,816)[163] and the highest annual total since 2022. However, movement has reduced significantly during 2026, with 14,200 arrivals in the first seven months – a fall of 44 percent compared to the total in the same period of 2025 (25,436).[164] A number of factors may have contributed to this decline, including the general reduction of irregular migration into the EU, as most small boat arrivals to the UK first travel through the EU to France. Changing conditions in certain sending countries, such as Syria, may also have played a role.[165] However, evidence suggests that migrant vessels have adapted their routes in response to these measures by departing from **Belgium** instead,[166] prompting the UK to negotiate a potential agreement with Belgium around small boat interceptions.[167] One opposition party, the Liberal Democrats, has called for the UK to join the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum to help facilitate returns to France.[168]

155 Pfeifer, H. (2026) What would the AfD change in Saxony-Anhalt? DW; Bell, B. (2026) Germany's far-right AfD adopts 'radical' manifesto ahead of key polls. BBC; Heine, F. (2026) Far-right triumph in eastern Germany leaves migrants questioning their future. Reuters.
156 Nöstlinger, N. (2026) German far right's 'remigration' plans amount to ethnic cleansing, says Merz. Politico.
157 Bell, B. (2026) Most Syrian refugees in Germany expected to return home in three years, Merz says. BBC.
158 Sanderson, S. (2026) Germany: Protection revoked in 1 in 6 reviews of Syrian asylum cases. InfoMigrants; Newsworm (2026) Voluntary Returns from Germany Rise 26%, Syria Tops List.
159 Santos, A.P. (2026) Germany and Austria: A combination of initiatives to encourage return to Syria. InfoMigrants.
160 The New Arab (2026) Denmark conditions Syria support, reconstruction on refugee returns; Wallis, E. (2025) Sweden and Syria announce cooperation for returns of migrants convicted of crime. InfoMigrants.
161 UNHCR (n.d.) Thinking About Returning to Syria?
162 Yüksel, U. and Strik, T. (2026) Why Syrian refugee return is driven by push, not pull. EUI Migration Policy Centre.
163 Dale, B. (2026) Annual Channel migrant crossings highest since 2022. BBC; Dale, B. (2026) Channel migrant arrivals in 2024 totalled 36,816. BBC.
164 UK Government (2026) Small boat activity in the English Channel.
165 Cuibus, M. (2026) Q&A: Why have small boat arrivals declined in 2026? The Migration Observatory.
166 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Belgium warns of rising irregular beach departures as migrant crossings to UK shift away from France. InfoMigrants.
167 Singh, A., Wheeler, C. (2026) UK on brink of migration deal with Belgium to cut small boat crossings. The i Paper
168 Whannel, K. (2026) Join EU migration pact to tackle small boats, says Ed Davey. BBC.

Graphic 4. Arrivals to the United Kingdom via the English Channel crossing 2022-2026



*Figures until September 9 2026.

Source: UK Government: Migrants detected crossing the English channel in small boats

More policy restrictions in the UK

The fall in numbers coincides with a raft of policies recently implemented by the UK government, many of them apparently intended to deter irregular migration through increasing restrictions. Among other measures, in September 2025 the UK government suspended the longstanding mechanism of family reunification for refugees to bring over their families.[169] This was followed by further amendments in November 2025 to existing protections which shortened the initial period of temporary protection from five to two-and-a-half years while extending the length of time refugees have to be in the country before becoming eligible for citizenship to as much as 20 years – and even longer if they arrived in the country irregularly.[170] In addition, the June 2026 Immigration and Asylum Bill outlines further restrictions, including a means-tested levy of GBP 10,000 for asylum seekers to contribute to their costs and the replacement of legally trained appeals officials with adjudicators without a legal background.[171] Critics of the policy argue that the legislation will have little practical impact on the number of deportations in the UK while likely resulting the rejection of more people with valid protection claims.[172]

At the same time, asylum acceptance rates have dropped precipitously from 76 percent in 2022 to 42 percent in 2025,[173] and the number of deportations in the two years since the Labour government took power in July 2024 has exceeded 80,000 – 52 percent higher than the total in the preceding two-year period.[174] Authorities have also imposed harsher penalties on those believed to have been involved in organising boat crossings. In April 2026, an Afghan national became the first person to be successfully prosecuted for endangerment of life since the law changed in January 2026 making it a criminal offence to pilot a boat carrying refugees and migrants. He received a sentence of two years, despite claiming that he was coerced into doing so.[175] This was followed by a number of other irregular migrants who also received lengthy convictions, including a 21-year-old South Sudanese man with no previous criminal convictions.[176]

Closer cooperation between UK and France on small boat arrivals

In addition to its reforms of domestic policy, the UK has also been working more closely with France to reduce the number of small boat arrivals. In 2025, after negotiating an arrangement whereby French authorities would intercept migrant vessels at sea for the first time, the two governments agreed on a so-called "one in, one out" deal which would enable the UK to return new arrivals from France in exchange for accepting an equivalent number of people with recognised ties to the UK currently based in France.[177] Between August 2025 and the end of June 2026 the arrangement, in addition to allowing 1,117 vetted individuals into the UK, facilitated the return of

169 Jorgensen, N. (2025) Q&A: The UK's new approach to refugee family reunion. The Migration Observatory.
170 Cuibus, M. (2026) Q&A: Why have small boat arrivals declined in 2026? The Migration Observatory.
171 UK Government (2026) Asylum seekers will pay towards costs of accommodation; Fouzder, M. (2026) New asylum appeals body 'will fail to reduce backlog'. The Law Society Gazette; Asylum Aid (2026) Asylum Aid's response to the Independent Appeals Body call for evidence.
172 Syal, R. (2026) Most asylum seekers rejected under tightened laws will remain in UK. The Guardian.
173 Cuibus, M. (2026) Q&A: Why have small boat arrivals declined in 2026? The Migration Observatory.
174 Herbert, C. (2026) Deportations hit 10-year-high under Labour – and are up 52% since Tories were in power. The London Economic.
175 Bevan, N. (2026) Migrant first to be convicted under new crossing law. BBC.
176 Hossein-Pour, A. (2026) Asylum seeker jailed for attempting to arrive in UK by small boat. The Independent.
177 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Mixed Migration Review 2025: Migration in the context of geopolitical turmoil, p. 117.

1,087 individuals to France – amounting to around four percent of small boats arrivals.[178] While the policy is notable for balancing border control with the provision of protection "in a controlled and managed legal way",[179] the arrangement has come up against repeated roadblocks, including criticism from human rights groups, legal challenges to some attempted removals, and a court ruling in July that the arrangement was unlawful.[180] There were also reports that large numbers of children whose age is contested by the government were being held in adult detention facilities ahead of their planned deportation to France.[181] Questions have also emerged about the sustainability of this approach, with almost 50 people deported from the UK under the programme known to have re-entered the country.[182] Many of those who returned to the UK travelled by lorry, with some migrants reportedly forced to do so by their smugglers in a bid to undermine the "one in, one out" model.[183]

In April 2026, the UK also signed a three-year, GDP 662 million deal with France, allowing for the deployment of dozens of personnel trained in the use of drones to increase detections of refugees and migrants crossing the Channel. In return, French police are expected to intercept people on the beaches before their departure. Initial data from May suggested that French security personnel – some of whom were put under investigation for verbal abuse and violence towards refugees and migrants – were apprehending two in three boats.[184] The UK Home Office issued a statement in August 2026 celebrating the apparent success of the agreement, claiming that French authorities had successfully intercepted 185 boats and 4,300 migrants in the first three months alone.[185] However, human rights groups have been quick to highlight the significant human cost of this new policy. In addition to thousands of reports of police violence among those intercepted, those attempting the journey face increasing dangers as a result of the crackdown.[186] The use of so-called mega-dinghies, in some instances carrying over 200 people at a time, has become increasingly frequent among smugglers in response to the restrictions, yet they are more dangerous for those on board.[187] In the first seven months of 2026, at least 19 people died or disappeared en route from Europe to the UK.[188]

Eastern Border

The section of the Eastern Border separating Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland from Belarus has been heavily securitised since 2021, when tens of thousands of migrants and refugees attempted to cross into the EU with the apparent orchestration of the Belarusian government. Since then, in response to the continued "weaponization" of migration at the border,[189] Poland and other countries have imposed increasingly tight restrictions to prevent irregular entries. After rising sharply in 2024, movement across the border fell 37 percent in 2025 compared to the previous year to 10,846, continuing into 2026 with 3,209 entries in the first seven months – 44 percent lower than the same period in 2025. The most represented countries of origin were Ukraine (primarily men of military age) and Somalia.[190]

Still no respite for refugees and migrants trapped at the border

Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have continued to prevent refugees and migrants crossing into their territories. This has resulted in the systematic use of pushbacks, with a coalition of NGOs documenting 28,452 incidents at the Eastern Border: **Poland** was responsible for the most violations (14,754), followed by **Latvia** (12,046) and **Lithuania** (1,652).[191] Thousands are still effectively trapped in the buffer zone between **Belarus** and the EU, in life-threatening conditions: since 2021, according to IOM, at least 134 people have disappeared at the border or died there from hunger, cold, illness or injuries.[192]

Despite these desperate conditions, Poland has repeatedly extended the suspension of asylum it originally announced in March 2025 with an initial 60-day timeframe. This prompted criticism from Poland's Commissioner for Human Rights, Marcin Wiącek, who queried the justification behind the continued imposition of "temporary restrictions"

178 Taylor, D. (2026) Nearly 50 asylum seekers deported under 'one in one out' scheme have returned to the UK. The Guardian.
179 UK Government (2025) UK-France treaty targeting illegal crossings comes into force.
180 Taylor, D. (2026) Rights groups urge airlines to halt 'one in, one out' deportation flights. The Guardian; Taylor, D. (2026) Judge halts removal of Eritrean asylum seeker from UK to France under 'one in, one out'. The Guardian; Sanderson, S. (2026) UK: High Court deals setback to UK-France 'one-in, one-out' migrant deal. InfoMigrants.
181 Taylor, D. (2026) UK has detained 76 'age-disputed' children under one in, one out scheme. The Guardian.
182 Taylor, D. (2026) Nearly 50 asylum seekers deported under 'one in one out' scheme have returned to the UK. The Guardian.
183 Taylor, D. (2026) 'One in, one out' asylum seekers sent to France return to UK in lorries. The Guardian.
184 InfoMigrants (2026) French navy personnel rescuing migrants in the English Channel under investigation for racist remarks; Bathke, B. (2026) French police say they stopped two thirds of small boats bound for UK in May. InfoMigrants.
185 UK Government (2026) France prevents 185 boats and 4,300 migrants reaching UK shores.
186 Taylor, D. (2026) French police accused of rising use of violence to stop Channel crossings. The Guardian.
187 Taylor, D. (2026) Record 230 people cross Channel to UK as smugglers turn to 'mega-dinghies'. The Guardian.
188 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within the Mediterranean: Mainland Europe to the UK.
189 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2026) People as ammunition: The structures behind Russian and Belarusian weaponized migration.
190 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings down 26% in 2025, Europe must stay prepared; Frontex (2026) Frontex: Preliminary data show irregular border crossings into EU down 37% in first seven months of 2026.
191 Strength in Numbers (2026) 80,000 illegal 'pushbacks' at Europe's external borders: "ICE-style violence also happens here".
192 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within Europe: Belarus-EU border.

at the border and called for a different, "less burdensome", approach to the rights of migrants and refugees.[193] Fears for the safety of those at the border have only increased since Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced in February 2026 that Poland could soon mine its eastern borders in anticipation of a potential Russian offensive – a move that would signal a major retreat for human rights in general, particularly those of the refugees and migrants stranded there.[194] Even those who do manage to reach Poland typically end up in protracted detention and potentially returned to their countries of origin, despite the risk of persecution there.[195]

Latvia, too, has also reported increased movements at its border during the year, with 10,000 entry attempts in the first eight months of 2026 compared to 12,000 in the entirety of 2025.[196] In January 2026 it claimed to have uncovered evidence on migrants' phones that proved the involvement of Belarusian security forces in facilitating their entry.[197] In August, Latvian authorities also uncovered an underground tunnel connecting to Belarus – the first of its kind for the country – and sent back 15 people attempting entry.[198] Lithuania, on the other hand, has detected no fewer than 12 tunnels since the start of the year.[199]

Ukraine

After almost five years of conflict, **Ukraine** remains Europe's largest displacement crisis, with one in four Ukrainians displaced as a result of the conflict.[200] This includes close to 5.7 million refugees worldwide, including 1.29 million in Germany, 0.98 million in Poland, and 0.39 million in **Czechia**.[201] Though not formally included in UNHCR's more recent figures, around 1.2 million Ukrainians are also in **Russia**.[202] In addition, as of July 2026 there were around 3.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), amounting to one in eight people: of these, more than two-thirds (68%) have been displaced for two years or more.[203] While spread across the country, large numbers of IDPs are located in the eastern oblasts of Dnipropetrovska and Kharkivska, as well as in and around the capital Kyiv. Many face a range of challenges including limited income, energy insecurity and reduced expenditure on health care: IDPs from occupied regions are especially vulnerable.[204]

The 1.5 million Ukrainians who have returned from abroad have also faced particular challenges. Though around 1.1 million have been able to return to their habitual place of residence, 398,000 remain internally displaced. While returnee IDPs are generally the most vulnerable, other returnees also face significant challenges around reintegration and in many cases may be living in conflict-affected areas near the frontline.[205]

Temporary Protection Directive extended until 2028, but solidarity is on the wane

The EU agreed in July 2026 to extend the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainians until March 2028,[206] a welcome step at a time when the solidarity that emerged in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has appeared to be in retreat. Two months earlier, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, had warned about "the growing fatigue and intensifying discussions at EU and national levels about ending emergency arrangements" and called on member states "to reengage the welcome and generosity that was so evident in 2022".[207] However, from March 2027 the TPD will exclude new requests for the protection of men of fighting age, at the request of the Ukrainian government.[208] Human rights commentators have suggested that the move – in effect, using refugee protection as a lever to support military conscription in Ukraine – is legally questionable, regardless of the fact that the Ukrainian government requested it.[209]

At the same time across Europe, from Czechia to Ireland, from Germany to Norway, governments are steadily rolling back the benefits and assistance previously provided to displaced Ukrainians.[210] In some countries this appears to be tied to growing anti-Ukrainian

193 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Poland's human rights commissioner raises concerns over prolonged asylum restrictions at Belarus border. InfoMigrants.
194 Fouda, M. (2026) Poland prepares to mine Russian border after exit from Ottawa treaty. Euronews; Głębocka, J. (2026) The ghost of a century past. Anti-personnel mines are back in Europe. Amnesty International.
195 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Afghans in Poland fear deportations as asylum access remains suspended. InfoMigrants.
196 Bathke, B. (2026) Latvia: 'Belarus route' increasingly active, says border guard chief. InfoMigrants; Peseckyte, G. (2026) Latvia stops 28 migrants after tunnel discovery: "We're protecting Germans and Belgians". Euronews.
197 Ciesnik, S. (2026) Latvia presents evidence of organized migrant transfers through Belarus. InfoMigrants; Santos, A.P. (2026) Latvia: Guards use tear gas, fire warning shot to prevent crossing from Belarus. InfoMigrants.
198 Sanderson, S. (2026) Latvian authorities discover smuggling tunnel along Belarus border. InfoMigrants.
199 Louis, L. (2026) Migrant tunnels in Lithuania direct suspicion towards Minsk. DW.
200 IOM (2026) Ukraine - Returning home from abroad: Reintegration barriers, outcomes and implications for Ukraine's recovery - August 2026.
201 UNHCR (2026) Ukraine Refugee Situation.
202 UK Parliament (2026) Ukraine: UK aid and humanitarian situation 2022 to 2026.
203 IOM (2026) Ukraine - Internal Displacement Report - General Population Survey Round 24 (July 2026).
204 IOM (2026) Ukraine - Internal Displacement Report - General Population Survey Round 24 (July 2026).
205 IOM (2026) Ukraine - Returning Home from Abroad: Reintegration Barriers, Outcomes and Implications for Ukraine's Recovery - August 2026.
206 European Council (2026) EU countries agree to extend temporary protection for those fleeing Ukraine until March 2028.
207 Council of Europe (2026) Safeguarding Ukrainians displaced across Europe.
208 Neiman, G. (2026) EU now hosting 4.4m Ukrainian refugees, but fighting-age men to face restrictions. EUobserver.
209 Novak, A. (2026) The wrong lever: Europe, Ukraine, and the refugee question. . International Viewpoint.
210 Novak, A. (2026) The wrong lever: Europe, Ukraine, and the refugee question. . International Viewpoint.

sentiment among the general population, particularly in Poland,[211] where a July 2026 poll found that the majority (52%) now oppose accepting Ukrainian refugees – a stance that appears to have been amplified by Russian disinformation online.[212] This is evidenced at a policy level, with right-wing President Karol Nawrocki passing legislation in February 2026 terminating the special status granted for Ukrainians in 2022.[213] Hate crime against Ukrainians also appears to be intensifying, with numerous documented incidents of abuse and harassment. This included a widely publicised incident in July 2026 when a number of Polish men physically assaulted a Ukrainian couple:[214] Donald Tusk condemned the attack.[215] In August, demonstrations against the rise in anti-Ukrainian hatred were held in 25 cities across Poland.[216]

EU's entente with the Taliban raises concerns about an uptick in returns to Afghanistan

While returns from Afghanistan were suspended after the fall of the former government in August 2021 to the Taliban, with limited numbers of returns only resuming in 2024, momentum has been gathering in recent months around escalating repatriations. This resulted in the EU's controversial decision to invite Taliban representatives to Brussels in June 2026 for discussions about the repatriation of rejected Afghan asylum seekers.[217] This move was strongly criticised by human rights groups not only for normalising a regime associated with the systematic abuse and repression of women, minorities and activists, but also for seeking to facilitate returns when it is still unsafe to do so.[218] The apparent willingness of countries, in particular Germany, to resume diplomatic ties has also raised concerns about the implications for Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, as well as family members still in Afghanistan, of increasing Taliban control in Afghanistan's embassies and their access to sensitive personal data.[219]

Germany has been at the forefront of returns from Europe, having carried out 215 deportations of Afghan nationals between August 2024 and July 2026, including 77 in the first seven months of 2026.[220] Until then, all Afghan returnees had had criminal convictions, providing the government with a security-based justification for their removal – particularly in the wake of tragic incidents such as the stabbing to death of a young student by an Afghan national in the city of Trier.[221] However, a flight to Kabul at the end of July was the first to include an Afghan national with no prior criminal convictions,[222] raising concerns among other Afghans in Germany about the potential threat of being returned in future.[223] This was confirmed in August when other Afghans without criminal convictions were also deported.[224] While a significant proportion of rejected Afghan asylum seekers have temporary protections in place to prevent their immediate deportation, thousands of Afghan nationals could be at risk of removal in future.[225]

At the same time, the acceptance rate for male Afghan asylum seekers in Germany – almost 100 percent in the first three years after August 2021 – has fallen precipitously since then, with a recognition rate of just 11 percent in the first four months of 2026.[226] In December 2025, the government also cancelled an admissions programme to allow entry to vulnerable groups in the wake of the Taliban's takeover, in effect annulling its pledge to hundreds of Afghan refugees living outside Afghanistan who had been promised resettlement to Germany.[227] However, in July 2026 a German court ruled that the government could not revoke its commitments en masse but would be obliged to review them on a case-by-case basis.[228]

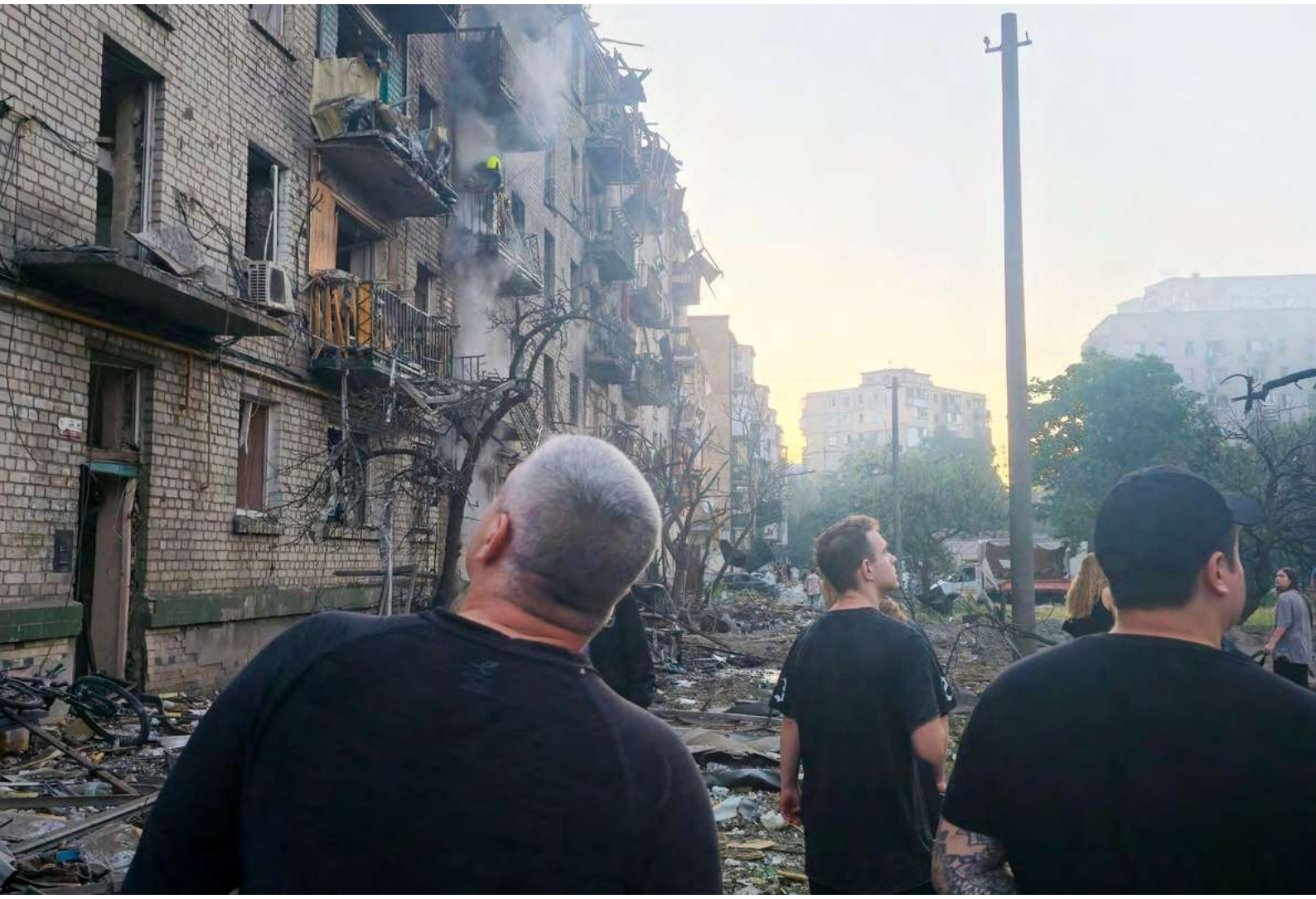
211 Орел, M. (2026) 'Get the hell out of here!" — The phrase Ukrainians in Poland are hearing more often. Hromadske.
212 Mazzini, M. (2026) In Poland, compassion for Ukrainians has turned to contempt. The consequences could be dramatic. The Guardian.
213 Notes from Poland (2026) Poland ends special status of Ukrainian refugees.
214 Sych, M. and Kochkina, E. (2026) 'Get off the bus, get out of the country.' Ukrainians took refuge in Poland. Now they're increasingly fearful. RFE/RL.
215 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Polish Prime Minister warns of rising anti-Ukrainian sentiment following attack. InfoMigrants.
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219 Knight, B. (2026) Germany: Afghanistan's consulates pose threat to refugees. DW.
220 Zahidi, B. (2026) Germany Deports 31 Afghans to Kabul on Direct Flight, Including One Without Criminal Record. Kabul Now.
221 Ariana News (2026) Germany defends Afghan deportation policy after fatal Trier knife attack.
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224 Kabul Now (2026) 30 More Afghan Migrants Deported from Germany to Afghanistan.
225 Ruttig, T. (2026) Erstmals Nicht-Straftäter zu den Taleban abgeschoben.
226 ECRE (2026) Germany: The Taliban's closest co-operation partner in the EU.
227 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Europe – Quarter 4 2025.
228 Murray, M. and Wacket, M. (2026) Top German court says Afghan resettlement pledges cannot be revoked en masse. Reuters.

These developments have implications for many Afghans across Europe.[229] Other countries appear to be taking steps to increase deportations of Afghans, such as Austria, with a bilateral agreement signed with Uzbekistan in May 2026 offering labour migration opportunities for Uzbek nationals in return for operating as a transit country for deported Afghan nationals.[230] Sweden has also called for the creation of an EU-wide returns policy for Afghans with criminal convictions or rejected asylum claims to be sent back to Afghanistan.[231] Beyond the EU, in **Switzerland**, a court ruled against an appeal from a young Afghan man whose asylum claim had been rejected in December 2025, on the basis that as a male of Pashtun ethnicity with professional skills and social connections in Kabul, he could safely return to any part of Afghanistan.[232] The ruling sets an important precedent which could inform Swiss migration policy going forward.[233]

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231 Van Brunnersun, S-J. (2026) Sweden calls for EU-wide action on returning failed Afghan asylum seekers. InfoMigrants.
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Photo credit: Kostya Pazyuk

People inspect damage in the aftermath of a Russian missile strike in Darnytskyi district, Kyiv, Ukraine July 2nd, 2026. The Ukraine war continues after four-and-a-half years with a devastating human cost, while also further destabilising geopolitics. It divides the world at a time when cooperation to address polycrisis is critical. Over 6 million Ukrainians live as war refugees in Europe. (See *Keeping Track in Europe*, p. 90).





Undocumented but united: migrant workers in Belgium

I have been in Brussels for almost 13 years and I am undocumented. Originally, I come from Morocco from an activist family. This led me to become a human rights activist myself at the age of 17.

Before living in Brussels, I was in Greece for a while, but the situation worsened with the economic crisis. I had to choose where to go next and, because I speak French, my only options were France and Belgium.

Since coming to Brussels, I have founded two activist collectives working on migrant rights, particularly the rights of undocumented migrants.

Debunking the 'criminal migrant' myth

There is a far-right narrative framing migration as a crisis here in Europe and it mostly comes from the media portraying migrants – especially undocumented ones – as criminals. But many undocumented migrants move just because they want to work and rebuild a life.

Part of my activism is to tell people that we, the undocumented, are not just numbers. We want society to think of us differently.

We know countries are willing to welcome people – look at what happened with Ukrainian refugees at the beginning of the war with Russia. However, when it comes to black or brown people, or Muslims, the attitude is suddenly no longer welcoming.

The migrants in our collective consider themselves workers: we came to work and to fill gaps in the workforce. So, why does the state not recognise that?

But even if a documented migrant wants to work, there are still issues. You are tied to your employer no matter what you do; but if the employer shuts down, or relocates, or has any legal issues, then your permit gets withdrawn.

A worrying trend

Being undocumented is not a crime. And yet, we're placed in detention centres without even knowing when we'll get out. A prisoner serving a sentence knows when they'll be released. Undocumented migrants don't and that can lead to depression.

Meanwhile, as more detention centres open, more reception centres close, meaning we don't have enough space to accommodate those seeking help. This trend is concerning, not to mention extremely expensive: detention centres and detention measures cost countries a lot of money.

Attacking solidarity

One of the most dangerous and destructive aspects of current policy changes regarding returns of undocumented migrants in Europe is home visits. Home visits are where authorities check up on migrants in their registered address. The thing is, home visits are not new – Belgium has been doing them for years when it issues a refusal [an official decision to reject an application for legal status] – but they are being pushed now. Why? Because they don't just target undocumented people, they target the whole community. Authorities enter your home, looking for someone you've taken in: a friend, a partner, whoever. It feels like they're coming for you, because you're helping someone in need. This feels like an attack on solidarity, and it's not a European invention: it comes from the US, and right-wing politicians in Europe are following the US model.

Collective action against the far-right

Undocumented migrants tend to work in the black market, which offers some kind of stability within precarity. Yet, you're never sure what to expect. One day, they might call you and tell you they don't need you.

It's tough for us, but that's precisely what the system wants: a precarious underclass. They want it to stay like this because we provide a cheaper workforce.

The only way out of this is to organise and take action collectively. Whether it be through rallies, hunger strikes or demonstrations, our struggle will pay off. I remember, in the early days of our collective, many people were scared to come and demonstrate, but they came nonetheless.

This was vital in building a collective consciousness and that consciousness will keep pushing us to react to the catastrophic rise of the far-right.

Our approach has already produced real successes. For example, the squat where we live hosts asylum seekers and we help them find work, especially when they cannot access established residential centres.

Regularisation – the way forward

For me, the long-term objective is regularisation. I'm talking about an individual, permanent mechanism based on clear criteria. This is happening in Spain, for example: migrants know what to expect and they know how they can achieve regular status.

That's what we need. Knowledge gives you hope and we need that hope.




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Interview



Migration as a ‘distraction’ in the EU’s politics of deterrence

As forced displacement reaches record levels globally, European migration policy is increasingly defined by deterrence and restriction. **Catherine Woollard** argues that this political focus on migration is, in fact, distracting from other crises and from the inability – or unwillingness – of governments to tackle them. In this interview, she examines the latest EU asylum policies, labour shortages and the future of refugee rights and protection.

Catherine Woollard is professor of law at the Free University of Brussels, researching issues of asylum and migration in European and international law. Previously, Catherine worked as director of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles for nearly 10 years, managing over 100 organisations working for the right to asylum.

The idea of a global polycrisis is now widely used. What does the term help us understand about displacement and migration, and what might it obscure?

In this era of polycrisis, migration serves as a distraction. It draws attention away from the other crises that are taking place, which political leaders are unwilling, unable or don’t have the courage to address. The idea and the obsession – the panic – over migration is a way to distract from those crises. At the same time, those crises contribute to challenges in relation to migration because they’re all leading to increased levels of forced displacement globally. Another criticism of the polycrisis narrative is that it can make interconnected problems seem almost natural or inevitable. But when we look at displacement today, how do we distinguish between genuinely systemic pressures and, on the other side, political choices for which governments and institutions should be held accountable?

If we look at the situation in most European states, there’s a vocal minority of the population and of the political class which is obsessed with migration. And there’s a tendency to pander to this group of people, partly to avoid dealing with other issues but partly out of both unethical and self-defeating strategies of other political actors in relation to the migration and displacement issues.

For many people in Europe, the language of polycrisis suggests we’re entering an unprecedented era of overlapping shocks. But for displaced populations, isn’t living through multiple simultaneous crises the norm rather than the exception? What does this tell us about whose perspective is embedded in the polycrisis narrative?

> **"In this era of polycrisis, migration serves as a distraction. It draws attention away from the other crises that are taking place, which political leaders are unwilling, unable or don't have the courage to address."**

We experience the current era as one of crisis because so many of the political issues on the agenda are being dealt with in a fast-moving crisis mode. This gives us the sense that everything is sped up, that politicians and political actors can't cope. It's true that, globally, all kinds of crises are taking place. For people in the middle of those crises, there is no doubt that's how they experience those situations. We may live in relative comfort compared to those people but the sense of things being out of control is still something that people experience even in more comfortable places.

Globally, forced displacement is at record levels these days, with global internal displacement alone having more than doubled over the last decade. In this context, isn't it inevitable that such a rise has seen a simultaneous sharp global turn towards restrictive border controls?

We see this anti-migration sentiment in areas which aren't as affected by that large-scale global displacement that you refer to. For instance, only between 10 and 15 percent of the global forcibly displaced population is in Europe. The major refugee-hosting countries are mainly outside Europe. And yet we have the sense within Europe that everybody is coming here – that Europe is doing more than other regions. So there's a disconnect between the level of crisis or panic and the objective facts. Despite the high numbers of people who are forcibly displaced, more resources exist to manage the situation than in previous eras. And despite the strong anti-migration and anti-refugee sentiments of a vocal minority within Europe, populations generally are far more positive about immigration and about refugee protection than they were 30 years ago and before. Even over the last 10 years, the percentage of the population with a positive attitude towards immigration is increasing in all European countries. At the same time, we also have another major crisis in Europe: the demographic crisis, which suggests that Europe needs new populations. So, despite the very dramatic situation globally in terms of displacement, there are other factors that should lead to a more rational, evidence-based approach, one of managing the arrival of people and ensuring integration rather than a panicked and futile attempt to prevent arrivals.

It's interesting that you view the vocal minority as such a minority, especially when you get quite substantial groups of the population voting for parties where their number one agenda is anti-migration, whether it's Spain, Austria, Germany, France or Britain.

We have to dig into the question of voting patterns. We currently have a situation of extreme political fragmentation in most political systems within Europe. So there may still be a minority voting for those extremist parties, but you can be the biggest party in a political system with 15, 20, 25 percent of the vote. In a situation where 25 percent is voting for an extreme right party, you've still got 75 percent not voting for that extreme. For instance, if we look at the Netherlands, it's the most fragmented political system in the world. The political landscape where two large political blocs competed on the centre-right and centre-left has completely broken down. In that context we have to look at what the appropriate strategies are in response to the extreme right parties in the political system and their harsh anti-migration agenda. This is where we often see a self-defeating strategy from other parties who absorb these views and decide to compete on the territory of these parties rather than focus on other issues and reduce the salience of this topic.

> **"We experience the current era as one of crisis because so many of the political issues on the agenda are being dealt with in a fast-moving crisis mode. This gives us the sense that everything is sped up, that politicians and political actors can't cope."**

On 12 June, the Pact on Migration and Asylum in Europe started to apply in all EU member states. The pact has overhauled the EU migration and asylum framework and now forms the centrepiece of the EU's new approach to migration. What's your current view on this pact?

The pact will neither destroy nor save asylum in Europe. That is up to the member states of the European Union. What the pact does is make it much harder for people to receive international protection at a time when there are ever higher numbers of people in situations of forcible displacement, as we've just discussed. This is a deliberate strategy. One of the unstated but well-known objectives of the pact is to reduce the number of refugees in Europe. The thinking behind it is that Europe can manage as long as the numbers of people arriving are significantly reduced. What will happen in practice is that people will still come, but it will be harder for them to receive protection. And so more people will be in irregular situations with all the risks that entails for them, but also for social cohesion which is put at risk by the presence of people in precarious situations. The pact does this by restricting access to protection in a number

> **"The major refugee-hosting countries are mainly outside Europe. And yet we have the sense within Europe that everybody is coming here – that Europe is doing more than other regions. So there's a disconnect between the level of crisis or panic and the objective facts."**

of ways: it increases the use of what we might call second-rate asylum procedures and, notably, the asylum border procedure. So, there'll be a greater concentration of people in the border setting where the risk of violations is higher. A number of those people will also be in detention, which is a very harmful practice. The pact provides for a drastic reduction in appeal rights at a time when about one third of negative asylum decisions are overturned on appeal, with protection granted at the appeal stage. An appeal is not a special luxury for asylum seekers. It's a standard part of any legal process.

The reduction in appeal rights is problematic in itself. It's a sign of how the rule of law is eroded in this area, which may then spill over to other areas. The pact also expands the use of dubious legal concepts such as the 'safe third country' in order to restrict access to protection in Europe. And we also see a punitive approach throughout the pact aimed at deterring people from coming to Europe.

> **"... despite the strong anti-migration and anti-refugee sentiments of a vocal minority within Europe, populations generally are far more positive about immigration and about refugee protection than they were 30 years ago."**

But what we find with deterrent policies is that they don't actually stop migrants arriving because they are pushed by the circumstances they are facing in their lives. Deterrence just increases suffering when people are present. So, for instance, the removal of access to reception in the asylum system if somebody moves from one EU member state to another is a form of punishment for that onward movement. Some of those punitive measures could even be described as baking cruelty into the asylum system. Despite all those measures, the pact is now law, so focus has to switch towards ensuring implementation in the least harmful way.

Hasn't the fact that it's become law and that it was able to be discussed for the last two years been mainly because of the anti-migrant right-wing swing within the European Parliament itself?

I'm not sure that's the case because anti-migration – anti-refugee – law and policy has been promoted throughout history. This is a more restrictive approach compared to the one in place just before; we can go back 10 years and similar measures were proposed. Some of the ideas now in place have already been tested by member states. I don't know that this is something dramatically different. The struggle for the rights of migrants and refugees is, in some senses, a perpetual struggle. The first raft of anti-refugee and anti-migration law was put in place 120 years ago. Since then, we have had periods of a more liberal, open approach and then periods of greater restriction, and yet refugees still move.

In the past, you commented that a vast amount of asylum budget in OECD countries, especially in the EU, is often spent on anything other than granting asylum or complementary pathways, such as on deterrence, warehousing, returns and so on. Do you feel this remains a main issue of concern?

Yes, but this is also an opportunity – a change that could be put in place. Take, for instance, the whole debate on return and deportation. A new reform is being negotiated now and will soon be adopted. Again, this is seen as a shift in direction. However, return has received disproportionate resources and attention – to an almost obsessive level – going back 30 years and, despite that, the percentage of people who are actually returned or deported is around 20 percent. So, if only some of those resources and attention were transferred to other parts of the asylum system, it would make them work effectively. This includes, for instance, investing in the regular asylum procedure so that cases can be handled quickly and fairly, and people can be granted protection as fast as possible, allowing them to access the labour market. Another aspect would be improving reception conditions in at least 14 of the EU's member states, which are facing a major crisis, ranging from a lack of protection for vulnerable people in the reception system to situations, for example here in Belgium, where thousands of people are unlawfully denied access to reception and forced to live on the streets in extreme destitution. Politics often determines where resources are spent but there's also a legal framework which governs and regulates that. So, the continued effort to ensure that states respect the law is also about appropriate allocation of resources and about ensuring that states comply with all their obligations, not just those that they selectively choose to focus on.

Spain is undergoing a significant regularisation process. One of the criticisms of this is that it just incentivises more irregular migration. What do you say to that?

On the contrary, I think regularisation is an extremely positive measure. It recognises people who are needed by European labour markets and European societies who, without a regular status, are at severe risk of exploitation. We also have to examine who these

> **"The pact provides for a drastic reduction in appeal rights at a time when about one third of negative asylum decisions are overturned on appeal, with protection granted at the appeal stage. An appeal is not a special luxury for asylum seekers. It's a standard part of any legal process."**

people are. In many cases, they will have entered legally but have fallen into situations of irregularity: perhaps they've been working for an exploitative employer and they've had to leave that job, and their work permit was dependent on their employer. That's one situation. They may be people who applied for asylum, didn't receive it but have not been returned or cannot be returned and have again lapsed into a situation of irregularity.

The presence of large numbers of people in an irregular situation is increasing across Europe due to a particular paradox of European migration policy. It takes us to the question of labour migration. One of Europe's real crises is the demographic crisis, with low birth rates contributing to ageing populations and major labour shortages. These labour shortages have previously been managed by bringing in migrants from other parts of Europe, but all parts of Europe up to and including the Caucasus and Central Asia now experience labour shortages. So we have a situation where European states are, on the one hand, taking every possible measure including the use of violence to prevent the arrival of certain groups of migrants while, at the same time, desperately seeking to bring in and recruit other migrants in order to fill the labour market shortages they face. This creates a situation where people who need international protection are not receiving it because asylum systems have become so restrictive, while people who are denied access at the borders then enter through irregular means because there's no other way to reach the territory and claim asylum. At the same time, though, you have European states bringing in large numbers of migrant workers, all while maintaining anti-migration discourses. In this rather schizophrenic policy environment, it's not surprising that the public loses trust in politicians, particularly when they see the combination of anti-migration discourse and the presence of quite large numbers of new migrant communities. They may be doing everything from driving buses to working in factories to delivering food products, so they are often very visible and present in their cities. The future challenge is to ensure that this new group of labour migrants have access to their rights, enjoy a decent standard of living and avoid falling into exploitation. One way to do that is through regularisation or by ensuring regular pathways – particularly, for work – that help to avoid precarious situations from the beginning.

> **"... we have to defend the [UN Refugee] Convention... if there's any attempt to reform the Convention, it will inevitably result in a more restrictive approach and in it becoming more difficult for people to receive international protection."**

> **"What is relevant is action. It is about resistance to unproductive, unreasonable, irrational policies. It's about empowering and supporting the people directly affected to fight for their own rights."**

Around 90 percent of those to be regularised in Spain come from the Americas (with the highest number from Colombia, Peru and Honduras), are mainly Catholic, are Spanish speaking and from middle-income countries. Is this a case of Spanish exceptionalism?

First, let's question the exceptionalism thesis because there is regularisation happening in a number of other countries, including Italy and Greece, sometimes of significant numbers of people. So, regularisation in response to labour shortages is a phenomenon across Europe. Yet, at the same time, it's not something that can be hidden because people are present, hence the very dysfunctional policies and situations that may arise. Secondly, Spain is exceptional in some regards just because we hear a more positive discourse on migration and a more positive approach to refugee protection. It also has a stronger economy compared to other European countries, which have a less positive approach to migration. Is there a link? It's well established in economics that, in a situation of labour shortages, migration is the only real answer because all efforts throughout history to deal with labour shortages by increasing the birth rate have failed. The way this happens, though, depends on politics. At times, other European governments have also had a positive approach to migration and refugee protection. Over the last 10 years, at different points in time, these have included Portugal, Luxembourg, Ireland, Sweden, Finland and Belgium. It depends on the composition of the government in place. In the medium term, this whole question of the intense pressure of labour shortages should, I estimate, push more governments to take a more nuanced approach on this issue.

In the context of global intersecting crises affecting many parts of the world, we can only expect to see more people on the move. At the same time,

however, there is rising resistance to more people being accepted for asylum or as refugees in most countries of the world. Do you think the UN Refugee Convention's days are numbered?

No, we have to defend the Convention. If the Convention opens up, if there's any attempt to reform it, it will inevitably result in a more restrictive approach and in it becoming more difficult for people to receive international protection. That is the likely result, not least because key European countries want that to happen and have already argued for its reform, in order to achieve that aim. This is a totally misguided objective. Again, it's based on non-evidence-based policies anchored in a belief that deterrence and making it harder to receive international protection will stop refugees from moving. It won't, because they have no choice and they're being forced to flee due to the different crises that we've been discussing. So, all that will happen is that more people continue to move without receiving protection status. Instead, it's a question of adding extra forms of protections to the Refugee Convention, which may be provided by regional or national law and serve to ensure that everybody, whatever the reason they're forced to leave, has some kind of legal status and is then able to contribute to the societies in which they find themselves.

In the future, do you see refugee and migration management going in a positive way or do you see things getting much tougher? Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

First of all, I actually reject the discussion about hope, optimism and pessimism. Those are emotional states of observers who look at this and my emotional state is not really relevant. What is relevant is action. It is about resistance to unproductive, unreasonable, irrational policies. It's about empowering and supporting the people directly affected to fight for their own rights. It's about continuing to argue for laws and policies that actually work, rather than those pandering to a vocal, often highly prejudiced, minority. This is a perpetual struggle, like all efforts to defend people's rights.

Photo credit: APA-PictureDesk

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum came into force on 12 June 2026. This photo shows Austrian State Secretary Jörg Leichtfried, Interior Minister Gerhard Karner and Foreign Minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger on Thursday 15 January 2026, at a press conference entitled "European migration turnaround? national measures for implementing the asylum pact" at the Ministry of the Interior in Vienna, Austria. The first test for the new pact was soon to follow in at the end of July when 72,000 irregular migrants crossed from Morocco into Ceuta (SP). Austria is also among the five European countries taking concrete steps towards the establishment of the first 'Return Hub' outside Europe, where failed asylum seekers can be sent to. (See *Keeping Track in Europe*, p. 90, and Article: *Born of crisis, bypassed in crisis: the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum after Ceuta*, p. 118).



Born of crisis, bypassed in crisis: the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum after Ceuta

Much has been written about whether the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum will work. Less attention has been paid to a more basic question: what happens when a system developed in response to a crisis meets an actual crisis? Seven weeks after the Pact came into application, the mass crossing into Ceuta offered an early answer. The Pact's crisis tools were not used and, within another seven weeks, the European Commission was proposing new ones. That sequence may say more about European migration governance than any of the Pact's individual provisions.

A Pact built after crisis

The Pact is itself a product of crisis. The arrival of more than a million people in 2015 to 2016 exposed the failings of the Dublin system, which placed disproportionate responsibility on frontline states, and opened a decade of deadlock over how responsibility for asylum seekers should be shared. Proposed by the Commission in 2020 and adopted in 2024, the Pact came into application on 12 June 2026.[1]

Crisis is written into its design. Alongside rules on screening, border procedures, Eurodac, responsibility-sharing and returns, the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation provides a framework for situations of mass arrivals and for the instrumentalisation of migration by third states.[2] That concept was shaped by a series of episodes – Türkiye in 2020, Belarus in 2021, Russia in 2023 and Morocco in May 2021, when thousands of people crossed into Ceuta after Moroccan border controls were relaxed amid a diplomatic dispute with Spain.[3] Under the regulation, a member state facing such a situation can request derogations – longer deadlines for registering asylum claims, extended use of border procedures – and solidarity from other member states. Critics warned at the time that this risked normalising emergency measures and lowering standards.[4] But whatever its flaws, the regulation rests on a principle: even in a crisis, people are screened, registered and given access to an asylum procedure, however accelerated.

Ceuta: the test that was not taken

On 30 to 31 July 2026, an estimated 72,000 people crossed from Morocco into Ceuta in under 48 hours, scaling the border fence or swimming around coastal barriers. At least 72 people were reported to have died.[5] It was exactly the kind of sudden, large-scale arrival at an external border – with a strong suspicion of third-state involvement – for which the Pact's crisis provisions were written.

They were not invoked, not even mentioned. Spain did not request activation of the Crisis Regulation, and the Pact barely featured in the official response. There was no screening of the kind the Pact requires for irregular arrivals. Instead, the Spanish government reported that over 90 percent of those who had crossed had returned to Morocco within 72 hours, describing the returns as voluntary.[6] Amnesty International said it was alarmed by reports contradicting that account,[7] and Human Rights Watch cited sources describing mass pushbacks without individual assessments – including of people who arrived by sea, whom a Spanish Supreme Court ruling earlier that month had said must be individually assessed.[8]

The political fallout followed a familiar pattern, one the Pact's solidarity architecture was meant to end. Rather than responsibility-sharing, there was recrimination. Italy, joined by several other member states, called for Spain's suspension from the Schengen area and reintroduced checks at its own borders with Spain; a joint letter signed by 22 member states[9] blamed Spain's large-scale regularisation programme for acting as a

1 European Council (2026) Pact on migration and asylum.
2 European Council (2026) Pact on migration and asylum.
3 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2025) Countering the instrumentalisation of migrants.
4 European Policy Centre (2023) EU Crisis Regulation: Securing reforms or constructing a crisis?
5 Blaakman, S. and Mentzelopoulou, M.M. (2026) Ceuta migrant crisis: What it means for Spain and the rest of the EU. European Parliamentary Research Service.
6 Government of Spain (2026) Statement by the President of the Government of Spain to provide an update on the Government's response to the events that have taken place in Ceuta since 30 July.
7 Demócrata (2026) Amnesty International asks for explanations from Spain for the response to the arrival of 72,000 people in Ceuta and warns of possible summary returns.
8 Sunderland, J. and Seibert, L. (2026) Rapid Returns Follow Migrant Crossings to Ceuta. Human Rights Watch.
9 Pirzada, S.A. (2026) Italy suspends free movement with Spain: Is Schengen in crisis after Ceuta? Al Jazeera.

pull factor.[10] Large anti-migration protests took place in Madrid and other Spanish cities.[11] Within weeks, a single border event had become a domestic political crisis in Spain and an intra-EU confrontation over Schengen.

Why a framework designed for this moment went unused is open to interpretation. The Crisis Regulation involves a request, a Commission assessment and a Council decision – which could take many days if not weeks, rather than hours. Referencing 'instrumentalisation' would have implied blaming Morocco for deliberate 'weaponisation' of migration, for which there may have been insufficient evidence, and Spain seemed to prefer maintaining a good bilateral relationship with Morocco, which may have contributed to the swift return of most of the arrivals. Activating it would also have meant applying it: registering and screening people and giving them access to protection procedures. Summary returns offered a faster, and politically more attractive, show of control.

Answering a crisis with the next instrument

The most telling moment came in Ursula von der Leyen's State of the European Union address on 16 September 2026. Referring to Ceuta – for which she blamed "callous traffickers and smugglers" and EU "adversaries" the Commission President called for full implementation of the Pact, insisting that "the only possible solution is a European solution" and the European solution is "the Pact on Migration and Asylum"[12]. This is remarkable, as the Pact was not referenced nor followed in the aftermath of Ceuta. Additionally, moments later in her speech, she argued that Ceuta showed Europe's tools needed to evolve, particularly for emergencies: "Europe needs the means to protect its borders at all times. Especially in scenarios when mass movements are engineered and weaponised."[13] Which is why she announced a new European Emergency Response Framework, allowing "time-limited and strictly defined flexibility" in standard asylum and return procedures.[14]

Three things stand out. First, in the State of the Union, smugglers and traffickers are blamed multiple times for what happened in Ceuta, even though there is no evidence at all about the involvement of smugglers – why would a smuggler be needed to swim across to Ceuta?

Second, the language of engineered and weaponised movements – largely absent from the debate during the crisis itself – was introduced after the fact to justify a new instrument, even though the Pact already contains one for precisely that scenario. Third, the substance of the proposal appears to point towards legitimising, for future emergencies, what Spain actually did in Ceuta: mass returns without people having a meaningful chance to apply for asylum. The bar, it seems, is never low enough. Just two months into the application of a legislative package that took a decade to negotiate, the Commission is already signalling that it is insufficient. While the Pact has been presented as the solution that will enable Europe to better control its external borders and manage migration and asylum, this response signals yet again a lack of confidence, which will indeed undermine public trust in the EU's ability to govern migration.

This fits a broader pattern. European migration policy appears to require a permanently open reform agenda – always one more instrument, one more derogation under discussion – that allows the Commission to show it is "doing something" on migration and allows some member states to keep pushing standards downwards. For political actors who benefit from migration remaining a top contentious issue, a settled system which offers genuine solutions would be a loss. The Pact's own early trajectory shows how this works: a new instrument is adopted, bypassed at its first real test, and then treated as a reason to build the next one.

Crisis as the rule

The Pact was designed around a model of crisis as the exception: a system for normal times, with a mechanism to switch on when things go wrong. Polycrisis undermines that model. When geopolitical leverage, domestic politics, intra-EU disputes and humanitarian emergencies overlap and reinforce one another, crisis becomes a standing condition rather than an interruption – and a governance approach built around exceptions tends to make the exception permanent.

Ceuta suggests that the real risk is not that the Pact's crisis provisions are too weak, but that they are made irrelevant by practices that go further, which are then written into law. That erodes the Commission's credibility with member states and, more importantly, with the

10 Demócrata (2026) Italy, Finland, and Denmark request to suspend Schengen with Spain.
11 O'Mullony, A. (2026) Ceuta protests spread across Spain as police report points to Rabat, Brussels Signal.
12 European Commission (2026) 2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen.
13 European Commission (2026) 2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen.
14 European Commission, DG Migration and Home Affairs (2026) State of the Union: President von der Leyen calls for a common European response on borders, migration and security,.

public: a system presented as the solution one day and as outdated the next can hardly inspire confidence. And it leaves people on the move facing a framework whose protections are strongest on paper and weakest at the moment they are most needed.

Photo credit: SOPA Images

Madrid, Spain, 2 September 2026. Thousands of people gather in Cibeles Square in Madrid. The demonstration is held in support of the residents of the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, in North Africa, following the recent mass crossings of migrants from Morocco which some likened to an 'invasion'. While the Spanish government, compared to many other countries in Europe, implements relatively progressive migration policies, including a large-scale regularization programme in 2026, the party most associated with anti-immigration politics in Spain, Vox, has rising popularity and is estimated to command 17–19 percent of the national vote. (See *Keeping Track in Europe*, p. 90).



Asia

Overview

Peter Grant

Asia's mixed migration landscape continues to be shaped by political instability, environmental stress and the imperatives of labour migration. Afghanistan, already grappling with protracted internal displacement, is now facing the added pressure of mass returns from Iran and Pakistan. In Myanmar, conflict and a deepening humanitarian catastrophe are driving ever higher levels of internal displacement, making the prospect of return for the large number of Rohingya living outside the country even more remote. While desperation is leading increasing numbers of people to journey from Myanmar and Bangladesh to other countries in the region, the maritime route through the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal is now one of the deadliest in the world. Meanwhile, as has been the case with previous crises, the impacts of the US-Israel conflict with Iran has exposed many Asian workers in the Gulf to new vulnerabilities.

Displacement and returns to Afghanistan

Internal displacement in Afghanistan

While much of **Afghanistan**'s displacement until the fall of the government in August 2021 was driven by conflict, in particular attacks by the Taliban insurgency, the security situation within the country has since stabilised. However, climate shocks, limited access to livelihood opportunities and lack of services in many areas mean that millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) – some of them displaced for many years – are still unable to return to their communities, with some experiencing secondary displacement or forced to out-migrate again as a result of these pressures.[1] As of the end of 2025, there were around 3.2 million IDPs in the country according to UNHCR statistics[2] – though the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)'s estimate, totalling 7 million, was significantly higher.[3] Since 2023, more than 6 million Afghans have also returned from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, including 1.18 million people in 2026 as of 29 August.[4] According to the United Nations, millions more are expected to return by the end of the year.[5]

In 2025, most new displacements were the result of natural disasters (253,000) rather than conflict and violence (168,000).[6] Of the latter, the majority were driven by fighting between Afghanistan and Pakistan which broke out in October 2025,[7] resulting in the displacement of as many as 20,000 households in Kandahar as a result of airstrikes.[8] A fragile ceasefire agreed the same month was violated by both sides in the weeks that followed,[9] before erupting again into open warfare in late February 2026. In response to air raids carried out by Pakistan on Afghan territory, with the stated aim of targeting militant hideouts there,[10] Taliban authorities launched a border offensive against Pakistan in reprisal. Around 115,000 Afghans were displaced as a result of the fighting,[11] with many having to contend with the added impacts of flash floods and heavy rainfall towards the end of March.

Afghanistan is also contending with a deepening humanitarian crisis where almost three-quarters (74 percent) of the population is unable to meet its basic needs[12] and close to half (45 percent) requires humanitarian assistance.[13] Despite the severity of the crisis, international assistance to Afghanistan continues to fall far short of what is required. As of July 2026, only a quarter (25.6 percent) of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026 had been funded,[14] a

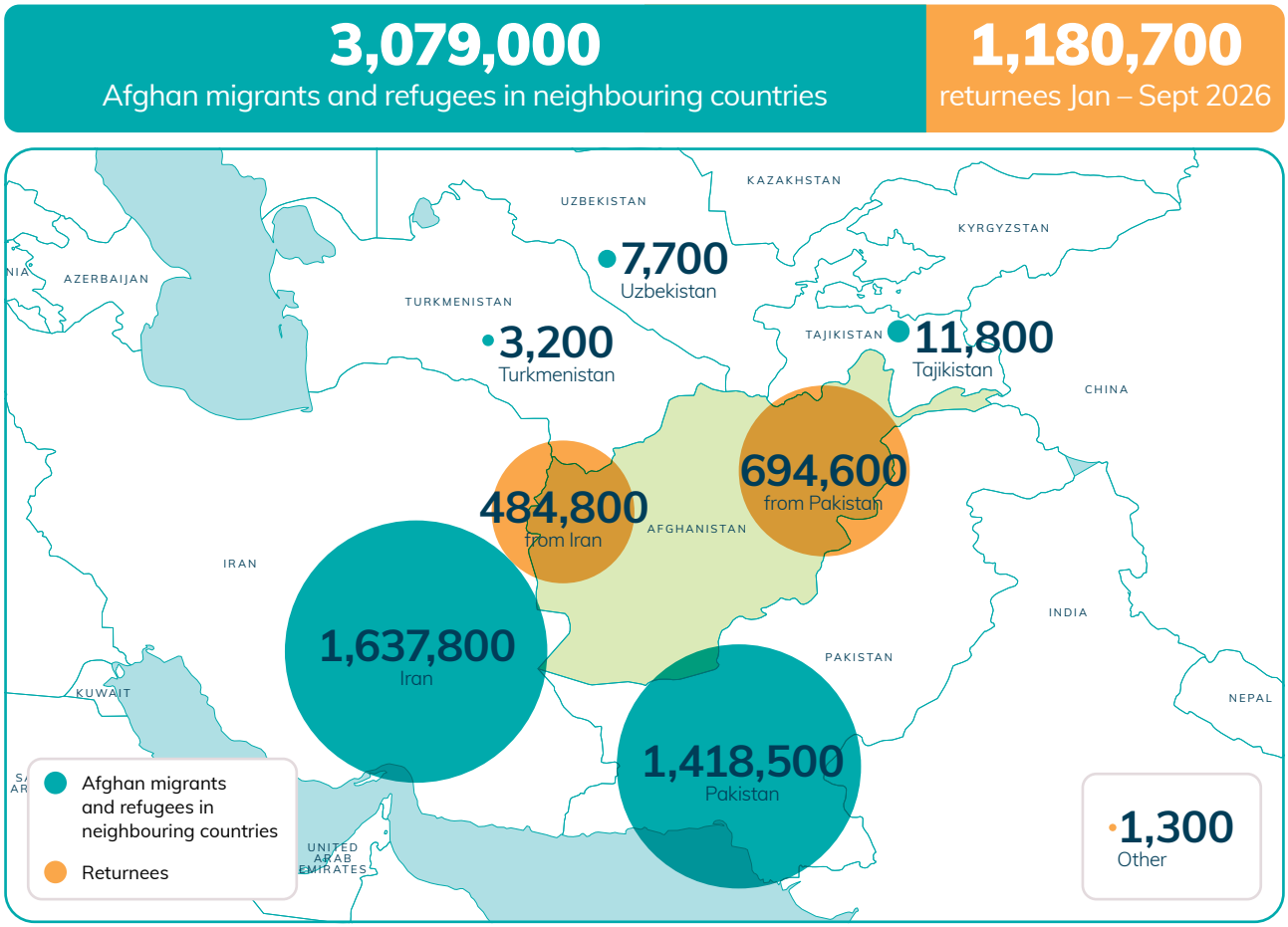
1 United Nations (2026) Humanitarian crisis 'worsening' in Afghanistan as war erupts in the Middle East.
2 UNHCR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Afghanistan.
3 IDMC (2026) GRID 2026: Global Report on Internal Displacement.
4 UNHCR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Afghanistan situation; UNDP (2026) Afghanistan Socioeconomic Review: Mass Returns at a Time of Growing Insecurity, 2024-2025.
5 United Nations (2026) 2026 Response Plan for Afghan Returnees (RPAR) published.
6 IDMC (2026). Afghanistan.
7 Ahmed, S., Ali, M. and Yawar, M.Y. (2025). Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to temporary truce after fresh fighting, airstrikes. Reuters.
8 Tolo News (2025). 20,000 families Displaced by Pakistani Airstrikes in Kandahar.
9 Maroof, H. (2025). Deadly border fighting breaks out between Pakistan and Afghanistan. BBC.
10 Al Jazeera (2026) Afghanistan promises 'appropriate response' after deadly Pakistani strikes.
11 OCHA (2026) Afghanistan Situation Update #2: Humanitarian Impact of Afghanistan-Pakistan Military Escalation (18 March 2026).
12 UNDP (2026) Afghanistan Socioeconomic Review: Mass Returns at a Time of Growing Insecurity, 2024-2025.
13 OCHA (2025) Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026.
14 OCHA Financial Tracking Service (2026) Afghanistan.

situation exacerbated by the outbreak of conflict in Iran and Lebanon.[15] In a context where resources are already overstretched and most households have little in the way of safety nets, the impacts of natural disasters are greatly magnified. Following devastating earthquakes in August and November 2025 that displaced thousands of households,[16] as well as protracted drought,[17] repeated incidents of flooding during 2026 across the country forced entire communities from their homes.[18]

Returns from Iran and Pakistan

Since the announcement in September 2023 of **Pakistan**'s Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, a broad programme outlining the phased return of different categories of Afghans, around 2.4 million Afghans (including many longstanding legal residents and refugees) have left the country as of June 2026,[19] including around 1 million in 2025 and another 531,800 Afghans in the first half of 2026.[20] While only a fraction (12%) of those repatriated between 1 January and 27 June were officially deported (61,800), many of those opting to leave are motivated by the threat of detention and the increasingly hostile environment in Pakistan. In the wake of renewed hostilities between the two countries, Pakistani authorities have launched extensive raids, arbitrary arrests and forcible returns in a number of cities.[21] On 28 June, authorities announced that from 10 July any Afghans apprehended without valid visas would be immediately detained.[22] While Pakistan's crackdown initially focused on undocumented Afghans, it was subsequently expanded in 2024 to include Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders before being extended further in 2025 to include those with Proof of Registration (POR) – a card issued to registered refugees by the government with UNHCR support.

Graphic 1. Afghan migrants and refugees in neighbouring countries, plus returnees (as of September 2026)



Source: UNHCR Operational Data Portal Afghanistan situation

15 Latifi, A. and Rahimi, F. (2026) "There's no interest": Iran war worsens and overshadows the crisis in Afghanistan. The New Humanitarian.
16 OCHA (2025). Afghanistan: Situation Update #7 - Eastern Region Earthquake Response (25 September 2025).
17 Humanitarian Action (2026). Afghanistan.
18 IOM (2026). Afghanistan Floods Again: Communities Never Get Time to Recover.
19 Anadolu Ajansi (2026). Over 2.4m Afghans have returned from Pakistan since September 2023, says Premier Sharif.
20 UNHCR (2026) Pakistan-Afghanistan - Returns emergency response #53 (as of 27 June 2026)].
21 Human Rights Watch (2026) Pakistan: Surge in Forced Returns of Afghan Refugees.
22 Khan N. (2026) Pakistan orders arrest of Afghans without valid visas from July 10. Arab News

While **Iran** has been undertaking large-scale deportations of Afghans for years, the expiry of around 2 million headcount slips (temporary registration documents issued to Afghans in the country) in March 2025 and the subsequent announcement of a major regularisation and returns programme has resulted in a marked uptick in the scale and intensity of these operations. A total of 1.9 million Afghans – the majority (1.26 million) of whom were deported – returned to Afghanistan in 2025, a process that has continued into 2026.[23] As of the end of June 2026, 358,800 Afghans had returned from Iran since the start of the year: of these, the large majority (81 percent) were deportations (290,800).[24] The situation for refugees and migrants has become increasingly inhospitable, particularly since the outbreak of the conflict with the US and Israel at the end of February 2026. As was the case during the previous Iran-Israel conflict in 2025, when Afghans were accused of spying for Israel,[25] Afghans have again been scapegoated and subjected to increased harassment.[26] Against a backdrop of discrimination and the economic fallout of the war, the estimated 4.4 million Afghans in Iran are struggling to eke a living and face a range of legal and social challenges in their daily lives.[27]

These large-scale returns, which in many cases are carried out arbitrarily and with little warning, are a further source of instability in the context of Afghanistan's struggling economy. Returnees not only require immediate humanitarian assistance, but also long-term development support to aid the process of reintegration.[28] Given the Taliban's increasingly restrictive policies towards women, effectively 'erasing' them from public life,[29] returnees are particularly at risk. Research by UN-Women suggest that fewer than a fifth of Afghan women (17 percent) are able to earn an income, even though many have developed specialised professional skills while in Iran or Pakistan.[30] Human rights groups have criticised the policies of both countries for forcibly returning vulnerable individuals to a country where, in addition to the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the threat of targeted persecution, many have not visited for decades and have little or no connections.[31] Critics of the policy point to the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan, the steady erosion of human rights under the Taliban and the particular vulnerability of many of those being forced to leave Pakistan, including many who have lived there for generations and never set foot in Afghanistan. Conditions remain sufficiently difficult in Afghanistan that significant numbers of Afghans are still attempting to cross into Iran, despite the hostile environment there and the dangers of the journey.[32]

Returns from other regions

Though the numbers of people, at present, are only a fraction of those being returned from Iran and Pakistan, there is also growing momentum within Europe to increase returns of Afghan nationals. This is reflected in the European Union (EU)'s recent decision to re-engage diplomatically with the Taliban, inviting representatives to Brussels in June 2026 to negotiate the return of Afghan asylum seekers whose cases have been rejected.[33] This controversial move was condemned by human rights groups not only for providing credibility to a regime associated with widespread abuse and discrimination against girls, women, minorities and activists, but also for seeking to facilitate returns when it is still unsafe to do so.[34] **Germany**, the country hosting the largest Afghan population in Europe, has been the most visible proponent of returns, having deported 215 Afghan nationals since 2024, including 77 in the first seven months of 2026.[35] While previously all those returned to Afghanistan had criminal convictions, a deportation flight to Kabul at the end of July was the first to include an Afghan national with no prior criminal convictions,[36] prompting fears among other Afghans in the country about the possibility of being returned.[37]

In the **United States**, too, many Afghans who arrived after the fall of Kabul in 2021 face an uncertain future amidst threats from the current administration that their visas could be revoked.[38] Reports emerged in June 2026 that Afghans were among a group deported to the **Central African Republic** under a third-country agreement.[39]

23 UNHCR (2026) Iran-Afghanistan: Returns Emergency Response as of 27 June 2026.
24 UNHCR (2026) Iran-Afghanistan: Returns Emergency Response as of 27 June 2026.
25 MMC (2025) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia and the Pacific, 2025 Q2.
26 Latifi, A. and Rahimi, F. (2026) From chaos to contradictory positions, Afghan resettlements have never been "dignified", The New Humanitarian.
27 UNHCR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Afghan situation.
28 UN-Habitat (2026) Durable solutions programming in Afghanistan.
29 United Nations (2026) Five years after Taliban takeover, Afghan women 'erased from public life'.
30 UN-Women (2026) Only 17% of Afghan women returnees from Iran and Pakistan are earning an income, new UN Women report finds.
31 Amnesty International (2025) Afghanistan: Forced returns to Taliban rule must end as latest figures reveal millions unlawfully deported in 2025.
32 Mellersh, N. (2026) Five Afghan migrants found dead after attempting to cross into Iran. InfoMigrants.
33 Connor, R. and Birchard, R. (2026) EU hosts Taliban for migrant return talks in Brussels. DW.
34 ECRE (2026) Joint statement: Afghan and European civil society oppose EU engagement with the Taliban on deportations.; Amnesty International (2026) EU must abandon Afghanistan deportation plans and stop readmission talks with the Taliban.
35 Zahidi, B. (2026) Germany Deports 31 Afghans to Kabul on Direct Flight, Including One Without Criminal Record. Kabul Now.
36 Pieper, O. (2026) Germany widens deportations to Afghanistan. DW.
37 Migazin (2026) Afghanistan-Abschiebungen verunsichern Community in Deutschland.
38 Bustillo, X. (2026) They fought for the U.S. in Afghanistan. Now they worry about losing their green cards. NPR.
39 Seibert, L. (2026) Central African Republic Latest 'Third Country' for US Deportees. Human Rights Watch.

Myanmar's multiple displacement crises

Increasing internal displacement in Myanmar

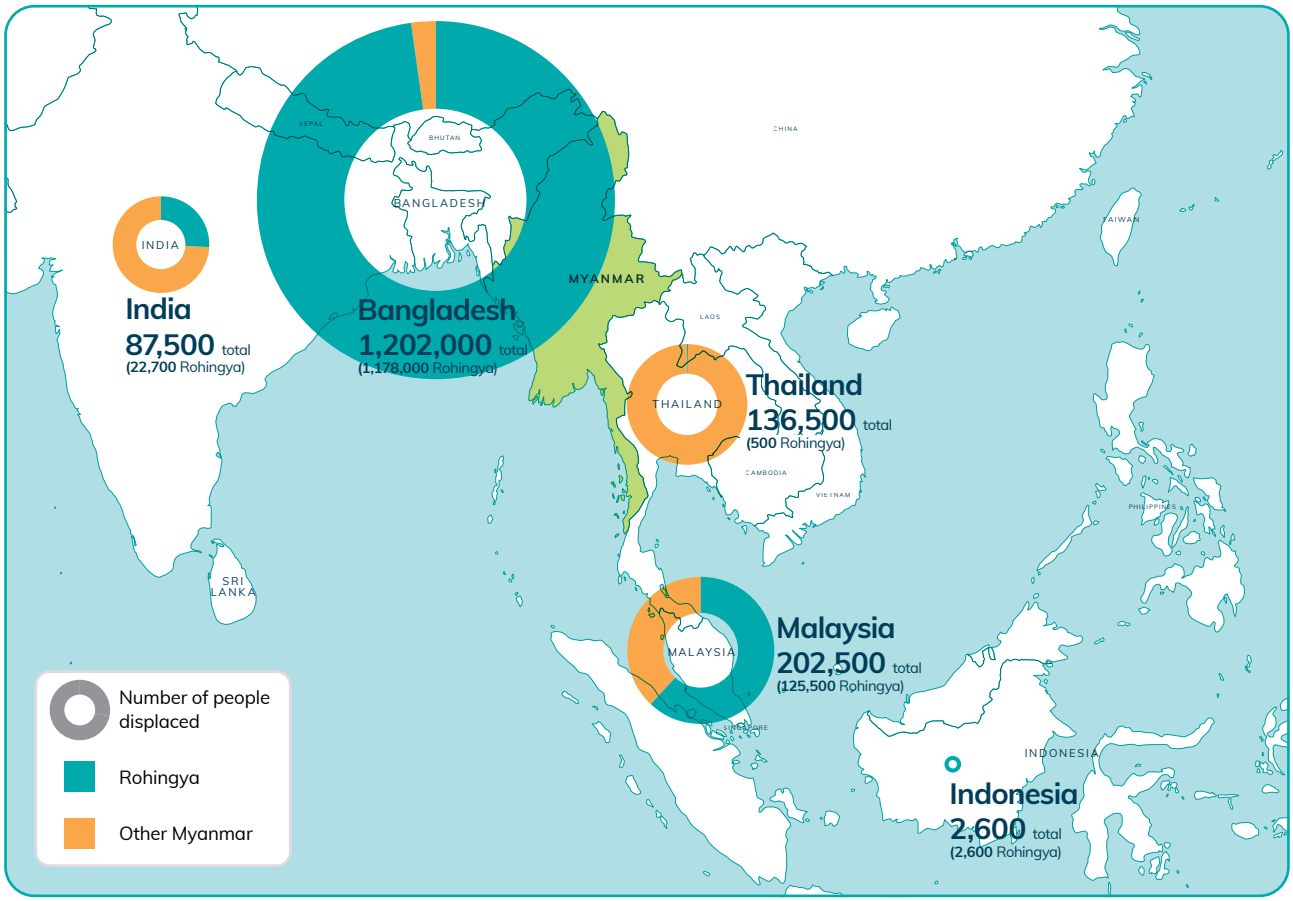
Since the military coup in February 2021 and the subsequent outbreak of civil conflict, **Myanmar** has been consumed by one of the largest internal displacement crises in the region. Although there was significant displacement in Myanmar even before this, as a result of conflict and climate change (on the eve of the military takeover, around 270,000 were internally displaced in the country),[40] the total has dramatically increased since then. In June 2026, the UN special envoy on Myanmar highlighted the severity of the crisis and the compounded effects of displacement, conflict and the proliferation of criminal networks, drawing particular attention to the "dire" situation of the Rohingya.[41] By July 2026, almost 3.73 million people had been internally displaced by the crisis – bringing the total IDP population to almost 4 million – and around 205,000 forced into neighbouring countries.[42] Around half of the IDP population are concentrated in two regions, Sagaing (1.35 million) and Mayway (0.44 million), with significant numbers also in Kayin (267,900), Rakhine (267,600), Bago (East) (265,900) and Kachin (181,400).[43]

Against a backdrop of worsening food insecurity, the United Nations predicted at the end of 2025 that over 16 million people would require assistance.[44] Despite this, international funding remains inadequate and the situation in Myanmar has been described as "almost invisible" outside the country.[45] The continued deterioration of humanitarian conditions is expected to drive further movement.[46] The junta's increasingly repressive measures, from forcible military conscription and the rollout of regime-controlled national elections in January 2021, that were accompanied by widespread violence against civilians, has also caused extensive displacement.[47] Among other abuses, the military has continued to target civilian infrastructure, including an aerial bombing of a displacement camp in Rakhine in June 2026. According to the United Nations, the army was responsible for at least 700 civilian deaths between August 2025 and January 2026 alone.[48] It is also the case that environmental shocks such as earthquakes, flooding and storms are also significant contributors to displacement: according to IDMC data, alongside 573,000 internal displacements due to conflict and violence, 406,000 also occurred as a result of disasters.[49]

While no community has been spared the effects of this crisis, some groups have been disproportionately affected, particularly where the conflict is rapidly evolving. While the military currently controls less than half of the country's territory, it has made significant gains during 2026 in Chin, Kachin and Karen border areas.[50] However, the situation is most difficult for the Rohingya population, whose persecution goes back decades, culminating in a genocidal campaign by the military in 2017 which displaced well over 700,000 people into Bangladesh. Since the end of 2025, 520,000 Rohingya have remained in Myanmar,[51] predominantly in Rakhine, caught in a "crisis within a crisis".[52] Rendered stateless by Myanmar's discriminatory laws, as many as 145,000 are currently being held in brutal conditions in internment camps,[53] while the remainder of the population face significant restrictions on movement, access to livelihoods and other fundamental rights. While the military's hold on Rakhine has weakened since the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group, gained control over the majority of the state, Rohingya have been subjected to abuses by both sides, including extrajudicial killings, forced recruitment, widespread sexual violence and trafficking.[54] The situation is believed to be contributing to the decision of numerous Rohingya in Rakhine to attempt the dangerous journey from Myanmar to other countries in the region, using routes controlled by the Arakan Army.[55]

40 UNHCR (2025) Myanmar UNHCR Displacement Overview 14 Jul 2025.
41 Guldogan, D. (2026) UN envoy warns Myanmar crisis deepening amid rising displacement, crime, hunger. Anadolu Ajansi.
42 UNHCR (2026) Myanmar UNHCR Displacement Overview 20 Jul 2026; UNCHR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Myanmar Situation.
43 UNHCR (2026) Myanmar UNHCR Displacement Overview 20 Jul 2026,
44 United Nations (2025) As conflict fuels suffering in Myanmar, UN publishes humanitarian report forecasting most urgent needs for 2026.
45 Vishra, M. (2025) 'Almost invisible crisis': UN urges world not to look away from Myanmar. United Nations.
46 World Food Programme (2025) WFP warns that Myanmar faces rising displacement and unacceptable hunger levels in 2026.
47 United Nations (2026) Myanmar crisis deepens five years after coup, as military ballot entrenches repression; JRS (2026) Myanmar's Displacement Crisis Deepens Amid Illegitimate Elections, Leaving Millions with Nowhere to Flee.
48 Wright, G. (2026) Myanmar army killed over 700 civilians in six months, UN says. BBC.
49 IDMC (2026) Myanmar.
50 Sommerville, Q. (2026) Inside Myanmar, rebels are losing ground as military forces men into army. BBC.
51 UNCHR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Myanmar Situation.
52 MMC (2025) Mixed Migration Review, p.153.
53 Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (2025) The Rohingya Genocide: Starvation and Forced Labour as Tools of Erasure.
54 Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (2026) Rohingya women and girls facing escalating sexual violence under Arakan Army control.
55 Burmese Rohingya Organisation (2026) More than 500 Rohingya Feared Dead After Arakan Army Forced Boat to Depart Despite Severe Weather.

Graphic 2. Myanmar displacement in the region, including Rohingya (as of 31 July 2026)



Source: UNHCR Situations Myanmar

Rohingya in Bangladesh

Following the displacement of another 150,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh in 2025, around 1.2 million Rohingya are now living in the country.[56] The majority are concentrated in refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar and on the remote island of Bhasan Char in conditions that have steadily deteriorated in recent years following sustained aid cuts. Having seen their already meagre food budget reduced earlier in the year from USD 12 a month to as little as USD 7 for some groups, despite widespread malnutrition in the camps,[57] the situation in the months ahead appears even more challenging. In May, the annual appeal by the United Nations and its partner agencies for humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh was launched at USD 710.5 million, 26 percent lower than the requested amount the previous year[58] – a reflection not that needs have reduced, but that funding has become even more restricted. While UNHCR has called on the international community to "stand in solidarity" with the Rohingya amid fears that their plight was being forgotten, as of mid-July only 49 percent (USD 348.4 million) had been funded.[59]

Their situation is further complicated by evidence of growing anti-Rohingya sentiment in Bangladesh and calls from across the country's political spectrum for their repatriation to Myanmar.[60] With the prospect of a safe and dignified return to Myanmar highly unlikely in the short- to medium-term, and the Bangladeshi government unwilling to integrate them further into society, Rohingya have few prospects in their host

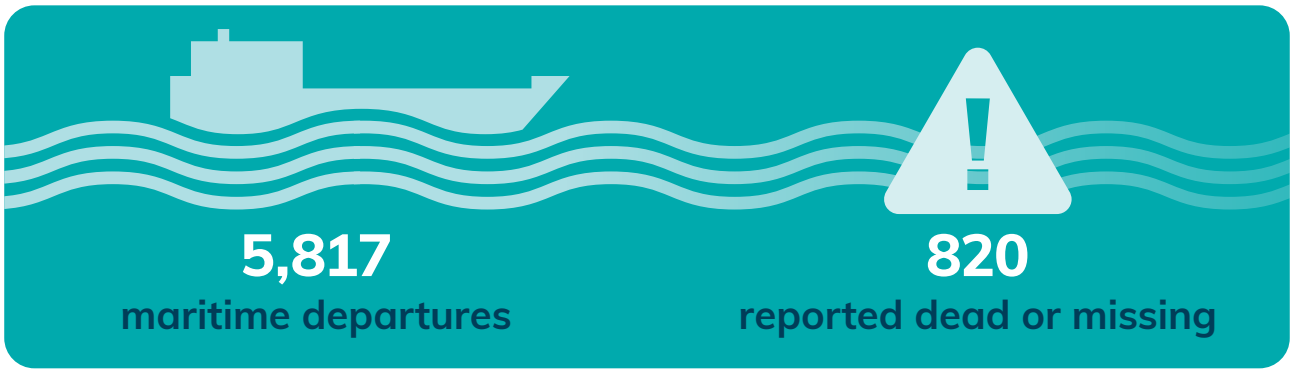
56 United Nations (2025) 150,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh amid renewed Myanmar violence; UNCHR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Myanmar Situation.
57 NPR (2026) Food assistance slashed for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees trapped in Bangladesh camps; Cole-Schmidt, G. (2025) No soap, no tents, no food: Rohingya families fight for survival as aid plummets. The Guardian.
58 Rohingya Refugee Response Bangladesh (2025) Recalibrating the Rohingya Response: 2025-26 Joint Response Plan; United Nations (2026) UN urges world not to forget Rohingya refugees as aid cuts threaten vital support;
59 United Nations (2026) UN urges world not to forget Rohingya refugees as aid cuts threaten vital support; Humanitarian Action (2026) Rohingya (JRP).
60 Miraj Ripon, T. (2026) 'No expectations': Bangladesh election means little to 1m Rohingya refugees. Al Jazeera; Kean, T. (2026) Time to Reset Bangladesh's Approach to the Rohingya. International Crisis Group.

country beyond day-to-day survival in what many regard as an 'open-air prison'.[61] Alongside limited access to education or livelihood opportunities, as well as the growing presence of criminal networks within the camps,[62] natural hazards such as cyclones and flooding also pose significant dangers in a context where many households are concentrated in highly risk-prone areas. This was illustrated in July 2026 during the monsoon season when landslides killed at least 17 people and displaced more than 3,000 others.[63]

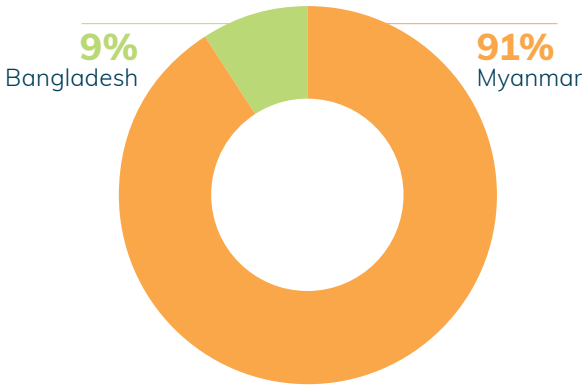
The wider region

The extreme difficulties that Rohingya face both within Myanmar and as refugees in Bangladesh continue to drive large numbers to attempt to migrate onwards to other countries in the region. Many of those who do so are trafficked by local criminal organisations or armed groups, a situation that can further aggravate the risks involved. While some travel overland into India or Thailand, thousands attempt the perilous maritime journey through the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. While the death toll in 2025 along this route was unprecedented, with a total of 860 deaths and disappearances along the route – a figure that translates to around one in seven of those who attempted the journey – this was almost matched by the total of 820 in the first six months of 2026 alone.[64] Among the most deadly incidents was the sinking of a boat travelling from Bangladesh to Malaysia in April which resulted in the deaths of at least 250 Rohingya and Bangladeshis.[65] Further incidents on 29 June and 8 July, when two boats sank in bad weather off the coast of Myanmar, resulted in the death or disappearance of 260 and 280 people respectively – more than 500 fatalities in the space of just 10 days.[66] While the high death rates can be attributed to a number of factors, including dangerous practices such as overcrowding and the limited presence of search and rescue operations, the increasing traffic of illicit oil shipments to the junta has also contributed to the lawlessness of the route.[67]

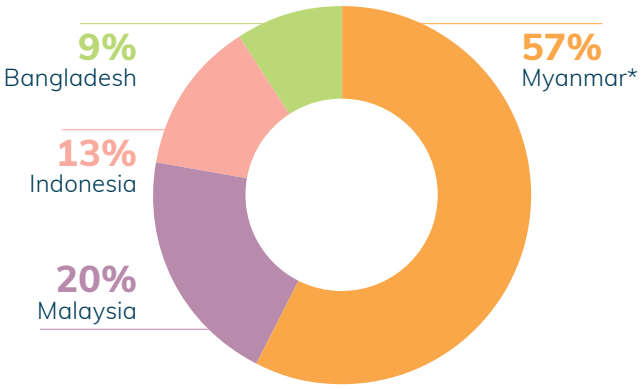
Graphic 3. Rohingya refugee maritime movements Jan – August 8 2026



Country of departure



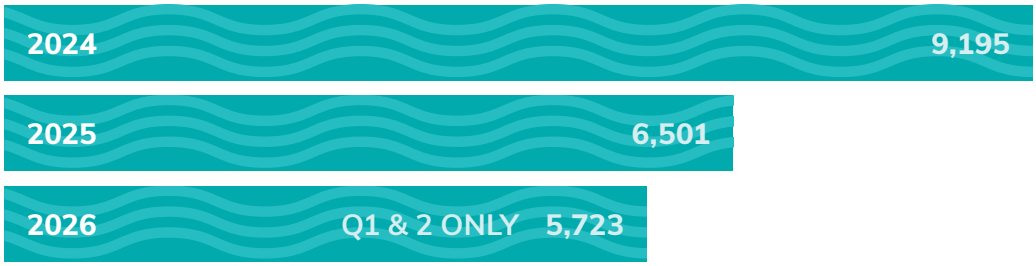
Country of arrival



*Arrivals to Myanmar include to Southern Myanmar where Rohingya refugees continue overland to Thailand and Malaysia.

61 France 24 (2026) Desperate Rohingya risk deadly voyages as trafficking surges.
62 Yunus, M.Y. (2026) Exploring insecurity, crime, and violence in Rohingya camps in Bangladesh: Types, factors, existing measures, and challenges. SN Soc Sci 6, 130.
63 Human Rights Watch (2026) Bangladesh: Landslides deadly for Rohingya refugees.
64 Jackson, W. (2026) Why more Rohingya are taking deadly boat journeys. ABC News; UNCHR (2026) Operational Data Portal: Myanmar Situation.
65 IOM (2026) Over 250 Rohingya and Bangladeshi Nationals Feared Dead in Latest Andaman Sea Tragedy.
66 IOM Missing Migrants Project (2026) Migration within Asia: Bay of Bengal / Andaman Sea; IOM (2026) IOM and UNHCR Deeply Concerned By Reports Of Maritime Incidents off Myanmar coast: Over 500 Feared Dead.
67 Franco, T. (2026) Andaman Sea "ghost" fleet. The Invisible Oil Fueling Myanmar's Genocide.

Rohingya embarking by boat per year



Source: UNHCR Situations Myanmar

Even for those who reach their destination, however, safety can be elusive. In **Thailand**, human rights groups have highlighted the continued risk of refoulement that Rohingya and other refugees face, including recent arrivals who fled from Myanmar after being forcibly returned by Indian authorities in 2025.[68] While Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it has passed legislation in recent years which on paper provides greater protections to vulnerable groups, such as the 2019 National Screening Mechanism and the extension in 2025 of legal working rights to long-term camp-based refugees at the Thai-Myanmar border – yet Rohingya refugees and non-camp-based refugees have not benefitted from either measure.[69]

Malaysia is one of the most popular destinations for Rohingya refugees, in part due to the large Rohingya population already present in the country, despite its increasingly hostile environment towards the community. A fresh spike in online hate speech during 2026 against the community, including calls for their removal, is believed to have contributed to a number of educational centres being closed.[70] Rohingya are already barred from attending state-run schools and are dependent on informal facilities provided by community organisations and international agencies. Until recently Malaysia allowed UNHCR to register refugees in the country and arrange third-country resettlement, but as of 1 January 2026 the government is replacing this system with its own scheme, known as Dokumen Pendaftaran Pelarian (DPP), and has called on UNHCR to pause its own registrations.[71] It is unclear, given the lack of official protections in place for refugees in the country, what these reforms will mean in practice: while human rights groups have called on the government to end the criminalisation of refugees, in particular Rohingya,[72] there are widespread concerns that the new legislation could instead be used to intensify surveillance of refugee communities.[73] Rohingya, due to their statelessness, are already at risk of indefinite detention and will likely be especially vulnerable to any new restrictions. At the end of July, more than 100 Rohingya who gathered outside UNHCR's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur after being evicted from their homes in Penang were rounded up by police and detained.[74]

While **Indonesia** is notable for being the only country in the region that allows disembarkations on humanitarian grounds, the growing number of arrivals and an orchestrated anti-Rohingya campaign has resulted in an increasingly inhospitable environment.[75] In addition to the threat of kidnapping and abuse at the hands of smugglers, Rohingya are facing extreme economic adversity as international assistance has reduced.[76] However, one positive development is the filing of a criminal complaint by a Rohingya survivor in a Jakarta court in April 2026, accusing Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing of genocide.[77] The case, following other previous rulings and arrest warrants issued against him, could help further the possibility of the regime being held accountable for its crimes.[78]

India has also continued an aggressive policy of detention and deportation towards Rohingya. Shortly after the election of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in West Bengal, thousands of Rohingya refugees and undocumented Bangladeshis were detained or forced to flee across the border into Bangladesh after

68 Fortify Rights (2026) Thailand: Protect Rohingya Refugees; Fortify Rights (2026) Thailand: End Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and Forced Returns of Refugees.
69 Fortify Rights (2026) Thailand: Protect Rohingya refugees; Chitra, S.M. (2026) Invisible in Transit: Rohingya Refugees in Thailand's Legal Grey Zone. Prachatai.
70 Latiff, R. (2026) Rohingya schools in Malaysia face closures amid online surge in hate speech. Reuters.
71 Strangio, S. (2026) Malaysia Orders UN Agency To Pause Registration of New Refugees. The Diplomat.
72 Fortify Rights (2026) Malaysia: Rohingya Refugees Held Indefinitely in Inhumane and Degrading Conditions.
73 Human Rights Watch (2026) Malaysia: New Refugee Registration System Raises Concerns.
74 Azhar, D. and Latiff, R. (2026) Malaysia detains over 100 Rohingya refugees seeking shelter at UNHCR. Reuters.
75 IOM (2026) IOM Flash Appeal: Rohingya Refugee Response (January-December 2026).
76 Rohingya Khobor (2026) Rohingya refugees in Indonesia face growing hardship.
77 Gunness, C. and Darusman, M. (2026) Why Indonesia must act now against the Rohingya genocide. The Jakarta Post.
78 CIVICUS Lens (2026) Indonesia's genocide case: A landmark test of universal jurisdiction.

authorities launched a crackdown against them.[79] This was the latest phase in the BJP's "detect, delete, deport" campaign to identify foreign nationals in the country, remove them from local registries and then expel them across the border – an approach that to date has been deployed almost exclusively against Muslim migrants and refugees, including the Rohingya.[80] Elsewhere in the country, in the southern city of Hyderabad, far-right Hindu groups have called for Rohingya to be violently removed from their settlements and community members have been subjected to harassment by local vigilantes.[81]

The human cost of Southeast Asia's booming scam economy

While the financial and psychological toll of cybercrime on its targets is well documented, until recently there was only limited awareness of its impacts on the workers – many of them trafficking victims – carrying out these operations. However, in recent years Southeast Asia has garnered international headlines for its proliferation of scam centres and the trafficking of migrants, both from within the region but also as far afield as Southern Africa, as workers for their operations.[82] According to estimates by the United Nations, as many as 300,000 victims from 66 different countries have been trafficked into the region's rapidly expanding cybercrime networks, trapped in vast compounds and coerced into working through torture and intimidation.[83] Weak governance and the presence of various well developed criminal networks has provided an environment where cyber-fraud syndicates have been able to flourish, with Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos in particular offering highly conducive conditions for these activities. While some of these facilities have ensured a measure of invisibility by basing themselves in remote locations, it is also the case that many of these compounds have benefitted from the complicity of officials themselves.[84] The economic incentives for turning a blind eye are compelling in a context where the revenue from cybercrime amounts to as much as 40 percent of the formal GDP of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar combined.[85]

It is not surprising that **Myanmar** has proved hospitable to these activities, given longstanding accusations of collaboration between the military junta and associated militias with criminal syndicates.[86] Yet during 2025, reportedly under pressure from its ally China to close these operations – in part because thousands of Chinese nationals had either been duped by online scams or forcibly recruited themselves into working for the scammers – the Myanmar military carried out a series of high-profile raids on scam compounds.[87] While these actions were supposed to signal the end of the country's criminal networks, in practice their operations have simply adapted and decentralised: instead of the vast industrial-scale facilities such as KK Park, housing tens of thousands of workers, the ringleaders are now setting up a multitude of smaller and more remote centres, often deep in the jungle. Conditions for victims in these new facilities have reportedly become even more brutal.[88] Human rights groups reported that, as of June 2026, around 5,300 trafficking victims were still being held near the Thai-Myanmar border.[89]

The situation in **Cambodia** is similarly opaque. Cybercrime in the country is now worth billions of dollars and has become a central part of the Cambodian economy, making it difficult to root out.[90] Beginning in 2025, Cambodian authorities launched a number of widely publicised raids on scam centres which culminated in January 2026 with the release of thousands of trafficking victims.[91] As in Myanmar, however, there is evidence to suggest that these crackdowns may have been performative, with reports that centre operators were warned in advance and relocated some of their operations to hotels so they could resume their activities in due course elsewhere.[92] At the same time, the government appears to have provided little in the way of support to trafficking victims,[93] with reports of a "silent humanitarian crisis" in the wake of the crackdowns and thousands of vulnerable individuals homeless on the streets, leaving them at risk of re-trafficking.[94] As of August 2026, thousands were still stranded in

79 Krishnan, M. (2026) India: West Bengal deportations raise human rights concerns. DW; Al Jazeera (2026) Hundreds flee India crackdown on undocumented migrants.
80 Singh, G. (2026) India's Bengal pushes out Muslim Bangladeshis, deepening religious tensions. Al Jazeera
81 Minhaz, A. (2026) Hyderabad's Rohingya trapped between hate rallies and deportation threat. Frontline.
82 OHCHR (2026) UN report details grave abuses against those trafficked into scam centres.
83 OHCHR (2026) A matter of survival: The human cost of cyber scam operations in South-East Asia.
84 OHCHR (2026) A matter of survival: The human cost of cyber scam operations in South-East Asia.
85 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (2025) Compound crime: cyber scam operations in Southeast Asia.
86 Head, J. and Luo, L. (2025) Myanmar's army says it wants to eradicate scam compounds. Is it really doing that? BBC.
87 Head, J. and Luo, L. (2025) Myanmar's army says it wants to eradicate scam compounds. Is it really doing that? BBC.
88 Hogan, L., Fankhauser, J. and Fell, J. (2026) Scam centres growing 'exponentially' despite Myanmar crackdown. ABC.
89 Al Jazeera (2026) More than 5,300 people still held in Myanmar scam centres: rights group.
90 Hutt, D. (2026) Is Cambodia serious about ending organized cyberscams? DW.
91 Ratcliffe, R. (2026) Thousands of workers flee Cambodia scam centres, officials say. The Guardian.
92 Hansen, R. (2026) Inside Southeast Asia's scam compounds: A trafficked worker tells of fraud, coercion and torture. The Conversation.
93 Amnesty International (2026) Falling Through the Cracks: Cambodia's "Crackdown" on Scamming Compounds and the Victims It Has Failed.
94 Mahtani, S. (2026) Cambodia cracked down on scams costing Americans billions. It created a new crisis. NPR.

Phnom Penh, with no support from their embassies or recognition of their status as trafficking victims. Unable to return due to accumulated visa overstay fees and restrictions on leaving Cambodia, many have ended up being held in detention centres or even lured into working for the scamming centres again.[95]

In the wake of recent crackdowns, there are also concerns that these activities may simply relocate elsewhere in Asia, with increasing activity reported in countries such as **Sri Lanka**.[96] These developments demonstrate the adaptive and globalised nature of these criminal networks, making them especially difficult to eradicate without a concerted transnational effort. Addressing this phenomenon requires a multi-pronged approach which effectively hobbles the deceptive recruitment strategies being deployed, while also engaging with the complex governance challenges in Southeast Asia which have enabled scam operations to thrive.

Labour migration and exploitation

Millions of migrants, predominantly from South (in particular, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan) and Southeast Asia (including Indonesia and the Philippines) rely on employment in other countries to support themselves and their families. Many do so either by entering or remaining in their host countries without documentation – a situation that leaves them at constant risk of detention or removal – while others use the services of brokers and middle-men to secure their employment, often in the process creating substantial debt and opening themselves up to exploitation.

Some of this labour migration is sustained by inequalities within the region between countries. More developed economies, such as Malaysia, attract significant numbers of migrant workers and are also dependent on sending countries for their own economic survival. Despite this, the relations between employers in host countries and migrant workers is characterised by deep-seated inequalities which in turn can lead to exploitation. In **Japan**, for instance, despite recent reforms to improve the rights of foreign workers, migrants are still caught in an unequal system which perpetuates their social and economic precarity.[97] **South Korea**, meanwhile, has attracted unwelcome attention with repeated reports of discrimination and exploitation. In January 2026 the government launched an unprecedented crackdown on trafficking and labour exploitation of seasonal migrant workers in an effort to address these problems.[98] Nevertheless, when relations break down between sending and receiving countries, both are likely to be adversely affected. For instance, the exodus of an estimated 780,000 migrant workers from Thailand to Cambodia in the wake of hostilities between the two countries in 2025 has left returnees in Cambodia struggling with poverty and debt while Thai employers have had to contend with acute labour shortages.[99]

A large proportion of Asian migrants end up working in the Gulf, where many aspects of *kafala* – a system that requires workers to be 'sponsored' by employers in the country (see *Keeping Track in the Middle East* p. 42) – are still in operation, despite some efforts at reform in recent years. This leaves them highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including long working hours, low pay and limited protections. Many face elevated health risks as a result of poor safety standards and the challenges of working in extreme heat.[100] These issues have become even more pronounced since the US and Israeli attack on Iran in February 2026 and the proliferation of aerial attacks against Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, among other countries. In the wake of the attacks, many migrant workers were left without pay or assistance from their employers,[101] with some ordered to return home despite being owed money.[102] The impacts are profound not only for migrants themselves, but also families and communities reliant on remittances for their own survival.

At the same time, Asian workers have been disproportionately likely to be killed in the fighting: out of 23 people killed between 28 February and 23 April across the Gulf, 21 were foreigners, including from India (eight), Bangladesh (four), Pakistan (four), and Nepal (one).[103] While a variety of issues are at play, from limited access to safety information to unsafe accommodation, a key factor is that most migrants are obliged to keep working despite the dangers involved,[104] even when

95 Barber, H. (2026) They escaped south-east Asia's scam compounds. Then they realised they were still trapped. The Guardian.
96 Rebert, J. and Nixon, N. (2026) Asia's scam centre problem is moving on, not shutting down. Lowy Institute.
97 Aichholzer, S. (2026) Japan's labour migration reforms leave foreign workers vulnerable. East Asia Forum.
98 Min-ho, J. (2026) Gov't orders nationwide crackdown on labor exploitation of migrant workers. The Korea Times.
99 Human Rights Watch (2025) Cambodia: Returned Migrant Workers Face Hunger, Joblessness; Tan, V. (2026) How Cambodian worker exodus exposes Thailand's fragile labour model. South China Morning Post.
100 Human Rights Watch (2026) Gulf States: Migrant Workers' Heat Protections Fall Short.
101 Human Rights Watch (2026) Gulf Countries: Conflict, Hardships Leave Migrants in Limbo.
102 MRRORS (2026) Forced exits, unpaid wages, and uncertain future.
103 Wehrey, F. and Johnson, C. H. (2026) The Iran War is a Stress Test for Gulf States. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
104 Equidem (2026) Protect Migrant Workers on the Frontlines of Conflict in the Middle East; Bali, M., Burhan, B. and Patidar, S. (2026) Nepali security guard killed in Abu Dhabi shows risks faced by 'trapped' migrant workers. ABC; Ullah, A. (2026) 'If I don't work, I go hungry': The migrant workers risking their lives to keep the Gulf running. Middle East Eye.

their workplaces have been actively targeted.[105] In addition, migrants have been subjected to increasing repression from authorities and severe restrictions on their freedom of expression,[106] with hundreds reportedly detained for viewing or sharing video clips related to the conflict online.[107]

Labour migration can also create significant vulnerabilities even within countries due to legal or societal barriers. In **China**, in particular, the longstanding hukou system has for decades tied individuals administratively to their birthplace, making it very difficult for rural residents to move elsewhere. In practice, however, millions of migrant workers have still moved to cities in other parts of the country but been unable to formally register as residents there or access services, resulting in a vast and disenfranchised 'floating population'. However, in 2026 the Chinese government announced sweeping reforms to the system which would effectively decouple public service access from birthplace registration, enabling long-term migrant workers to access services in their places of residence.[108]

Oceania

Asylum and immigration policies tighten again in Australia...

For years, **Australia** has been criticised for its highly punitive 'crimmigration' policy, including the controversial use of offshore detention facilities.[109] While its centre on Manus Island, **Papua New Guinea** closed in 2017, dozens of asylum seekers were transferred to Port Moresby and remain stranded there to this day, with many still struggling with the mental health impacts of their incarceration.[110] A January 2026 court ruling found Australia culpable for the torture of, and violence towards, an Iranian asylum seeker who had suffered while being held there between 2013 and 2019, including, reportedly, having his throat slit by a security guard (see *Interview: Behrouz Boochani*, p. 134).[111]

In **Naoero**, meanwhile, 91 asylum seekers were still being held as of September 2025, at a cost of around AUD 9 million each annually: despite this, almost all of them lack sufficient funds to purchase enough food or clean water, forcing them to skip meals or eat expired products.[112] A AUD 2.5 billion 30-year agreement with Australia was also announced in September 2025, allowing for up to 354 migrants and refugees whose right to remain in Australia has been withdrawn as a result of criminal convictions to be relocated to the island.[113] The first transfer under the new agreement took place at the end of October 2025, continuing into 2026 with 29 arrivals in the first five months.[114]

Conditions in Australia's in-country immigration detention facilities have also prompted serious human rights concerns amidst reports of a "culture of fear" in Villawood Immigration Detention Centre (VIDC). Based in Sydney and housing more than 400 people, including children, the centre was visited by independent monitoring bodies in March 2026, who documented drug dealing, the manufacture of makeshift weapons and widespread violence, with one detainee reportedly killed by another person in detention. Children detained in the centre had apparently been isolated and denied access to education for months. These were not the first failings VIDC had been accused of, with previous incidents including stabbings and the denial of health care to seriously ill detainees.[115]

The passage of the Migration Amendment (2026 Measures No. 1) Bill 2026[116] (also known as the Refugee Ban Bill) in parliament in March 2026 enables the government to impose an "arrival control determination". This would immediately suspend entry of temporary visa holders from specific regions (in particular, those experiencing conflict or political upheaval), a situation that could leave nationals of affected countries already in transit at risk of arrest and expulsion. The ban is expected to last six to 12 months with as many as 61,000 visa holders from the Middle East impacted.[117] Shortly after its approval, the government announced a six-month travel ban to all Iranians wishing to enter on a temporary visa, effectively closing off one of the last remaining

105 Acharya, P. (2026) In the crosshairs of someone else's war. MRRORS.
106 Human Rights Watch (2026) Gulf States: Repression of Migrant Workers During Conflict.
107 Amnesty International (2026) Gulf States: Phone searches, arrests exacerbate existing restrictions on trade unions, expression.
108 Reuters (2026) China to expand public service access for migrant workers.
109 Tulich, T., Kenny, M.A and Murray, S. (2026) The changing landscape of immigration detention in Australia: Preventive 'crimmigration' and the legislative response to NZYQ. International Journal of Refugee Law, 38(1):25-45.
110 JRS (2026) Refugee leader warns of ongoing concern for friend detained on Manus Island.
111 OHCHR (2026) Australia: Offshore and prolonged detention exposed Iranian asylum seeker to torture, UN committee finds.
112 ASRC (2026) Media release: 99% of people seeking asylum Australia has transferred to Nauru are not able to access enough food; Refugee Council of Australia (n.d.) Offshore processing statistics.
113 Truu, M. (2025) Nauru deportation deal set to cost Australia $2.5 billion over 30 years.
114 Refugee Council of Australia (n.d.) Offshore processing statistics.
115 Doherty, B. and Knaus, C. (2026) Drug-dealing, makeshift weapons and a 'culture of fear' at Villawood detention centre, report warns. The Guardian.
116 Parliament of Australia (2026) Migration Amendment (2026 Measures No. 1) Bill 2026.
117 Staszewska, E. and Tamer R. (2026) 'Hypocritical': Government moves to curb some Iranian visas after footballer asylum cases. SBS.

pathways for vulnerable individuals to seek asylum in Australia.[118] This coincided with the government's offer, the very same month, of humanitarian visas to members of Iran's women's football team who were in Australia for the Asian Cup. While this decision was celebrated by all sides of the political spectrum, many also accused the government of hypocrisy for shutting out around 7,200 other Iranians who had already been granted visas but as a result of the Refugee Ban Bill would not be able to travel to Australia.[119] In August, reports emerged from the Home Office that Australia's annual refugee intake would be cut by a third in 2027 to 13,750 people but, following widespread criticism, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that the intake would remain at its current level of 20,000.[120]

Despite this highly securitised approach, the number of migrants and refugees arriving irregularly in Australia remains very low. However, there have been reports of increasing numbers of Chinese nationals attempting to reach Australia from Indonesia by boat since 2024, apparently as an alternative to the route through Central America towards the US. The Australian government has declined to disclose the exact numbers involved to avoid diplomatic friction.[121] Indonesia has also apprehended Chinese nationals apparently preparing to leave for Australia, including five people who were deported to China in August 2026.[122]

… while New Zealand follows suit

The introduction by the **New Zealand** government in March 2026 of the proposed Immigration (Enhanced Risk Management) Amendment Bill[123] has been condemned by human rights groups about its likely implications for the rights and protections of asylum seekers if passed. While the past 25 years have seen a gradual shift in the country towards a more exclusionary 'Fortress New Zealand' immigration policy, the new legislation takes this a step further.[124] Its provisions include accelerated removal processes, fewer opportunities for appeals and a "bad faith" consideration that could negate an asylum seeker's claim if their own actions (such as political expression) are deemed to have attracted attention to themselves, a move that could undermine the fundamental principles of refugee protection.[125] Despite denials by the government, the bill has also raised concerns that it could pave the way for the sort of invasive community crackdowns being carried out in the United States against migrant populations, increasing the risk of family separation and undermining protections for vulnerable children.[126] As of August 2026, the legislation was still under review.

The launch of the Pacific Regional Guidance on Planned Relocation

On 4 March 2026, governments in the Pacific inaugurated the Pacific Regional Guidance on Planned Relocation.[127] Drawing on international standards and the 2023 Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility, this ground-breaking document represents the world's first regional framework on climate-related resettlement.[128] As such, it provides a comprehensive, rights-based roadmap to support future relocations in the face of rising sea levels and natural disasters, encompassing a range of considerations from customary land tenure to Indigenous rights. While designed to address the specific context in the Pacific, it has the potential to serve as a blueprint for other climate-stressed regions such as the Caribbean.

It comes at an opportune moment, with communities already forced to resettle after repeated environmental displacement[129] and the arrival of the first group of Tuvaluans to Australia as part of the Falepili Union, a bilateral climate mobility agreement that is also a global first. Nevertheless, the Pacific will need the support of the wider international community to realise durable solutions for the most climate-vulnerable nations. At present, however, the level of assistance being provided to countries such as **Kiribati** is still nowhere near the scale needed.[130] Collectively, in 2022 Pacific nations received USD 1.5 billion in international climate adaptation finance, a total amounting to just two percent of global adaptation funding and one-sixth of the amount needed to respond to their needs.[131]

118 Minister for Home Affairs (2026) Protecting the integrity and sustainability of our migration system; ASRC (2026) Albanese Government's heartless act leaves the Iranian community with nowhere to turn.
119 Staszewska, E. and Tamer R. (2026) 'Hypocritical': Government moves to curb some Iranian visas after footballer asylum cases. SBS.
120 Norman, J. (2026) Prime Minister dramatically intervenes, confirms no change to Labor's refugee intake. ABC News
121 Kuang, W. (2026) Australia refuses to say how many Chinese nationals are arriving by boat, saying it may damage bilateral relations. The Guardian.
122 Antara News (2026) Indonesia deports five Chinese nationals suspected of Australia route.
123 New Zealand Legislation (2026) Immigration (Enhanced Risk Management) Amendment Bill.
124 Marlow, J. and Fadgen, T. (2026) Is New Zealand sliding toward a US-style approach to immigration and asylum? The Conversation.
125 McClymont A. (2026) Khalistan, asylum and bad faith: What NZ's new immigration bill really changes. Awaaz.
126 Bonnett, G. (2026) Fears for NZ children in 'harsh' immigration crackdown. RNZ; Crimp, L. (2026) Claims immigration changes will see US-style crackdown 'completely wrong' - Erica Stanford. RNZ.
127 Pacific Resilience Partnership (2026) The Pacific Guidance on Internal Planned Relocation.
128 Human Rights Watch (2026) Pacific Islands: World's First Regional Guidance on Climate Relocation.
129 Human Rights Watch (2025) "There's just no more land": Community-led planned relocation as last-resort adaptation to sea level rise in Solomon Islands.
130 Amnesty International (2025) 'Navigating injustice': Climate displacement from the Pacific Islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati to Aotearoa New Zealand; Ataneka, A. (2026) A fairer Pacific migration system starts with Kiribati — Part 1. DevPolicyBlog.
131 Pacific Resilience Partnership (2026) Costing Planned Relocation.

Furthermore, as the Pacific Regional Guidance makes clear, relocation should only be a last resort. In addition to the economic losses associated with abandoning longstanding communities, there is the potential for conflict between displaced and host populations, lasting psychological trauma and the erosion of deep-seated values, traditions and identities tied to the land.[132]

132 Baleinakorodawa, P. and Boege, V. (2024) Climate Change-Induced Community Relocation in Fiji: Challenges and Ways Forward. Toda Peace Institute.

Interview



The violence of border control: the 'Australian model' and its colonial roots

A complex, multi-layered concept, the notion and enforcement of 'borders' is deeply rooted in colonial and imperialist histories and current realities, Kurdish writer and activist **Behrouz Boochani** argues.

Behrouz Boochani is a Kurdish journalist, human rights defender, writer and film producer living in New Zealand. His book No Friend but the Mountains won the Victorian Prize for Literature, Victorian Premier's Literary Awards Non-Fiction Prize (2019) and other awards. His second book, titled Freedom Only Freedom was released in 2022.

Can you tell us a little about yourself and your background?

My name is Behrouz Boochani. I'm Kurdish but I left Iran for Australia in 2013. I arrived in Indonesia, then I got on a boat and went to Australia. When I arrived in Australia, they said, 'Our policy has changed: anyone who arrives after 19 July will be sent to Manus Island or Nauru Island.' So, they banished me to Manus Island. I was imprisoned there for more than six years. Finally, I ended up in New Zealand. I'm a writer but I'm also working in cinema at the moment and, of course, I'm involved in human rights activism.

People often talk about migration as a crisis. From your perspective, is migration really the crisis or is the crisis the way nation states respond to human movement?

I don't agree with the word 'crisis'. I think it is a very political word that has been used for many years. But if we look at the reality of what is happening on the ground, such as in the Middle East and in Africa, the reality is not a refugee crisis. What we are seeing is the way wealthier countries respond to these tragedies. It is really important that we focus on that, rather than look at refugees as a crisis. Also, it's really important that we mention that, in many nations around the world, including and especially Australia, refugees and migrants did a lot to contribute to building those countries. That is the reality and they cannot ignore it. So, for me, it's not a complicated question. It's obvious that migrants and refugees still contribute to the economy, the culture and the politics of countries all around the world. Just imagine: if the refugees who recently arrived in Europe stopped working for just one week, what would happen to the economy?

Many people think of borders as physical lines on a map. You, on the other hand, have written about borders as systems of power. Can you elaborate on that?

Definitely. As I mentioned earlier, I'm Kurdish, and my background is extremely important to me because it is associated with a particular life experience. Our culture was shaped by borders. Those borders exist because superpowers divided our people. So, yes, that has led me to think about borders not in a simple way – they're not just simply a line or a divide between two nations. We need to reimagine borders based on their new realities in our world. We can even look at the concept of borders as an industry. In a country like Australia, the Border Force is a very important concept. Borders are way more complicated than we imagine. There are many security companies that have contracts with governments all around the world, especially in Australia, and are making money off border control. Australia, for example, has spent more than $14 billion just on borders over the past decade. Borders are also political, as they are, of course, related to national security, particularly in recent times.

> **"... migrants and refugees still contribute to the economy, the culture and the politics of countries all around the world. Just imagine: if the refugees who recently arrived in Europe stopped working for just one week, what would happen to the economy?"**

National security is a very important concept because it's on that basis that many governments get re-elected. Political parties use it as a term in their election campaigns, creating fear among society and using that fear to control people.

The concept of 'border' has also expanded in many ways recently and, in some cases, has even become invisible, because now we have different kinds of borders. For example, look at Australia's agreement with Papua New Guinea and Nauru, Italy's agreement with Albania or the UK's former agreement with Rwanda. They expanded their power to other countries and have more control now beyond their own borders. So, it's like a colonialist, imperialistic approach towards borders.

This fits in closely with what you've been writing about in some of your work, called the 'kyriarchal framework' or 'kyriarchal system', which is all about the broader structures of domination in society and in the world. Can you explain more?

My understanding is that a kyriarchal system is a system of control. Of course, the extreme version is detention but any form of control within detention or beyond detention and prisons can be understood and analysed through a kyriarchal framework.

> **"Borders are way more complicated than what we imagine... Political parties use [them] as a term in their election campaigns, creating fear among society and using that fear to control people."**

In Manus Island, refugees are kept in a more explicit prison camp, but when this concept is applied more generally, I call it invisible violence. It's about how the system everywhere in what we call 'free society' has become very bureaucratic. Manus Island is not simply a prison or a detention centre. It is a smart bureaucratic system which makes detainees constantly feel like they are watched and controlled. This system creates the conditions that trigger competition between detainees to have access to food, for example, which is a basic need, or to get medical help. And when that happens under a system of control for many years, it creates hate between the detainees and, ultimately, divides the community.

Inside and outside prison, there is a system of surveillance, with cameras everywhere – in many ways, the state is run like a prison system but with more subtle control. In their everyday life, people are dealing with a highly bureaucratic system. So, in general, I feel the kyriarchal system is an invisible level of state violence in which even people who experience that violence are hardly able to explain or to describe it.

Do you think different control systems around the world learn from each other, especially in relation to migrants and refugees?

Yes. And specifically, I want to talk about how prisons learn from prisons. The big example now is Australia. Australia has not only inspired other countries but has also been active in exporting this model. There are many examples. In 2016, I remember a group of Danish politicians came to Australia. They visited Canberra and then they wanted to visit Nauru Island to look at it, to learn from it. Later, Tony Abbott, the Australian Prime Minister when I was on Manus Island, visited the UK and talked a lot about the Australian system, suggesting that the UK used it, too. Recently I received a book by an Italian researcher who, with some other journalists, wrote a book about the deal between Italy and Albania. The author of the book also exposed that, in October 2022, the United Kingdom appointed the former Australian minister, Alexander Downer, who is well known in Australia as the architect of the offshore policy, to serve on a government commission tasked with independently overseeing the famous agreement signed a few months earlier with Rwanda. So that

> **Manus Island is not simply a prison or a detention centre. It is a smart bureaucratic system which makes detainees constantly feel like they are watched and controlled.**

means Australia has been actively introducing its approach and not just inspiring other countries.

You've often connected migration to colonial histories. In your view, are today's migration 'crises' really new, or are they just consequences of unfinished colonial projects or continuations of colonial projects?

They definitely are the consequences of colonisation. What I am more interested in, though, is the form of violence which people experienced during colonisation and how this has been developed in different forms today and is hardly even recognised as such.

I'm interested in how wealthier countries with a history of colonisation treat other countries. For example, the way Australia has been treating Papua New Guinea and Nauru: that's a classic example of colonisation. Because obviously they are using their land to banish and torture people, which is a very colonial mindset. That's how the first Europeans who came to New Zealand and Australia treated indigenous people there.

The mindset is: these are empty countries, no one lives there, so we send convicts there. But people did live there. In the Australian context, I'm also interested in how the same form of violence that was used to target indigenous people has now been exported to target new groups of people. Think about, for example, family separation, or the so-called Stolen Generation in Australia. That's a big thing. And we can still see it in the way they treat refugees. Banishment is a big part of Australia's detention industry. And where did that come from? That came from its historical context, the way they banished and treated indigenous people: millions of the people who become refugees and who go to countries in the Global North have emerged from the structures which were established during the era of classic colonisation. In the case of Kurdish people, for example, we were divided by the winners of the First World War when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. The winners divided our territory into three countries and that's why we have been struggling for more than 100 years.

We experience violence, war, genocide. And that means we have to keep moving, leaving and escaping to other countries. These kinds of structures are a major part of the problem, and were, of course, created by Western superpowers.

Do you ever feel that identity itself has become a kind of journey rather than a destination? How has your sense of identity managed this period of transition?

This is a very important question. For me, identity is still an ongoing journey because I'm Kurdish and I was born in a colonial system. That is one part of my identity. But when I became a refugee, that added another layer to my journey: in fact, I wasn't just a refugee, I was an imprisoned one, for crimes I had not committed.

> **Millions of the people who become refugees and who go to countries in the Global North have emerged from the structures which were established during the era of classic colonisation.**

Banishment is another deep form of violence which I experienced. When you are banished from free society, they make you feel like you are a piece of rubbish and need to be sent far away. Now I am living in New Zealand as a refugee and that is a challenge. Being a refugee and having that label has become quite a heavy burden, making it difficult for me to work and live. I live in this world to find my way to contribute to a society that has shaped or has created so much struggle for me, which I experience as a form of violence. So, it's so difficult to be known, represented, or seen beyond this image of a refugee. I'm not denying that I'm a refugee: of course I am, and that's a big part of my life, at least it was when I was on Manus Island for more than six years. I cannot deny that. I can't ignore it. And I feel I'm responsible for doing something about refugees in this world, too, but at the same time I also want to be known beyond this concept of being a refugee.

> **I live in this world to find my way to contribute to a society that has shaped or has created so much struggle for me, which I experience as a form of violence.**

People expect that whatever I do in this world, it should be just about refugees – just write about refugees, talk about refugees. I always get approached to be involved in projects about refugees. No, I'm not just a refugee. I'm doing other things. And my third book is not about refugees at all. It's just fiction.

Can exile or banishment provide space for intellectual freedom alongside all the loss, especially for those coming from culturally conservative societies or authoritarian regimes?

Definitely, according to my own life experience. Even within the detention on Manus Island, I had a level of freedom that I never had before: I could write and I could publish my work. I don't say that I felt safe in front of the authorities, but at least I knew there was a civil society in Australia, or some platforms in Australia and beyond to publish my work. But in general, I think being a refugee or being in exile – which means you need to leave your life behind and cannot go back – is challenging. That is an existential challenge. And that is good in many ways, because it is a meaningful challenge, an identity challenge, which means it can be inspiring as well. It can allow you to see the world from different perspectives and different angles, which makes it intellectually interesting.

"Inside and outside prison, there is a system of surveillance, with cameras everywhere – in many ways, the state is run like a prison system but with more subtle control."



From persecution to precarity:
Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

I am originally from Rakhine State, Myanmar, and I've been living in Malaysia for three months. In 2017, my family was forced to flee to Bangladesh due to persecution, discrimination and the violence committed against the Rohingya people by the Myanmar military. We fled to save our lives, believing we had finally reached safety.

I lived in the refugee camps in Bangladesh for almost nine years. Although we escaped the violence in Myanmar, life in the camps was extremely difficult. We lived under severe restrictions, with very few opportunities for education, work or a better future. Food assistance was also scarce. Initially, we received US$10 per person per month but, over time, this was reduced to US$8, making it difficult for families to meet their basic needs.

Environmental conditions made things even harder. During the monsoon season, heavy rainfall often caused flooding and landslides. There were also regular fires. These disasters damaged shelters, blocked access to services, made movement around the camp very difficult and caused injuries and deaths.

Migrating for marriage

As the years passed in the refugee camp, my parents became increasingly worried about my future. They wanted me to get married, but our family could not afford the costs for me to get married in Bangladesh. After speaking with a family whose son was already living in Malaysia, they decided that I should travel there to marry him.

At first, I was uncertain. However, my parents encouraged and convinced me that this would be the best option for my future. They hoped that, through marriage, I would have greater stability, safety and opportunities than in the refugee camp.

To reach Malaysia, I travelled with the assistance of smugglers and undertook a dangerous journey by boat and through multiple transit locations. The journey involved significant risks to my safety and well-being but, given the lack of legal options, I had no choice.

I was constantly afraid. I had heard stories of women and girls being abused, including experiencing sexual violence while travelling irregular routes. I was fortunate that this did not happen to me, but the fear stayed with me until I finally arrived in Malaysia.

I would have chosen a safe and legal way to migrate if it had been available to me. I never wanted to risk my life to reach another country, but I had no other way to do so. In the future if I ever need to move to another country, I would only do so through safe and legal migration pathways.

The complexity of statelessness

When I was living in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, I was registered as a Forcibly Displaced Myanmar National (FDMN) and received a UNHCR refugee card. This recognised me as a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh and provided me with official documentation of my status there.

But when I arrived in Malaysia, I realised that the document which recognised me in one country meant nothing in another. About 20 days after I arrived in Malaysia, my husband submitted an online registration application to UNHCR on my behalf so that I could be registered as a refugee. Since then, I have been waiting without knowing when, or if, I will receive my documentation.

For many Rohingya refugees, this is the reality of statelessness. We are forced to move because of persecution, yet every border we cross brings new uncertainty. Without recognised legal documents, we cannot work legally, move freely, or feel safe. Instead, we live with the constant fear of arrest, detention and an uncertain future while waiting for refugee registration. Living without legal documentation means living with uncertainty every day.

I hope that one day I will receive my UNHCR documentation in Malaysia and I hope to be resettled to a third country where we can live safely, enjoy legal protection, equal rights and have access to education, employment and a more secure future.

Precarity across the region

When I arrived in Malaysia, I hoped life would be more stable. Instead, I found myself living with a different kind of uncertainty. I do not have legal status, I do not have the right to work legally, and access to education, healthcare and other basic services is limited.

Every day, I live with the fear of being stopped, arrested or detained because I do not have recognised documents. Most of the time, I stay at home because I do not feel safe going outside. Even at home, I worry that immigration officers could come to our apartment at any time.

A few days ago, I went to a hospital for medical treatment. At the registration counter, I was asked to show my identification documents. I felt embarrassed and anxious, so I told them that I had left my documents at home. Moments like this remind me how difficult it is to live without legal recognition. It affects even the simplest parts of daily life.

Over time, anti-Rohingya sentiment has increased in Malaysia and many people have become less welcoming towards us. There have also been stricter immigration enforcement measures, which have increased the fear of arrest and detention, especially for Rohingya refugees who do not yet have UNHCR documentation. Living with uncertainty and fear has become part of our everyday life.

I haven't reached out to any organisation for financial assistance because of my fears around being undocumented, so I depend entirely on my husband for my daily needs. Occasionally, some of our relatives living in Malaysia provide us with small amounts of support when they are able, and we are very grateful for their kindness. But like many Rohingya families, we continue to live with uncertainty while waiting for the protection and recognition that every refugee deserves.



Our struggles never end

My hope is that one day Rohingya refugees will have access to safe and legal pathways, faster refugee registration and stronger international protection. Without these, people will continue to risk dangerous journeys because they feel they have no other choice.

No one chooses to risk their life at sea or depend on smugglers if there is a safe alternative. Most of us only take these dangerous journeys because we have no other option: in Myanmar, we face persecution, violence and discrimination; in Bangladesh, life in the camps is extremely difficult.

Everyone deserves the chance to live in safety and dignity, regardless of where they come from. Providing timely legal protection and documentation would reduce suffering, protect people from exploitation and give refugees hope and the opportunity to build a better future.

I want people to understand that migration is not a choice we make for a better life. For many Rohingya families, it is a decision we make to survive. Even after reaching Malaysia, our struggles do not end. We continue to live with uncertainty, waiting for protection, recognition and the chance to rebuild our lives.

We are not asking for luxury or special treatment. We are simply asking for what every human being deserves: to live in safety and dignity, to have legal protection, to study, to work and to have the chance to build a peaceful future for our families. I hope the international community will not forget the Rohingya people. As long as the root causes of our displacement remain unresolved and safe, legal pathways remain out of reach, many people will continue to risk dangerous journeys in search of the protection every human being deserves.



Interview

Myanmar: living under a military dictatorship, forgotten by international actors

With repeated lack of international attention, fundamental deficiencies in ASEAN and caught in the competing context of global polycrisis, the situation for people from Myanmar continues to be extremely difficult, as **Manny Maung** explains.

Manny Maung is a journalist, researcher and human rights advocate on Myanmar. Currently, she is a research associate with the UK's Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI Global, one of the world's leading independent teams dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice.

Could you briefly describe some of the key displacement and refugee migration movements currently taking place in Asia?

My expertise is mainly on Myanmar: we can see that what's going on in Myanmar has driven up movements of irregular migration outside, into parts of South East Asia and Asia. But obviously the conflict there fuels a lot of instability across the region. So, it stands to reason that we should look at ways to mitigate this. And it starts with trying to bring a real civilian government back into Myanmar.

The world's attention often shifts rapidly from one crisis to another. There are crises in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar and elsewhere. How does this 'competition for attention' affect displaced populations and enable impunity for those in power?

That's a really great question because, obviously, with competing attention it's really difficult to maintain pressure on existing crises. We definitely saw this in Myanmar, particularly after Afghanistan and then, of course, Ukraine. And now we're seeing this again in the Middle East. Also, let's not forget our partners and other refugees who are moving around the Americas as well. It's been really challenging to keep momentum up. The real crisis here is that lack of attention is not just the fault of the media, but also because of the funding situation This has really thrown a spanner in the works, and the attack on gender and on marginalised peoples across the board is making things so much worse for those who are already under severe pressure. This crisis creates further crises on top of further crises. So it's snowballing.

What about the major power rivalries, particularly between China and the US and others? How do these shape the prospects for resolving refugee situations in Asia and, particularly, Myanmar?

These power dynamics have completely shifted and

the main thing here is that we've lost our allies – I'm looking at the US when I say this! China has traditionally been what we would call a non-reliable ally and now, of course, the US is the same. We can't rely on the US to be there for support: I think their push to decrease funding towards things like a gendered response and overseas development assistance is appalling. But the fact is that other countries – supposedly rights-respecting independent democracies – are falling into line with the US and removing funding from programmes. It's a tragedy just waiting to happen. In fact, it is already happening and – I can't stress enough – in areas that are predominantly non-white.

Myanmar is your home country, and since the coup in February 2021, Human Rights Watch and others have documented that the military and pro-military militias have summarily executed and forcibly disappeared civilians and razed villages to the ground during so-called military operations. It's incredible how little attention this situation gets.

Yes. It's always been a complicated situation so I don't expect everyone to have a handle on it. But we can generally ascertain that the military are still the oppressors and perpetrators of the main human rights abuses against the civilian populations across Myanmar. This has also perpetuated militias who fight against them, and who fight against each other: they perpetrate human rights abuses against their civilian populations as well, and it's hard to hold either the military or others to account. So, in the absence of a trustworthy legal system, we have to look at the military apparatus as the main perpetrator: their attempts in recent months to seem like they're moving towards a civilian government can be called nothing but a sham. It's certainly not believable for most of us who observe this country closely. And the elections held around December and January are less than credible and really just a rebranding exercise for Myanmar's military to try to gain some credibility and legitimacy internationally.

> **"It's been really challenging to keep momentum up. The real crisis here is that lack of attention is not just the fault of the media, but also because of the funding situation."**

You suggested there's racialised discrimination in media attention and policy interest. Could you elaborate?

I think it's fairly self-evident. For example, Sudan is one of the worst crises we've seen in many decades and there's just such little understanding or even awareness of what's happening there. Certainly, it is complicated to understand the waves of violence that have happened over the years. But the simple attention that it deserves – all the aid that is needed there – speaks for itself. What we've found with these movements and refugee migration, especially during prolonged conflict, is that they have to rely on their own communities and networks because formal humanitarian aid and support has been lacking, not just because of the attention to the crisis but also because of a lack of access for aid and humanitarian providers. Most of these communities rely on what we call mutual aid systems, essentially relying on your own communities to help support you, which of course comes with pros and cons.

> **"... the military are still the oppressors and the perpetrators of the main human rights abuses which are occurring against the civilian populations across Myanmar."**

The Arakan Army is a Rakhine Buddhist group which includes separate, smaller armed factions made up of Rohingya people, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization. Is there effectively a Buddhist versus Muslim civil war in Rakhine State, separate from the terror and violence meted out by the Myanmar state?

That's a great question. There are elements of both of this happening and it has been happening for a long time. The Islamophobia and xenophobia prevalent in Myanmar still stem from decades of the military changing and espousing propaganda against Muslim people and against many minority groups. What happened in Rakhine State is, in recent memory, probably the most visible movement of people who have been forced out of the country. And it was captured on television. It was seen. Obviously, it's also on a huge scale: in 2017, almost a million people were forced out in one go. But the attacks on Rohingya were happening before that, and they've been a persecuted minority for far longer. The genocide against the Rohingya has been happening for decades and this is fundamental to understanding what genocide is. It's trying to erase a people. You don't have to kill them to do that, you just have to remove them. And to do so, the Myanmar military tried to force them out. They did kill them, they did maim them and they're continuing to do that. And the Rakhine Army or the Arakan Army – in the early days they were seen as a potential ally for rights-respecting groups – have shown their true colours as an

> **"... the elections held around December and January are less than credible and really just a rebranding exercise for Myanmar's military to try to gain some credibility and legitimacy internationally."**

untrustworthy ally. If anything, they have been deemed a terrorist group by the military itself, which is ironic.

> **"We can't rely on the US to be there for support: their push to decrease funding towards things like a gendered response and overseas development assistance is appalling."**

It must be a distressing subject for you to work on, given that you have relatives and community members who are caught up in this: you must hear about this daily. Would it be fair to say this is also a personal struggle for you?

It is, although at the beginning it was more of a shock than anything else. Having worked on it since the earliest days of the coup, I would say we've experienced almost a numbness to the level of violence perpetuated through our psyche. It's been over five years now, and people have really high fatigue dealing with it. We should also mention that there are still daily airstrikes, there are still daily conflicts where the military attacks civilian and refugee populations. These are war crimes. Media is suppressed and human rights activists themselves flee as refugees. We hear fewer stories in real time. On top of that, there are constant rolling internet outages and people just don't have access to the outside world anymore.

> **"ASEAN works on consensus, so effectively they're hamstrung because they all have to agree. I've been a long-time critic of ASEAN itself and the member states, particularly those who have failed to really hold Myanmar accountable."**

What are the prospects for a safe, voluntary and dignified return for those Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in 2017, joining the ones who were already in the country? Is this just a distant dream at present?

A short answer is yes, it's not possible for them to return. Considering the state of play right now with the former commander-in-chief becoming the president of Myanmar, it's clear that this is not going to happen for them, let alone the people who've also been forced out since the coup in 2021. So, it's no longer just the Rohingya. It's also millions of other Myanmar people who have been forced out because of the coup and because of the ongoing attacks on civilian populations. It's going to be a very hard road for Rohingya.

ASEAN, as a bloc, has traditionally emphasised non-interference, as we know. Has that principle become a liability in responding to refugees and displacement crises? And what responsibilities do neighbouring ASEAN states have when large-scale displacement originates from one member state and its treatment of its own people?

Yes, ASEAN works on consensus, so effectively they're hamstrung because they all have to agree. I've been a long-time critic of ASEAN itself and the member states, particularly those who have failed to really hold Myanmar accountable, but ASEAN has also been criticised as a bit of a club of dictators. If they were to come out and really criticise the Myanmar military, they might have to look at themselves, which they'd like to deflect. But what is most serious is that they do have a responsibility to help and assist, and perhaps bilaterally they've done this in quiet ways. For example, Thailand has tried to toe the line by entertaining the [Myanmar] military while also turning a blind eye at times to the waves of refugees who come over the border. The problem is mainly that countries who receive refugees are going to see a great deal of insecurity – and they already have in recent years – with people trying to flee Myanmar. We've seen this in Thailand, we've seen this in Malaysia, we've seen this in India; they don't know what to do with them to the point where they have even pushed back refugees. It stands to reason that they should try to pressure the Myanmar military to return to a path of democracy and have a real civilian government in place, release all political prisoners and allow people to return home without killing them. I don't know if this is a possible request in the medium term – certainly not in the short term, while we have a military perpetrator at the helm. Min Aung Hlaing should step down so that we see a full return to a civilian government. ASEAN should be the ones who push for this because they are the neighbouring regions who are going to feel the effects of regional insecurity the most as people continue fleeing Myanmar.

What's behind this in terms of historical forces and is there a lesson about polycrisis that we can learn from Myanmar, or is it just simply about strong men in power?

Latent capitalism and the exploitation of natural resources have been directly linked to the conflicts in Myanmar. This 'strongman' mentality really does stem from the colonial mindset that has morphed into Myanmar's cultural norm. But without the central body wanting to back down, no one is going to give an inch. I think we had an opportunity about six months into the coup to really apply pressure on Myanmar from an international perspective. And international pressure would have really seen a lot more impact if we had somehow been able to force the military to back down, but because of a lack of political will, particularly from the ASEAN region, this has failed to happen.

So, going forward, we need to support the groups who are still trying to resist the military. Many of them are civil society actors either on the borders of Myanmar or outside in the diaspora, or even still working from inside Myanmar under really high security risks. When I say support them, I mean increasing the humanitarian aid we provide to these groups and also increasing the attention that we provide to this region. I'm in Australia and it matters that we look at our own backyard and say, 'How do we support the groups who are going to bring about economic stability, physical security and safety for people living in this region?' Because, essentially, it is the same region as our own.

> **"Latent capitalism and the exploitation of natural resources have been directly linked to the conflicts in Myanmar. This 'strongman' mentality stems from the colonial mindset, which has morphed into Myanmar's cultural norm."**

Often, the claims and needs of refugees are overlooked because of a wider dissatisfaction with what people perceive as too much migration. Do you have a sense of that in Australia? It's certainly dominating Europe at the moment.

Yes, I think the anti-migration position is definitely growing in strength across the board. I don't know if it's just this populist mentality of fear of the other, but I think places like Australia have been built on immigration. And whether it's an economic migrant or a refugee, they bring in so much skill and experience to the mix. If you look at many of the countries refugees are coming from, they're not great. I certainly won't be returning to Myanmar anytime soon. It's not a safe place to go for me or for many of my colleagues and friends who work in human rights advocacy or as civil society actors. I don't know how to urge more empathy and more interest in these regions without drawing a parallel and trying to show that people who are trying to flee this kind of violence are just the same as you and I. We just have the opportunity of being here and safe in the first place.

The accident of birth often defines life's outcomes so extremely, right?

Yes, and I'm very aware of this myself. I was born in Myanmar, but I have had so many opportunities that my other family members haven't had, and I'm cognisant of this.

> **"... we need to support the groups who are still trying to resist the military. Many of them are civil society actors either on the borders of Myanmar, or outside in the diaspora, or even still working from inside Myanmar under really high security risks."**

Photo credit: Nexpher Images

Rohingya refugees live in makeshift shelters on steep hillsides at a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar during the 2026 monsoon season. Heavy rainfall increases the risk of landslides and flooding, while muddy conditions, damaged infrastructure and limited access to clean water and sanitation pose additional health and safety challenges for hundreds of thousands of displaced residents. Their plight typifies the protracted displacement of millions of refugees, increasingly affected by the impacts of climate change and severe aid reductions, while they wait for the international community and their home governments to find just and durable solutions. In an era of polycrisis there is a sense that refugees such as Rohingya have been abandoned, which might lead to more of the community than before embarking on dangerous sea journeys towards South East Asia. (See *Keeping Track in Asia*, p. 122 and Essay: *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration*, p. 202).



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 2026 competition, selected for their unique perspectives on contemporary mixed migration issues. These personal, creative and insightful essays offer nuanced reflections on the lived realities of mixed migration challenges from the author's own context. In addition to publication in the Mixed Migration Review 2026, each winner also receives a cash prize.

This year's essays explore themes including: the multiple crises trapping Rohingya refugees in precarious situations in Bangladesh; migrant and refugee led responses to intersecting crises in Lebanon; the gendered impacts of migration for women in Peru's gold frontier; the climate and other pressures facing young people on the small island nation of Comoros; and the student exodus from Malawi and the reality for those who remain behind.



Stateless in a storm: Rohingya lives amid polycrisis

Ata Ullah

Originally from Myanmar but now in Bangladesh, Ata Ullah is a Rohingya refugee and founder of NextGen Rohingya Network. A student at Bard College studying Political Science and Human Rights, his writing on statelessness, education crisis, and displacement has been widely published internationally.

Where I live is like a jail, but it isn't a jail. More than one million Rohingya people live in the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. This is the place we have called home for the past nine years.

Can you imagine the lives of the children here who don't have access to a formal education system? Can you imagine their future in this digital age without education? They are living in limbo. I want to ask the global community, the United Nations and every human rights defender: Where is your voice when girls are told that books are not for them? Where is your support when thousands of children are out of school?

I remember a girl. She sat outside her shelter in Kutupalong camp, drawing letters in the mud with a stick. No paper. No notebook. No teacher standing over her. Just dry earth, a thin stick and a child who refused to stop learning. I watched her for a long time. Nobody had sent her to school that morning. Nobody had given her an assignment. She was doing it because something inside her demanded it. I thought, 'This is what survival looks like.' Not waiting. Not begging. Not appealing to the world for permission to exist. Building, with whatever is left, in whatever space you are given.

Forced to flee

I am a Rohingya refugee. I fled Myanmar in 2017. I did not choose to leave. The choice was made for me by soldiers, by fire, by a state that had already spent decades deciding that I did not exist. I arrived in Bangladesh with nothing. No documents. No plan. No certainty that tomorrow would come. I have lived in the camps of Cox's Bazar ever since. And in that time, nearly nine years now, I have watched the world change around us; not towards justice, not towards resolution, but towards something harder, colder and more indifferent.

The crisis that displaced me did not end when I crossed the border. It multiplied. And it keeps multiplying.

Climate change: a present reality

Every monsoon season, the floods come. I remember one morning when the water rose without warning. There was no announcement, no siren, no official telling us to move. The paths through the camp turned into rivers in hours. Families carried children on their shoulders, holding whatever they could above the waterline. I watched an old man stand in front of his shelter as the walls, bamboo and tarpaulin, everything he had built and rebuilt over the years, dissolved around him in minutes. He did not cry. He just stood there. I think he had run out of reactions.

I stood there too, watching, and I felt two things at once: helplessness and rage. Helplessness because there was nothing I could do for him, nothing I could do for any of them, nothing that would stop the water or bring back what was lost. And rage, a deep, steady rage, because there was no one coming to help. No emergency response. No state machinery mobilising on our behalf. No cameras that would stay long enough to matter. Just us, again, alone inside a disaster that the rest of the world would read about in a brief headline and forget by the next morning. That rage did not go away when the water receded. It is still with me. I have learned to use it.

The camp where I live was never designed to be permanent. It sits on land that cannot sustain it, hills that erode with every rainfall, drainage systems overwhelmed every season, shelters rebuilt year after year in the same vulnerable spots because there is nowhere else to go. Nearly a million people live here. The climate does not negotiate with stateless people. It does not offer exemptions or extensions. It simply arrives, and we bear it, and then we rebuild, and then it arrives again. Climate change is not a future threat for Rohingya refugees. It is the present reality of every monsoon, every cyclone warning, every morning we wake up and check whether the hill above us has shifted in the night.

Trapped in polycrisis

And yet, as the crises compound, the international response has moved in the opposite direction. Funding for refugee education in Cox's Bazar has been cut significantly in recent years. Schools that once served thousands of children have reduced their capacity or closed entirely. Resettlement pathways, already narrow, have tightened further as governments in the Global North pursue containment policies that push borders outwards and make legal migration nearly impossible for stateless people. We are told to wait. We are always told to wait. But nobody tells us what we are waiting for, or how long, or what will be different when the waiting is finally over.

This is the polycrisis as I have lived it. Not as a theoretical framework. Not as an analytical category in a research paper. But as the actual texture of daily life in Kutupalong. This is the conflict that erased our citizenship and the climate that batters our shelters; these are the shrinking aid systems and inadequate governance frameworks that were never designed with us in mind. Each of these crises would be serious alone. Together, they create something that functions like a trap – a trap with no visible exit, maintained not by any single actor but by the accumulated weight of decisions made in rooms where no Rohingya person was present.

But here is what those in the rooms do not see, because they are not looking: we are not waiting.

Building, leading, hoping

I founded NextGen Rohingya Network to teach digital literacy and leadership to young refugees in this camp. We run workshops on how to use email, how to find and enrol in online courses, how to apply for scholarships and how to stay safe online. To the outside world, these might sound like small things. Inside the camp, they are transformational. Access to the internet, to knowledge, to the ability to communicate beyond these borders: these things change what a person believes is possible for themselves.

I remember the day a young woman named Fatima sent her first email. She had come to our workshop nervous, unsure, convinced that technology was not for people like her. She sat with the phone for a long time. She typed slowly, checked everything twice and then she pressed send. She looked at the screen for a moment after. Then she said, quietly but very clearly: "Now I can apply for scholarships." There was no drama in it. Just a door opening. Today, Fatima is a peer educator in our network. She runs sessions for other girls in the camp. She is not waiting for the world to save her. She is building, the same way in which that girl built letters in the dirt, because something inside her demands it.

Listen to our voices

This is what the polycrisis narrative consistently misses. It documents our suffering with precision and describes our conditions in detail, but it frames us almost entirely as people things happen to. Victims of conflict. Victims of climate. Victims of policy failure. And while all of that is true, as we are targets of real and documented violence and neglect, it is not the whole truth. The whole truth is that, inside every crisis, inside every camp, inside every impossible situation, people are organising, teaching, learning and leading. Not because someone funded a program but because it is human nature to refuse to stop.

What the world's response to the Rohingya crisis lacks is not more data. There is no shortage of reports, surveys, assessments or recommendations. What is lacking is the genuine belief that the people living inside this crisis have something to contribute to solving it. That our voices are not just testimony to be collected but analysis to be heard. That our leadership is not a feel-good story at the end of a humanitarian report but a legitimate and necessary part of the response.

The girl in the mud is still learning through struggle. Fatima is still teaching. I am still here, still building, still angry, still believing that a stateless person can have a voice that reaches beyond the borders drawn to silence them. The polycrisis will not be resolved by the next report, the next funding cycle or the next international framework. It will begin to be resolved when the people living inside it are brought into the room, not as subjects, not as beneficiaries, but as leaders.

We have always been leaders. We were leading before anyone was watching. We will be leading long after the next report is written, filed and forgotten.

The question is not whether we are capable. We have already answered that. You can start by sharing this story, funding more educational activities – especially on digital literacy – and, most importantly, demanding Rohingya voices at the UN table for making a sustainable solution.



Polycrisis without protection: migrant responses in Lebanon

Bassel El Mrawed

Bassel is a Lebanese-Venezuelan humanitarian analyst and independent researcher. His work explores migration, response mechanisms and lived experiences of the people affected.

It was April and a fundraiser dinner was underway in the Tres Marias kitchen in Beirut. The sweet and sour fish was still in the pan, sharp vinegar cutting through the warm oil. Attendees of all backgrounds gathered for a cause, as proceeds would go towards sustaining a community kitchen that feeds two hundred displaced migrants daily.

As the members of the Filipino migrant community welcomed guests to eat, the municipal police appeared from a distance. Myra, one of the cofounders, took a deep breath and stepped outside to calm the tension.

The dinner continued; attendees exchanged looks of concern, but nobody in the room seemed surprised. Myra came back inside and sat down. The fish was still warm, but the dinner felt interrupted.

The cumulative effect of crises

From a distance, Lebanon's crises may seem sequential. In reality, they are cumulative. The 2019 economic collapse did not end before the pandemic arrived. The pandemic had not resolved before the Beirut port explosion wrecked the city. Israeli escalation of hostilities in 2024 and subsequent ceasefire violations were still reshaping lives when indiscriminate Israeli attacks forced another wave of mass displacement in March 2026. Each wave of crisis crashes in before the previous one has fully ebbed, shrinking Lebanon's capacity to respond with each blow.

Migrant workers faced the polycrisis, carrying the burden of fewer legal protections, less institutional trust and no political representation. Under Lebanon's *kafala* system, many migrant workers depend on the same employer who controls their legal residency. Abuse, abandonment or loss of employment can mean losing not only an income, but also the legal status needed to move freely, seek services or report violations.

Myra explained how, with each currency devaluation, many migrant workers saw wages withheld or lose value entirely. During the pandemic, migrant domestic workers were abandoned outside embassies by employers unwilling or unable to continue paying their wages or supporting them.

Organising for change

It was during this polycrisis that Tres Marias was born. A group of Filipino women requested humanitarian assistance for 'winterisation' kits for their colleagues who had been abandoned on the streets. Their rejection came with advice to contact their embassy. They decided to take matters into their own hands.

What began as small-scale emergency fundraising to cover immediate needs grew into something more structured over time, built on the same networks once used to organise birthdays, religious celebrations and community gatherings. The capacity to respond developed gradually through years of fundraisers, cultural events, rejected grant applications and community WhatsApp groups. With each new crisis, more people turned to them.

During the 2024 displacement, many migrants were excluded from collective shelters and formal assistance. Tres Marias responded by establishing a community kitchen, feeding displaced migrants and coordinating deliveries to communities trapped in areas under bombardment.

In 2026, renewed Israeli attacks once again pushed over a million people into forced displacement, including nearly 50,000 migrants.[1] Despite still recovering from the previous displacement crisis, Tres Marias reopened its kitchen.

1 International Organization for Migration (2026) Lebanon Situation Report: Update #03, 13–18 March 2026.

More than a community kitchen

The kitchen does not cook only Filipino food. Myra described making biryani at the request of Bangladeshi families, finding it too spicy herself but receiving good reviews. Maria, another cofounder, told me she enjoys cooking Lebanese dishes. They are always on the menu, she explained, because the kitchen feeds whoever is in need.

"We don't just help Filipinas," she told me. "We help any migrant in need, no matter their nationality."

Despite its impact, Tres Marias continues to face recurring harassment from some residents. Much like the incident at the fundraiser, municipal police are frequently called to monitor or interrupt its activities. In these moments, partnerships with more established organisations become critical. Jeanne D'Arc, a coordinator at a local organisation supporting migrants, explained: "Having someone who shows up, speaks Arabic, who is known and who the authorities have worked with before, makes a difference."

Religious networks form another layer of this infrastructure. Father Henry Ponce, a Filipino Jesuit priest and parish priest at Saint Joseph Church in Beirut, has spent nearly a decade ministering to migrant workers in Lebanon. During the 2026 displacement crisis, his shelter was operating at almost double capacity, hosting mostly Sudanese and Bangladeshi nationals. When he could no longer accommodate Filipinos, he coordinated directly with Tres Marias, forwarding donations and directing people to its kitchen.

During the dinner, the room paused as Myra video-called Father Henry. One woman at the table shared that she had heard about the fundraiser through him.

We left that night with a promise to return for the next fundraiser dinner. Tres Marias made the same kind of promise it has been making since 2021: to keep the kitchen open, to keep showing up for any migrant in need, regardless of where they come from.

"I have been through so much abuse," one of the women told me before I left. "But my community is what keeps me here. As long as there is a migrant in need, I will continue doing my best to help."

The police had come and gone. The kitchen remained, and conversations already shifted to the next fundraiser, the next distribution, the next family in need.



Peru's gold frontier: the invisible exploitation of migrant women

Hatsumi Otsu

Hatsumi Otsu is a Peruvian political scientist and researcher. Her studies explore the intersections of migration, sex work, human trafficking and illegal economies, with a focus on Latin America.

At 10 pm, the music is louder than the generators. Inside a wooden bar illuminated by coloured lights, a young Venezuelan woman serves drinks to miners who have spent the day extracting gold from the Amazonian rivers. She arrived in Madre de Dios only weeks ago after responding to a job advertisement on TikTok. The video promised employment in a restaurant, free accommodation and an opportunity to send money home. What it did not mention were the debts she would accumulate upon arrival, the restrictions on her movements or the violence that surrounded the mining camp.

Outside, excavators continue operating through the night. Trucks loaded with fuel, alcohol and supplies move constantly along dusty roads. Gold extraction does not stop when the sun goes down. Neither does the economy built around it.

A new kind of gold rush

For outsiders, La Pampa is often portrayed as a lawless mining zone hidden deep within the Peruvian Amazon. For migrants, however, it is something else: a destination. Every year, thousands of people arrive searching for opportunities unavailable elsewhere. Some come from impoverished Andean communities where agricultural livelihoods have become increasingly precarious. Others arrive from neighbouring countries, particularly Venezuela, after years of economic crisis and displacement. Most are not attracted by the forest itself. They are attracted by gold and the possibility of having a future.

The global rise of gold prices over the last two decades transformed Madre de Dios into one of South America's most important extractive frontiers. What was once a remote Amazonian region became deeply connected to global markets. Gold extracted from riverbeds and forest clearings eventually enters international supply chains, finding its way into jewellery, electronic devices and financial reserves around the world.

The gold rush also created something else: a powerful migration corridor. Labourers, mechanics, cooks, transport workers, traders and entrepreneurs began moving towards mining zones. Entire local economies emerged around extraction sites. In many respects, La Pampa functions as a boomtown. Opportunities appear rapidly; money circulates quickly, and populations expand almost overnight.

Exploitation, criminality and vulnerability

Yet, prosperity in La Pampa is deeply uneven. The same conditions that attract migrants also create fertile ground for exploitation. State institutions struggle to maintain a consistent presence. Labour regulations are weakly enforced. Criminal organisations profit from activities that range from illegal mining to trafficking and extortion. Economic opportunity and vulnerability coexist within the same territory – and it is women who most often bear the weight of that contradiction.

Many women arrive through informal recruitment networks operating on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and, increasingly, TikTok. The advertisements are carefully crafted. They feature smiling women in clean uniforms, promises of weekly pay and testimonials from supposed former employees. Some videos show images of restaurants that do not exist. Others list salaries that will never be paid. The algorithm does the rest, pushing content towards young women in cities with high unemployment, towards Venezuelan migrants waiting in border towns, towards anyone whose search history suggests financial desperation.

Women as vessels of profit

For women facing unemployment, debt or the responsibility of supporting family members, these opportunities appear not just attractive but necessary. The promise is not luxury. It is survival.

Mariana was 23 years old when she saw one of those videos. She had been in Lima for eight months, working irregular cleaning jobs and sleeping in a shared room with five other women from Puno. The advertisement promised a waitressing job in a lodge near Puerto Maldonado, three meals a day and enough money to send something home every two weeks. She took a bus for four days. When she arrived, there was no lodge. There was a camp, a debt she supposedly owed for her transport and the first week of accommodation and a man who explained, calmly, that she would begin working that same night.

She stayed for seven months before finding a way out. She has not spoken publicly about what happened during that time. Her story is not exceptional. It is common.

Upon arrival, women encounter debt arrangements designed to bind them in place. Restrictions on mobility prevent departure. Threats and coercion replace the conditions promised in the advertisement. Around illegal mining camps, sexual exploitation has become an enduring feature of the local economy – not an anomaly, but a structure. While the specific experiences of women vary, their vulnerability is not accidental. It is produced by the frontier itself: a space where legal protections are absent, where accountability rarely arrives and where the extraction of value from human bodies follows the same logic as the extraction of gold from the earth.

Extraction causes destruction

The environmental consequences of illegal mining are well documented. Vast areas of forest have been cleared. Rivers have been contaminated by mercury used in gold processing. Biodiversity has declined across landscapes once considered among the richest in the Amazon. But the destruction does not stop at the tree line.

Mercury enters rivers and accumulates in fish. Communities that have depended on those rivers for generations now face contaminated food sources and rising rates of neurological disease. The land that once sustained people has become hostile to them. Displacement follows not only from poverty or conflict but from the simple fact that the territory has been made uninhabitable. And so, people move toward the same mining zones that poison the rivers, because those zones are now the only places where money circulates. The frontier produces its own migrants.

Illegal mining depends on the continuous extraction of value from territory. Forests become resources. Rivers become resources. Land becomes a resource. Within this system, human vulnerability can also be transformed into economic value. The logic is consistent: extract as much as possible, leave as little as possible and move on before accountability arrives.

An exploitative supply chain

Gold is not the only resource being extracted in La Pampa. The stories of migrant women reveal a broader reality in which the Amazon and the bodies of those who migrate to its mining camps are incorporated into the same economy of disposability. Environmental degradation, labour exploitation and trafficking do not operate separately. They reinforce one another within a frontier where profit depends on the ability to extract value from both nature and people simultaneously.

The global supply chain that begins in a cleared stretch of Amazonian forest ends in a jewellery shop in Zurich or a circuit board assembled in Shenzhen. Somewhere along that chain, accountability disappears. The gold is certified. The violence is not.

As dawn approaches, trucks continue arriving while others depart carrying gold whose final destination may be impossible to trace. For many women, however, departure is far more difficult than arrival. Their experiences remind us that the costs of extraction cannot be measured only in hectares of deforested forests or kilograms of mercury released into rivers. They must also be measured in lives shaped by displacement, exploitation and uncertainty.

At night, gold does not sleep. Neither do the women living in its shadows.



Between the ocean and the border: polycrisis in the Comoros

Dr. Abdou El Oihab Mohamed Ali

A Comorian medical doctor and global youth leader, Dr. Abdou El Oihab Mohamed Ali is committed to advancing peace, global health and sustainable development. As the founder and leader of several national youth initiatives and the Comorian representative within multiple international youth networks and United Nations-related platforms, he works to amplify young people's voices, foster intercultural dialogue and promote inclusive policies which drive meaningful local and global impact.

I grew up in the Comoros, where migration is not an exception. It is part of family history, daily conversations and survival. Here on the islands, almost every family has a relative abroad. Some leave to study, some to work, some because hospitals cannot provide specialised care and others because opportunities feel too distant from the lives they dream about. Migration is discussed in kitchens, ports, airports and hospital corridors. It is not an abstract political concept for us. It is personal.

For many people outside small island states, migration is often imagined as a movement from war zones or major economic crises. But for island communities, migration can emerge slowly and invisibly. It grows from accumulated pressures: unemployment, weak health systems, climate vulnerability, limited educational opportunities, rising living costs and the feeling that remaining may slowly close the future.

Migration as a hope and a wound

As a medical student from the Comoros studying abroad, I have witnessed how migration becomes both a hope and a wound. Young people leave carrying the expectations of their families. Parents sell land or borrow money to finance journeys that they believe will secure a better future for their children. Yet, migration is rarely simple. Behind success stories, there are exhausted students, undocumented workers, people trapped between borders and migrants who struggle to prove that they deserve dignity.

What troubles me most is that discussions about migration often ignore the emotional reality behind movement. Policymakers talk about statistics, irregular routes, deportation numbers or labour needs. But migration is also about loneliness. It is about identity. It is about learning to survive in places where your accent, passport, religion or skin colour can define your value.

In many African and island societies, migration is seen as a success before the journey even begins. Young people who remain are sometimes viewed as lacking ambition. Social media reinforces this illusion. Photos from Europe or the Gulf create the impression that migration guarantees stability. What is rarely shown are the sacrifices behind those images: overcrowded apartments, discrimination, exploitative jobs, depression and the constant fear of administrative uncertainty.

I have met students who skipped meals to pay tuition fees while pretending online that life abroad was perfect. I have met migrants who delayed seeking medical care because they feared costs or immigration consequences. I have also seen young people become trapped in cycles of insecurity despite their education and resilience.

Invisible islands and climate pressures

For migrants from small island developing states, there is another layer that is rarely discussed: invisibility. The world often overlooks countries like the Comoros. Our crises are not considered urgent enough to dominate international headlines. Yet, small island states face a combination of pressures that make migration inevitable.

Climate change is one of them.

When climate discussions focus on islands, attention usually goes to Pacific states threatened by rising sea levels. But islands in the Indian Ocean face vulnerabilities too. Coastal erosion, stronger storms, environmental

degradation and pressures on agriculture affect livelihoods and food security. These changes do not always create immediate displacement but they intensify economic fragility and uncertainty. Migration then becomes an adaptation strategy.

The problem is that global migration systems are not designed to recognise these realities. A person escaping environmental collapse, mixed with economic hardship and institutional weakness, rarely fits into legal categories. They are not always recognised as refugees. They often move through dangerous and uncertain pathways where protection is inconsistent.

At the same time, the countries most affected by global inequalities contribute the least to the systems driving those inequalities. Young people from the Global South are told to innovate, adapt and become resilient. But resilience has limits when mobility itself becomes unequal.

Unequal access to opportunities

A European passport opens borders. A Comorian passport closes them.

I realised this while applying for international conferences, academic programmes and travel opportunities. Sometimes, the biggest obstacle was not competence or motivation, but simply nationality. Visa systems can transform even educational or humanitarian mobility into humiliating experiences. Applicants are asked to prove that they will return home, as though their dreams are automatically suspicious.

This unequal mobility shapes migration in powerful ways. Safe pathways remain inaccessible for many, while dangerous routes continue to expand. People do not risk their lives crossing deserts or seas because they enjoy danger. Most do it because legal alternatives feel impossible.

In the Indian Ocean region, the tragedy between the Comoros and Mayotte reflects this reality. Families are separated by borders that cut through shared histories and cultures. Many Comorians attempt dangerous sea crossings, hoping to access healthcare, education, safety or economic opportunities. Some never arrive.

I still remember hearing stories of mothers who lost children at sea. In my community, these stories are not distant news reports. They belong to neighbours, relatives, classmates and friends. Yet, despite repeated tragedies, the underlying causes remain insufficiently addressed.

Migration policies often focus on control while paying less attention to why people move in the first place. Security responses alone cannot solve migration challenges when structural inequalities remain intact.

A public health issue

As someone training in medicine, I also see migration as a public health issue. Migrants frequently experience interrupted healthcare, mental stress, social exclusion, unsafe working conditions and barriers to reproductive and preventive care. Irregular migrants are vulnerable because fear prevents many from seeking support until conditions become severe.

Mental health is another neglected dimension. There is a silent psychological burden carried by many migrants: the pressure to succeed, survivor's guilt towards families left behind, isolation and the exhaustion of constantly adapting. For students and young migrants, this burden can become overwhelming.

Yet, migrants are too often discussed only as problems to manage instead of people with knowledge, skills and aspirations.

Migration has also transformed societies positively. Diasporas support families financially, transfer knowledge, build businesses and strengthen international connections. In countries like the Comoros, remittances sustain countless households and communities. Many hospitals, schools and local projects survive partly because migrants continue supporting relatives back home.

But remittances should not replace structural development.

There is a dangerous global tendency to normalise dependence on migration while failing to invest in healthcare systems, education, youth employment and local opportunities. Young people should migrate because they choose to explore the world, not because staying home feels like surrendering their future.

Changing the migration conversation

What I hope to see in global migration debates is a more human conversation.

We need migration policies shaped not only by states and security institutions but also by migrants themselves, especially young people from underrepresented regions. Too often, discussions about migration happen without including those most affected.

We also need to stop dividing migrants into categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. Human dignity should not depend on nationality, income or legal status.

For small island states, migration must also be connected to climate justice and development justice. Countries facing environmental vulnerability need stronger investment in adaptation, healthcare, education and sustainable economic opportunities. Otherwise, migration pressures will continue to intensify.

At the same time, host societies must recognise that integration is not only the responsibility of migrants. Inclusion requires effort from institutions, communities, universities, employers and political leaders. Xenophobia and discrimination create invisible borders long after physical borders are crossed. I believe young people have an important role in changing this conversation.

Across Africa and other parts of the Global South, a generation is emerging that understands migration not only through theory but through lived experience. We are students studying abroad, children of diaspora families, climate advocates, health workers, volunteers and community organisers. We understand both the pain of exclusion and the power of solidarity.

The multiple layers of migration

Personally, my experiences in medicine, youth advocacy and international engagement have taught me that migration cannot be separated from health, inequality, climate and dignity. These issues are interconnected.

When a young person leaves because hospitals lack resources, migration becomes a health issue.

When climate shocks destroy livelihoods, migration becomes an environmental issue.

When visa systems privilege some nationalities over others, migration becomes a justice issue.

And when migrants die crossing borders that the world has made increasingly inaccessible, migration becomes a moral issue.

Moved by hope

I do not believe the solution is to stop migration. Human mobility has always existed and always will. The real question is whether migration will continue being shaped by inequality and desperation, or whether it can become safer, fairer and more humane.

For people from small island states like mine, migration often represents both attachment and departure at the same time. We leave while carrying our islands within us. We search for opportunities abroad while remaining tied to home.

Sometimes, I think about how many young people from my generation are scattered across continents, trying to build futures while also trying not to lose themselves.

Maybe, that is the contradiction at the centre of migration today.

People move to survive, to learn, to dream, to protect their families or simply to feel possible again. Yet, in many parts of the world, migrants are increasingly treated with suspicion instead of empathy.

Still, despite everything, people continue moving.

Because hope also moves.



From education to exit: labour migration in Malawi

Wanangwa Moyo

Wanangwa Moyo is a recent graduate of Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) and an Aspire Leaders Program alum (Harvard University). He is currently developing a fortified maize-soy flour project aimed at improving nutrition and food outcomes in Malawi.

The last time I saw Isaiah, he was talking about the pH levels of soil in our Agribusiness Management university lecture. He had opinions about fertiliser subsidies, small value chains and ideas about the great potential Malawi has to feed itself. That was 2022. Today, Isaiah is 26 years old, working as a waiter in a restaurant in Israel, while the knowledge he gained in his Agribusiness class remains unused and his degree is filed away somewhere between Lilongwe and Tel Aviv.

Isaiah did not leave because of war or drought. Rather, he followed an opportunity, a formal recruitment programme through our university. When the programme had ended after one year, Isaiah stayed and found a job that had nothing to do with the future he was studying for at university. As for me, back home, I stayed not because I had better plans but because the opportunity had not come yet, and that is the candid truth about migration and education in Malawi. Many have left the country because education nowadays no longer guarantees economic stability.

A ceaseless student exodus

Of the people I studied alongside at university, 12 have left Malawi for work. Some are in Israel, some in Dubai and others in South Africa, and Isaiah is no exception. The sad part is that some left before they even graduated, calculating early that the certificate mattered less than the job abroad. They work in farms, restaurants, domestic households and construction sites, and these sectors bear little or no relation to the degrees they earned or studied for. They are not the type of migrants the world thinks of when it talks about migration in Africa, or Malawi, to be more specific. These people are fleeing a country that educated them and then had nothing to offer them. In some ways, this is even more demoralising.

To understand why, you have to understand what happened to Malawi's economy in overlapping layers. Malawi is one of the most aid-dependent countries in the world, with external assistance historically funding over 40 percent of the national budget. In recent years, as global donor priorities shifted and development aid declined, that support has contracted sharply. The public sector, which for decades was the primary employer of university graduates, has effectively frozen hiring. Graduate programmes that once absorbed young professionals have stalled. At the same time, climate change has accelerated the collapse of agriculture-based livelihoods which most Malawian families depend on.

Climate as a compounding factor

In 2023, Cyclone Freddy, one of the longest-lasting tropical cyclones ever recorded, devastated southern Malawi, destroying crops, infrastructure and communities. Erratic rainfall patterns have made smallholder farming increasingly unreliable even in the years between disasters. The Malawian kwacha has lost value dramatically, making imported goods unaffordable and eroding the purchasing power of whatever wages exist. These crises do not arrive separately. They compound each other in ways that close every door simultaneously, resulting in no jobs, no functioning safety net, no stable agricultural income and a currency that makes staying feel like a slow surrender. This is the polycrisis, and Malawi sits inside it without the institutional buffers that might absorb the shock.

The thwarted promise of a future

For a university graduate in Malawi, this reality lands with particular cruelty. Agricultural universities like ours were built on a promise: that education in food systems, value chains and natural resource management would translate into meaningful work in a country where 80 percent of people depend on farming. That promise has broken down completely. Malawi does not lack

agricultural knowledge; it lacks the institutional investment, the functioning markets and the climate stability to put that knowledge to work.

Isaiah studied agribusiness because he believed, as we all did, that understanding markets and value chains would make him valuable here. Instead, he found that being valuable here and being employed here had become two entirely different things. So, when the university's recruitment programme offered him a one-year contract in Israel, he took it. The money he earns waiting tables in Tel Aviv is, by his own account, roughly ten times what a graduate earns in Malawi per month. He is happy, he tells me. And I believe him. But happiness and justice are not the same thing.

What happens to Malawians who migrate for labour is not a story of simple success. The countries receiving them – Israel, the Gulf states and parts of the Arab world – absorb them into sectors with weak protections, limited legal recourse and high dependency on employer goodwill: domestic work, restaurant service, agriculture, informal labour. These are sectors where contracts are fragile, where workers can be dismissed or stranded without easy access to their embassies and where the skills they bring from home are rendered invisible by the conditions they arrive in.

Malawi skills for foreign economies

A woman trained as a teacher cleaning a house in Dubai. A man who studied natural resource management picking crops under a temporary contract that expires before he has saved enough to come home. The migration is real, the remittances are real, the relief on families back in Malawi is real, but so are the exposure, the precarity and the quiet humiliation of being educated for one life and permitted only another.

I have not left yet. I am still in Malawi, working on a fortified maize-soy flour project; an attempt to address malnutrition using locally available ingredients, the kind of applied agricultural work I was trained for. I stay not out of noble patriotism but because the work is here and I believe in it. But I watch my peers leave and I understand every single one of them. The question Malawi must answer is not why its graduates are migrating. That answer is obvious. The question is what it means for a country when education becomes a preparation for exit rather than a foundation for staying. When universities produce graduates for other economies, when climate stress accelerates rural collapse, when aid withdrawal removes the last institutional cushion, migration stops being a choice and becomes the only rational conclusion available.

A crisis of broken promises

The world talks about migration as a crisis of borders and numbers. In Malawi, it is a crisis of broken promises. We were told that education was the path out of poverty. What we discovered is that education without opportunity is just a longer road back to the same departure point.

Isaiah carries his Agribusiness degree to a restaurant in Israel, not because he abandoned Malawi, but because Malawi – under the weight of intersecting crises it did not create and cannot easily escape – abandoned him first. Until that changes, until climate adaptation is funded seriously, until agricultural systems are stabilised, until public institutions can absorb the graduates they helped create, then the education-to-exit pipeline will keep running.

And the ones left behind will keep asking the same question I ask myself some days, watching another friend's flight track cross the Mediterranean on my phone screen: not why they left, but how much longer I can afford to stay.

Photo credit: Eyepix Group / Luis Barron

Following the high-profile U.S. military capture of President Nicolás Maduro, Latin America has become a frontline flashpoint, straining relations with Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia. There were demonstrations against the arrest of Maduro on *principle* in many capitals around the world, objecting to such a 'strongman' unilateral intervention, upsetting the rules-based order. Here, supporters of President Nicolas Maduro take part during a demonstration to condemn the military action and illegal detention of the Venezuelan President on January 4, 2026, in Mexico City. (See *Keeping Track in the Americas*, p. 62).



Photo credit: AP Tolang

The US–Iran war effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for global oil shipping. Higher fuel costs soon raised transport, packaging and fertilizer costs, pushing up the price of gasoline, electricity, and groceries. The squeeze has fallen hardest on lower-income households, which spend a larger share of their budgets on food and energy. Here, in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 13 March 2026, residents queue at a gas depot to stock up on cooking gas amid fears of shortages and rising prices. (See *Keeping track in Asia* p. 122 and Article: *The rise of anti-migrant sentiment at a time of economic anxiety* p. 214)



Section 3

Migration in the era of polycrisis

Through essays, expert interviews, articles and 4Mi data analysis, this section explores the era of polycrisis and its impacts on mixed migration. Six feature essays unpack the theme, with the first exploring the concept of polycrisis including its utility and limitations. The next four essays explore the escalating protection crisis facing people on the move alongside unprecedented challenges to multilateralism; the impacts of dwindling foreign aid budgets on people and mixed migration dynamics; how labour mobility pathways are used and applied in the era of polycrisis; and, critically, the direct impacts of polycrisis on migrants and refugees. A final essay looks to the future, exploring possible mixed migration scenarios extending from current realities.

Feature essays are complemented by expert interviews and articles exploring the impacts of polycrisis on mixed migration. Analysis of over 30,000 4Mi interviews with refugees and migrants from across the globe explores the multiple drivers of migration, protection risks faced on journeys, the impacts of aid cuts, as well as the limited knowledge – and use – of labour mobility pathways.

Polycrisis and mixed migration in 2026

Jennifer Vallentine[1] *and Bram Frouws*[2]

Crises are occurring all around us. Conflicts, both long-running and newly emerging, are displacing people in their millions. Economic fragility coupled with deeply systemic and historically rooted inequality, is hollowing out livelihoods across the world. Climate change is no longer a distant threat; we are in its midst. Seismic events, from the global financial crisis, Covid-19 to the proliferation of wars and conflicts, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war in Sudan and most recently the US-Iran war, have rippled across the globe, sending shockwaves to every corner. We are also witnessing a shifting global order and resulting geopolitical turmoil, leading some to announce the effective end of multilateralism as we know it.

The cumulative effect is not simply a series of distinct events, rather something that appears categorically different. As we reach what feels increasingly like a critical point, theorists, analysts and politicians have leaned into the term 'polycrisis' to describe the complexity of our current era – one in which multiple crises are not merely occurring side by side but interacting, interlinking and compounding in ways that result in something even worse than the sum of their parts.[3]

The concept of polycrisis works remarkably well in the context of mixed migration, as neither phenomenon can be understood by isolating their components: mixed migration sees different groups move together along shared routes, with drivers and vulnerabilities entangled across categories, while polycrisis insists that conflict, climate, economic fragility, and other crises cannot be treated as distinct, since they interact and amplify one another.

Across this essay we apply a polycrisis lens to mixed migration in 2026, exploring what it offers, where it needs interrogating, and what it means for how we understand contemporary migration dynamics.

Defining polycrisis... and its limits

The term polycrisis has gained increasing traction across academia and politics, steadily finding its way into the language of this sector to describe our current moment. Yet, its sudden popularity has outpaced its intellectual development, with critics warning it risks becoming "a buzzword with little substantive content" – applied to everything but explaining very little.[4]

A term in its relative infancy with varying definitions, polycrisis broadly describes a phenomenon in which the combined effect of multiple interlocking crises is more overwhelming than the sum of its parts.[5] However, the idea of interlinking crises is by no means new. In the migration and humanitarian sectors, linkages between conflict, climate and economic fragility are not new terrain and, in the world of academia, complexity theorists have long examined the intertwining dynamics shaping our globalised world, while Marxist scholars have traced how economic and political crises are never truly discrete.[6] The term itself was first coined by Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern in their 1999 work,[7] though it remained relegated to academic obscurity for over a decade.[8] It entered mainstream political life when the then European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker borrowed it for a 2016 speech delivered in Greece at the height of the so-called refugee crisis to explain how Europe's overlapping crises were not simply simultaneous but mutually reinforcing, feeding a deep sense of public uncertainty.[9]

During the pandemic, as Covid-19 collided with the war in Ukraine, the term resonated more widely: thinkers sought to grapple with the resulting health, energy, migration and inflation shockwaves, which spread to all the corners of the globe. In this context, economic historian Adam Tooze popularised the term with his 2022 op-ed in the Financial Times, *Welcome to the world of polycrisis*,

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2 Bram Frouws is the director of the Mixed Migration Centre and a migration researcher with extensive experience across Africa, Asia and Europe. He writes widely on migration and displacement.
3 Tooze, A. (2022) Chartbook #130: Defining polycrisis – from crisis pictures to the crisis matrix. *Chartbook*.
4 Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockström, J., Renn, O. and Donges, J.F. (2024) Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability*, 7, e6.
5 Tooze, A. (2022) Chartbook #130: Defining polycrisis – from crisis pictures to the crisis matrix. *Chartbook*.
6 Albert, M.J. (2025) Capitalism, complexity, and polycrisis: toward neo-Gramscian polycrisis analysis. *Global Sustainability*, 8, e7.
7 Morin, E. and Kern, A.B. (1999) Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium. Hampton Press.
8 Patel, R. (2025) Polycrisis: A Breviary. *Transition Security Project*.
9 Juncker, J.-C. (2016) Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV). European Commission, 21 June.

bringing it to greater attention.[10] His definition – crises that interact so that the whole is more overwhelming that the sum of its parts – has become a popular working definition. After prominent use at the World Economic Forum in 2023,[11] the term as Tooze applied it became firmly embedded in policy and public discourse alongside a body of scholarship across disciplines which has since emerged, including the work of the Cascade Institute[12] among others. Yet, the term remains genuinely contested in the absence of a robust analytical framework.

Important critiques of polycrisis

While it has come to increasing prominence, the word polycrisis has attracted genuine critiques which must be explored. Among these is the critique of exceptionalism – the assumption that our current predicament is unparalleled and without historical precedent. As historians have pointed out, cascading, interlinking crises are not new. The 1970s oil shocks created ripple effects far beyond the fossil fuel markets, as entangled geopolitics saw wider global economic disruption.[13] Similarly, the 2008 global financial crisis compounded oil supply pressures and caused food price spikes and political instability beyond financial markets.[14] Precisely this critique of exceptionalism has led to fierce debate about whether we are in *an* era of polycrisis, for example one of several polycrisis eras that humans have seen, or *the* era of polycrisis, a period representing genuine historical rupture.

What is categorically different about our current era is the existential threat of climate change. While interlinking crises may not be new, the scale and existential impacts of climate change have no real historical precedent. As Tooze concludes, this "unmistakably highlights the utter novelty and radicalism of our current moment".[15] What has also shifted is the scale – escalating climate breakdown, and intensifying multi-power competition makes the current moment feel categorically different – not just because crises are interlinked, but because the depth of their interaction produces a "new catastrophic potential" where the old assumption, that once a crisis is over life will return to normal, no longer stands.[16]

Second, crisis narratives in general have come to dominate much of recent political discourse. Europe alone has been told it faces a financial crisis, a euro crisis, a refugee crisis, a Covid crisis, an energy crisis, a cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis – each declared unprecedented, each answered with emergency powers or improvised fixes, and each giving way to the next. The first risk of naming something as a crisis is that, because it is unusual, ordinary procedure and political choices[17] can be restricted or suspended until the crisis is resolved, leading to exceptional measures outside the normal rules.[18] Polycrisis carries that risk too, but adds a second and opposite risk as well. Where crises are multiple and entangled, their variety and complexity can spawn political inaction and a pervasive hopelessness, since no single measure can respond to the sheer complexity of multiple and intersecting crises. What is required instead is sustained governance of systemic conditions rather than a permanent state of emergency response – 'polysolutions' whose design reflects the way the problems themselves are connected.[19]

Finally, and most critically, whose reality does a lens of polycrisis really reflect? Polycrisis has been critiqued for centring the Western world's experience of an era of increasingly intersecting crises as if they were universal. The postwar decades were peaceful only if you looked at them from Western Europe. Elsewhere, conflict and dislocation continued largely uninterrupted, and they produced today's displacement and mixed migration patterns. Europe's insulation was purchased with American security guarantees and spent on welfare states and prosperity; the Balkans aside, its wars happened to other people. That arrangement is now fraying. If overlapping crises feel like the world coming apart, it may be worth considering that this is what the world mostly looked like all along. As Raj Patel has written, working class and impoverished communities in the Global South have been living on the frontlines of climate crisis, debt, militarisation, disease and authoritarianism for decades – long before the language of polycrisis was adopted.[20] Compounding, interlinked crises rooted in colonial histories have long been the reality for much of the world and, without proper recognition of this, there is a dangerous risk of erasure

10 Tooze, A. (2022) Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. *Financial Times*, 28 October.
11 Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockström, J., Renn, O. and Donges, J.F. (2024) Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability*, 7, e6.
12 Cascade Institute (n.d.) About the Institute.
13 Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockström, J., Renn, O. and Donges, J.F. (2024) Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability*, 7, e6.
14 Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockström, J., Renn, O. and Donges, J.F. (2024) Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability*, 7, e6.
15 Tooze, A. (2025) Chartbook 343: Polycrisis and the critique of capitalocentrism. adamtooze.substack.com. Chartbook.
16 Tooze, A. (2025) Chartbook 343: Polycrisis and the critique of capitalocentrism. adamtooze.substack.com. Chartbook.
17 Boletsi, M., Houwen, J. and Minnaard, L. (eds) Languages of Resistance, Transformation, and Futurity in Mediterranean Crisis-Scapes. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1–24.
18 Horwood, C. (2025) 'When the extreme is normalised: shifting boundaries in 'acceptable' migration policy'. In Vallentine, J., Frouws, B. and Forin, R. (Eds.) *Mixed Migration Review 2025*. Geneva: Mixed Migration Centre.
19 Schreiber, D. et al. (2025) From Polycrisis to Polysolutions: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Complex Global Challenges PolyCIVIS Policy Brief No. 1.
20 Patel, R. (2025) Polycrisis: A Breviary. *Transition Security Project*.

of the majority world's experiences and reinforcement of destructive power asymmetries.

These critiques of polycrisis are important and necessary to understand when adopting the term. However, this essay does not aim to resolve them, rather it aims to utilise a broad and pragmatic polycrisis lens, acknowledging the structural and historical elements which shape it.

Polycrisis and mixed migration

The realities of mixed migration are closely aligned to the concept of polycrisis – for example, conflict, climate, economic fragility and inequality are not isolated forces but deeply interconnected and reinforcing ones. Like polycrisis, the term 'mixed migration' emerged through both practice and research to describe a complex phenomenon.[21] As a lens, it looks across legal categories, centres people's needs and rights, and recognises the multiple, interlinked drivers – conflict, climate, economic inequality, and the search for better opportunities – which shape how and why people move. There is a natural synergy between the two terms: both resist oversimplification and place complexity, nuance and interconnectedness at their core. And the synergy runs deeper still, as polycrisis is itself a driver of mixed migration, as will be discussed below – it is indeed often not displacement or economic hardship in isolation, that drives migration, but the interaction of multiple – or mixed – drivers at once.

The nexus of climate, conflict and economic fragility

Climate change and conflict are a clear example of this mutual reinforcement. Global temperatures are on target to reach an annual long term average of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels within a few years.[22] Sea level rise is accelerating, and extreme weather events – droughts, floods, heatwaves and storms – are increasing in frequency and intensity. This is happening simultaneously, limiting the ability to recover between shocks. Where these pressures meet armed conflict, interconnections compound. Conflict undermines resilience to climate impacts at both societal and individual levels, while competition over resources made scarcer by climate factors can itself fuel conflict.[23] Researchers estimate that climate change has contributed between three and 20 percent of conflict risk over the past century, a figure we can expect to rise sharply as climate impacts accelerate.[24] This toll falls disproportionately on the most vulnerable – people in fragile and conflict affected states currently account for 58 percent of climate-related disaster deaths.[25]

Economic inequality only compounds the mutual reinforcement of conflict and climate further. Those with the fewest resources to adapt, recover or rebuild are also those most exposed to both conflict and climate shocks, leaving them trapped in a cycle where each crisis erodes their capacity to withstand the next. This is precisely the inequality that climate justice discourse seeks to address – not only the unequal distribution of the impact of climate change, but the deeper, historically entrenched power imbalances fuelling the intersection of multiple, compounding inequalities.[26] And this connects directly to the critique raised above – these are not new inequalities presenting themselves as novel crises in 2026, but long-standing structural realities reaching a critical point, unable to be ignored in the same way as before.

How polycrisis shapes migration dynamics

Polycrisis, like the individual crises within it, undoubtedly impacts migration dynamics. 4Mi data collected by the Mixed Migration Centre consistently shows that multiple intersecting drivers shape migration decision-making and journeys.[27] It is rare that one single factor drives someone to move, but rather the combination and accumulation of several.

Yet, instead of being straightforward and linear, these impacts are multidirectional and complex. It is too simplistic to argue that interlinking crises always drive increased displacement or cross-border and irregular migration. While for some this may be the case, for others the opposite can be true – heightened vulnerability can reduce a person's ability to move at all, leaving them trapped in conditions of involuntary immobility.[28] Migration requires resources such as money, networks and physical capacity, the very elements that compounding crises will

21 MMC, (n.d.) What is mixed migration?
22 UNEP (2026) 'UNEP: World set to cross 1.5°C global warming, but can still limit, adapt to and return from higher temperatures', UN Environment Programme, 2 September.
23 Cuesta Leiva, J.A. and Huff, C. (2026) Climate and Social Sustainability in Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Contexts. Policy Research Working Paper 11283. World Bank.
24 Cuesta Leiva, J.A. and Huff, C. (2026) Climate and Social Sustainability in Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Contexts. Policy Research Working Paper 11283. World Bank.
25 Cuesta Leiva, J.A. and Huff, C. (2026) Climate and Social Sustainability in Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Contexts. Policy Research Working Paper 11283. World Bank.
26 Zahnow, R., Yousefnia, A.R., Hassankhani, M., and Cheshmehzangi, A. (2025) Climate change inequalities: A systemic review of disparities in access to mitigation and adaptation measures. Environmental Science & Policy. Vol. 165
27 MMC (n.d) About 4Mi.
28 MMC (n.d) Climate (Im)mobility.

deplete. For example, smallholder farmers dependent on agriculture may face declining yields from climate change at the same time as global shocks raise their input costs, such as the fertiliser price spikes triggered by the war in Ukraine. Together, these pressures consume the savings and assets a household would otherwise need to finance movement, deepening vulnerability while simultaneously excluding migration as a possible coping mechanism. The Horn of Africa from 2021 to 2023 is another clear example. The region faced one of its worst droughts in recent decades, compounded by years of conflict and instability, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and rising food prices driven partly by the war in Ukraine.[29] Rather than enabling movement, this accumulation of shocks stripped households of the resources that migration requires, trapping many in place amid worsening conditions.

Polycrisis dynamics can also immobilise people who are already on the move, stranding them in transit, forcing route diversions or driving involuntary returns. The same crises driving displacement, such as climate stress, conflict or economic fragility, also generate financial pressure, political instability, and populist mobilisation within transit and destination states, fuelling a competitive tightening of borders. The result is a potential feedback loop: crises produce displacement; displacement feeds political pressure in states themselves affected by those same crises; that pressure drives further restrictions; restrictions strand people in transit or push them into more dangerous, informal channels. The current situation along mixed migration routes towards Europe might exemplify this. The factors driving people to migrate are persistent, but since 2025 the arrivals along irregular migration routes to Europe have decreased, arguably leading to ever more people stuck in countries along the routes.

For all these reasons, polycrisis does not also overwhelmingly direct migration towards countries of the Global North. The vast majority of movement, including displacement and migration driven by polycrisis, remains internal or regional with most people remaining in their regions of origin. Even when impacted by multiple and intertwined crises, people in search of better opportunities usually seek them close to their origin countries. Polycrisis, thus, is likely to continue, greatly impacting mixed migration dynamics, shaping not only whether people move but how they move and where to.

Migration governance and the polycrisis

While polycrisis has entered the political vernacular, migration governance has, for the most part, failed to keep pace with the complexity of systemic factors driving it. The decline of multilateralism – and an international human rights architecture that, however imperfect or contested before, now appears increasingly hollowed out – will only compound the vulnerability faced by people on the move. This breakdown in governance can itself be understood as a crisis[30] with examples including the Trump administration's closure of USAID and the open contestation of the Refugee Convention, echoed by many European and other states,[31] (see *The protection crisis: a crisis of solidarity and political will* p. 180). The decline of multilateralism and unprecedented reduction in foreign aid are not stand-alone crises, they actively dismantle the ability to address the impacts of all the other crises (see *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration*, p 202).

Conclusion

The intersection of multiple crises in the era of polycrisis is shaping mixed migration dynamics in complex and nuanced ways – not simply increasing the numbers of people moving, but shaping whether people can move, how, and where to. People are not just being driven to migrate by polycrisis; they are also being trapped by it, stranded within it, and forced to return home even when it is not safe to do so.

The polycrisis lens forces us to confront these intersections rather than treating each crisis as a separate problem with an isolated impact. This is one of the greatest functions the term offers: the foundations for a systemic and nuanced analysis of complex and inextricably linked phenomena.

But this also raises a question – if everything is complex and interconnected, does polycrisis thinking risk inducing paralysis rather than action, since simple solutions are unlikely to fit the complexity of the situation at hand?

In the context of mixed migration, instead of searching for a single solution that does not exist, focus should instead be on building responses based on complexity: governance frameworks that recognise the complexity of mixed migration in the era of polycrisis and develop coherent multi-pronged, multi-sectoral approaches that do not treat migration governance, climate justice, economic inequality or governance reform as

29 UNDRR (2024) Horn of Africa floods and drought, 2020-2023 – Forensic analysis, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 17 September.
30 Micinski, N.R. (2025) The erosion of migration multilateralism and the 'new world order'. In Vallentine, J., Frouws, B. and Forin, R. (Eds.) *Mixed Migration Review 2025*. Geneva: Mixed Migration Centre.
31 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Trump targets the Refugee Convention: a fundamental shift in asylum norms. In Vallentine, J., Frouws, B. and Forin, R. (Eds.) *Mixed Migration Review 2025*. Geneva: Mixed Migration Centre.

separate silos. In other words, what has been termed as polysolutions.

Polycrisis might be an imperfect lens, easily reduced to a buzzword. However, used with an awareness of its limits, it offers something we need in current times: the ability to see the complex and multiple factors shaping mixed migration dynamics. Most importantly, this allows us to remain fully focused on the reality of challenges facing people on the move.

Photo credit: Ataurrahmanstudio

Climate change impacts are clearly a major, and growing, aspect of the current polycrisis. In 2026 repeated heat waves swept across the globe, with the highest ever recorded temperatures in India and various oceans. The implications for humans and mobility in an increasingly unlivable world are highly significant. Here, on July 25, 2026, two airplanes release water above the wildfire of La Mierla in Condemios de Arriba, Guadalajara, Spain. (See Essay: *Polycrisis and mixed migration in 2026*, p. 160).



About 4Mi in the MMR

About 4Mi

4Mi is MMC's flagship primary data collection system that helps fill knowledge gaps and informs mixed migration policy and response. Launched in 2014, 4Mi is a standardised, quantitative and globalised survey, operating via a network of more than 120 field enumerators. Regional teams in West and North Africa, Eastern and Southern Africa, the Middle East and Asia, Europe and Latin America collect and analyse data on mixed migration through interviews with refugees and migrants about their motivations and aspirations, protection concerns and experiences along mixed migration routes. 4Mi also conducts short-term, topic-specific surveys. To date, the 4Mi teams have conducted more than 150,000 interviews, all surveys combined.

In addition to analysis published by MMC throughout the year, 4Mi data can be accessed via the 4Mi Data Explorer, which enables users to analyse our latest data according to their own population and topic of interest. More information about 4Mi is available here: mixedmigration.org/what-is-4mi-migration-data.

4Mi in the MMR 2026

The 4Mi data presented in this year's Mixed Migration Review speak directly to the impacts of polycrisis on mixed migration and, specifically, the topics covered in the featured essays. In this year's edition of the MMR, the analysis therefore appears throughout the pages of the Review, following four of the essays and covering themes such as polycrisis drivers, protection risks, access to aid and regular pathways.

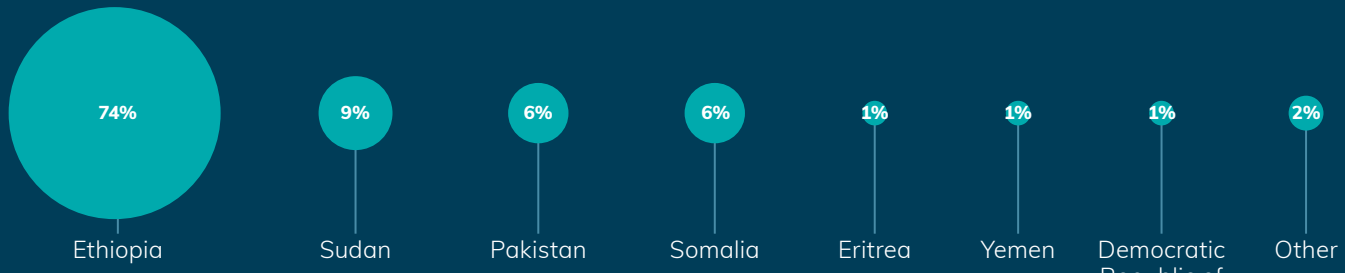
The 4Mi analysis presented is based on 4Mi surveys collected globally between 1 January 2025 and 30 June 2026 with refugees and migrants who were on the move or had been in the country of interview for less than two years. The sample is composed of 31,294 4Mi surveys collected in Eastern and Southern Africa (n=7,862), West Africa (n=6,755), North Africa (n=3,351), Asia and the Middle East (n=7,571), Latin America and the Caribbean (n=3,939) and Europe (n=1,816). Women represent 37% of the sample, and men 63%.

The analysis presented is necessarily a simplification, grouping a diverse sample of respondents to give a brief and global snapshot of what refugees and migrants around the world say on the subjects covered in the essays. MMC regularly publishes more nuanced and targeted insights on particular routes, locations and population groups, and the 4Mi Data Explorer allows for this more specific analysis. Totals may vary in the analysis we present, as questions may not be asked of all respondents.

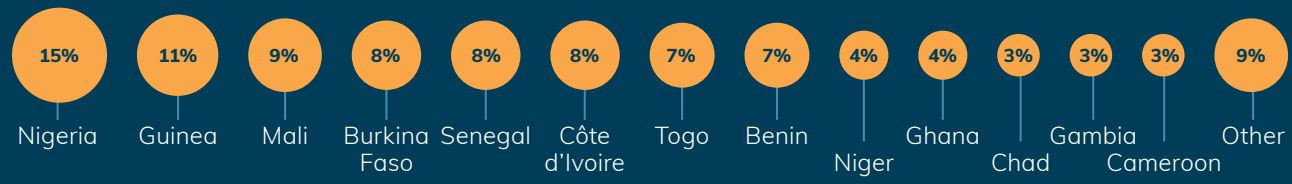
The most common nationalities interviewed in each region are outlined below:

Graphic 1. Most common nationalities interviewed in each region

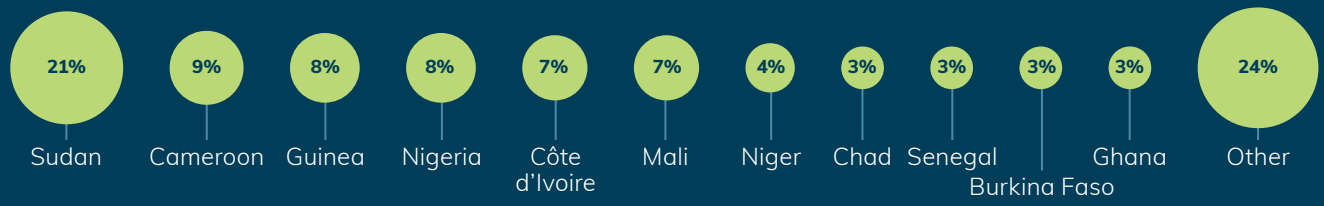
Eastern and Southern Africa (n=7,862)



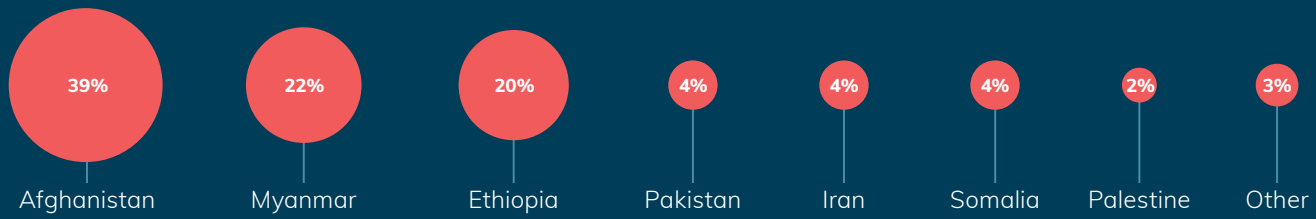
West Africa (n=6,755)



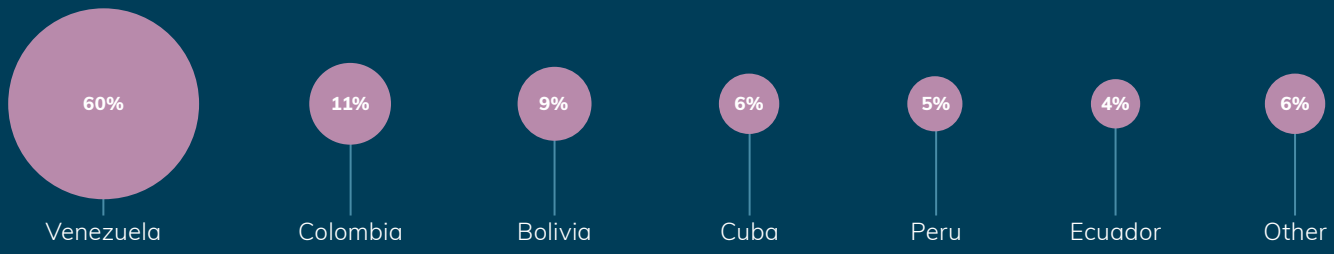
North Africa (n=3,351)



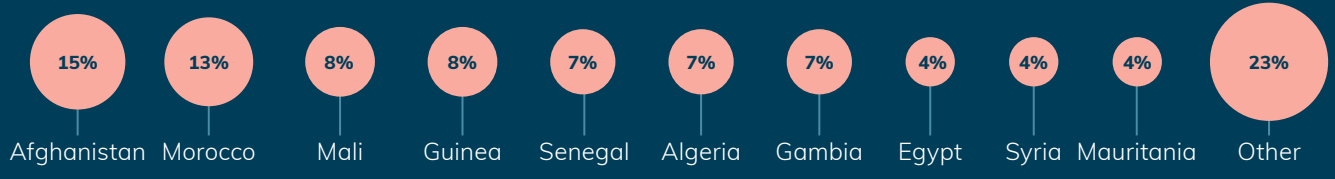
Asia and the Middle East (n=7,571)



Latin America and the Caribbean (n=3,939)



Europe (n=1816)



Drivers of migration in the era of polycrisis

Conflict, economic insecurity, climate change and poor governance are often not isolated issues; instead, they interact and compound one another. This reality is often reflected in individual migration drivers. Complementing this year's MMR essay *Polycrisis and mixed migration in 2026* (see p. 160), this brief gives a global overview of what 4Mi data (31,294 surveys) collected between 2025 and Q2 of 2026 can tell us about migration drivers in the era of polycrisis.

Economic reasons and armed conflict are the most commonly reported drivers...

Across our global data set, economic reasons (71%) and armed conflict and generalised violence and insecurity (34%) were the two most reported reasons for leaving. This was followed by personal, family and societal reasons (32%), lack of rights and freedoms (24%) and natural disasters or environmental factors (18%), among others.

... however, drivers vary by region of origin

Economic reasons were the most frequently cited driver by respondents from all regions of origin, bar those from Asia and the Middle East.

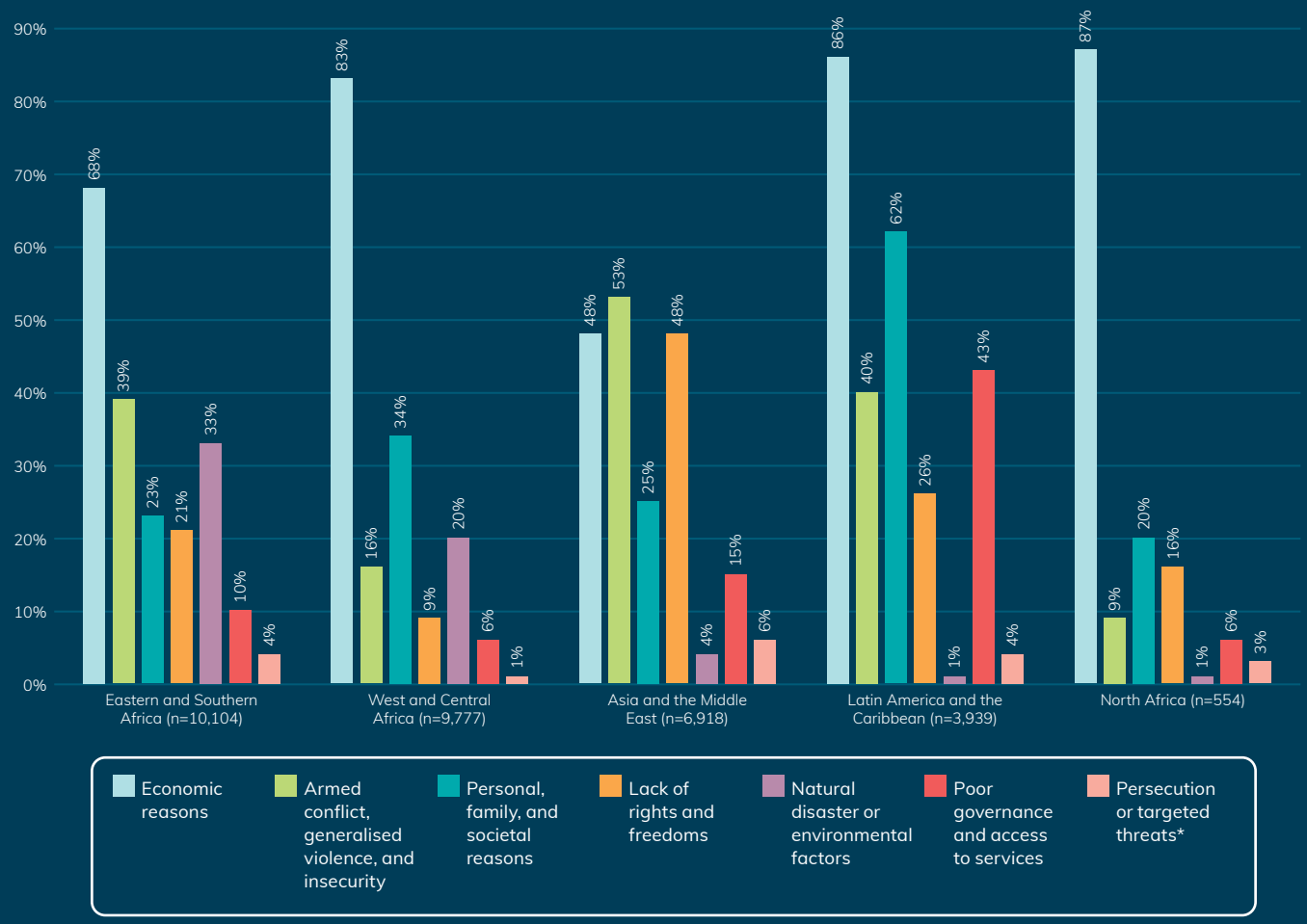
Economic factors were most cited by North African respondents (87%), followed by respondents from Latin America (86%), West and Central Africa (83%) and Eastern and Southern Africa (68%). While respondents from Asia and the Middle East most often reported conflict drivers (53%), economic drivers were still reported by almost half (48%, see Graphic 1).

> *"I had no choice but to migrate because I couldn't find a well-paying job, and the small business I owned couldn't sustain me enough. It was sad to leave my beloved family behind without informing them of my decision. I feel sad every day, but I have to carry on."*
>
> **26-year-old Nigerian woman interviewed in Libya**

> *"I want people to understand that my migration experience was not a choice... it was for survival. I crossed the sea by a small boat from Bangladesh to Indonesia with my husband and our 10 children... As a mother, I was very worried about their safety every day."*
>
> **22-year-old Rohingya woman interviewed in Indonesia**

Graphic 1. For what reason did you leave [your country of departure]?

(By region of origin, multi-select)



Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

*The answer option "Persecution or targeted threats" was added to the 4Mi survey in 2026 and in the 2025 data would have been captured in the answer options "Armed conflict, generalised violence, and insecurity" or "Lack of rights and freedoms".

Multiple reasons for leaving are common

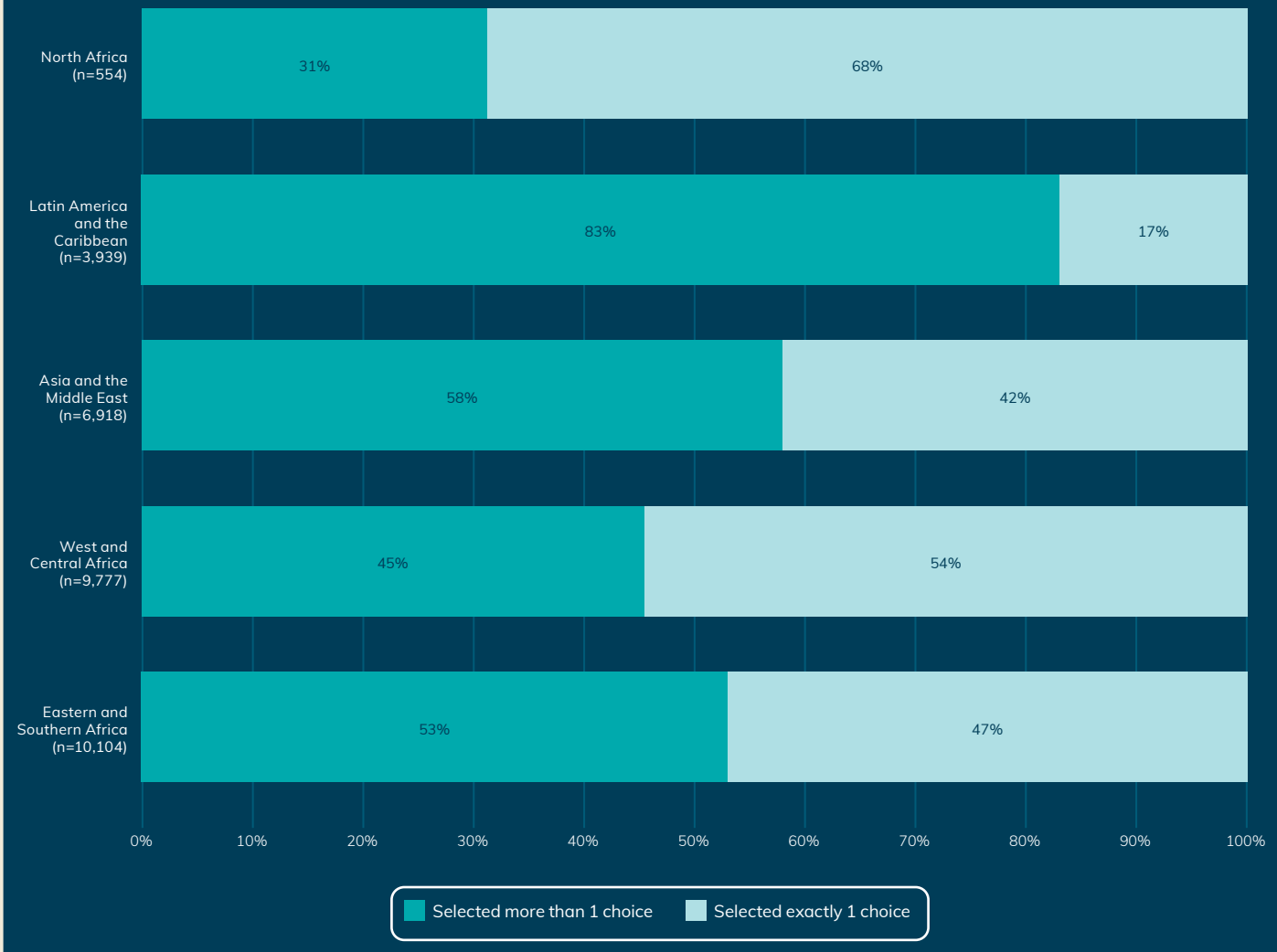
55% of respondents migrated for more than one reason

45% cited only a single reason

Respondents from Latin America most frequently reported multiple reasons for leaving (83%) compared to one third of respondents from North Africa (31%) who reported multiple reasons for leaving (see Graphic 2).

Graphic 2. Selection of multiple reasons for leaving

(By region of origin)



Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Economic drivers are common but, for most, they present in combination with other drivers

71% cited economic reasons for leaving

63% of people who selected economic drivers cited other drivers in combination

37% chose economic drivers alone

Economic factors were a common reason for respondents' migration, but seldom presented in isolation. Among interviewees who cited economic factors (n=22,120), nearly two-thirds (63%) named at least one other driver in combination. The minority (37%) said they left for economic reasons alone.

Respondents from North Africa, however, reported comparatively higher rates of migrating for economic reasons only (60%). The share falls steadily among respondents from West and Central Africa (41%), then Eastern and Southern Africa (26%). Respondents from Asia and the Middle East (13%) and Latin America (10%) least commonly reported economic drivers alone.

More than two-thirds of respondents from the Middle East and Asia (68%) reported multiple drivers. As mentioned, conflict was most commonly reported; however, it often appeared alongside other factors – one in five (20%) reported economic factors and conflict together, and a further 20% reported conflict alongside another non-economic factors.

Respondents from Latin America show a similar pattern of reasons for leaving. While the vast majority of respondents reported economic drivers (86%), few cited them in isolation – 34% reported economic drivers in combination with conflict, and 42% in combination with another non-conflict driver.

> *"I left for economic reasons and also because of political persecution – I had taken part in opposition activities at times... the persecution is brutal... it was a difficult decision."*
>
> **27-year-old woman from Venezuela interviewed in Colombia**

Climate factors: prevalent and almost exclusively combined with other drivers

As the impacts of climate change accelerate, they increasingly shape why people move – sometimes directly, but also indirectly by worsening pressures that already exist.

37% said natural disasters, the climate or other environmental factors influenced their decision to leave



97% 97% of people who reported climate factors as a reason for leaving (n=5,634) did so in combination with other drivers, signalling the extent to which climate factors combine with other issues

Regional context strongly influences how prevalent climate factors are reported. In Eastern and Southern Africa, a region which is heavily climate affected, more than half (57%) of respondents cited climate as a factor in their reason for leaving,[1] whereas only 7% of respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean did – an eight-fold difference.

1 The prominence of climate factors in East and Southern Africa is partly due to purposive sampling for a climate-related project.

"Losing entire livelihoods was the end of food, income and way of life. The severe drought brought famine that forced them to abandon decades of tradition. Not only did they run away from drought but also from conflicts, political tensions and riots. Those who were once proud pastoralists are now reduced to beggars."

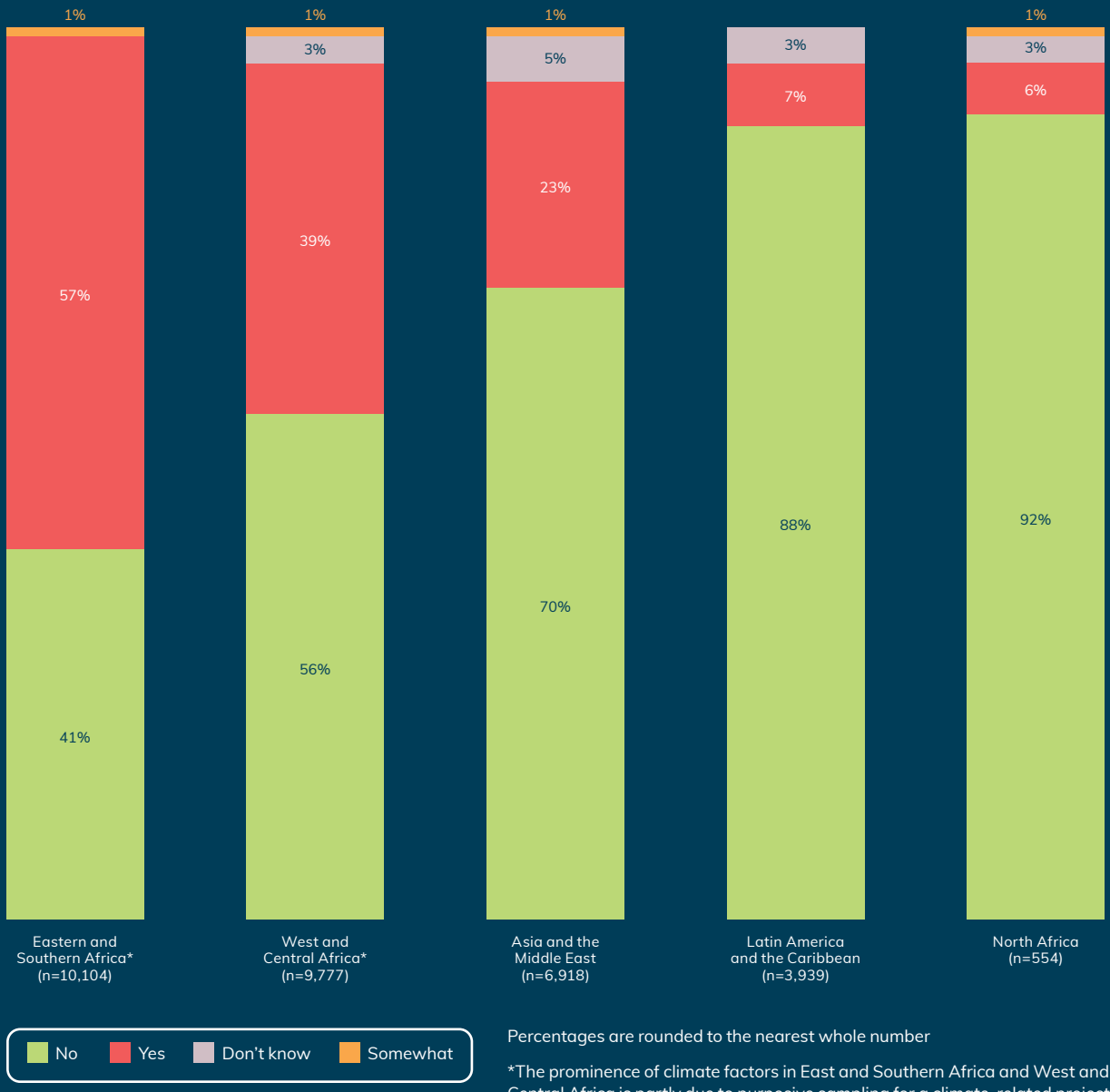
26-year-old Ethiopian woman interviewed in Kenya

"I was a farmer. I decided to travel because of irregular weather patterns, which resulted in bad yields. I had no choice but to travel because the future looked bad for me if I were to depend on that kind of work for survival."

22-year-old man from Ghana interviewed in Libya

Graphic 3. Did climate factors influence your decision to leave?

(By region of origin)



Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

*The prominence of climate factors in East and Southern Africa and West and Central Africa is partly due to purposive sampling for a climate-related project.

Of the 37% who cited climate factors as influencing their decision to leave (n=11,924), the most common reasons were: direct threats to survival (45%), direct effects on housing, sanitation or other living conditions (44%) and economic effects, such as losing their livelihoods (42%).

Photo credit: Amazing Aerial

A major humanitarian and aid emergency in Manhiça, Mozambique on 20 January 2026, caused by catastrophic flooding trapped residents on rooftops. Weeks of torrential rainfall across central and southern Mozambique caused widespread devastation, prompting the government to declare a nationwide Red Alert. Climate change events such as these are increasing in frequency while aid budgets have been slashed, and in 2025 USAID itself was terminated. (See Essay: *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration*, p. 202).





Interview

An ‘order collapse’ like no other? What history tells us about the polycrisis

Does history really repeat itself? If so, what can we learn from past polycrises when it comes to understanding our current era of complex, intersectional global issues? **Ayşe Zarakol** weighs in on this topic, with a focus on mixed migration.

Ayşe Zarakol is Professor of International Relations at the University of Cambridge and a politics fellow at Emmanuel College. She is also the author of After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West *and the award-winning* Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders.

Currently, you are leading a multi-year British Academy Knowledge Frontiers grant and working with global historians to study historical periods of disorder. Have you uncovered any interesting findings which may relate to today’s polycrisis?

Thus far, we’ve really focused on trying to define what we mean by disorder. We also probed some historical time periods which may act as analogies for the present. In international relations, a typical comparison is, of course, the time from World War I to World War II – a period of disorder between two periods of order. There are also moments, in the 19th century, that both historians and sociologists have studied. We’ve also looked at the 17th century, which comes out of my own work and I personally think is a better analogy for polycrisis.

There is a long-standing idea in history of a general crisis during that time, applied especially to European politics, such as the Thirty Years War. Recently, there have been attempts to globalise that frame. We know that Asian empires also struggled in this era. For instance, the Ottoman Empire had mass rebellions. Now, one of the popular explanations for the 17th century’s general crisis is climate change, as this was a particularly cold period – the peak of what’s known as the Little Ice Age, which extends from the 13th century to the 19th century.

I like the 17th century as an analogy because it features elements such as climate change and big financial changes, but also because it’s the time when capitalism is starting to organise social relations. Additionally, there are scientific changes, wars, great power competition, rebellions, agricultural crop failures, a breakdown of overland trade… In these ways, the 17th century is an interesting analogy for the present.

> **"... social hierarchies continue to shape migration regimes. Who's considered a good refugee? One could point to the different treatment of Ukrainian refugees in Europe compared to refugees from elsewhere."**

In the book you edited, *Hierarchies in World Politics*, there's an argument that formal sovereign equality masks deep hierarchies between states. Do you think the global asylum and migration regime functions as an expression of that hierarchy today?

Definitely. The 19th century's international order was organised around 'the standard of civilisation' which gave legal recognition only to European states and former colonies headed by settlers of European descent. Even as we did away with such explicitly articulated legal expressions of hierarchy, especially after World War II, and moved away from scientific racism, many of the social hierarchies have remained because they are buried in our assumptions, concepts and definitions. What we take to be the norm in international politics, whether we're talking about the nation-state, the citizen or political institutions, is defined around the European model. Everybody else who deviated from that norm was traditionally considered as lacking in some way. Often, that gets expressed as an imputation of backwardness, danger or threat: the migration and visa regime also operates with similar assumptions.

You've said the international order has always been organised around who is inside and who is outside it. Is the current border and asylum crisis – if we can talk about a crisis in the first place – a symptom of world order breaking down, or is it working exactly as historically designed, sorting people by where they sit in the hierarchy of states? And to what extent is race part of this dynamic?

I like to talk about social hierarchies in general because I don't think hierarchies are always organised around race. There are also hierarchies in how different classes, religions and ethnicities are viewed. To me, social hierarchy is more of a catch-all term. But race, of course, has been quite important in the international order, especially in how hierarchy was defined at the beginning. That's what the 'standard of civilisation' was all about. We moved away from hierarchical formal categories around race from the mid-century onwards, yet the social hierarchies continue to shape migration regimes. Who's considered a good refugee? One could point to the different treatment of Ukrainian refugees in Europe compared to refugees from elsewhere.

Is there a risk your critics might argue that the word 'hierarchy' is just a less offensive way of describing underlying factors which are predominantly racist?

I think it's a more scholarly way [of describing those factors]. If I were a political activist, I might emphasise racism or racial discrimination more, which is definitely a part of it. By using the word 'hierarchy', I'm trying to articulate a mode of political organisation which can take different shapes. I study historical international orders. Orders always create hierarchies. This is not to excuse racism in the modern international order. At the same time, orders always have insiders and outsiders, and they always have hierarchies. The question, then, is: of what type? It may not always be around race. Reading everything through that lens could also re-perpetuate US or Western centrism.

You talk about the concept of status anxiety. Could the intense politicisation of migration in the West be read as a status anxiety response from a declining, or fear-of-declining, power trying to reassert control over eroding boundaries, rather than a rational reaction to migration numbers themselves? Or is it simply fear of too much multiculturalism, too fast?

I think it's all of those things. It's definitely a 'status anxiety'. It is also to do with how the West understands political order and the nation-state. Not all countries are against migration. For instance in Istanbul, where I am right now, anxiety around migration is at a lower level than in Europe, even though the numbers of refugees and migrants are higher. Part of that is a historical holdover from the Ottoman period, where the political order was organised for a long time around the idea of a universal monarchy. If you're claiming to be a universal monarch, you cannot obsess about borders or keeping people out. Given the way the nation-state emerged historically in Europe, by contrast, part of what makes the state sovereign is its ability to manage and police borders. When people feel this cannot be done, they perceive it as a weakness. It's within that particular understanding of politics that immigrants and refugees create extra anxiety.

Additionally, there are groups in the West that don't like the liberal multicultural regime. They feel it threatens their privileged position, both domestically and internationally, at the top of long-standing social hierarchies. They want to do away with that regime, and that's a form of status anxiety as well.

The interesting question is whether the international order is falling apart. I think it is. That doesn't mean that there will be no order. But we're slowly moving away from this way of seeing a world which has one centre in the West. From the 19th century to the present, that's what we've had. If we reach the day where people are no longer trying to come to the West, that may create even more status anxiety than now,

> **“... history never repeats exactly... It’s possible we face two existential risks – climate change and AI – for which there may not be many analogies.”**

because it’s one thing to be desired and say, “No, I don’t want you.” But what if nobody desired to come in the first place? That might create even more status anxiety. So I would say to these anti-immigrant groups, “Be careful what you wish for.”

Last year, during a presentation in Vienna, you discussed whether the disorder of our times is unprecedented. But, with the existential threat of climate change – extreme weather, warming oceans, the melting of glaciers, the biodiversity crisis and so on – does that not put us at a unique point in human history? A polycrisis like no other, even?

In some ways, history never repeats exactly, and thus we are in a unique moment. We certainly face an existential risk from climate change as well as from AI. If you listen to the AI optimists, they think we’re going to have superintelligence within 10 years, maybe even sooner. If this happens, the effects might be unthinkable. Some are very optimistic that superintelligence will solve all problems, but you could argue the opposite: that it will end politics and humanity as we know it. It’s possible we face two existential risks – climate change and AI – for which there may not be many analogies.

At the same time, if you look at the long history of humans, going as far back as the deep Ice Age, there are many times when humanity came close to extinction. Existential risk is not exactly a new thing for our species, and neither is order collapse. Recently, I’ve seen the movie Odyssey, and it draws a very clear parallel between the Late Bronze Age collapse and what’s happening now. In fact, characters in the movie even spell it out for the viewer and say, “Our civilisation is ending”. They seem to have a lot of prehistorical awareness of what’s going to happen later! Jokes aside, the movie blames the collapse of order on the way the Mycenaeans were acting towards both their enemies and friends, which is an explanation driven by implicit analogy to the US in the present. It may work pedagogically, but it is a bit misplaced because, back then, the Mycenaean Greeks were not at all the top dog in the Late Bronze Age order (they were quite peripheral in an international system dominated by the Egyptians and the Hittites). Historians would point to other, more structural issues, including climate change, as one of the reasons why the Late Bronze Age order collapsed. In any case, the point is we can find other moments in history where established orders were coming apart at the seams, and we can debate the reasons why and draw lessons.

I think what makes it different now is that – unlike the fictional characters in the movie Odyssey who are written as having precognition of what will happen later – we actually have historical awareness, we have a sense of agency and we can do things (we think) to prevent undesirable outcomes. In the past, most people would have experienced these moments of crisis as the gods being angry or a punishment for their sins, whereas we now understand the role humans have played in creating these risks. It’s us doing it. We’ve created this situation. I think that’s what’s different about our moment.

Türkiye sits at possibly the starkest fault line in some of these issues. Along with Iran, it hosts the largest refugee population in the world, while having itself historically been cast as the representative of the East managing its relationship with the West. How does this dual position shape Türkiye’s migration policy compared to the stance of European states with their different historical relationship to the same hierarchy?

First, despite what I said earlier that the country is more open to migration, I have to add that refugees in Türkiye don’t always receive a warm welcome. There are instances of mistreatment of refugees and immigrants here as well. Migration and asylum have sometimes been a wedge issue in Turkish politics. At times, some of the opposition has used anti-migrant sentiments. However, what’s different in the Turkish context is that President Erdoğan is a populist leader but, unlike most European populists, he has in general been quite welcoming of immigrants. As I said before, this is a very long historical shadow of the Turkish idea that, ‘This is a sign of our strength both as a state and as a nation, as a culture, that we can absorb, open doors and offer hospitality.’

The European Union was built on a cosmopolitan idea for insiders, if you like, but it depends on a hard line around who isn’t an EU citizen. Is European free movement, in effect, importing the same hierarchy of belonging that you’ve written about at the level of world order, just miniaturised to the regional level of Europe?

Oh, yes, definitely. One of the arguments that I made in my first book, *After Defeat*, which was based on my PhD thesis, is that international order from the 19th century onwards has functioned as a status club. It was a club of established European states which had equal treaties between themselves, but not with others. Even as they were fighting each other, to the rest of the world they functioned as a status club, built on the idea of white European Christians being superior to others. As I said, that’s become muted in the 20th century. Still, you could argue that the European Union was a late iteration of the same project – a status club for Europeans.

To be fair, though, membership in the European Union project was defined on a meritocratic basis – geographic, but also meritocratic. Technically, there were criteria you could meet – democracy, management of the economy, human rights and so on – and then you would be admitted. Going from a status club expressed in racial and religious terms in the 19th century to a status club that's – at least, in theory – defined meritocratically in the 20th century is definitely progress.

In practice, that's not how it functioned. In the case of Türkiye, the goalposts started to move whenever Türkiye approached membership criteria, whereas certain shortcomings were overlooked in the case of post-communist European countries. People in Türkiye, as Erdoğan has recently said, have concluded that there's no future for Türkiye in the European Union. To be sure, some of that is fair: right now, Türkiye is very far from being democratic. The point is, while you could argue whether or not Türkiye was ever a deserving candidate, it was also the case that many people on the European Union side did not really want the criteria to be meritocratic if that meant including Türkiye. They wanted the membership criteria to remain civilisational, racial and otherwise subjective.

> **"Europe needs migration. Populations are not replacing themselves and, sooner or later, that's going to create acute crises in how our economies function. Capitalism needs perpetual growth, which is very hard to separate from population growth."**

As climate and conflict displacement grow, do you think the EU citizenship model can adapt to a mobile world, or is it fundamentally designed to manage insiders rather than absorb new populations?

Whether we're talking about migration, the capacity to absorb migration or being able to have a say on the world stage versus the United States and China, the EU has as much material capability as anyone. These countries, put together, are a huge world economy.

The material capability is certainly there. It is the cultural willingness that is lacking. Some of that stems from these historical legacies we have discussed. Even though we associate Europe with liberalism, democracy and, to some extent, multiculturalism, historically, it's not really a multicultural space. It's more of a "let's keep people out" kind of space.

And yet, Europe needs migration. Populations are not replacing themselves and, sooner or later, that's going to create acute crises in how our economies function. We're already seeing this with care for the elderly in places like Japan and Italy, which are at the front of this wave. Beyond that, pension systems will run into trouble. Capitalism needs perpetual growth, which is very hard to separate from population growth. Pro-natalist government policies do not really work beyond slowing decline.

> **"... stoking resentment against immigrants seems to be an easy way to get votes at a time when problems are more structural and the causes are hard to pin down."**

One could, therefore, say the rational thing for Europe is to be open to more immigration, especially skilled immigration. At the same time, politically, it's very difficult for politicians in Europe. Earlier, I said that Ukrainian refugees received better treatment. But there is now even resistance to – or grievances against – them in parts of Eastern or Central Europe.

Culturally, Europe is not a very open place, at least when it comes to large segments of the population who may be more politically active these days and who vote for populist politicians. How do we break out of this cycle? I don't know. Stoking resentment against immigrants seems to be an easy way to get votes at a time when problems are more structural and the causes are hard to pin down. But that leaves all the European economies much more vulnerable to longer-term problems due to demographics.

If a new world order is indeed emerging – more multipolar, less US- or European-centred – do you expect it will produce a more equitable global system of asylum and protection, or simply a new hierarchy with different countries at the top deciding who moves and who doesn't?

As I said, the AI optimists think we are going towards some kind of utopia – no disease, no politics, nothing. I'm much more sceptical. I'm actually sceptical that a new world order is emerging.

Part of the reason I like the 17th century analogy for today is that it was a really long period of disorder. The 16th century global order, which I've written about in *Before the West*, fragmented towards the end of that century and no new order emerged from it. The precursor of the modern international order, what we call the Westphalian order, didn't emerge until the latter part of the 17th century. There were 50 to 70 years of fragmentation, as everyone dealt with their own regional problems.

> **“Creating order requires agency, people willing to put their heads together and write the new rules. We’re going to live in the ruins of the liberal international order for a while.”**

As for the term ‘multipolar’, that’s a term my field, International Relations, gets from 19th century politics, from the Concert of Europe. That description, thus, assumes there’s a centre and, in the centre, there are these great powers and they move in concert. They talk to each other and they coordinate their behaviour even as they are competing. The very expectation of a multipolar order, I believe, is therefore somewhat optimistic because it assumes a degree of coordination and centred order.

Apart from the existential risks, one scenario exists – which is better than annihilation but still worse than a new order emerging – where things fall apart and we kind of get by, or where regional orders emerge but without any central organisation. This is a scenario within which the poles are not really talking to or mirroring each other. It would be even worse than the Cold War order, which had a lot of agreement about what the competition was about, even amidst the hostility.

In the near future, at least for the next decade, I think it’s likely we will get something much messier than the 19th or 20th century arrangements. I don’t think we will immediately see the emergence of a new world order centred on China or elsewhere. Meanwhile, all the candidates for creating a new order will have to deal with their own demographic issues, their challenges with AI and technology and all the social disruptions that will bring. We will all be dealing with climate change. I don’t think there’ll be the wherewithal to create a new order. Creating order requires agency, people willing to put their heads together and write the new rules. We’re going to live in the ruins of the liberal international order for a while, I think.

Where do you think we are on that continuum? Are we just at the foothills, halfway up the mountain or at the peak?

I don’t want to be too pessimistic, but I do think we’re only at the beginning of this journey. I think things will get worse before they get better. It doesn’t mean everything will collapse at once. It’s possible that some aspects of the migration regime will survive in some regions, and maybe even improve, become more equitable in parts, as some countries realise that they do need migrants. It won’t be centrally organised, which leaves room for improvement in some places, and for things getting much worse in others.

It sounds like the relevance of the United Nations is destined to diminish in the near future, then?

Probably, but not completely. You know, in Türkiye, when you look at buildings, parts of them are often repurposed from earlier ones, some going back to the Roman Empire even. This is to say that humans always repurpose what exists. The fact that there is an institution like the United Nations, with all its flaws, will make it easier for the next iteration to emerge. It will live on in some way.

You have said that the political right is more proactive than the liberal left in terms of offering ideas of what they would like the future to be. You have suggested there’s a paucity of thinking or imagination about what future global structures and management might look like. Why might this be?

The elites of the liberal centre have been the least imaginative about the future because they were most attached to the existing order. Until very recently, all they did was attempt to just hold on. That’s why, first the reactionary right, and now also the more progressive left, are more politically proactive: they’re not as emotionally attached to what’s being lost. We’re coming to the point where everybody’s realising we cannot bring the 1990s back. That moment is not coming back. We have to think about the future. There were a lot of positive ideals in what was called the ‘liberal international order’ – above all, the idea of equal treatment of individuals. If we can hold on to some of that, we can restart there.

> **“... humans always repurpose what exists. The fact that there is an institution like the United Nations, with all its flaws, will make it easier for the next iteration to emerge. It will live on in some way.”**

Photo credit: Nexpher Images

Shortly after the new EU Migration Pact came into force (see Article: *Born of crisis, bypassed in crisis: the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum after Ceuta*, p. 118), it faced its first test, when an estimated 72,000 migrants crossed irregularly into the Spanish territory of Ceuta over 2 or 3 days, from Morocco, creating extraordinary scenes, disputes between European countries and the announcement, despite the Pact's existence, of a new European Emergency Response Framework. The majority were returned without due process and over 70 tragically died while travelling the short distance between the two territories.



The protection crisis: a crisis of solidarity and political will

Daniel Ghezelbash[1]

Migration and displacement are increasingly being shaped by overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises – or 'polycrisis'.[2] Conflicts are intersecting with climate change and disasters, food insecurity, economic fragility and other shocks, which amplify one another.[3] Just as the need is greatest, the space for humane and coordinated responses is shrinking. Division is deepening, the multilateral system is fraying, funding is contracting and populist rhetoric is surging. Migrants and refugees are too often scapegoated for economic, security and cultural anxieties, made into easy targets while the real causes of those anxieties go unaddressed.

The result is a policy landscape structured around exclusion, rather than protection. Externalisation has reduced access to asylum, pushing the border outward. Deterrence has become standard practice rather than an exceptional measure, with detention, temporary status and hostile reception conditions deployed deliberately to discourage people from seeking protection at all. Resettlement places, meanwhile, have collapsed.[4] Taken together, these dynamics are producing a growing population of people in need of protection who are stuck in transit, unable to move forward to safety and unable to return home.

More broadly, the absence of safe and regular pathways shapes mixed migration as a whole. Externalisation and deterrence make no distinction between those fleeing persecution or conflict, victims of trafficking or people seeking better lives and opportunities.[5] Options for family reunification are limited and labour pathways remain inaccessible to many who might otherwise be able to move safely and regularly. Where legal routes are scarce, dangerous and irregular journeys become the only option.

It has become common to describe this as a 'migration crisis' or a 'refugee crisis'. This language locates the emergency in the people seeking protection. That framing should be rejected. What we are living through is better described as a 'protection crisis': a crisis in the capacity and willingness of systems to deliver the protection required by the Refugee Convention and other international legal frameworks relevant to refugees and people on the move.[6] It is not the result of failures in these instruments. Rather, it is a crisis of solidarity and political will. The same pressures driving displacement and migration are also generating political anxiety in the states required to respond to it, and it is that anxiety, seized on and amplified by populist rhetoric, which pushes governments toward greater restriction.

This year, the Refugee Convention marked its 75th anniversary.[7] It did so at a moment when the international and domestic protection systems built to give it effect are under mounting strain. The Convention provides the clearest cautionary tale of how the political anxieties and populist rhetoric driving restrictive policies can evolve into direct assaults on international frameworks. We are now at a precipice, where states are no longer only quietly evading their obligations, but contesting the legitimacy of the Convention itself. This essay traces how we got here and what it would take to repair the system of protection the Convention was built to guarantee.

The Refugee Convention under attack

In the shadow of World War II, drawing on the hard lessons of the interwar period, the international community recognised that responding to displacement required a coordinated response grounded in law. The Refugee Convention, rooted in the longstanding institution of asylum, defined who qualifies as a refugee and set out the standards for their protection. It was later expanded in geographical and temporal reach by the 1967 Protocol.[8] Together, they bind states to a cornerstone promise: no

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2 Lawrence M., Homer-Dixon T., Janzwood S., Rockström J., Renn O., Donges J.F. (2024) Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. Global Sustainability, 7, 1–13.

3 Bjarnesen, J., Muvumba Sellström, A. and Tarvainen, J. (2026) Expert insights on displacement in times of polycrisis. NAI Policy Notes, 2026:4. The Nordic Africa Institute and United Nations Development Programme.

4 UN News (2026) Resettlement remains out of reach for millions of refugees.

5 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) What is mixed migration?

6 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951).

7 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951).

8 United Nations Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 16 December 1966)

one will be forcibly returned to a country where they face a well-founded fear of persecution.[9] For 75 years, this framework has enabled millions of people to find safety and rebuild their lives. My own family is among them.

Yet the Convention is now under attack. The familiar claims are that it is outdated, unworkable, too generous, too constraining of state sovereignty over borders. That argument should be rejected. The Convention is not the problem. It remains sound, it remains relevant and it has proved remarkably adaptable.[10] What has failed is not the normative framework it established, but the willingness of states to implement it in good faith.

We are now at a precipice. For decades, the threat to the Convention was covert. States sabotaged it in practice while professing fidelity to it in principle. The political calculus was that the public valued the appearance of compliance with international law, even as it wanted asylum restricted. So states evaded their obligations quietly, while still paying lip service to them.[11] That calculus is now visibly shifting. Some politicians have concluded that a growing part of the public no longer values compliance with international law and that there is now active political reward for attacking it openly. As a result, we are moving from an era of strategic evasion towards the open contestation of the Convention's legitimacy and authority. The argument has shifted from 'we comply, actually' to 'the treaty itself is the problem.'

The bitter irony is that the failures those same states produced are now offered as the reason why the Convention must be reformed or watered down. If we want to understand the 'protection crisis', we must be clear about where the failures come from. Not from the Convention, but from states sabotaging it, first quietly, now openly.

Strategic Evasion

For decades, the dominant frame through which states have engaged with international protection has been a deliberate strategy of evasion.[12] This is essentially a posture of bad-faith compliance. States pay lip service to refugee protection obligations. They remain parties to the Convention. They use the language of protection, while at the same time developing increasingly sophisticated ways of ensuring that as few people as possible can access protection in practice. They claim to comply with the letter of the law, but they systematically subvert its purpose.

This is facilitated through two tactics: hyper-legalism and obfuscation.[13] Hyper-legalism is an overly formalistic, bad-faith approach to interpreting international obligations. It exploits ambiguity. It pushes literal interpretation to breaking point. It cherry-picks obligations, invoking the provisions that serve states while ignoring those that constrain them. Many states have used hyper-legalist arguments to justify moves to push protection elsewhere: Australia's offshore processing policies,[14] the US's safe third country agreements,[15] the UK's Rwanda scheme.[16] However, the tactic is dissected here using the EU's safe third country regime as an example, not because it is exceptional, but because it lays the method bare.

The original incarnation of the EU policy, which was itself already contested, turned on two fundamental safeguards, both of which have been progressively eroded. The first was the meaning of safety. Previously, this required access to refugee status and convention protection.[17] The 2024 Asylum Procedures Regulation, which came into force earlier this year, lowered that bar to 'effective protection', dispensing with the need for the third country to be signatory to the Convention[18] and allowing it to be deemed safe only in parts, or for some categories of people and not others.[19] The second safeguard was connection. A person could only be sent to a country they had a genuine link to.[20] Amendments this year reduced that to mere transit, or simply an agreement

9 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951), art 33.
10 Goodwin-Gill, G. S. and McAdam, J. (2026) The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol – Relevance and a Continuing Foundation for Protection?. Opinio Juris, Symposium on the 1951 Refugee Convention at 75, 17 June 2026.
11 Ghezelbash, D. (2020) Hyper-Legalism and Obfuscation: How States Evade Their International Obligations Towards Refugees. The American Journal of Comparative Law, 68(3), 479–516.
12 Ghezelbash, D. (2020) Hyper-Legalism and Obfuscation: How States Evade Their International Obligations Towards Refugees. The American Journal of Comparative Law, 68(3), 479–516.
13 Ghezelbash, D. (2020) Hyper-Legalism and Obfuscation: How States Evade Their International Obligations Towards Refugees. The American Journal of Comparative Law, 68(3), 479–516.
14 Gleeson, M. (2016) Offshore: Behind the wire of Manus and Nauru. New South Publishing.
15 Ardalan, S. (2025) US Border Externalisation Through Funding: Implications for the Right to Seek Asylum and Refugee Protection in the United States. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 23 (1), 135-146.
16 Drakeley, R. (2023) Loophole or Law-Breaking? Rwanda Plan's Inconsistency with International Refugee Law. York Law Review, 4, 141-181.
17 European Union (2013) Directive 2013/32/EU on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast), art 38(1)(e).
18 European Union (2024) Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union, art 57(1).
19 European Union (2024) Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union, arts 59(2), 59(4)(b).
20 European Union (2024) Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union, art 38(2)(a).

with the third country to take people.[21] The label has not changed, but what it was meant to guarantee has been hollowed out. 'Safe' once meant Convention protection and a real connection. It can now mean a country that offers neither. This is hyper-legalism at work: preserving the form, while emptying out the substance.

We see the same logic at work elsewhere. In legal fictions that treat people physically present in a state's territory as though they are not there for the purposes of the Convention. In claims that non-refoulement does not apply on the high seas, justified through linguistic gymnastics as to the meaning of 'return'. In domestic legislation that redefines, at the national level, what the state's international obligations mean. The function of all this is to construct a veil of legality. The form of the obligation remains intact. The protective purpose is hollowed out. Governments can say, "we are acting within the rules", but they redefine what those rules require.

Obfuscation is the partner to hyper-legalism. If hyper-legalism produces too many words in bad faith, obfuscation produces deliberate silence: secrecy about what the government is doing and what legal justification it claims to rely on. It thrives in certain spaces – at sea, in offshore facilities, in transit zones, in secret bilateral arrangements of murky legal status and in operational contexts framed as national security and therefore shielded from scrutiny. When we do not know what a government is doing, or on what legal basis, we are left to criticise the secrecy, not the act.

Together, hyper-legalism and obfuscation have produced the architecture of deterrence and exclusion we see today. Outside the state, visa controls, carrier sanctions, maritime interception, extraterritorial processing, safe third-country arrangements and the deals that pay and equip other states to intercept and contain people seeking asylum all push the border outward, stopping people before they reach the territory where protection would be hardest to deny.[22] Inside the state, restrictive admissibility rules, hollowing out of asylum procedures, prolonged detention and the use of temporary status as a deterrent in place of durable protection extend that architecture inward, limiting the protection available to those who nevertheless arrive.

The Race to the Bottom

These policies, and the tactics of hyper-legalism and obfuscation which sustain them, have spread around the world through a process of competitive diffusion.[23] States do not make asylum policy in isolation. They monitor each other. When one jurisdiction devises a new way restricting access to asylum, while preserving a nominal claim of legality, others take notice. This dynamic was traced in my 2018 book Refuge Lost, examining how mandatory detention, maritime interdiction and offshore processing moved between the United States and Australia, each borrowing and hardening what the other had built.[24]

The pattern has only accelerated since.[25] The UK's Rwanda policy was explicitly modelled on Australia's offshore processing system.[26] When it collapsed, the idea did not. Italy built its own version, sending asylum seekers to processing centres in Albania.[27] In June this year, the EU agreed in principle on rules allowing member states to set up 'return hubs' in third countries, [28] with at least five EU countries already in talks to do so.[29]

And the key driver is competition. Policymakers increasingly understand themselves to be operating in an environment where they do not want their country's asylum policies to be perceived as more generous than comparative countries. When one country tightens its measures, others feel pressure to match or exceed them. This competition is performed as much for prospective asylum seekers as it is for domestic audiences: a race to not be seen by one's own voters as the soft touch. Responsibility-sharing gives way to responsibility-shifting. The result is an international regime that looks increasingly like a competition to avoid protection obligations rather than a framework for sharing them.

The damage does not stop at the borders of the wealthy states driving this evasion. When these nations refuse to do their fair share, how can we expect lesser resourced states that host the overwhelming majority of the world's refugees to do more? Some are signatories to the Convention, left to uphold standards that wealthier nations are busy hollowing out. Many are not, yet a growing body of research shows that Convention norms

21 European Commission (2025) 'Amending Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 as regards the application of the 'safe third country' concept', amending art 59(5).
22 Shachar, A. (2020) The shifting border: legal cartographies of migration and mobility. Manchester University Press.
23 Ghezelbash, D. (2014) Forces of diffusion: what drives the transfer of immigration policy and law across jurisdictions?. International Journal of Migration and Border Studies, 1(2), 154–172.
24 Ghezelbash, D. (2018) Refuge Lost: Asylum Law in an Interdependent World. Cambridge University Press.
25 Shachar, A. and Ghezelbash, D. (2026, forthcoming) How and Why "Ideas Travel" in Migration Law and Policy. In K. Cope, S. B. Elias and J. Goldenziel (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Immigration Law. Oxford University Press.
26 Matera, M., Tubakovic, T. and Murray, P. (2023) Is Australia a Model for the UK? A Critical Assessment of Parallels of Cruelty in Refugee Externalization Policies. Journal of Refugee Studies, 36(2), 271–293.
27 De Leo, A. and Celoria, E. (2024) The Italy–Albania Protocol: A new model of border-shifting within the EU and its compatibility with Union law. Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law, 31(5), 595-618.
28 Council of the European Union, Council and Parliament reach deal on returns of illegally staying third-country nationals. Press release, 1 June 2026.
29 Taha, R. (2026) EU reaches deal on 'return hubs' for rejected asylum-seekers. DW.

and protections can nonetheless shape practice in states that are not party to it.[30] Evasion therefore weakens protection in both signatory and non-signatory states, while giving every state still outside the regime a ready pretext never to join.

On the precipice: from evasion to rejection

As difficult as this era of evasion and competitive deterrence has been, we are now at the precipice of crossing into something worse: the contestation of the Convention itself. The tactics of evasion – hyper-legalism and obfuscation – rested on the assumption that the public cared whether its government was seen to comply with international law. They were the tools that managed the contradiction, allowing governments to keep refugees out while still appearing to be good international citizens who respect rights and honour their word.

But decades of evasion produced the very failures now blamed on the convention itself: inequitable responsibility-sharing, chronic underfunding and slow and inconsistent asylum procedures that leave people waiting years for their claims to be processed. These delays in turn can incentivise unmeritorious applications, placing further strain on asylum systems. States manufactured the breakdown and then relabelled it a 'crisis', placing the blame either on migrants and people seeking protection or on the international legal frameworks set up to protect them. As Violeta Moreno-Lax argues, this crisis framing is performative. It manufactures the aversion needed to justify and normalise exceptional measures.[31] Through that framing, the failure to build functioning, adequately resourced protection systems becomes a rationale for dismantling access to protection altogether. This is how manufactured breakdown becomes a manufactured mandate for reform.

At the September 2025 UN General Assembly, and at a US-hosted side event on its margins, that attack became explicit.[32] There, the Trump administration declared the global asylum system outdated, broken, and "a significant loophole in our immigration regulations," and set out its "urgent reforms": that asylum be temporary rather than permanent; that a universal "first safe country" rule should prevent asylum seekers from travelling onward to seek protection elsewhere; and that sovereign states alone, not transnational bodies, decide when conditions in a country of origin are safe enough to send people home.[33] At the same General Assembly meeting, Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, called for "a profound revision" of the international conventions governing migration and asylum, rules, she said, "enshrined in an era when mass irregular immigration did not exist."[34]

Note what kind of argument this is. It is not an argument that a particular policy complies with the Convention. It is an argument that the Convention itself is the problem, an attempt not to interpret it, but to undermine it. This shift from evasion to open contestation has not happened in a vacuum. A world defined by polycrisis, and the perception that we are living through a time of compounding emergencies, makes it easier to argue that normal rules should no longer apply. Emergency measures responding to security, public health and economic shocks have already normalised exceptionalism as a mode of governance. Each invocation of emergency lowers the political cost of the next, including the cost of setting aside the hard-won protections of the Refugee Convention.

Some well-intentioned actors have joined the chorus for reform, based on a belief that compromise and concessions are required to head off more radical proposals. But as Filippo Grandi, then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, warned, "Putting the Refugee Convention and the principle of asylum on the table would be a catastrophic error."[35] Such reform proposals risk diluting foundational principles and narrowing the scope of protection for refugees at precisely the moment protection is most needed.

That is the precipice, and it reframes the task of repair. It is no longer only a question of closing the implementation gap. It is a question of defending the Convention's authority itself, of holding the line. So, if that is the diagnosis, what would repair look like? Two overarching pre-conditions must come first. The first relates to the expertise that must drive this work. The second is around winning back public support. The effectiveness of the other tasks I will turn to after depend on both.

Centering lived-experience leadership and expertise

Migration and refugee policy is more durable and more legitimate when it is shaped by those who live its consequences. Centering the expertise and leadership of refugees is crucial to closing the implementation gap

30 Janmyr, M., Gürakar Skribeland, Ö., and Kazmi, A.B. (2025) Non-Signatory States in International Refugee Law. Brill.
31 Moreno-Lax, V. (2024) Crisis as (Asylum) Governance: The Evolving Normalisation of Non-Access to Protection in the EU. European Papers, 9(1), 179-208.
32 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Trump targets the Refugee Convention: a fundamental shift in asylum norms. Mixed Migration Review 2025.
33 US Department of State, Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau at the Panel "The Global Refugee and Asylum System: What Went Wrong and How to Fix It. Transcript. 25 September 2025.
34 Meloni, G. (2025) Statement by Italy at the General Debate of the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly. United Nations General Assembly.
35 Grandi, F. (2025) High Commissioner's Opening Statement to the 76th Plenary Session of the Executive Committee. Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, 6 October 2025.

and defending the Convention's authority. People with experience of displacement understand the problems within our systems and the solutions needed to address them. When their leadership helps to shape policy and practice, refugee protection becomes not only more effective but more just and enduring. This is not an argument for consultation or for providing opportunities for input after substantive decisions have already been made. As the refugee-led network R-SEAT puts it, the test of meaningful participation is not whether refugees are seen at the table, but whether they are heard, and ultimately whether they are trusted to shape the outcome.[36] It is an argument for treating refugee leadership as a method: one that should shape all the concrete measures I will turn to next.

The 2025 Independent Declaration on the Right to Participate operationalises these principles in practice.[37] It affirms the right of people with experience of forced displacement or statelessness to participate in decisions that affect their lives, not as a courtesy but as a right. It was co-developed over two years by a global working group of displaced and stateless experts alongside lawyers, practitioners and academics. It is a model of the refugee-led, norm-building work this moment demands.

Winning back public support

The other necessary pre-condition for repair is winning back public support. As long as leaders believe that hostility towards people on the move wins votes, evasion and contestation of the norms meant to protect them will continue.[38] Refugees and migrants alike are too often scapegoated for economic and social issues that governments themselves have failed to address: the rising cost of living, housing shortages, stagnant wages and underfunded public services. Blaming the newcomer is politically easier than confronting the policy failures at home, and it distracts the public from asking who is actually responsible. If we are serious about repair, we have to become better communicators. We need to unveil the hypocrisy of these claims and expose the political convenience behind them.

We also need to tell a better story. For refugee protection, that story should be grounded in something older than the Refugee Convention itself: the recognition, shared across cultures and faiths for centuries, that people fleeing danger deserve shelter. The Convention did not invent that principle. It gave it legal form.

And when it is upheld, it works. Millions of people have rebuilt their lives under its protection, raising families, contributing their skills, resilience and enterprise to the communities that received them.[39] Protecting people fleeing danger is not only the right thing to do. It is also a shared opportunity. The Convention itself benefits states too. It gives governments a shared set of rules, creates predictability and reduces the chaos of ad hoc, unilateral responses to displacement.[40] When governments undermine it, they are not simply weakening protections for refugees, they are weakening the international system on which they themselves rely.

That is the affirmative story. But a true story does not win on its own merits, not when the space it needs to occupy has already been filled by a false one. Most people's understanding of refugee law does not come from reading the Convention. It comes from social media, from tabloid headlines and from political rhetoric. Much of this is misleading and some of it deliberately distorted. This matters enormously, because misinformation shapes public opinion and public opinion shapes policy.

Rebuilding support thus also depends on effectively countering misinformation. This must be done carefully, as there is a risk that attempts to correct falsehoods can inadvertently amplify them. Fortunately, this is no longer a problem that we need to navigate by instinct. Drawing on the latest research in behavioural science, the Kaldor Centre, together with the Behavioural Insights Team, has developed an evidence-based framework for countering misinformation in the refugee and migration context. It sets out when to pre-bunk falsehoods before they take hold, how and when to debunk those already circulating and when the more effective course is to disregard them and offer a better story instead.[41]

If we get this right and win hearts and minds, not only can we step back from the precipice of outright contestation of the Convention, but also effectively push back against the evasion tactics discussed earlier. The gap between what governments claim and what they actually do becomes something people care about and our task then becomes documenting and exposing that gap.

Only with those two preconditions in place does the concrete work become possible. What follows focuses on three priority areas: fixing asylum systems, strengthening accountability and fostering more equitable responsibility sharing. The intention is not to set out a comprehensive agenda, but rather some key illustrative examples of the repair that is needed.

36 R-SEAT (2025) Participation for Purpose: Seen. Heard? Trusted?.
37 Jakarta Declaration Working Group (2025) Independent Declaration on the Right of Persons with Experience of Forced Displacement or Statelessness to Participate in Decisions That Affect Them ('Jakarta Declaration on the Right to Participate'). 15 December 2025.
38 Ghezelbash, D. and Dorostkar, K. (2024) Understanding the politics of refugee law and policy making: Interdisciplinary and empirical approaches. Journal of Refugee Studies, 37(4), 898–914.
39 UNHCR (2025) The Economic Case for Welcoming Refugees – Fact Sheet.
40 McAdam, J. (2017) The Enduring Relevance of the 1951 Refugee Convention. International Journal of Refugee Law, 29(1), 1–9.
41 Wodak, S., Erdene-Ochir, M., Fung, B., Ghezelbash, D., Martin, L. and Voon, F. (2025) Countering misinformation about refugees and migrants: An evidence-based framework. UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law and Behavioural Insights Team.

Getting asylum processing right

The failure to invest in fair and fast processing is the root of many of the problems facing the current international protection regime. When status determination is slow, the integrity of the whole system suffers.[42] Backlogs accumulate, asylum seekers are left for years in limbo, and the longer the wait, the greater the practical and legal barriers to removing those ultimately found not to be owed protection. Part of this pressure is structural. With few accessible labour migration or other regular routes, the asylum system is often the only avenue into safety and status for many people on the move, regardless of the strength of their claim for protection. This is a gap that wider legal migration pathways, discussed below, are needed to close

States have too often reached for the wrong remedy when seeking to speed up asylum processing: eroding procedural safeguards, setting up restrictive admissibility rules and accelerated procedures, which impede the opportunity of applicants to effectively present their case.[43] These create further backlogs downstream, with higher instances of appeals and decisions being overturned.[44] Following the familiar logic discussed before, states then point to the resulting dysfunction as justification for externalisation measures that prevent people from accessing the asylum process in the first place.[45]

Addressing this requires a fundamental shift: an understanding that fairness and speed are not in tension, but rather fairness is what produces efficiency. That does not mean using the language of fairness while in practice limiting the right to be heard through accelerated and border procedures, as the European Migration and Asylum Pact does.[46] It means frontloading resources into fair and fast decision-making, increasing decision-making capacity not only at first instance but across the appellate bodies too, and giving every applicant early access to independent legal assistance. A growing body of quantitative and comparative research around the world demonstrates that when claimants are supported to put their case properly the first time, decisions are quicker and more accurate, appeal rates fall, and fewer cases are overturned down the line.[47]

This must also be supported by robust doctrinal work identifying binding minimum due process standards that no procedure may fall below. This is another area where hyper-legalism has thrived. States have pointed to the absence of explicit guidance in the Refugee Convention as to how procedures should be structured to justify highly restrictive procedures.[48] What is missing in this context is an integrated reading of the Refugee Convention along with international human rights law. The Refugee Law Initiative's Declaration on Minimum Legal Standards for Asylum Determination Procedures is an attempt to do exactly this.[49] The aim is legal certainty, moving beyond best practice recommendations to binding standards, so that states know the floor they must meet, those assisting asylum seekers have firmer ground on which to hold them to account, and courts have a concrete framework to apply.

This integrative method is not confined to due process standards in asylum procedures. It is often an effective answer to hyper-legalism wherever it appears. Whether in the territory, at sea or in third states, an integrated reading of refugee law, human rights law and other applicable bodies of international law can expose the illegality of practices that states defend by picking and choosing norms that support their actions while ignoring those that do not.

Strengthening accountability

When states breach their obligations, they must be held accountable. That is easy to state but hard to deliver, because the two tactics described above are designed precisely to defeat it. Hyper-legalism evades accountability through argument; obfuscation evades it through concealment. Hyper-legalism can be met on its own terms. It is a legal argument and it can be answered with the integrated, good-faith interpretation of international law just described. Obfuscation is a different beast. When states hide what they do by pushing boats back beyond the public gaze, transferring asylum seekers to third countries or criminalising

42 Barbour, B. (2018) Refugee Status Determination Backlog Prevention and Reduction. Legal and Protection Policy Research Series, Research Paper No. 37/PPLA/2018/03. Division of International Protection, UNHCR.
43 Ghezelbash, D. (2021) Fast-track, accelerated, and expedited asylum procedures as a tool of exclusion. In C. Dauvergne (ed), Research Handbook on the Law and Politics of Migration. Edward Elgar Publishing, 248–261.
44 Bridle, M. and Ghezelbash, D. (2025) Fairness and Efficiency in the Review of Asylum Decisions: Data-Driven Insights and Lessons From Australia's Failed Fast Track Process. Refugee Survey Quarterly, 44(2), 252–273.
45 See, eg, European Commission (2025) Commission proposes to facilitate the application of the safe third country concept. Press release, 20 May 2025. European Commission, Brussels.
46 Apatzidou, V. (2025) Bordering Asylum: Examining the EU's Border Procedures under the Asylum Procedures Regulation (EU) 2024/1348, International Journal of Refugee Law. 37(2), 201–218.
47 For an overview of this research, see Ghezelbash, D. and Hruschka, C. (2024) A Fair and Fast Asylum Process for Australia: Lessons from Switzerland. UNSW Kaldor Centre Policy Brief No. 16, September 2024.
48 Ghezelbash, D. (2025) Refugee Status Determination Procedure. In V. Chetail (ed) Elgar Concise Encyclopedia of Migration and Asylum Law. Edward Elgar Publishing, 455–460.
49 Refugee Law Initiative (2026) Declaration on Minimum Legal Standards for Asylum Determination Procedures. Forthcoming.

disclosure by officials, health workers and NGOs, there is no argument to answer, because the facts have been engineered out of view.

Before accountability of any kind is possible, this veil of secrecy must be pierced. Visibility is the precondition for accountability. Without it, there is no case to bring and no public to persuade. That work begins with the people directly affected. Refugees and asylum seekers themselves are not passive subjects of accountability but among its primary producers: documenting conditions, preserving evidence and reconstructing what governments try to hide from the public gaze.[50] They make the hidden visible not only through testimony and evidence, but through creative works. Their writing, poetry and art can carry the realities of detention and displacement into the public imagination in a register no court filing can reach.[51]

They have been joined by civil society organisations turning the tools of surveillance back on those who run the border. For example, Forensic Architecture and Forensis have used satellite imagery, vessel-tracking data and open-source verification to reconstruct pushbacks at sea, document state failures to carry out their duties of rescue and to expose the brutal realities inside Libya's detention centres and the EU support that sustains them.[52] Search and rescue NGOs have taken this further still, deploying planes over the Mediterranean to spot vessels in distress and document violations in real time.[53] This is countersurveillance: using the same instruments that power the architecture of deterrence to pierce the obfuscation that protects it.[54]

Once facts are in view, the question is what to do with them? One approach is accountability through litigation. This is an area where there is a need for more creativity, in both the tools relied on and in the venues where they are deployed. On tools, the usual focus is on human rights litigation and judicial review in domestic courts, the tried and tested public law mechanisms. But there is a need to think beyond these.

The experience of contesting the offshore processing policies in Australia provides an instructive example. The constitutional and administrative challenges, brought in Australia's own courts, were generally unsuccessful. It was tort law, not public law, that proved to be the more effective avenue. The argument that the Australian government had breached its duty of care by not providing adequate medical care offshore resulted in orders compelling the transfer of asylum seekers and refugees to Australia for medical treatment.[55] Over 320 people were brought back through litigation and the threat of it.

On venue, it was not the decision of an Australian court, but the finding of the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea that detention breached the right to liberty under that country's constitution that ultimately led to the closure of the Manus Island processing centre.[56] That is the double-edged sword of externalisation. It does not only help states evade their obligations, it creates new points of legal vulnerability in the legal system of the partner state.

Litigation, however, cannot stand alone. Legal challenges create an opening that populist leaders are quick to exploit. When a contested question of refugee or migration policy is settled by a court rather than won in the public square, the victory can be real but brittle, easily recast as unelected judges overriding the will of the people.[57] We are currently seeing this play out in Europe. In May 2025, nine states led by Italy and Denmark published an open letter accusing the European Court of Human Rights of having gone "too far" in migration cases and of protecting the "wrong people".[58] A year later, in May 2026, all 46 Council of Europe member states adopted the Chişinău Declaration, calling on the Court to give states greater deference in migration and expulsion cases.[59] A legal win not accompanied by public persuasion can deepen the very backlash we are trying to resist. Winning in court must always be paired with winning in the court of public opinion.

50 Ghezelbash, D. (2022) Technology and countersurveillance: holding governments accountable for refugee externalization policies. Globalizations.
51 See, eg, Boochani, B. (2018) No Friend But The Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison. Trans. O. Tofighian. Picador, Sydney.
52 Forensic Architecture. Investigations – By Category – At sea. (n.d.)
53 Alizadeh Marandi, N.(2024) Italy Threatens to Ground Rescue Planes in the Mediterranean. Human Rights Watch.
54 Ghezelbash, D. (2022) Technology and countersurveillance: holding governments accountable for refugee externalization policies. Globalizations.
55 Talbot, A. and Newhouse, G. (2019) Strategic litigation, offshore detention and the Medevac Bill. Court of Conscience,13, 85–90.
56 Ghezelbash, D. (2025) International refugee law and constitutional interpretation. In Choudhry S., O'Regan C., and Bernal-Pulido C. (eds.) Constitutional Interpretation, Research Handbooks in Comparative Constitutional Law series. Edward Elgar Publishing, Chapter 22.
57 Köker, P., Swalve, T., Huber, M., Hönnige, C. and Nyhuis, D. (2025) Populists before power: delegitimization strategies against independent judiciaries. Democratization, 32(6), 1432–1449.
58 Governments of Denmark, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland (2025) Open letter on the interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights. 22 May 2025.
59 Committee of Ministers, Council of Europe (2026) Chişinău Declaration. 15 May 2026.

From responsibility shifting to responsibility sharing

The distribution of responsibility for refugee protection is profoundly unequal. The states most capable of contributing have invested most heavily in evasion and shifting responsibility onto less-resourced states. Reversing that requires replacing the competitive logic driving the race to the bottom with cooperation and solidarity.[60] Wealthy states need to lead by example, rather than benchmarking against the most restrictive practices elsewhere. That means respecting the right to seek asylum while expanding regular pathways. This includes resettlement, alongside complementary pathways for people in need of protection such as labour mobility, education, family reunification and community sponsorship.[61] It should also include evacuations, whose protective role has only recently drawn systematic legal scrutiny.[62] Providing alternate pathways is also important in addressing mixed movements more broadly. Expanding safe, regular options for work, study and family reunion reduces reliance on dangerous and irregular journeys and the harms that accompany them.

More broadly, it means rebuilding engagement with host and transit countries on different terms. Listening rather than coercing. Cooperation that genuinely promotes protection outcomes, rather than containment, with wealthy states honouring their commitments, not as leverage, but as obligation. It also means confronting the wider collapse in funding across the multilateral system charged with refugee protection and migration governance. For years, UNHCR has operated with far fewer resources than it needs and the gap is widening. Thousands of staff have lost their jobs, and millions of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons now risk losing access to assistance they depend on to survive.[63] Other key international organisations, including the World Food Programme, UNICEF and the International Organisation for Migration, are likewise reporting steep funding shortfalls that are forcing ration cuts, reductions in health and education services and operational restructuring.[64] This has profound consequences for refugees, migrants and host communities, as well as for the credibility of the multilateral system itself.

Conclusion

We live in a world where the scale of displacement is at near record levels.[65] This is in part the product of what has become known as a 'polycrisis': overlapping conflict, climate stress and economic shocks that compound and reinforce one another. It is also true that these same pressures are hardening public opinion towards refugees and migrants in some receiving countries. Yet the overwhelming majority of the world's forcibly displaced people are hosted not in the wealthy states where this backlash is loudest, but in the low- and middle- income countries neighbouring crisis and conflict, many of which face far greater capacity constraints. These factors are placing genuine strain on protection systems, but that strain is distributed radically unevenly.

Governments have a choice in how they navigate this environment and exclusion is not the inevitable response. What we are witnessing is not simply the product of external forces beyond states' control. The protection crisis is in large part the result of the unwillingness of a relatively small number of powerful, wealthy states to deliver the protection they themselves promised. It is also the result of their deliberate choices to undermine the international frameworks created specifically to manage displacement in a predictable and orderly way.

The attacks on the Refugee Convention as it marks its 75th anniversary are the sharpest example of this. The Convention remains fit for purpose but, for too long, it has been undermined by states sabotaging the conditions under which it can operate as intended. Through hyper-legalistic interpretations that shrink obligations while claiming fidelity to them. Through obfuscation that shields conduct from scrutiny and frustrates accountability. Through the race to the bottom that fuels the spread of restrictive policies around the world. Those same states are citing the resulting failures as the justification for reforming or weakening the Convention. That move should be rejected. Defending the Convention in this moment is not head-in-the-sand wishful thinking. It is an act of leadership these times demand. It rests on a clear-eyed accounting of where the failures actually lie: not in the Convention, but in the lack of good-faith implementation of its principles on the part of states.

60 Ghezelbash, D. (2018) Refuge Lost: Asylum Law in an Interdependent World. Cambridge University Press.
61 Crisp, J. (2022) Unpicking the notion of 'safe and legal' routes. Mixed Migration Review 2022. Mixed Migration Centre.
62 McAdam, J. and Mulder, T. (2026) A Last Resort? Reframing Evacuations as an Anticipatory Disaster Risk Management Strategy. Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies, 17(1), 7–29.
63 UNHCR (2025) As funding cuts bite, some 11m people are losing aid. UNHCR briefing notes.
64 UNRIC (2025) Humanitarian aid: the most vulnerable already severely impacted by budget cuts. 1 September 2025.
65 UNHCR (2026) Global Trends Report 2025.

Whether states keep their word in relation to the Refugee Convention has ramifications far beyond the protection of refugees and people on the move. The viability of the broader multilateral rules-based system rests on the premise that commitments will hold, even when they become inconvenient. As Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez put it earlier this year, "[the] international order rests on a shared belief: that power can be restrained by law, that commitments can outlast immediate interests, and that cooperation can moderate rivalry." On his account, the erosion we are witnessing, "Should therefore be treated not as an inevitable decay of multilateralism, but as a test of our willingness to renew it."[66] The Refugee Convention is the frontline of that test. States that treat the commitments they made by ratifying the Convention as disposable should not expect their word to carry weight the next time they need someone else to keep theirs. We should also be open-eyed that this repudiation, once legitimised, will not remain constrained to refugees and migrants. What states permit themselves to do to those with the least power, they eventually permit themselves to do to everyone else.

66 Sánchez, P. (2026). The fiction that moves the world forward, if we defend it. Le Monde Diplomatique. April 2026.

Photo credit: Sipa USA

Despite years of efforts by rights organisations and movements who campaigned to urge the EU to 'rethink' its migration Pact, the 'new' EU Pact on Migration and Asylum came into force on 12th June 2026. Here, tents are placed in front of the German Reichstag Building during a 'Tent demonstration' in an early part of the campaign. Rights organisations and movements are concerned that the Pact is a negative development for protection, rights and opportunities for migrants and asylum seekers in Europe. (See *Keeping track in Europe*, p. 90 and Article: *Born of crisis, bypassed in crisis: the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum after Ceuta*, p. 118).



Protection risks and perpetrators

As argued in the essay *The protection crisis: a crisis of solidarity and political will* (see p. 180), the impacts of polycrisis are driving displacement and migration to near-record levels, while these same pressures are also hardening public opinion towards refugees and migrants in some receiving countries. The perception that we are living through a time of compounding emergencies also makes it easier to argue that normal rules should no longer apply, paving the way for increasingly restrictive and harsh migration policies. This leads to escalating dangers for migrants and refugees en route. This brief gives a global overview of what 4Mi data (31,294 surveys) collected between 2025 and Q2 of 2026 can tell us about protection risks and perpetrators on journeys.

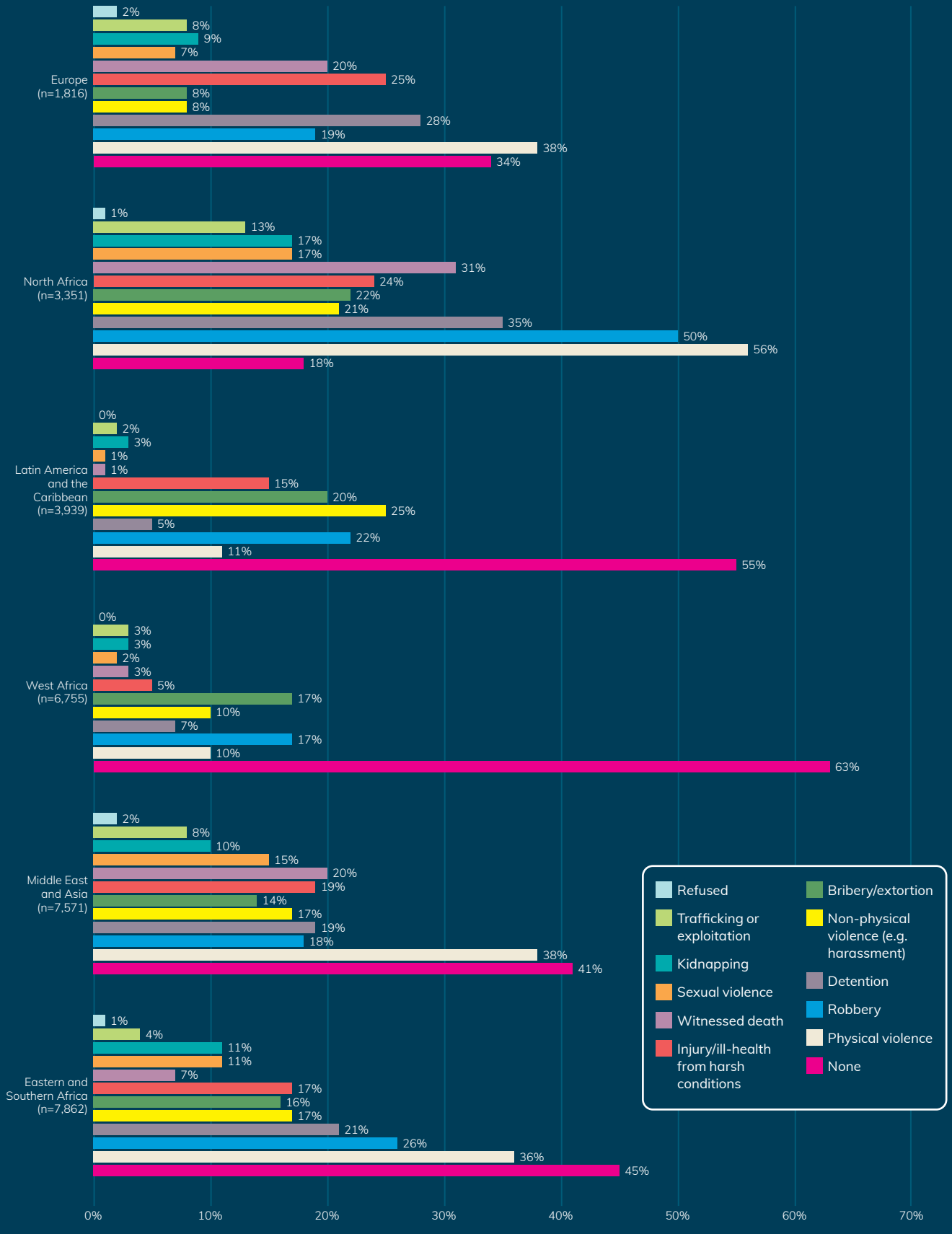
Just over half witnessed or experienced an incident en route

54% reported witnessing or personally experiencing at least one incident during their journey

Across regions, incidents were most reported by people interviewed in North Africa (82%) and Europe (66%), who would, on average, be further along migration journeys and had gone through particularly dangerous zones in North Africa and the Mediterranean crossing. Incidents were least commonly reported by respondents interviewed in West Africa (37%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (45%) (see Graphic 1).

Graphic 1. Did you witness or personally experience any incidents of violence, being injured or other human rights violations on your journey?

(By region of interview, multi-select)



Physical violence, robbery, detention and harassment were the most common incidents overall

Physical violence was the most reported incident overall (30%), followed by robbery (24%), detention and harassment (17% each). However, the types of incidents commonly experienced or witnessed depended on the region of interview.

Among respondents who had reached Europe, physical violence was most prominent, with 38% of people having experienced or witnessed incidents, followed by detention (28%) and injury or ill-health from harsh conditions (25%).

People interviewed in Eastern and Southern Africa reported a similar pattern, with 36% having cited physical violence. Robbery (26%) and detention (21%) were also common, as well as harassment (17%) and injury and ill-health from harsh conditions (17%), among others.

Sexual violence, kidnapping and trafficking highest in North Africa

Respondents interviewed in North Africa reported the highest sexual violence incidents at 17%, followed by Asia and the Middle East (15%). Kidnapping was also reported as highest among those interviewed in North Africa, at 17%, as was trafficking and exploitation (13%).

Sexual violence, which is likely underreported across all regions, was more frequently reported by women than men, at 11% and 8%, respectively.

Harassment and extortion most reported in Latin America

Latin America and the Caribbean stood apart. Harassment (25%) and bribery or extortion (20%) were more often reported there than in any other region, while physical violence (11%) and detention (5%) were far less common.

Witnessing death was highest among respondents in North Africa, Asia and the Middle East and Europe

Death was most often witnessed by people interviewed in North Africa (31%), Europe (20%) or Asia and the Middle East (20%). In North Africa and Europe, this reflects the rising number of deaths reported along Mediterranean routes, as well as the dangers on routes through the Sahara Desert.[1] In Asia and the Middle East, this supports the widespread violence, including deaths, reported along the eastern route through Yemen and to Saudi Arabia.[2]

Perpetrators – commonly state officials and criminals

48% reported **state officials** as perpetrators

48% reported **criminals** as perpetrators

Among people who had experienced or witnessed protection incidents, state officials (48%) and criminals (48%) were named most commonly. Smugglers followed at 30%, then non-state armed groups (29%) and people from local communities (28%). As with incidents themselves, though, who was responsible varied considerably by region.

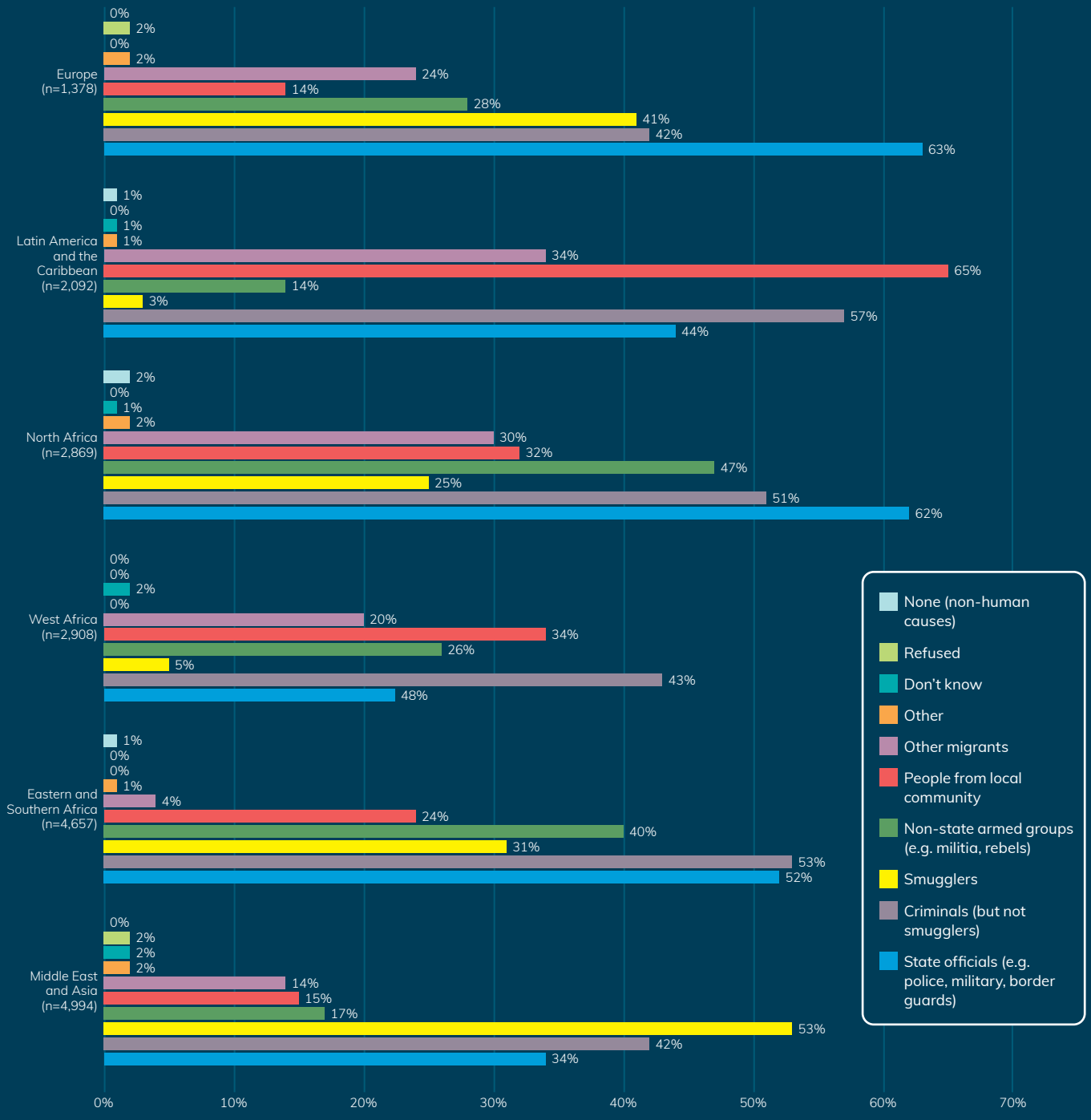
1 IOM (2026) Migration Routes Grow Dangerous Even as Irregular Arrivals Fall in 2026, New IOM Data Show.
2 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Smuggling dynamics on the Eastern Route through Yemen.

State officials were the most commonly named perpetrators among respondents interviewed in Europe (63%), North Africa (62%) and East and Southern Africa (52%). However, it is important to note that these respondents were not only describing incidents and perpetrators in the region where they were interviewed, but also in countries they had passed through earlier in their journeys. This is especially the case for Europe, where interviewees have usually transited through multiple countries and regions. State officials were named least often in Asia and the Middle East and in Latin America, though still at substantial rates (34% and 44% respectively) (see Graphic 2).

Criminals took their place among the top perpetrators for people interviewed in Latin America (57%) and East and Southern Africa (53%), and were commonly named in every other region too, if less often. These abuses may have occurred in the region of interview or elsewhere along respondents' routes.

Graphic 2. Who were the main/the likely perpetrators of such incidents?

(By region of interview, multi-select)



Note: This question was modified in 2026 from asking about likely perpetrators of perceived protection risks along journeys to actual perpetrators of experienced/witnessed protection violations along journeys. For the purpose of this analysis, these were combined.

Local community and other migrant perpetrators most reported in Latin America compared to other regions

An alarming 65 percent of respondents cited people from local communities as perpetrators in Latin America, far higher than any other region. Latin America was also the region where other migrants were most often cited as perpetrators (34%).

> *"In Ecuador, I was raped by other migrants. Since that time, I have been traumatised."*
>
> **30-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Peru**

The role of smugglers

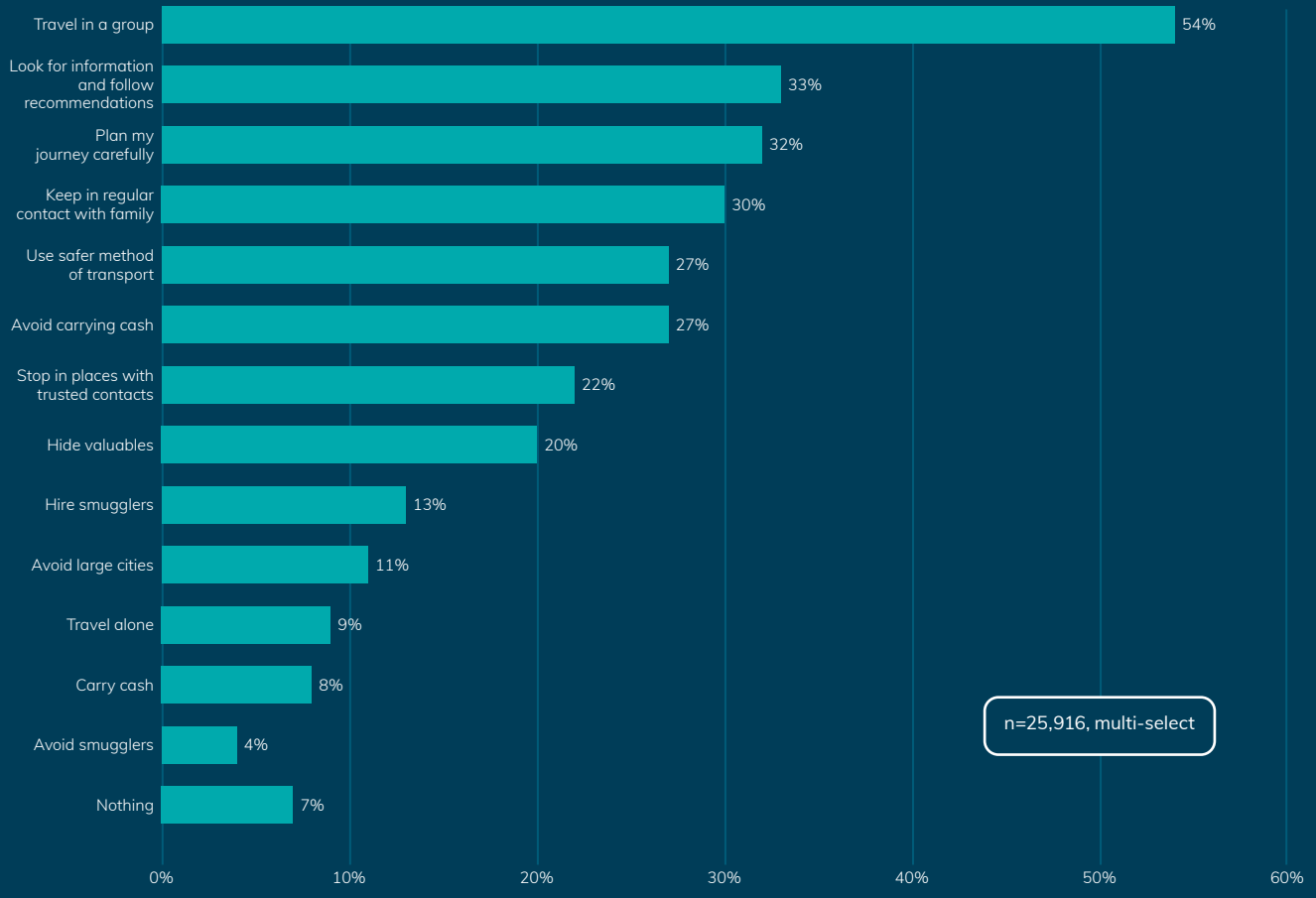
Smugglers ranked among the top three perpetrators for people interviewed in Asia and the Middle East (53%), Europe (41%) and East and Southern Africa (31%). Along the East African and Asia routes in particular, reports of aggravated smuggling are common.

> *"I experienced bribery, harassment, exploitation and abuse; migrants may be exploited by smugglers and face risk in detention where they experience human rights violations."*
>
> **37-year-old Ethiopian woman interviewed in Kenya**

How migrants and refugees are protecting themselves en route

Respondents reported that travelling in a group was how they most often protected themselves from abuse and crime along their journey (54%). Researching and careful planning (33% and 32%, respectively) were also commonly reported. Avoiding carrying cash (27%) and hiding valuables (20%) were important safety precautions, along with maintaining regular communication with family members (30%) and stopping in places with trusted contacts (22%). Regarding smuggler use, 13% reported using a smuggler to help protect themselves from abuse and crime, whereas 4% reported avoiding a smuggler for the same reason. (see Graphic 3).

Graphic 3. What do you do to protect yourself from abuse and crime on your journey?



Impacts of policy on migration experiences



42% reported direct impacts of policies or repressive actions by authorities on their migration experience

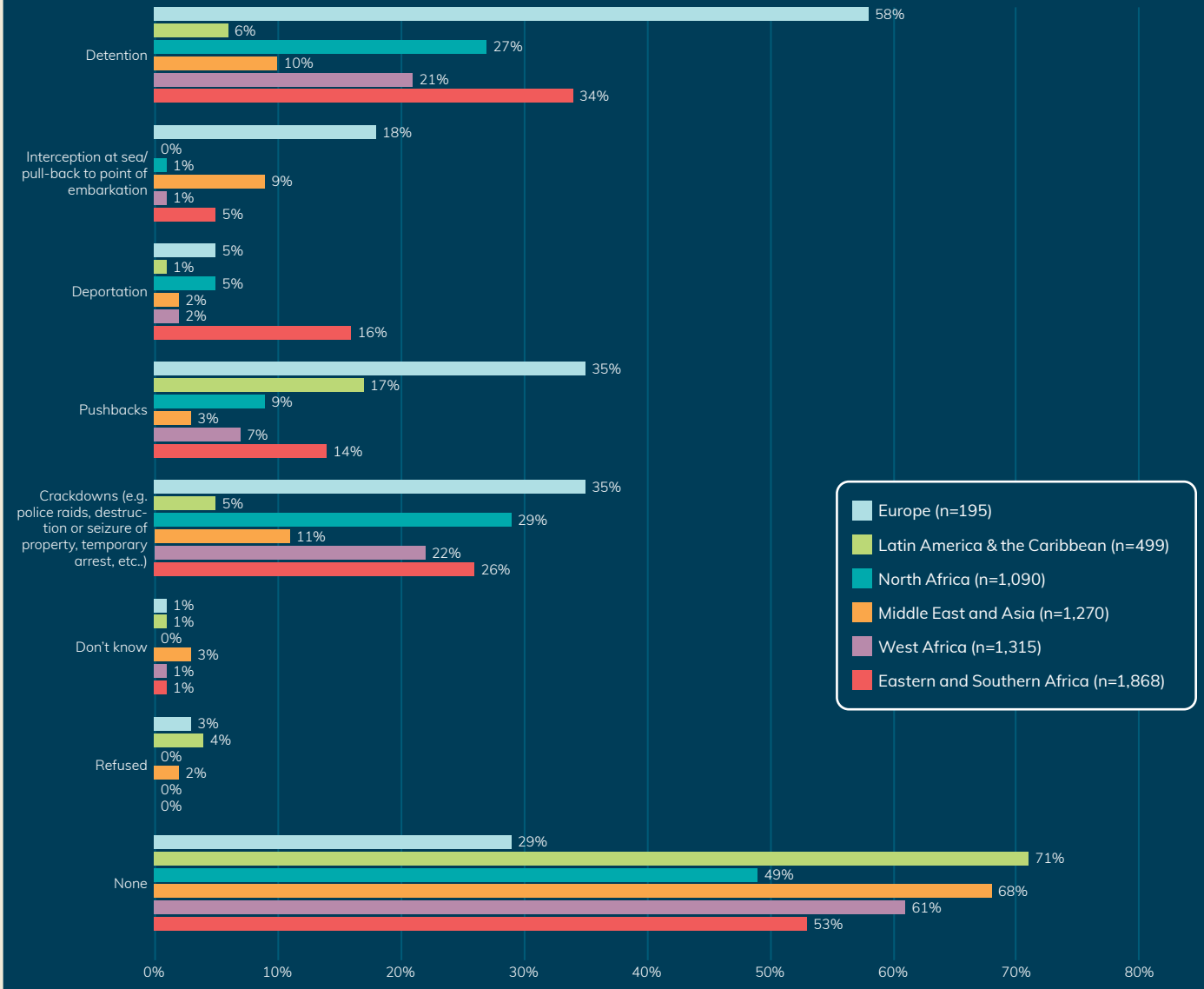
Among those who were asked about the impact of policy on their migration experience (n=6,237), 42% reported direct impacts. Almost a quarter (24%) reported detention, and one fifth (21%) reported crackdowns like police raids. Respondents interviewed in Europe reported the highest levels of experiencing detention along their journeys through multiple regions, at 58%, followed by respondents in East and Southern Africa (34%) and North Africa (27%) (see Graphic 4).

Around a third of people interviewed in Europe reported crackdowns (35%) and pushbacks (35%) as direct impacts of policy on their migration experience. Crackdowns were also commonly reported by those interviewed in North Africa (29%), West Africa (26%) and East and Southern Africa (22%).

> *"I tried to migrate to Europe but I was intercepted at sea in Algeria and then pushed back, and today I'm going through very difficult times in Mali."*
>
> **28-year-old man from Guinea interviewed in Mali**

Graphic 4. Have you experienced any of the following, specifically targeting migrants, in any of the countries you have been through?

(By region of interview, multi-select)





Interview

Migration, multilateralism and the Global Compact: rethinking mobility in a polycrisis

At a time when many Global North states frame migration as one of the most contentious aspects of the current polycrisis, what role do legally and non-legally binding agreements and conventions play? **Jonathan Prentice** offers his perspective on the topic.

Jonathan Prentice is a senior migration governance official at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). His current role is head of the secretariat of the United Nations Network on Migration (UNNM), a network coordinated by IOM that supports implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Most agree that the climate crisis is one of those urgent global crises contributing to this age of 'polycrisis'. Would you say that migration is another? Or perhaps you would disagree with its categorisation as a crisis at all?

Whether it's different forms of climatic events or changing weather patterns, whether it is stresses on our political systems or whether it is the increasing fragility of our economic systems, there does appear to be a number of interlinking crises. I think the migration crisis, as you called it, does play into this polycrisis framing. I suspect it plays a role both as cause and effect. And to your question as to whether or not it is a migration crisis, well, it certainly is for those migrants who are caught up in desperate situations. I think we can all agree that. But is it a migration crisis when you look at the overall migration architecture, whereby the overwhelming number of migrants travel in a safe, orderly and regular way, integrate and then return home? Then no, it's not a crisis. Is it a crisis in terms of overall numbers of migrants? Again, no. But is it a crisis in terms of how some people view it? Politicians, media and otherwise? If people see it as a crisis, then to a certain extent that's all that matters.

Political polarisation has made migration one of the most contentious topics worldwide. Can you see a trajectory or a scenario where this improves international treatment of migrants and refugees, or is the situation only going to worsen?

I don't know if 'political polarisation' is the right phrase, but I agree with you that migration is becoming a very divisive issue in many communities. And let's be clear, we are talking essentially about countries in the Global North, but by no means exclusively. I sometimes wonder whether the reason this issue has become so fraught is that information is often poorly conveyed, even manipulated. Again, coming back to your theme of polycrisis, when there are stresses on our democratic systems, when our societal norms

> **"... the call for greater movement towards alternatives to detention... is another significant achievement which wouldn't have happened without the Global Compact being in existence. But multilateralism is an iterative process. It is not a revolution."**

and values are coming under pressure, when trust in fundamental institutions frays, it's very difficult to know what information to believe and what not to believe. That's where one aspect of the polycrisis exacerbates the migration debate. It is difficult for people to get information that they feel is reliable. But what leaves me with some cause for optimism is, I think, growing signs that states are recognising that the crisis aspects of this agenda cannot be addressed in isolation. Our job in the Network on Migration is to support states in implementing the Global Compact on Migration. Every four years, states come together in New York. They just came together this May and it was a remarkable testament to people's desire for multilateral frameworks to help provide answers, judging by the number of states who attended, the senior level of participation in the forum and the fact that they were able to agree on a consensus outcome, which in the current situation of our multilateral world is an increasing rarity.

Coming to those outcomes: the priorities that you ended up with were strengthening labour rights, expanding safe migration pathways, combatting trafficking and enhancing access to basic services for migrants. Nonetheless, it appears that many of the same governments who endorse these priorities are actively conducting operations and implementing policies in an opposite direction. Or is it more nuanced than that?

I think it's a little more nuanced on several fronts. For a start, if you're going to list the real priorities coming out of the May meeting in the Progress Declaration, I think the call for practical guidelines on strengthening cooperation along routes and along corridors is a significant achievement. The call for greater movement towards alternatives to detention, again through the development of concrete guidelines, is also another significant achievement which wouldn't have happened without the Global Compact being in existence.
But multilateralism is an iterative process. It is not a revolution. So, what you have is a framework that came into existence in 2018 amidst quite a febrile atmosphere where, paradoxically, while the overwhelming majority of states had and have no issue with it – and it was adopted by consensus – a small number of states were viscerally opposed to it. That was where all the noise came from. So it came into being with broad support but the overwhelming noise was hostile. However, since then, you now have a situation in which the UN is coming together more effectively. It can, of course, always be more effective, but the progress has been significant. Furthermore, the number of states attending the May meeting was significantly higher than in 2018 despite it being, politically, a much more complex environment. But, yes, you're right: many of these non-binding commitments are not being realised. For example, we're at record highs in the number of migrants who have gone missing or lost their lives since the last International Migration Review Forum (IMRF). Yet, Objective 8 of the GCM is to actually save migrant lives. So, what do we conclude from that? That this is an exercise in hypocrisy, that it is bankrupt, that it is devoid of meaning? If we do that, then I suggest we have to do the same with the Convention Against Torture or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. And they're legally binding, by the way. That's not an avenue that I would wish any of us to go down. I think we are creating a framework and an ecosystem in which states are gaining comfort in talking to each other on these issues, bringing other actors to the table and we should recognise that eight years ago it didn't exist. Is this any comfort to those people caught up in a crisis now? No, I agree, but that should not be to dismiss the importance of the GCM, only to highlight how much further we have to go.

> **"... it's very difficult to know what information to believe and what not to believe. That's where one aspect of the polycrisis exacerbates the migration debate. It is very difficult for people to get information that they feel is reliable."**

On 12 June 2026, the Pact on Migration and Asylum started to apply throughout European member states. How do you see the pact and do you share the view of some in civil society that it's ultimately a fig leaf for finding ways to deny and control access to Europe?

I want to come back to the polycrisis aspect of it. We at the UN have our perspective on the polycrisis and migration's position within it. It may be that European actors have their own as well. A number of European body politics are under huge strain and one of the reasons is because the migratory discourse has been taken off course in particularly destructive and negative ways. So, it needs to be brought back on course. If there's a polycrisis, there are presumably polysolutions, one of which is to restore faith that governments have a degree of control. In much polling I have seen, there is a strong suggestion that the majority of people are not particularly against migration or particularly for it. What concerns them more is a sense that there is a degree of control. Apart from anything else, I think the Pact on Migration and Asylum goes some way towards that.

> **In 10 years, we're going to be another decade further along with the demographic changes we're currently seeing in many societies. Maybe, that will focus the mind a little more to realise that, actually, migrants tend to be part of the solution rather than the problem.**

The president of the United Nations General Assembly, Annalena Baerbock, opened the May IMRF saying migration is an inevitable human reality. She said the question is not whether migration is good or bad, the question is whether we manage it well and manage it together. The political right and populist right in various countries are on the rise precisely because people disagree with that notion that migration is neutral.

It's also the case that we are, I think, talking about a relatively limited number of countries. Maybe they have an outsized impact on the global debate on migration, but the discourse has taken this turn in a limited number of countries and regions. There are a number of ways we need to work to address it. One would be to always ground comments to any extent possible in data and observations in international law and recognise, coming back to your theme, that because we're living in an era of polycrisis, senses of insecurity and anxiety are going to be heightened. And, at those moments, people are going to have a range of reactions, which is a very human thing to do. So, viewing migration as a crisis on its own which needs its own set of solutions is probably not going to lead us to the promised land, but is contributing to creating a degree of anxiety in which migrants or migration can become too easily a catch-all explanation for this anxiety.

> **If there's a polycrisis, there are presumably polysolutions, one of which is to restore faith that governments have a degree of control.**

It is clearly a significant issue of our time. My point is simply that there are vast chunks of the world where the issue of immigration is not as venomous an issue as in others. And again, in some ways, it comes back to your earlier question. Is this a migration crisis? In the vast canvas of migration in the world today, the majority is moving quite smoothly. But that doesn't mean that we don't need to tackle both the causes of the type of migration, essentially unregulated, that contribute to the effects we are seeing in this more politically charged atmosphere.

I would suggest that, at IOM for sure, and even at the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), we need to question – which is different from criticise – our potential influence in shaping the narrative around the migration story. We often cover the bits of the migration narrative that aren't going well. Now, we do that for a reason. We do it for advocacy, to raise awareness of the plight of those in danger, to highlight solutions that maybe, in the future, could prevent tragedies from happening. Those are all absolutely laudable and necessary reasons, but maybe they do also help contribute to a sense of a migratory governance framework that is out of control and has collapsed under the sheer weight of numbers.

What about multilateralism? You've spoken about it being under strain at the moment, but you were also speaking glowingly of the increased engagement by nation states in the global compacts. So, perhaps, one could argue, despite this kind of erosion of traditional multilateralism, migration compacts seem to be quite healthy. Is that correct?

I detect that you felt I was being naive in my praise for the IMRF. Firstly, I think there is a sense that migration needs collective responses and, secondly, multilateralism needs shoring up. I think those two came together in the IMRF. Now, was it perfect? No. But very few processes in the UN now go through by consensus. Increasingly, the norm is that there will be a vote. Late last year, conversations on migration in some of the committees had been highly divisive, so it was interesting that this wasn't what we saw and what we experienced in May. Now, it may take a bit of time to shake out what exactly that means or what exactly that will yield. Yet, that is a hell of a lot better than what might have been.

> **We often cover the bits of the migration narrative that aren't going well... but maybe they do also help contribute to a sense of a migratory governance framework that is out of control and has collapsed under the sheer weight of numbers.**

What do you think the global conversation on refugees and migration will be like in, let's say, 10 years? What will we be talking about that isn't being talked about enough today? Do you think there will be a paradigm shift?

I would like to see a slightly more sober and grounded conversation. In 10 years, we're going to be another decade further along with the demographic changes we're currently seeing in many societies. Maybe, that will focus the mind to realise that, actually, migrants tend to be part of the solution rather than the problem.

Five years back, I thought the reactions during the pandemic were quite instructive, because while you did have areas of discrimination in terms of access to medication, we also witnessed, in many societies, that the pandemic itself educated people as to the critical role that migrants played in utterly essential aspects of our lives. In sectors such as frontline healthcare and the transport of food and other goods, it drove home that migrants are essential contributors to our communities. I hope that, maybe not through another pandemic, that process of education continues, so that everyone can feel comfortable, including migrants.

The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration

Bram Frouws[1]

It is tempting to classify the collapse of foreign aid as one more entry on the list of things that went wrong this decade, alongside spreading conflict, climate shocks, debt distress and democratic backsliding. Foreign aid, for all its flaws and the criticism it attracts, has still functioned as a shock absorber in the poorest and most fragile countries: keeping drought from becoming famine, a displacement crisis from becoming a protection vacuum, a fragile state from tipping over. Its collapse, therefore, signifies much more than a 'foreign aid crisis'. It is a multiplier of every other crisis, decimating the capacity to absorb and respond to them.

The scale is now documented. In April 2026, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that official development assistance fell by 23.1 percent in real terms in 2025 to USD 174.3 billion, or 0.26 percent of donors' combined national income – the largest annual contraction in the history of overseas development aid (ODA). United States' assistance fell by 56.9 percent, the largest reduction ever recorded by any donor,[2] accounting for three-quarters of the global decline. Within the Development Assistance Committee, 26 of the 34 members cut their ODA, with humanitarian assistance falling by 35.8 percent, aid to the least developed countries by 25.8 percent and aid to sub-Saharan Africa by 26.3 percent.[3]

The decision to withdraw this support at this precise juncture – in an era in which shocks are building and increasingly compounding one another – was a choice, not an accident. But it was also, in an important sense, a product of the same polycrisis it is now amplifying. The polycrisis has provided the justification, among some of the major donors, for an otherwise political choice to cut foreign aid, and these cuts have removed the capacity to absorb the impacts of the polycrisis. For mixed migration, the consequences are huge, and they run deeper than the familiar and largely unfounded claim that aid cuts "cause" more people to move.

A crisis produced by other crises

On 25 February 2025, the United Kingdom announced the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, and the government stated plainly that "the increase… will be funded by reducing ODA from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI and reinvesting it into defence".[4] The House of Commons Library puts the total UK foreign aid at around GBP 9.2 billion by 2027/28, the lowest level since 2012,[5] against roughly GBP 15.4 billion had the 0.5 percent target been maintained.

This major reduction follows the cuts announced in November 2020, when the UK cut aid from 0.7 to 0.5 percent of national income.[6] At the time, the then chancellor told the Commons that "during a domestic fiscal emergency… sticking rigidly to spending 0.7% of our national income on overseas aid is difficult to justify to the British people, especially when we are seeing the highest peacetime levels of borrowing on record."[7] The first major cut was justified by the pandemic and the most recent one by a war, but neither was reversed when the emergency passed.

According to Donor Tracker, the UK is the one donor to have made the defence trade-off the most explicit.[8] Others have used the language of national interest, fiscal consolidation and domestic priorities to justify choices to reduce foreign aid.

In June 2025, NATO allies committed in The Hague to invest five percent of GDP annually on defence and security-related spending by 2035.[9] SIPRI records world military expenditure at USD 2,887 billion in 2025, with a 14 percent rise in Europe alone[10] – an increase of roughly USD 106 billion in a single year, against a total global aid budget of USD 174 billion.[11] ODI Global notes that countries meeting their defence spending target

1 Bram Frouws is the director of the Mixed Migration Centre and a migration researcher with extensive experience across Africa, Asia and Europe. He writes widely on migration and displacement.
2 OECD (2026) Preliminary official development assistance levels in 2025.
3 OECD (2026) Preliminary official development assistance levels in 2025.
4 UK Government (2025) Prime Minister sets out biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, protecting British people in new era for national security.
5 House of Commons Library (2026) UK aid: Reducing spending to 0.3% of GNI by 2027/28.
6 UK Parliament (2025) UK aid: spending reductions since 2020 and outlook from 2024/25.
7 UK Parliament (2020) Spending Review 2020 and OBR Forecast.
8 Welch, Z. and Laub, K. (2025) The impact of defense spending on ODA: Outlook and trends. Donor Tracker.
9 NATO (2025) The Hague Summit Declaration.
10 SIPRI (2026) Global military spending rise continues as European and Asian expenditures surge.
11 SIPRI (2026) Global military spending rise continues as European and Asian expenditures surge.

do not commonly meet their aid target,[12] and projects a 31 percent reduction in ODA volumes over 2024-2029.

Between September 2021 and January 2023, European public finances also absorbed EUR 651 billion in energy-crisis support,[13] on top of borrowing related to the Covid-19 pandemic that has left global public debt near 94 percent of worldwide GDP.[14]

These decisions were made against a backdrop of competing fiscal demands, not in the absence of alternatives: governments facing the same pressures have also raised taxes, issued debt or reallocated other budget lines. That the choice to cut aid was not inevitable, nor necessarily the best option from a foreign policy standpoint, does not make it any less a political choice, nor the polycrisis any less its convenient cover.

The United States is a case apart. Where the cuts by major European donors have been gradual, if substantial, and can be traced to political choices made against a backdrop of rising defence, debt and energy costs, the US cuts were abrupt: decisions, taken within weeks in early 2025, that would reduce foreign aid by more than 55 percent,[15] cancel thousands of ongoing contracts[16] with implementing partners and dismantle United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as an independent agency.[17] This was not primarily a response to the fiscal pressures documented above – it was a distinct political choice to reorder the aid architecture itself. Its effects, however, still compound everything else described here: the people and systems absorbing the US withdrawal are largely the same ones already strained by conflict, climate shocks and other donors' cuts, so the consequences add to the same multiplier regardless of the cause.

A final layer complicates this: where the remaining aid goes. A substantial share never leaves the donor country at all: in-donor refugee costs stood at USD 23 billion in 2025, 13.2 percent of all ODA,[18] a share that held steady even as the total pot collapsed by almost a quarter. In the UK, these costs fell to 18.3 percent[19] in 2025, a decrease of 15 percent from the previous year. Meanwhile, Ukraine received USD 44.9 billion in development assistance in 2025, more than the 44 least developed countries combined.[20]

The multiplier

All these factors produce a compounding effect rather than an additive one. People and communities absorbing drought, conflict, inflation and debt distress simultaneously lose, in the same period, the assistance that made those shocks survivable. Modelling published in *The Lancet Global Health* in February 2026 projects that current defunding could produce 22.6 million additional deaths by 2030 across 93 low- and middle-income countries[21] in its severe scenario, with 5.4 million of them being children under five.

The humanitarian system has responded not by asking for more, but by asking for less. The 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview seeks USD 33 billion for 135 million people,[22] with a hyper-prioritised tier of USD 23 billion for 87 million – out of 239 million people[23] assessed as being in need. The 2023 appeal, by comparison, was USD 51.5 billion.[24] In 2025, the appeals were funded at 35.5 percent.[25] Fewer than 60 percent of people identified as in need are even being targeted but, despite the severity of the situation, the international community has been forced to lower the ambition to meet those needs.

The arrivals paradox

Against this backdrop, arrivals at the borders of wealthy states continue to fall. Frontex recorded that irregular crossings into the EU decreased by a third in the first eight months of 2026, with the Central Mediterranean down by 55 percent and the Western African route down by 58 percent – the steepest decline recorded amongst the most active routes.[26] At the US southern border, encounters fell from 1,530,523 in fiscal year 2024 to 237,538 in 2025.[27] Provisional figures for fiscal year 2026 are of 128,009 encounters.[28] In June 2026, UNHCR reported that global refugee numbers had fallen for the

12 Pudussery, J. and Gulrajani, N. (2025) Aid and defence: A data story of two global targets. ODI Global.
13 Sgaravatti, G., Tagliapietra, S., Trasi, C. and Zachmann, G. (2023) National fiscal policy responses to the energy crisis. Bruegel.
14 International Monetary Fund (2026) Fiscal Monitor: Fiscal Policy under Pressure: High Debt, Rising Risks.
15 OECD (2026) A historic decline in foreign aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA data.
16 Schreiber, M. (2025) Rubio announces that 83% of USAID contracts will be cancelled. NPR.
17 Faguy, A. (2025) USAID officially closes, attracting condemnation from Obama and Bush. BBC.
18 OECD (2026) Preliminary ODA levels in 2025.
19 Bond (2026) UK aid spend falls by over £1 billion in 2025 as over 18% of budget diverted towards asylum support costs.
20 Loy, I. (2026) What the latest OECD numbers tell us about the future of aid. The New Humanitarian.
21 Da Silva, A., Anderle R., Sibils, G. et al. (2026) Impact of two decades of humanitarian and development assistance and the projected mortality consequences of current defunding to 2030: retrospective evaluation and forecasting analysis. The Lancet Global Health, 14, Iss. 5, e690-e701.
22 OCHA (2025) Global Humanitarian Overview 2026.
23 OCHA (2025) Global Humanitarian Overview 2026.
24 OCHA (2022) Global Humanitarian Overview 2023.
25 Financial Tracking Service (2024) Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) snapshot for 2025.
26 Frontex (2026) Frontex: Irregular border crossings into the EU down 1/3 in first 8 months of 2026.
27 Gramlich, J. (2026) Migrant encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border are at their lowest level in more than 50 years. Pew Research Center.
28 U.S. Customs and Border Protection (2026) Southwest Land Border Encounters.

first time in a decade, to 41.6 million[29] – driven, though, by 14.7 million returns, including to Afghanistan, Sudan and Syria, which say rather little about conditions improving.

There are two competing explanations for this. The first is enforcement: routes closed, deterrence hardened, third countries paid to intercept earlier and the legal architecture for removal expanded. The second is capability. Migration costs money, and the collapse of household economies removes the means to fund a journey long before it removes the reason to make one.

This is the distinction migration scholarship has insisted on for two decades. Carling's work on 'involuntary immobility'[30] and de Haas's 'aspirations-capabilities' framework[31] both treat the ability to move as a resource which can be depleted independently of the desire to move. Furthermore, Clemens's evidence on the 'emigration life cycle'[32] shows emigration rising with income across the lower part of the development range, which is why the assumption that aid keeps people in place was always weak – and why, conversely, its withdrawal will not straightforwardly produce more movement.

As argued in the Mixed Migration Review 2025,[33] the paradox is that, as aid shrinks, more people may need or want to move, while fewer might be able to. A September 2026 study by the Danish Refugee Council and the University of Copenhagen, which followed South Sudanese refugee households in Kenya and Uganda through the 2025 aid cuts, found exactly this split: some stayed in the camps and adjusted their livelihoods, while others moved – mostly back to South Sudan, often pushed by debt, in what the authors call 'survivalist mobility' or 'distress migration'. Which option was open to people depended on policy, geography and, above all, social networks, with relocation to towns largely out of reach for those without money or connections.[34]

What follows are three more versions of what the impact of aid cuts on mixed migration could look like.

More movement, short range

In the camps of Cox's Bazar, some 1.2 million Rohingya cannot work, study or leave.[35] Assistance is not a supplement to the economy, but a large part of it. The World Food Programme has lost roughly a third of its funding, and the Rohingya response, only around half funded in 2025, opened 2026 at 19 percent.[36] From 1 April 2026, the monthly food allocation was restructured into three tiers of USD 12, USD 10 and USD 7, with around 17 percent of the population dropping to the lowest band.

This may have contributed to an increase in maritime and regional – although not intercontinental – movement: between January and March 2026, 2,907 Rohingya left Bangladesh and Myanmar by boat, against 1,571 in the same months of 2025[37] – an 85 percent increase, concentrated around the ration cuts, with women and children making up over half of those departing. Of course, these remain small numbers against a camp population of more than a million, which demands caution in drawing strong conclusions. However, it is plausible that the withdrawal of assistance, when assistance is so crucial for survival, may be pushing more people onto boats.

More people stuck with less protection

In Mexico, the services that would once have received someone stranded mid-route were defunded in the same period the route closed. UNHCR Mexico, which had relied on the United States for 86 percent of its USD 58 million budget, cut that budget by 60 percent and closed four of 12 offices.[38] Mexico's asylum agency lost around 60 percent of its own budget, leaving roughly 100,000 people stuck at pre-registration[39] and an estimated 80,000 stranded at Mexico's two borders. In Tapachula, on the southern border, shelters operate at less than a third of their previous capacity,[40] while Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)'s mental health consultations rise. In this case, the cuts did not lead to movement of people. Rather, US policies led to more people being stranded – and then removed the resources which made being stranded survivable.

29 UNHCR (2026) Refugee numbers drop for first time in a decade, but millions remain trapped.
30 Carling, J. (2002) Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 28(1), 5-42.
31 De Haas, H. (2021) A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework. Comparative Migration Studies, 9.
32 Clemens, M. A. (2020) The Emigration Life Cycle: How Development Shapes Emigration from Poor Countries. IZA Institute of Labor Economics.
33 Frouws, B., Vallentine, J. and Worden R. (2025) The end of development aid? How aid cuts may reshape migration management. Mixed Migration Centre.
34 Danish Refugee Council (2026) Staying and Moving: Refugee Adaptations to Cuts in Humanitarian Support.
35 UNHCR (2026) Bangladesh.
36 Gelineau, K. (2026) Food assistance slashed for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees trapped in Bangladesh camps. The Hill.
37 Save the Children (2026) Rohingya boat departures nearly double this year as aid cuts and insecurity force families out of camps.
38 Mexico News Daily (2025) United Nations refugee agency closes 4 offices in Mexico due to US funding cuts.
39 Oakes, A. (2026) The UN Refugee Agency's New Boss in Mexico Has Her Work Cut Out for Her. PassBlue.
40 Médecins Sans Frontières (2025) Tapachula: Once a transit hub, now a dead end for migrants stranded in Mexico. Doctors Without Borders.

More than 6.4 million Afghans[41] have returned from Pakistan and Iran since September 2023, over 1 million of them this year, with returns in 2026 driven by two wars. Fighting with Pakistan displaced close to 115,000 people and hit the reception centres[42] at Torkham and Spin Boldak, and Pakistan speeded up deportations[43] once the border reopened. By August, 426,700 Afghans had left Iran,[44] an estimated 82 percent of them deported.

On the western border, the war between Iran and the US pushed returns to around 1,700 per day[45] in its early weeks, while Iranian food prices rose by almost 130 percent and families who could no longer afford to stay began leaving on their own.[46] Back in Afghanistan, chronic malnutrition and poverty plague the country. The UN World Food Programme reports they are able to support only one in nine of the country's 14 million acutely hungry,[47] with the USD 1.7 billion national appeal being only 30 percent funded[48] as of late August.

Aid cuts did not cause these returns; policy and war did. However, they mean that people, many in acute need, are returning to a country whose humanitarian response cannot receive them. The UN has warned that such rapid returns risk generating further instability and onward movement,[49] yet few returnees from Iran plan to leave again (in UNHCR's post-return monitoring, only 6 percent said they intended to, most of them straight back to Iran).[50] The result is people pushed back into the place least able to receive them.

The displacement of routes and the misreading of falling arrivals

UNHCR opened 2026 with a USD 1.6 billion appeal covering Sudanese refugees in seven countries.[51] In Egypt, which has received some 1.5 million Sudanese since 2023 and where 851,427 are registered with UNHCR as of August 2026,[52] budget cuts forced the closure of two of the operation's three registration centres, pushing appointments as far back as 2029 and leaving people undocumented and exposed, with those who could neither register nor stay safely beginning to move west. Sudanese are now the single largest migrant nationality in Libya, at around 34 percent of the total.[53]

Departures from eastern Libya towards Crete have grown (from 815 arrivals in 2023 to 5,161 in 2024 and over 25,000 in 2025,[54] although numbers dropped again to around 13,500 as of the end of September 2026), while almost every other route into Europe has contracted.

Nonetheless, headlines about falling Mediterranean arrivals may risk concealing other realities. For example, a funding shortfall could close registration centres in Cairo, with the backlog producing undocumented statuses for many people. In turn, these people would be at risk of detention and removal or may be led to make the journey into Libya, feeding into the growing European route. Still, set against 11.5 million people displaced by the Sudan conflict,[55] these are marginal numbers, which is precisely the overarching point. Most displaced Sudanese, within Sudan and in neighbouring countries such as Chad, are stuck, with the humanitarian response that should support them severely underfunded.[56]

Because arrivals in Europe and North America are falling in the same period as funding cuts are rising, the two risk being read in donor capitals as cause and effect – proof that deterrence works and that assistance was never the thing holding the line. Falling arrivals, however, measure the closure of routes and the exhaustion of household resources, not the resolution of the crises people are leaving. If further cuts are justified on the strength of that reading, the buffer erodes further while the pressure behind it continues to build.

Almost everything described above – a quarter of a million people held at the edge of Chad, 100,000 stalled in a Mexican asylum queue, boats in the Bay of Bengal – is invisible in arrival statistics in Europe and the US. The needs have not decreased, but the visibility of needs in the countries where the donor money is decided have.

41 Zahidi, B. (2026) Over 6.4 million Afghans Return from Iran and Pakistan in Three Years, UNICEF Says. KabulNow.
42 Osmani, A. and Osmani, I. (2026) Afghans deported from Pakistan face loss, separation and war at home. Zan Times.
43 Dipti Sur, P. and Din Ikram, Q. (2026) Pakistan Must Immediately Halt Deportation of Afghan Refugees. Refugees International.
44 U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2026) Return Without Protection: Afghan Refugees and the 2026 U.S.-Iran War.
45 United Nations (2026) Afghanistan returns increase amid conflict and displacement. United Nations.
46 Al-Haei, R. (2026) 'The wealthy poor': Soaring food prices hurt Iranian families. Al Jazeera.
47 United Nations (2026) Afghanistan hunger crisis intensifies as millions left without food aid.
48 Zahidi, B. (2026) Over 6.4 Million Afghans Return from Iran and Pakistan in Three Years, UNICEF Says. KabulNow.
49 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR mobilizing across region as Middle East crisis escalates.
50 UNHCR (2025) Afghanistan post-return monitoring survey report.
51 United Nations (2026) Sudan crisis: UN agency launches $1.6 billion appeal to support refugees in seven countries.
52 UNHCR (2026) Egypt.
53 Zaptia, S. (2026) Nearly one million illegal migrants in Libya: IOM. Libya Herald.
54 Mejdini, F. and Herbert, M. (2026) A smuggling route reawakens: Movement surges between eastern Libya and Crete. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.
55 World Health Organization (2026) Public health situation analysis: Sudan Conflict and Complex Emergency.
56 United Nations (2026) Sudan crisis: UN agency launches $1.6 billion appeal to support refugees in seven countries.

When the remaining aid becomes migration policy

In the context of funding cuts and rising defence spending, shrinking aid budgets are also simultaneously being re-purposed. The European Commission's proposed Global Europe instrument would provide EUR 200.3 billion for 2028-2034,[57] that the Center for Global Development (CGD) calculates as, at best, a 44 percent increase and most likely under a 30 percent increase in real terms.[58] More significant than the envelope is its architecture. The proposal removes the indicative spending targets of the current instrument – including the 10 percent migration benchmark.[59] According to the think tank ECDPM,[60] the result is a paradox at the centre of the debate: migration may become more politically important within EU external action while becoming financially less visible, harder to track and potentially more strategically fragmented.

The proposal includes, in Article 12-3, a power to suspend support where a partner country fails to readmit its own nationals.[61] ECDPM describes this as a hardening from a general "'incitative approach' to a distinct mechanism of negative leverage directly linked to readmission cooperation".[62] Oxfam's migration coordinator put it more sharply: "this is the first time that they [have tried] to put conditionalities into legislation."[63]

The direction of travel is consistent across instruments. The Commission's January 2026 visa policy strategy[64] states that the EU "must expand its toolbox to include instruments in other areas, such as international cooperation and trade." The Return Regulation, agreed in June 2026,[65] permits return hubs in third countries, with five member states aiming for first transfers in 2027[66] and partner countries expected to receive funding and "other incentives". On the other side of the Atlantic, the same logic operates without the pretence of development: a US Senate minority staff investigation documented direct payments to governments to accept third-country deportees,[67] concluding that, in some cases, more than USD 1 million was spent per person transferred. According to the Guardian[68] and Washington Post,[69] the United States is willing to spend USD 410 million on deportation agreements and USD 250 million was reappropriated[70] from refugee aid programmes "with US-based resettlement groups to help finance 'Project Homecoming', a Department of Homeland Security initiative aimed at incentivising migrants to leave the country."

Where to from here?

The polycrisis contributed to (and provided the justification used by many politicians for) the foreign aid cuts: the cuts removed the capacity to absorb the shocks and stresses resulting from the polycrisis, and the much-reduced aid budgets are increasingly used towards containing movement, or even for remigration and deportation efforts.

Three things follow for policy. First, the fall in arrivals should not be read as success nor as a sign of decreasing needs or aspirations to migrate. It is, instead, a measurement of exhaustion. Second, just like tying development aid to objectives to reduce irregular migration was always problematic to begin with,[71] it should also not be concluded that a reduction in aid would inevitably lead to more, or less migration. Third, and most practically, the populations bearing the cost of foreign aid cuts are overwhelmingly not at donor borders. They are in Chad, in Cox's Bazar, in Tapachula and in Cairo, in countries already hosting the large majority of the world's displaced.

Underfunding today may buy short-term political gains domestically for Western governments, but it risks producing deeper instability, more protracted displacement and more expensive emergencies later – costs that will be borne first by people on the move and the communities hosting them and, eventually, also by the donors who decided the 'savings' were worth making.

57 ECDPM (2025) A companion guide to the Global Europe instrument proposal.
58 Gavas, M. and Granito, L. (2026) How Much Is the EU's Proposed Development Budget for 2028-2034 Really Increasing? Center for Global Development.
59 Knoll, A. (2026) How the next MFF could reshape EU migration financing. ECDPM.
60 Knoll, A. (2026) How the next MFF could reshape EU migration financing. ECDPM.
61 ECDPM (2025) A companion guide to the Global Europe instrument proposal.
62 ECDPM (2025) A companion guide to the Global Europe instrument proposal.
63 Di Sario, F. (2026) How EU development aid could bankroll migrant deportations. The Parliament Magazine.
64 European Commission (2026) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on EU visa policy strategy.
65 Council of the European Union (2026) Council and Parliament reach deal on returns of illegally staying third-country nationals.
66 Genovese, V. (2026) Five EU countries aim to send migrants to return hubs by 2027. Euronews.
67 U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2026) At What Cost: Inside the Trump Administration's Secret Deportation Deals.
68 Loveluck, L. (2026) Banished to alien lands: Trump's secret deportation deals. The Guardian.
69 Nakamura, D. and Taylor, A. (2026) How Trump turned refugee bureau into a $410 million deportation operation. The Washington Post.
70 Nakamura, D. and Taylor, A. (2026) How Trump turned refugee bureau into a $410 million deportation operation. The Washington Post.
71 Frouws, B. (2020) Mistaken metaphor: the 'root causes' approach to migration is both dishonest and ineffective. Mixed Migration Centre.

Photo credit: Artaxerxes Longhand

In Atar, in Mauritania's desert Adrar region, a sack of EU humanitarian food aid is handed out during a relief distribution, a lifeline for households facing poverty and economic hardship. Around 500,000 Mauritanians, about 11 percent of the population, were projected to face crisis-level food insecurity during this year's lean season. The need is rising just as aid is shrinking: while the EU has pledged €1.9 billion in humanitarian aid for 2026, major European donors including Germany and France have sharply cut their own budgets, leaving agencies like the World Food Programme short of funds in Mauritania. (See Essay *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration* p. 202).



Access to assistance

Global humanitarian funding dropped heavily in 2025, driven by sharp cuts in support from the United States and other major donors. This has removed people's absorption capacity to cope with the many shocks and stresses caused by the compounded impact of the polycrisis, as argued in the essay *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration* (see p. 202). Against this backdrop, assistance needs among refugees and migrants remain critical across regions. In many cases, refugee and migrant communities themselves are filling assistance resourcing gaps, despite their already strained resources, as discussed in the essay *The survival trap: why adaptation is not protection in the age of polycrisis* (see p. 230). This brief gives a global overview of what 4Mi data (31,294 surveys) collected between 2025 and Q2 of 2026 can tell us about access to assistance and assistance needs of refugees and migrants on the move across the world.



60% of respondents reported needing assistance at some point en route but not receiving it

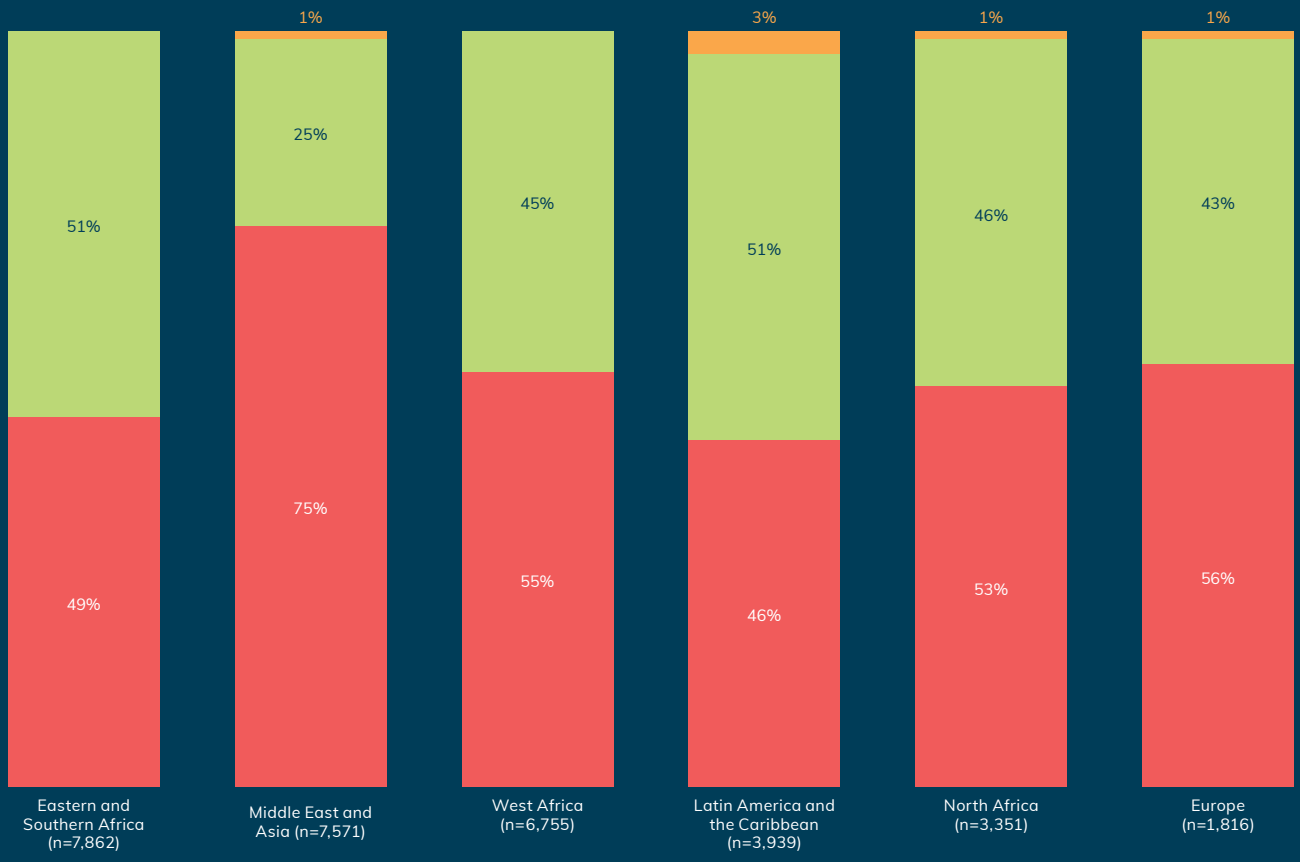
Across regions, respondents interviewed in North Africa (81%), Europe (73%), and Asia and the Middle East (69%) most commonly reported needing assistance during their journey but not receiving it.

Globally, less than half (42%) of refugees and migrants interviewed reported that they had received some form of assistance during their migration journey – where assistance refers to support provided to a person without payment, exchange or condition attached. Assistance was most commonly reported by those interviewed in Latin America and the Caribbean (51%) and East and Southern Africa (51%), while least commonly in Asia and the Middle East (25%) (see Graphic 1). Women slightly more frequently reported receiving assistance than men (47% vs 40%, respectively), while there was no difference between respondents travelling with or without children.

> *"We need assistance, and since this journey is hard, I will ask humanitarian organisations to assist us because we are travelling without food and water."*
>
> **25-year-old man from Ethiopia interviewed in Somalia**

Graphic 1. Did you receive assistance along the way?

(By region of interview)



Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Food and water are the most common forms of assistance

Among those who received assistance (n=13,236), most accessed immediate relief in the form of food (80%) and water (75%). Access to other types of assistance followed at a distance, mainly in the form of shelter (37%) and medical assistance (20%). This gap was particularly pronounced in Eastern and Southern Africa, where those who accessed assistance mostly received food (87%) and water (85%), yet rarely received more specialised, protection-oriented support, including medical assistance (13%), legal assistance (6%), psychological support (2%) and safe spaces for women and children (2%). Medical assistance was accessed more commonly by respondents travelling with children (32% vs 16% among those travelling without), likely reflecting children's greater vulnerability to illness en route and caregivers' greater propensity to seek help.

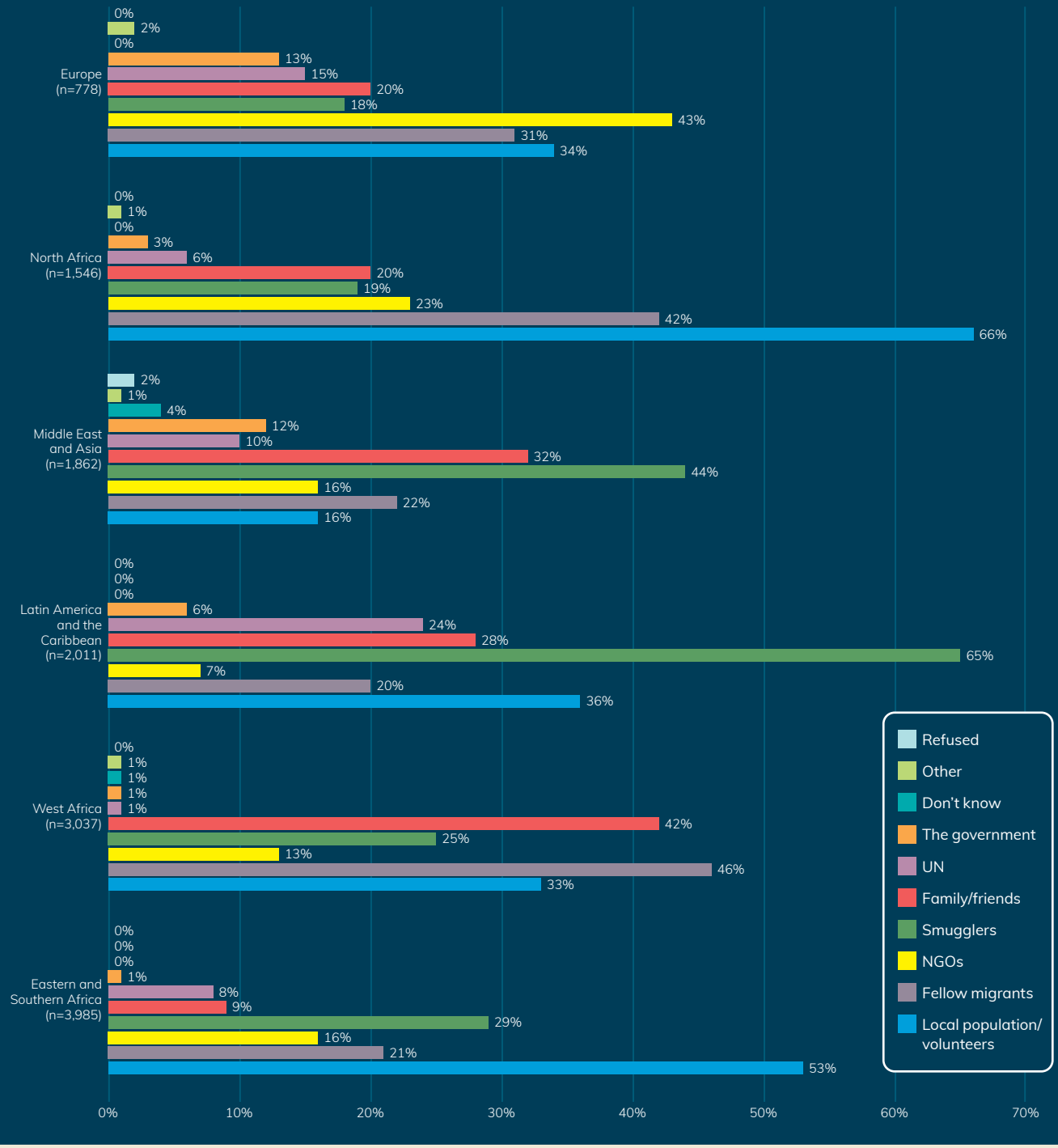
Local communities and fellow migrants are top sources of help

Assistance was overwhelmingly provided by local populations and volunteers (41%) and fellow migrants (30%). These were ahead of any formal channel, including NGOs (25%), the UN (9%) or government support (4%) (see Graphic 2). Host-community generosity and migrant-to-migrant solidarity are not only filling a gap, but are the main source of support for people on the move. In a context of shrinking humanitarian services, responding to unmet needs will be loaded even further onto informal and under-resourced solidarity-based support.

> *"First, we went through Malaysian waters. There, people on other boats gave us water to drink. Then, we travelled through Thai waters, where they also gave us water and biscuits to help us during the journey... We had to rely on the kindness of others for basic things like water and food."*
>
> **19-year-old man from Myanmar interviewed in Indonesia**

Graphic 2. Who did you receive assistance from?

(By region of interview; among respondents who reported receiving assistance, multi-select)



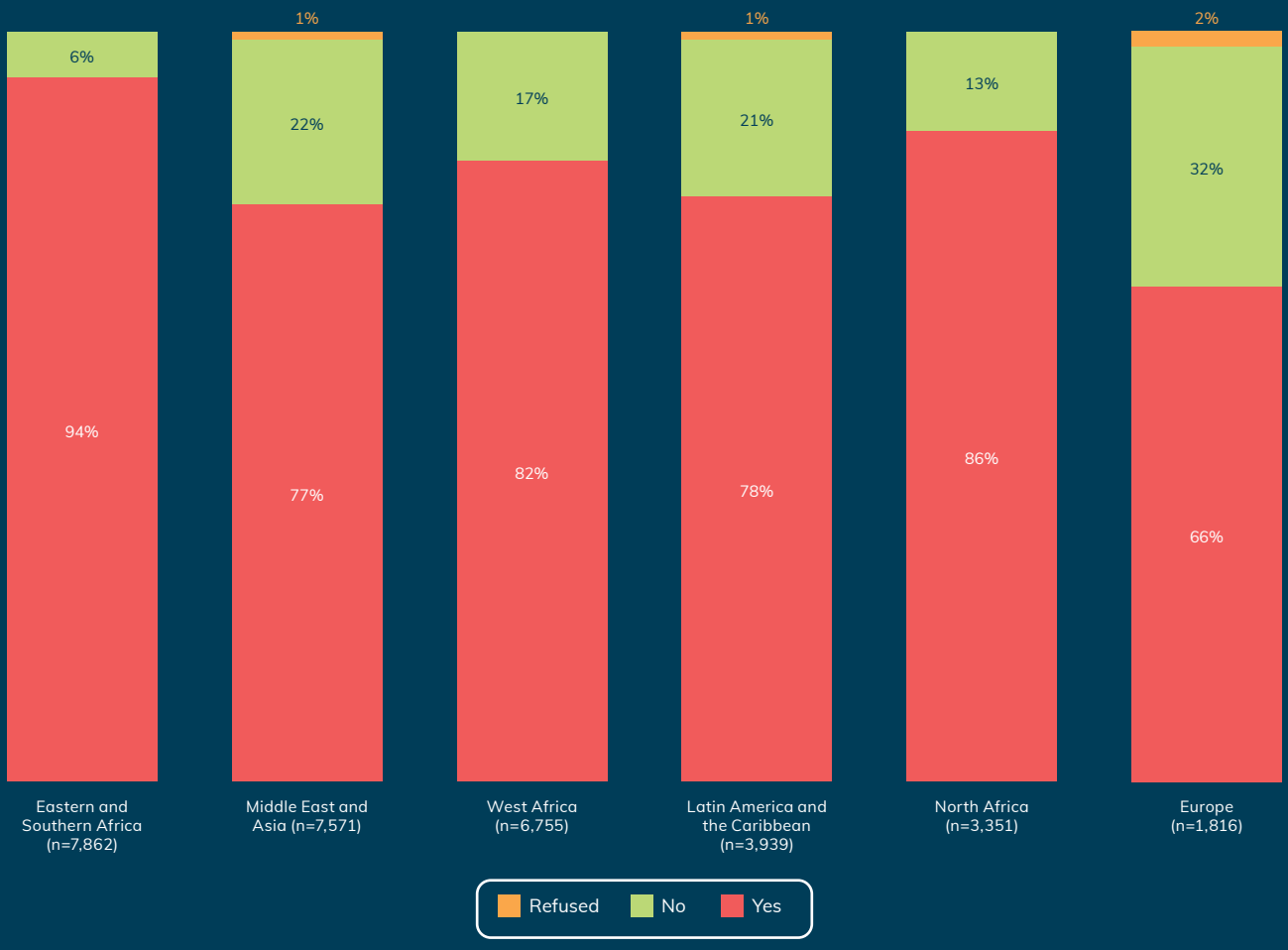
Majority report assistance needs: cash and food top the list

83% needed assistance at the time of interview

The large majority of interviewees reported needing assistance at the time of interview. This need was highest in Eastern and Southern Africa (94%) and lowest, but still reported by the majority, in Europe (66%). Needs were consistent across genders and those travelling with/without children (see Graphic 3).

Graphic 3. Do you need additional assistance now?

(By region of interview)

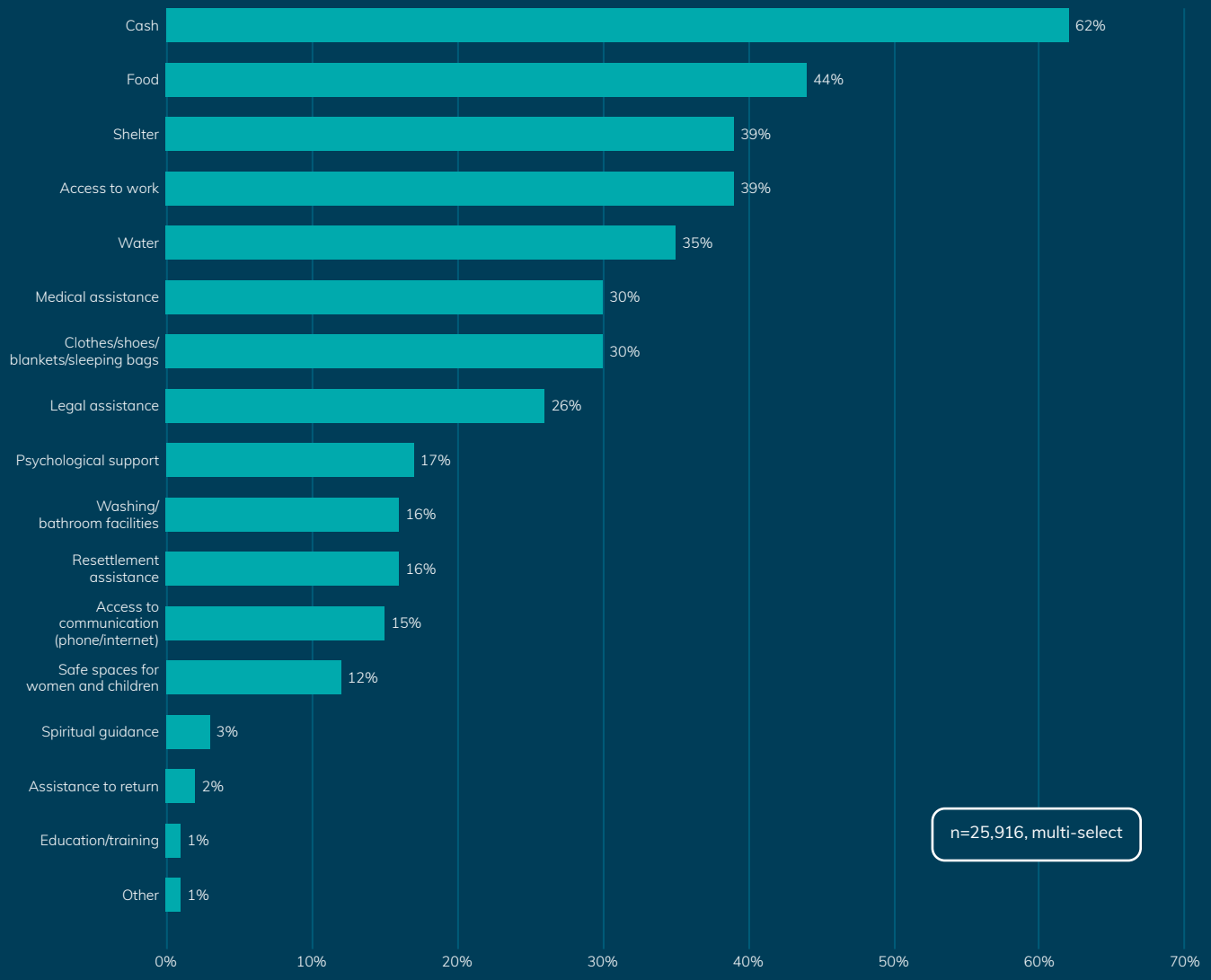


Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Among those who say they need assistance (n=25,916), cash (62%) and food (44%) were the most commonly cited needs, followed by shelter (39%) and access to work (39%) (see Graphic 4).

Graphic 4. What kind of assistance do you need?

(Among respondents who reported needing assistance)



Needs, however, vary notably by region: cash needs were highest in West Africa (81%) and North Africa (73%) and lowest in Europe (35%), while the need for legal assistance was far higher in Latin America (47%) than in West Africa (10%), reflecting differing legal-status concerns along these routes. The need for safe spaces for women and children was expectedly higher among those travelling with children compared to those travelling without (24% vs 8%, respectively), and gendered (21% among women vs 7% among men).

> *"We had very little food, water or help, and many people were weak, sick or in danger... migration is not easy, especially for families with small children. Refugees like us need protection, safety and support."*
>
> **29-year-old woman from Myanmar interviewed in Indonesia**

Photo credit: Golnaz Jamsheed

Afghan children inside a refugee settlement in Yazd, Iran. Iran, alongside Pakistan, hosts the largest number of Afghans. In 2025, amid rising anti-Afghan sentiments, more than 1.9 million Afghans returned from Iran, many involuntarily. Deportations have continued into 2026, meanwhile need in Afghanistan is huge and foreign aid is dwindling. The UN refugee agency's operation in Iran is only a fraction funded this year. (See *Keeping Track in Asia* p. 122 and Essay *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration* p. 202).



Article

The rise of anti-migrant sentiment at a time of economic anxiety

This article aims to show how the current and recent economic anxiety – as a central outcome of the polycrisis era – has translated into anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiment around the world in 2026. While this dynamic is not new and has been observed at different points in history, the scale and scope of anti-migration-related demonstrations and electoral support for parties with strong anti-migration views and agendas are unusually broad.

Indeed, what was once confined to the political fringes of explicit anti-migration platforms has moved into the mainstream of governance in 2026, with parties built around restricting or reversing migration now winning power, entering coalitions or setting the terms of debate in many countries. In short, this article illustrates that, when times are tough, people look for something or someone to blame, and political elites typically capitalise on this dynamic and weaponise anti-migration sentiment for their political advantage.

Migration-related mobilisation

The past 18 months have produced anti-migrant mobilisation as well as significant levels of pro-migration counter-demonstrations on nearly every continent. In Europe, riots took place in north Belfast, UK, in June 2026, after a Sudanese asylum seeker was charged over a knife attack. Masked crowds set fire to homes believed to house immigrants, torched vehicles and fought police using water cannons, leaving dozens homeless.[1] In 2025, tens of sustained anti-immigration protests took place across Scotland and England, with disorder in cities including Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle. The largest protest occurred on 13 September, when up to 150,000 people took part in a London march.[2]

In the Netherlands, there were sustained waves of anti-migration protests in various locations throughout 2026 (from April to September), mostly concentrated around specific local asylum shelters, citing disputes between migrants and local populations.[3] By contrast, on 2 September, an estimated 50,000 people gathered in Madrid, Spain, marking one month since 72,000 migrants entered Ceuta in a two-day mass rush. Chants and signs included "Invaders – go home!" and "Sánchez to prison". Violence continued after the main protest ended, with gunshots and explosions reported through the night. Protesters were reported to be waving Spanish flags and calling for stronger border control while criticising prime minister Pedro Sánchez's handling of the 'crisis'.[4] In June 2026 Italy's 'remigration and reconquest' march in Rome grew out of a far-right summit in Gallarate a year earlier and drew several thousand participants.[5] Across the other side of the world, Australia's 'March for Australia' drew more than 50,000 in multi-city, anti-migrant demonstrations in August 2025[6] and has since held repeat rallies.[7]

A global tour of a selection of events illustrates that the phenomenon is by no means confined to the Global North. In North Africa, many thousands of Libyans chanting slogans such as "Libya only for Libyans" joined anti-UNHCR protests in Tripoli, in June 2026, blaming visible foreign populations for demographic and economic anxieties.[8] In March 2025, the Dominican Republic's nationalist march in Hoyo de Friusa turned violent and included a fatal shooting.[9] In South Africa, the number of anti-migrant events in 2026 has already exceeded the total number of events documented in previous years: on 1 July alone, more than 900 people were arrested as thousands took to the streets.[10]

However, while visibly active anti-migrant sentiment is increasing across the globe, it is also being countered in many places, with pro-migrant and pro-rights demonstrations mobilised in response,[11] sometimes larger in numbers than the anti-migrant marches themselves.[12] Rather than anti-migration sentiment simply winning the field, our current era is, in fact, best described as a period of sharpening polarisation, where both anti- and pro-migrant politics are becoming more

1 Ferguson, A. and Russell, W. (2026) Knife attack victim's family calls for calm after anti-immigrant violence in Belfast. Reuters.
2 Yalahuzian, V., Tessier, Y. and Mcdill, S. (2025) Police and protesters scuffle as 110,000 join anti-migrant London protest. Reuters.
3 Refugee Help (2026) Unrest at reception locations: the situation in the Netherlands.
4 Al Jazeera (2026) Thousands protest in Spain as Ceuta's migration crisis festers a month on.
5 Al Jazeera (2026) Thousands rally in Rome, Italy for rival pro- and anti-migration marches.
6 Maguire, D. and Thorpe, A. (2025) Anti-immigration rallies and counter protests held in cities across the country — as it happened. ABC News.
7 Al Jazeera (2025) Clashes in Australia's Melbourne as thousands rally against immigration.
8 Battisti, M. (2026) Libya's fuel crisis and the politics of migrant blame. Libya Gazette.
9 IOM (2026) Haiti — Monthly Monitoring of Forced Returns to Haiti (March 2026).
10 Serwat, L and Deetlefs, S. (2026) Is South Africa experiencing its highest peak of anti-migrant mobilization? ACLED.
11 Doyle, K. (2026) Confrontations between ICE and protesters: How does Minnesota compare to other states? ACLED.
12 Cole, D. (2026) Anti-AfD protests sweep Germany as far right closes in on two more states. The Guardian.

mainstream, more organised and more electorally consequential simultaneously.

Economic anxiety and its political uses

Public displeasure with migration tracks closely with severe domestic economic pressures. Inflation, high living costs, stagnant real wages and austerity-driven budgetary discipline across the EU and elsewhere are combining with the fallout of conflict, climate impacts and energy price volatility, leaving populations feeling financially disenfranchised, anxious and frustrated.

Research consistently confirms that a downward economic spiral correlates with more negative attitudes towards immigration.[13] A 25-country European study found people becoming less positive about immigration during economic crises, with the most pessimistic attitudes concentrated where the crisis bit hardest.[14] One 2026 analysis shows that inequality fuels anti-immigrant sentiment – especially among those who perceive their personal financial situation as deteriorating – and that such sentiment is strongly associated with increased support for right-wing parties.[15] Another analysis found economic deprivation may heighten perceptions of societal breakdown, making conspiracy theories that scapegoat immigrants more appealing, and notes that citizens of lower-GDP countries and those in financial precarity show higher susceptibility to these narratives.[16] Strikingly, this analysis found that anti-immigrant sentiment typically rises in recessions even when actual immigration is falling. The trigger is the economic pain, not a change in migration policy or outcomes.

Mechanisms enabling economic anxiety to fuse with anti-migrant sentiments and morph into anti-migrant politics include the scapegoating of migrants as 'displacement'. Migrants offer an easy, if misplaced, visible 'explanation' for diffused economic pain which could include rising housing costs, benefit strain, job competition and unemployment. Migrants, as newly visible claimants in a context of housing shortages, alongside strained health and education systems, become an intuitive, if statistically marginal, explanation for scarcity.

Scapegoating is also part of an enabling political context where centre-right and even centre-left parties increasingly adopt anti-migrant rhetoric to compete electorally with the far right, on the contested assumption that 'toughness' wins back support. Importantly, hostility or resistance to migrants is no longer confined to fringe parties: it is structurally embedded and mainstreamed.

The polycrisis frame

Pressures arriving from multiple systems or situations at once, interacting and amplifying, with salience varying by country and condition, are characteristic of polycrisis. Various crises, current and in the recent past – like Covid-19, the Ukraine war and the Iran/US war – all have financial and economic repercussions.

The intersectionality is very clear in the contemporary 'energy crisis': the 2026 US war with Iran, which has disrupted one fifth of global oil trade through the Strait of Hormuz, has directly raised the price of oil for everyone. With the Houthis' military ambitions in Yemen and their potential control of access to the Red Sea, the situation could get much worse before the end of the year. Not only is the price of oil affecting direct users, but due to the use of fuel at almost every part of the production and supply chain, multiple products and services are more expensive, and an affordability stress has gripped much of the world – not only the global majority but wealthy northern countries, too. A 2026 Guardian/Harris poll found that 95 percent of American adults believe the country is in the middle of an affordability crisis.[17] As an emblematic and very visibly-priced commodity (billboarded at every petrol station), rising fuel costs compound the same 'affordability crisis' mood that studies link to anti-immigrant scapegoating.[18] Conflict-affected oil markets, therefore, directly feed into the pre-existing global cost of living crisis[19] which, simultaneously, constrains the fiscal space governments need to cushion it.

The inherent paradox

There is, therefore, an inherent paradox in the relationship between economic anxiety and anti-immigration sentiment. This paradox was captured in the case

13 Laaker, D. (2023) Economic Shocks and the Development of Immigration Attitudes. British Journal of Political Science, 54(1), 220-240.
14 Vogt Isaksen, J. (2019) The impact of the financial crisis on European attitudes toward immigration. Comparative Migration Studies, 7, 24.
15 Polacko, M., Di Pasquale G. and Lofstedt, E. (2026) Bridges and Walls: How Rising Income Inequality Drives Anti-Immigrant Politics and Republican Realignment. Polit Res Q, 79(3): 994-1008.
16 Hattersley, M. et al. (2025) The Interplay Between Economic Hardship, Anomie, and Conspiracy Beliefs in Shaping Anti-Immigrant Sentiment. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 55, Iss. 8, 600-623.
17 Davis, S. (2026) 95 percent say US in affordability crisis: Survey. The Hill.
18 Polacko, M., Di Pasquale, G. and Lofstedt, E. (2026) Bridges and Walls: How Rising Income Inequality Drives Anti-Immigrant Politics and Republican Realignment. Polit Res Q, 79(3): 994-1008.
19 Whiting, K. (2022) The cost-of-living crisis is having a global impact. Here's what countries are doing to help. World Economic Forum.

of the EU in the July 2026 Eurobarometer, which put inflation and the cost of living as the top concern (at 47%) that citizens wanted the European Parliament to tackle, with migration and climate change receding into the background. Yet, anti-migrant sentiment did not recede alongside it, arguably because it's easier for political parties to focus on migration as a core issue, rather than actually address the factors leading to the cost-of-living crisis. Parties with explicit anti-immigration policies are now in government in various EU member states. In many others, such as France, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Sweden (as well as the ex-EU member UK), anti-immigration parties are strong runners-up or leading the polls. Generally, restrictive migration policy has become the mainstream EU default across nearly all 27 member states. If anything, as evidenced by voting intention surveys and party support,[20] antipathy to migration has hardened. Almost one in four voters in Europe now cast their ballot for far-right parties, research shows, a proportion that has grown nearly fivefold since the mid-1990s and surged over the past three years[21] – even as irregular arrivals sat well below their 2015 peak, and even as voters themselves reported caring more about their wallets than about migration.

These are not two crises running in parallel, though; increasingly, one crisis is expressing itself through the language of the other. Cost-of-living anxiety is being channelled into, and politically weaponised as, anti-migrant sentiment.

Economic distress is, therefore, best understood as a permissive condition rather than a sole or direct cause of anti-migrant sentiment. So, the fusion of cost-of-living anxiety and anti-migrant sentiment should not be seen as a causal trajectory. It is better understood as a feedback loop where economic precarity generates diffused anger, migration provides a visible outlet for that anger, political actors across the spectrum find electoral reward in validating that outlet (harnessing and weaponising it) but the resulting policy focus on migration control does nothing to resolve the 'economic precarity' that generated the anger or frustration in the first place.

20 Henley, J. (2026) Europe's centre fears nationalist wave after AfD victory but only has itself to blame. The Guardian.
21 Henley, J. (2026) Nearly a quarter of voters in Europe now back far-right parties. The Guardian.

Photo credit: Nexpher Images

Economic disruption and trade wars have wide repercussions for stability and security, not to mention cost of living. 2026 has been full of tariff wars mainly instigated by the US, threats of trade wars and threatening stances. For those already vulnerable, high prices resulting from trade wars could be the tipping point that leads to flight or migration. Here, US president Donald Trump visits President Xi Jinping of China in May 2026 with poor outcomes, and later in the year further heavy tariffs are applied. (See Article: *The rise of anti-migrant sentiment at a time of economic anxiety*, p. 214).



Labour mobility in the age of polycrisis

Anna Knoll[1]

Migration governance has become increasingly restrictive. Border externalisation has expanded, asylum systems have tightened and migration has become more politically contested. Yet, labour migration governance has followed a more contradictory trajectory. Governments continue to expand labour pathways, conclude bilateral mobility agreements and recruit foreign workers to address persistent shortages. Labour mobility has, therefore, returned to the centre of migration debates not because states have become more open to migration generally, but because migrant labour remains economically necessary.

This contradiction reflects the contemporary polycrisis: the interaction of interconnected crises whose effects reinforce one another across different systems.[2] Rather than producing a single direction of travel, these pressures pull labour migration governance in opposing directions.

This essay argues that governments have not retreated from labour migration. Instead, its governance is becoming ever more selective, bilateral, reactive and politically negotiated. These developments create new opportunities, but also reinforce unequal access, leave protection gaps unresolved and complicate mixed migration governance.

Polycrisis and the competing pressures shaping labour mobility governance

The significance of contemporary polycrisis for labour migration governance lies not simply in the coexistence of multiple crises, but in the competing pressures they create for labour migration policies. While some create growing incentives to expand labour mobility in response to demographic and economic change, others encourage greater restriction, control and the strategic use of migration for political and geopolitical objectives.

Demographic change is reshaping both the demand for and supply of labour. Many higher- and some middle-income economies face population ageing and slowing labour-force growth, while working-age populations continue to expand across much of sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia. Latin America and the Middle East are following different demographic trajectories, with distinct consequences for labour markets and migration. By 2050, one in four people globally is projected to live in sub-Saharan Africa.[3] At the same time, the European Commission projects the EU's old-age dependency ratio to rise from around 33 percent today to almost 60 percent by 2100.[4] North America will also continue to age.[5] These trends create complementary but unequal pressures: ageing economies seek to attract and retain workers, while countries with expanding working-age populations face pressure to create employment, including through labour mobility.

While demographic change creates long-term demand for labour mobility, economic transformation shapes its scale, sectoral composition and urgency. Technological change, the green transition and shifting production structures are altering demand across sectors and occupations.[6] Many advanced economies (including Germany, Japan, Canada and Australia) face persistent labour shortages in critical sectors such as healthcare, construction, information technology and agriculture, and rely on migrant workers to help address structural labour market needs and sustain economic competitiveness.[7] Economic diversification and major development projects similarly generate demand in the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[8] Labour-importing economies seek workers, while countries with growing labour forces frequently view overseas employment as part of their development strategies.[9] Unlike demographic change, however, economic demand is more volatile: business cycles, technology and shifting growth prospects can quickly alter the requirement for workers even where structural shortages persist.

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2 Rakowski, J.J., Schaan, L.N., van Klink, R., Herzon, II, Arth, A., Hagedorn, G., Rode, J., Creutzig, F. and Pe'er, G. (2025) Characterizing the Global Polycrisis: A Systematic Review of Recent Literature. Annual Review of Environment and Resources, 50, 159-183.

3 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024) World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results.

4 European Commission (2026) Demographic transformation in the EU: understanding change and adapting to its consequences.

5 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024) World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results.

6 World Economic Forum (2025) Future of Jobs Report 2025.

7 OECD (2025) International Migration Outlook 2025.

8 Karolak, M. (2026) From Oil Economies to Knowledge Hubs: GCC Higher Education and Skilled Migration. GLMM Policy Brief No. 34. Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM).

9 Kenny, C. (2026) Emigration as a Growth Strategy. CGD Policy Paper 385. Center for Global Development.

Yet, it is precisely here that the contradictions of the polycrisis become apparent. Demographic and economic pressures generally favour greater mobility but domestic politics in major destination countries often pull in the opposite direction.

Rising electoral salience, the growth of populist parties, public demands for visible border control and concerns over the exploitation of migrant workers have all contributed to making migration an increasingly contentious political issue. In many destination countries, this has reduced governments' willingness to pursue ambitious labour migration reforms despite persistent labour market needs.[10] More broadly, the increasing politicisation of migration has narrowed the political space for governments to pursue pragmatic and predictable labour migration policies, even where these respond to clearly identified labour market and demographic needs.[11] In many labour-sending countries, by contrast, political pressures centre less on limiting emigration than on balancing overseas employment opportunities with domestic job creation, skills retention and the protection of citizens abroad. For example, recent debates in Kenya over the government's strategy of promoting overseas employment alongside demands for greater domestic job creation illustrate these competing political priorities.[12]

Geopolitical fragmentation is also reshaping labour migration governance as strategic competition, regional instability and shifting alliances increasingly influence international cooperation. Rather than being negotiated solely in response to labour market needs, labour mobility is ever more embedded within wider diplomatic relationships and strategic partnerships. This can create new opportunities for strategic labour partnerships and mobility agreements. At the same time, labour migration becomes contingent on cooperation in other policy areas, including border management, return and broader migration diplomacy, meaning that geopolitical priorities do not always align with economic and demographic objectives.

The coexistence of these competing pressures, rather than any one of them in isolation, makes coherent labour migration governance yet more challenging.

Governing contradiction: what kind of labour mobility governance is emerging?

Labour migration governance under conditions of polycrisis has undoubtedly created new opportunities for labour mobility. This is reflected not only in the expansion of bilateral,[13] regional and multilateral mobility agreements facilitating regular migration pathways,[14] but also in sustained growth in labour migration to major destination countries. Following a sharp post-pandemic expansion, permanent labour migration to OECD countries reached historically high levels. Although new permanent labour migration declined by 21 percent between 2023 and 2024 to around 934,000 admissions, it remained 32 percent above its 2019 level and almost double (plus 93%) levels recorded in 2015, suggesting that the recent decline represents a moderation rather than a reversal of the longer-term trend. At the same time, humanitarian migration continued to rise, illustrating that legal labour mobility and mixed migration have continued to evolve simultaneously rather than as substitutes for each other.[15]

Yet, this expansion has not resolved the competing pressures facing labour migration governance. Instead, governments have often adapted labour migration policies in selective, differentiated and often contradictory ways that seek to reconcile the pressures described in the previous section. Three broad governance trends can be observed across regions, as discussed below.

Labour migration governance is becoming more reactive, contradictory and selective

Rather than pursuing stable long-term strategies, many destination countries are opting to respond by using incremental and reversible policy changes. Short-term political considerations shape labour migration policymaking,[16] producing a combination of selective liberalisation and broader migration restriction.[17]

10 International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2025) ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025. ICMPD; OECD (2025) International Migration Outlook 2025.
11 Knoll, A. (2024) Re-thinking approaches to labour migration? Potentials and gaps in EU Member States' migration infrastructures. Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD.
12 Ross, A. and Martinez, M. (2025). In search of economic boost, some African countries send workers abroad. Reuters.
13 Chilton, A. and Woda, B. (2022) The expanding universe of bilateral labour agreements. Theoretical Inquiries in Law, 23(2), 1-64.
14 United Nations (2026) International Migration Review Forum Progress Declaration.
15 OECD (2025) International Migration Outlook 2025.
16 Knoll, A. (2024) Re-thinking approaches to labour migration? Potentials and gaps in EU Member States' migration infrastructures. Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD.
17 Benton, M. (2026) Population Aging is Here. Immigration Can Offer Half an Answer. Migration Policy Institute;

Where pathways have expanded, they have done so selectively. Recruitment increasingly targets shortages[18] in health and long-term care, construction, agriculture, manufacturing, transport, hospitality and information technology.[19] OECD countries continue to prioritise highly skilled workers through talent schemes and fast-track visas, while lower-skilled workers are more often channelled into temporary or seasonal programmes. For example, in 2024, OECD countries (excluding Poland) granted 2.3 million temporary work permits, an increase of 26 percent compared to 2019.[20] Recent reforms, therefore, remain piecemeal and, in the EU, skewed towards highly skilled workers despite shortages across medium- and lower-skilled occupations.[21]

These pathways can also change abruptly in response to political pressure, governance failures or public controversy, sending inconsistent signals to migrants, employers and partner countries. This volatility is particularly visible in lower- and middle-skilled routes.

The United Kingdom illustrates this dynamic.[22] After expanding overseas recruitment of care workers in 2022 to address acute labour shortages, the government progressively restricted the route before ending overseas recruitment in 2025.[23] While the decision was justified by concerns over abuse and exploitation within the sponsorship system,[24] it also formed part of a broader strategy to reduce net migration,[25] despite continued workforce shortages in the care sector.[26] In Italy, concerns over widespread fraud in work authorisations led to the temporary suspension of recruitment from several origin countries, including Bangladesh,[27] interrupting established labour migration channels even as the government continued to expand legal labour migration through successive *Decreto Flussi* reforms.[28]

Emerging policy responses may also conflict with longer-term economic objectives. In the United States, restrictions introduced since 2025 have reduced migration to its lowest level in decades, despite evidence that slower immigration will constrain labour-force growth and output.[29] In the Netherlands, proposals to reduce migration, including international student numbers, prompted warnings from the Netherlands-based semiconductor giant ASML that access to international talent remains essential to competitiveness.[30]

The tensions created by the polycrisis are not confined to Europe, although they manifest differently across regions. In the GCC,[31] governments continue to depend heavily on migrant workers to sustain economic growth while simultaneously pursuing labour market nationalisation strategies and strengthening recruitment governance and labour standards. Similarly, Malaysia[32] continues to rely on migrant labour in key sectors while seeking to reduce dependence on low-skilled migrant labour through tighter recruitment governance, automation and productivity reforms.[33] In Africa, meanwhile, labour mobility has been promoted as a driver of regional economic integration. Yet, implementation of free movement frameworks, including the African Union Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement regime,[34] remains uneven as governments balance integration ambitions against security concerns, displacement pressures and domestic labour market priorities.[35] Across these diverse contexts, labour migration governance is increasingly characterised by efforts to navigate competing policy objectives rather than pursue a single, coherent direction.

18 European Migration Network and OECD (2025) Labour migration in times of labour shortages.
19 Knoll, A. (2024) Re-thinking approaches to labour migration? Potentials and gaps in EU Member States' migration infrastructures. Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD.
20 OECD (2025) International Migration Outlook 2025.
21 Kumar, C. (2024) Expanding legal pathways for labour immigration: a stocktake of the European Commission's efforts. ODI Global.
22 Brindle, B. and Sumption, M. (2025) Work visas and migrant workers in the UK. The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford.
23 UK Home Office (2025) Overseas recruitment for care workers to end.
24 McKinney, C.J. and Gower, M. (2026) Changes to UK visa and settlement rules after the 2025 immigration white paper. Research Briefing. House of Commons Library.
25 House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee (2025) Thirty-Third Report: Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules (HC997). UK Parliament.
26 Savitski, A. (2025) International recruitment of care workers has ended, the impact may be disastrous. Work Rights Centre
27 Embassy of Italy in Dhaka (2024) Important news for work visa applicants. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy.
28 OECD (2026) OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Italy 2026.
29 Edelberg, W., Veuger, S. and Watson, T. (2026) Macroeconomic implications of immigration flows in 2025 and 2026: January 2026 update. Brookings Institution.
30 Sterling, T. (2024) ASML's future growth in Netherlands remains uncertain. Reuters.
31 Karolak, M. (2026) From Oil Economies to Knowledge Hubs: GCC Higher Education and Skilled Migration. GLMM Policy Brief No. 34. Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM).
32 Rahman, A., Bilo, S., Chatterjee, S. and Cheng, N.F.L. (2024) Migration, Automation, and the Malaysian Labor Market. World Bank.
33 ADBI, ILO and OECD (2025) Labor Migration in Asia: Fair Recruitment, Training and Development.
34 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2024) Urgent need to reverse slow progress on ratifying the protocol on free movement of persons. Joint ECA-AUC report.
35 IOM and AU (2024) Africa Migration Report (Second edition) - Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant.

Diverging governance responses complicate international labour migration governance

Internationally, these pressures are generating both convergence and divergence. Bilateral mobility partnerships, talent strategies and legal migration reforms have expanded, but governments differ substantially in how they balance them against migration control and domestic political priorities. There is, therefore, growing convergence around the importance of labour migration, but continued divergence in how it is governed.

Within the European Union, Spain has expanded legal pathways and promoted regularisation, while Germany has liberalised skilled migration. The Netherlands has moved towards tighter policies,[36] whereas Hungary recruits third-country workers while maintaining strong anti-immigration rhetoric.[37] A similar contrast is visible in North America between Canada's longer-term demographic and economic approach and the more restrictive direction taken by the United States.[38]

These differences generate tensions within systems of regional and international migration governance. Within the European Union, Spain's more expansive approach to labour migration and migrant regularisation has generated criticism from several other EU member states, which argue that large unilateral regularisations act as a signal attracting irregular migrants and thus have implications for the functioning of the Schengen area and require greater European coordination.[39] At the same time, governments are increasingly seeking to project their preferred approaches internationally. Spain has sought to promote a more positive narrative around labour migration as an economic necessity,[40] while the United States has integrated migration into its foreign and security policy, encouraging partner countries to strengthen migration controls and align with broader security objectives.[41] The future direction of international labour migration governance may, therefore, depend not only on managing common demographic and labour market pressures, but also on which approaches to migration governance prove most influential internationally.

Labour migration governance is becoming bilateral, conditional and strategic

Geopolitical pressures are also making labour migration governance more bilateral, conditional and strategic. Governments increasingly expand mobility through country-specific partnerships while embedding labour migration within wider migration and foreign-policy objectives.[42]

The European Union illustrates this shift particularly clearly. Labour mobility becomes ever more incorporated into broader migration partnerships with third countries, linking opportunities for labour migration with cooperation on migration management, including return and readmission.[43] While this approach seeks to incentivise cooperation by offering labour mobility opportunities, it also reframes labour migration as an instrument of external migration management rather than primarily a response to labour market needs.

Bilateral agreements have also expanded across regions. Germany, Austria and Japan concluded new or strengthened agreements in 2024, while the EU continued to develop Talent Partnerships.[44] Japan has expanded recruitment agreements with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Tajikistan,[45] while African governments increasingly pursue bilateral agreements[46] as part of employment strategies, prompting African Union (AU) and International Labour Organization (ILO) guidance.[47] Such arrangements can materially reshape corridors: World Bank analysis estimates that bilateral labour agreements may increase migration between participating countries by around 70 to 75 percent over the next decade.[48]

The expansion of bilateral cooperation is making labour migration governance more geographically selective. Governments are not only deciding which workers to admit but also which partner countries to prioritise. EU Member States increasingly tailor labour mobility arrangements to selected countries which support

36 Migration Partnership Facility (2024) Mapping Pathways: Netherlands Summary.
37 Migration Partnership Facility (2024) Mapping Pathways: Hungary Summary.
38 Edelberg, W., Veuger, S. and Watson, T. (2026) Macroeconomic implications of immigration flows in 2025 and 2026: January 2026 update. Brookings Institution.
39 Dubois, L., Jopson, B. and Ricozzi, G. (2026) EU Ministers to discuss Spain's migrant crisis after Sánchez hits out over criticism. Financial Times.
40 Sánchez, P (2026) I'm the Prime Minister of Spain. This Is Why the West Needs Migrants. The New York Times.
41 The White House (2025) National Security Strategy of the United States of America.
42 ICMPD (2026) ICMPD Migration Outlook 2026.
43 European Commission (2026) European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy. COM(2026) 45 final.
44 European Migration Network and OECD (2025) Labour migration in times of labour shortages.
45 OECD (2025) International Migration Outlook 2025
46 ECOWAS Commission (2025) ECOWAS Draft Labour Migration Strategy.
47 ILO and IOM (2019) Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements in African Union Member States: taking stock and the way forward.
48 Adhikari, S., Changom, N., Kaila, H.K. and Shrestha, M. (2024) Do Bilateral Labor Agreements Increase Migration? Global Evidence from 1960 to 2020. Policy Research Working Paper WPS11000. World Bank.

labour market needs and broader strategic interests.[49] Comparable patterns are evident in the GCC, where labour migration remains predominantly organised through bilateral recruitment agreements with selected countries in South and Southeast Asia.[50]

New opportunities, new challenges: the consequences of labour migration governance under polycrisis

The governance trends described above have created new opportunities for labour migration, but within a migration system that remains predominantly restrictive, security-oriented and increasingly externalised. Labour pathways can reduce irregular migration in specific corridors where they are accessible, sufficiently large and aligned with labour market demand and migrant profiles.[51] Yet, because recent reforms remain highly targeted, they have expanded opportunities for some migrants while leaving broader mixed migration governance challenges largely unresolved.[52]

Consequences for access and protection

The highly selective nature of labour mobility pathways has consequences. Workers from countries without established migration corridors or bilateral agreements, those lacking recognised qualifications or destination-country language skills, people unable to afford recruitment costs[53] and applicants without employer sponsorship or professional recruitment networks continue to face the greatest barriers to regular labour migration.[54]

Across major destination countries, the principal beneficiaries have been young or prime-working-age workers with tertiary or vocational qualifications, occupations on shortage lists and access to employer sponsorship or previous study or work experience in the destination country.[55] This pattern is particularly evident in Canada, Australia, the European Union[56] and the United States. Indian nationals, for example, have benefitted most consistently, receiving 43 percent of Canadian Express Entry invitations in 2024[57] and 21 percent of EU Blue Cards,[58] while also dominating Australia's skilled migration programme[59] and the US H-1B system.[60] Other recurring beneficiaries include Chinese, Filipino, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Turkish nationals, particularly in information technology, engineering and healthcare. The reforms have also favoured migrants already present in destination countries: in Australia, for example, 61 percent of permanent skilled visas in 2024-25 were granted to applicants already onshore.[61]

At the lower-skilled end, opportunities have expanded mainly through bilateral and sector-specific recruitment programmes. Central Asian workers have benefitted from seasonal recruitment in the United Kingdom, Western Balkan workers from Germany's labour migration reforms, Asian workers from employment-permit systems in Japan and South Korea, and workers from established South and Southeast Asian recruitment corridors (particularly India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and the Philippines)[62] from continued recruitment into GCC labour markets.[63] African countries have also gained, although much more selectively. Recruitment has remained concentrated in a relatively small group of countries, for example Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and South Africa, and largely in healthcare recruitment to the United Kingdom[64] and skilled migration to Canada.[65]

Overall, recent reforms have expanded labour migration, but not evenly. The principal beneficiaries have been workers whose nationality, qualifications and recruitment networks align with destination-country

49 Knoll, A. (2024) Re-thinking approaches to labour migration? Potentials and gaps in EU Member States' migration infrastructures. Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD.
50 Karolak, M. (2026) From Oil Economies to Knowledge Hubs: GCC Higher Education and Skilled Migration. GLMM Policy Brief No. 34. Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM).
51 Barslund, M., Di Salvo, M. and Ludolph, L. (2019) Can regular replace irregular migration across the Mediterranean? Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).
52 De Haas, H. (2023) How Migration Really Works: A Factful Guide to the Most Divisive Issue in Politics. Viking.
53 Lebon-McGregor, E., Siruno, L. and Benzi, G. (2024) Global study on recruitment fees and related costs: Second edition. ILO.
54 McAuliffe, M., Abel, G., Oucho. L.A. and Sawyer, A. (2024) Growing migration inequality: What do the global data actually show? In McAuliffe, M. and Oucho, L.A. (eds). World Migration Report 2024. IOM.
55 McMahon, S., Gandini, L. and Diallo, B.D. (2026) Rethinking regular migration pathways: myths, realities and opportunities. In McAuliffe, M. and Ceriani Cernadas, P. (eds). World Migration Report 2026. IOM.
56 Knoll, A. (2024) Re-thinking approaches to labour migration? Potentials and gaps in EU Member States' migration infrastructures. Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD.
57 Government of Canada (2025) Express Entry Year-End Report 2024. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.
58 European Commission (2026) Migration and asylum in Europe: migrant skills. Eurostat.
59 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2025) Australia's Migration Trends, 2024-25. Australian Government.
60 US Citizenship and Immigration Services (2025) Characteristics of H-1B Specialty Occupation Workers. US Department of Homeland Security.
61 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2025) Australia's Migration Trends, 2024-25.
62 OECD (2024) International Migration Outlook 2024.
63 OECD (2025) International Migration Outlook 2025.
64 UK Home Office (2025) Why do people come to the UK? Work, Immigration System statistics.
65 Government of Canada (2025) Express Entry year-end Report 2024. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

labour shortages, while those outside established migration corridors or without recognised skills, employer sponsorship or sufficient financial resources remain substantially constrained. One consequence is that people whose circumstances do not fit neatly within existing migration categories continue to face limited legal mobility options. This also limits the extent to which labour pathways can provide an alternative to irregular migration, particularly where accessible opportunities remain limited for countries of origin and migrant profiles that feature prominently along irregular routes.

This increasingly reactive governance of labour migration may, in fact, undermine the attractiveness of destination countries. Highly skilled workers and international students[66] consider not only employment opportunities but also the stability and predictability of migration policies when choosing where to study and work.[67] Frequent policy shifts may, therefore, weaken countries' ability to attract and retain the talent needed to meet long-term labour market and competitiveness goals.

Access does not guarantee protection

Access to regular labour migration is only one dimension of effective labour migration governance. Whether migrants remain protected throughout recruitment, employment and return is equally important. Recent ETF research argues that labour migration does not automatically produce a "triple win" for destination countries, origin countries and migrants, but depends on fair recruitment, effective skills systems and robust governance institutions. Under conditions of polycrisis, these safeguards become even more important as demographic, economic, geopolitical and climate-related shocks expose weaknesses in labour migration systems. Expanding legal pathways,[68] therefore, does not automatically translate into safer migration if recruitment remains poorly regulated, labour protections weakly enforced or crisis support insufficient.[69]

Germany's recent expansion of skilled labour migration illustrates this tension. While reforms have broadened opportunities for third-country nationals, safeguards for ethical recruitment have not expanded at the same pace. Migrants may still incur excessive recruitment fees, receive misleading information or become indebted through opaque recruitment intermediaries before departure.[70] Similar concerns persist elsewhere. Across countries including the Netherlands, Canada, the GCC (see Box 1), Japan, Malaysia and South Korea, research continues to document excessive recruitment costs,[71] labour exploitation, poor working conditions and barriers to reporting abuse, despite workers entering through regular labour migration pathways.[72]

Polycrisis in practice: migrant workers in the Gulf

The Gulf illustrates how migrant workers on the ground experience the consequences of polycrisis. Rather than creating entirely new vulnerabilities, the overlapping pressures associated with polycrisis, including climate change, regional instability and economic disruption, interact with existing features of labour migration governance, such as temporary migration status, recruitment debt, employer dependence and limited access to social protection. These pressures can also shape migration to the Gulf in the first place, as climate change, economic insecurity and livelihood pressures in countries of origin contribute to decisions to seek employment abroad. As a result, migrant workers are often among those most exposed when crises occur.

Climate change provides a particularly clear example. Across Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, rising temperatures are increasing the frequency and severity of extreme heat, placing migrant workers, especially those employed in construction and other outdoor occupations, at growing risk. Although measures such as midday work bans have been introduced, implementation remains uneven and labour protections have struggled to keep pace with worsening climatic conditions.

The result is that climate change, rather than operating as an isolated crisis, amplifies existing vulnerabilities created by temporary labour migration systems,[73] illustrating how the polycrisis reshapes both the conditions under which migrants work[74] and their ability to cope when multiple crises overlap.[75]

66 OECD (2026) International Students in Higher Education.
67 Andersson, L. (2025) Measuring and assessing talent attractiveness in OECD countries, second edition: Methodology paper. Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper Series No 318. OECD Publishing.
68 McMahon, S., Gandini, L. and Diallo, B.D. (2026) Rethinking regular migration pathways: myths, realities and opportunities. In McAuliffe, M. and Ceriani Cernadas, P. (eds). World Migration Report 2026. IOM.
69 European Training Foundation (2026) Skills and Migration in Changing Labour Markets: Evidence from Research for New Policies and Actions. Working Paper.
70 Knapp, N. and Landmesser, E. (2026) Protection Gaps in Germany's Skilled Labour Migration System. SWP Comment 2026/30. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP).
71 Lebon-McGregor, E., Siruno, L. and Benzi, G. (2024) Global study on recruitment fees and related costs: Second edition. ILO.
72 McAuliffe, M. and Oucho, L.A. (eds.) (2024) World Migration Report 2024. IOM.
73 MMC (2024) Crossing Borders, Building Livelihoods: The insecure economic lives of Migrants in Libya.
74 MMC (2025) Exploring the climate-labour-mobility nexus for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.
75 De Bel-Air, F. (2026) A Gulf Crisis is also a Migrant Crisis. GLMM Factsheet No 14/2026.

Experience in the Gulf demonstrates that expanding labour migration does not automatically strengthen migrants' resilience during crises. More broadly, increased access has not necessarily been accompanied by stronger rights. Hungary's guest-worker regime combines expanded recruitment with narrower residence rights while, elsewhere, documentation insecurity, xenophobia and intensified immigration enforcement make existing rights harder to exercise. Under conditions of polycrisis, governments may therefore expand access to migrant labour in ways that prioritise workers' contribution to destination-country economies without investing equally in migrants' long-term protection, security and inclusion.

Consequences for migration systems

The expansion of labour migration pathways has not resolved a more fundamental challenge: the mismatch between migration governance systems organised around discrete legal categories and the ever more complex realities of mixed migration. While labour migration, asylum and other admission channels continue to operate through distinct legal frameworks, migration decisions are increasingly shaped by overlapping economic aspirations, environmental pressures, indebtedness, family strategies[76] and, for some, protection concerns.[77] Under conditions of polycrisis, these drivers intersect, meaning that people may move for multiple overlapping and changing reasons that do not fit neatly within existing migration categories. Polycrisis, therefore, not only complicates migration governance but also reinforces the mixed character of contemporary migration.

Bangladesh illustrates this mismatch. In 2025, Bangladeshi nationals were the fourth-largest nationality applying for asylum in the European Union despite a first-instance recognition rate of only around three percent and Bangladesh's inclusion on the EU's proposed list of safe countries of origin. They were also among the nationalities most frequently detected crossing the EU's external borders irregularly, particularly along the Central Mediterranean route.[78] Recent Mixed Migration Centre research suggests that many Bangladeshi migrants initially pursue legal labour migration before being redirected into irregular routes through the same recruitment intermediaries when regular opportunities prove inaccessible or fail.[79] Where aspirations and labour demand persist, but accessible legal pathways remain limited, smuggling networks can exploit this gap by offering alternative routes and services. Rather than operating as separate systems, regular labour migration, irregular movement and smuggling increasingly overlap within the same migration infrastructures.[80]

Existing evidence does not support a simple substitution effect whereby expanding labour migration pathways automatically reduce irregular migration or asylum applications. Outcomes vary considerably across migration corridors and policy contexts.[81] Where legal pathways remain inaccessible while employer demand persists, migration pressures may instead be redirected into irregular migration, asylum or informal labour markets rather than disappearing altogether.

Similarly, the events of July 2026 in Ceuta, when almost 100,000 people are reported to have swum from Morocco to the Spanish exclave on the African coast, illustrate the limits of partnership-based migration governance. Despite close EU-Morocco cooperation, the large-scale movements into Ceuta demonstrate that border cooperation cannot eliminate underlying migration aspirations where legal pathways remain inaccessible and smuggling networks continue to adapt. The episode also highlights how migration partnerships themselves remain vulnerable to broader geopolitical dynamics.

These developments also raise broader questions about the future direction of labour migration governance. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) envisaged labour mobility as a partnership-based, rights-oriented framework capable of generating mutual benefits for destination countries, countries of origin and migrants. Yet recent research questions whether initiatives such as Skills Mobility Partnerships can reconcile these competing objectives,[82] suggesting that many of the underlying trade-offs are structural[83] rather than simply matters of programme design. [84]

76 Crawley, H. and Skleparis, D. (2018) Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44 (1), 48-64.
77 Horwood, C., and Frouws, B. (eds) (2021). Mixed Migration Review 2021.
78 EUAA (2026) Latest Asylum Trends: Annual Analysis: Applications.
79 MMC (2026) Navigating new corridors: the evolving route of Bangladeshi migration to Italy through Libya.
80 Azad, A. and Vallentine, J. (2023) Beyond dichotomies: Bangladesh's complex migration landscape, in Horwood, C. and Frouws, B. (eds) Mixed Migration Review 2023.
81 Barslund, M., Di Salvo, M. and Ludolph, L. (2019) Can regular replace irregular migration across the Mediterranean? Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).
82 Schneider, J. (2023) Labor migration schemes, pilot partnerships and skills mobility initiatives in Germany. Background paper to the World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees and Societies. World Bank.
83 Miyai, T. (2026) The enduring migration-development dilemma: skills mobility partnerships and the challenge of conflicting capabilities. Comparative Migration Studies, 14, Article 12.
84 Kessler, S. and Katsiaficas, C. (2026) Six ways to improve the mutual benefits of labour mobility. Commentary. ICMPD.

Eight years after the GCM: has labour migration become more accessible?

The GCM envisaged labour mobility as a partnership-based and rights-oriented system generating mutual benefits for destination countries, countries of origin and migrants. Eight years later, labour migration has undoubtedly expanded. Governments have introduced[85] talent schemes, bilateral labour agreements and Skills Mobility Partnerships, reflecting the growing importance of labour mobility in responding to demographic and labour market pressures.[86]

Yet, the governance model which has emerged differs in important respects from that envisaged by the GCM. Rather than broad, flexible pathways embedded in international cooperation, labour mobility has by and large developed through selective bilateral arrangements, targeted recruitment and employer-driven schemes. At the same time, progress on fair recruitment, decent work and worker protection has been more uneven (see main text).

The question, eight years after the GCM, is therefore not whether labour mobility is expanding, but on what terms. In fact, under conditions of polycrisis, labour migration is evolving less as the partnership-based, rights-oriented model envisaged by the GCM and more as a selective instrument for addressing labour shortages while advancing wider migration and geopolitical objectives.

Conclusion: towards a crisis of labour migration governance?

As this essay has argued, labour migration is not disappearing under conditions of polycrisis. Instead, governments are reshaping how it is governed. Rather than pursuing comprehensive reforms, they increasingly rely on selective, bilateral and incremental approaches which respond to immediate labour market needs while accommodating competing political, security and geopolitical pressures.

Labour migration governance under polycrisis is characterised less by a clear shift towards greater openness or greater restriction than by the coexistence of contradictory pressures pulling policy in different directions. The result is a system of labour migration governance that is more selective, more temporary, more politically negotiated and, ultimately, less predictable. While these arrangements create new opportunities for some migrants, they also reinforce unequal access, leave important protection gaps unresolved and struggle to accommodate the growing complexity of mixed migration.

The challenge posed by the contemporary polycrisis is, therefore, not simply that governments face more pressures, but that these pressures steadily undermine their ability to govern labour mobility strategically and coherently over the long term. In this sense, the polycrisis may itself be creating a crisis of labour migration governance.

85 IOM (2024) Migration governance insights on regular pathways: delivering on the promise of migration.
86 United Nations Secretary-General (2026) Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration: report of the Secretary-General, A/80/632.

Legal pathways

Safe and legal migration channels are a crucial aspect of effective migration governance featuring widely in international and bilateral agreements. Legal pathways cover a range of avenues, including family reunification, study pathways, humanitarian admission and labour migration.

Labour migration, one aspect of legal pathways, in particular, faces competing pressures in the current polycrisis, as discussed in the essay *Labour Mobility in the Age of Polycrisis* (see p. 218). Migrant labour is in high demand in many destination countries with ageing societies, to fill crucial jobs and keep their economies going and growing. Yet, in many of the same countries, there is simultaneously a strong political push to reduce migration, and access to labour mobility, particularly for people from some countries of origin, is limited.

But what do migrants and refugees on the move across the world tell us about their knowledge of and access to, legal pathways? This brief draws on 6,237 4Mi surveys conducted worldwide in the first half of 2026 to explore migrants' and refugees' access to legal pathways.[1]



59% of interviewees across the globe did not know of legal pathways to migrate

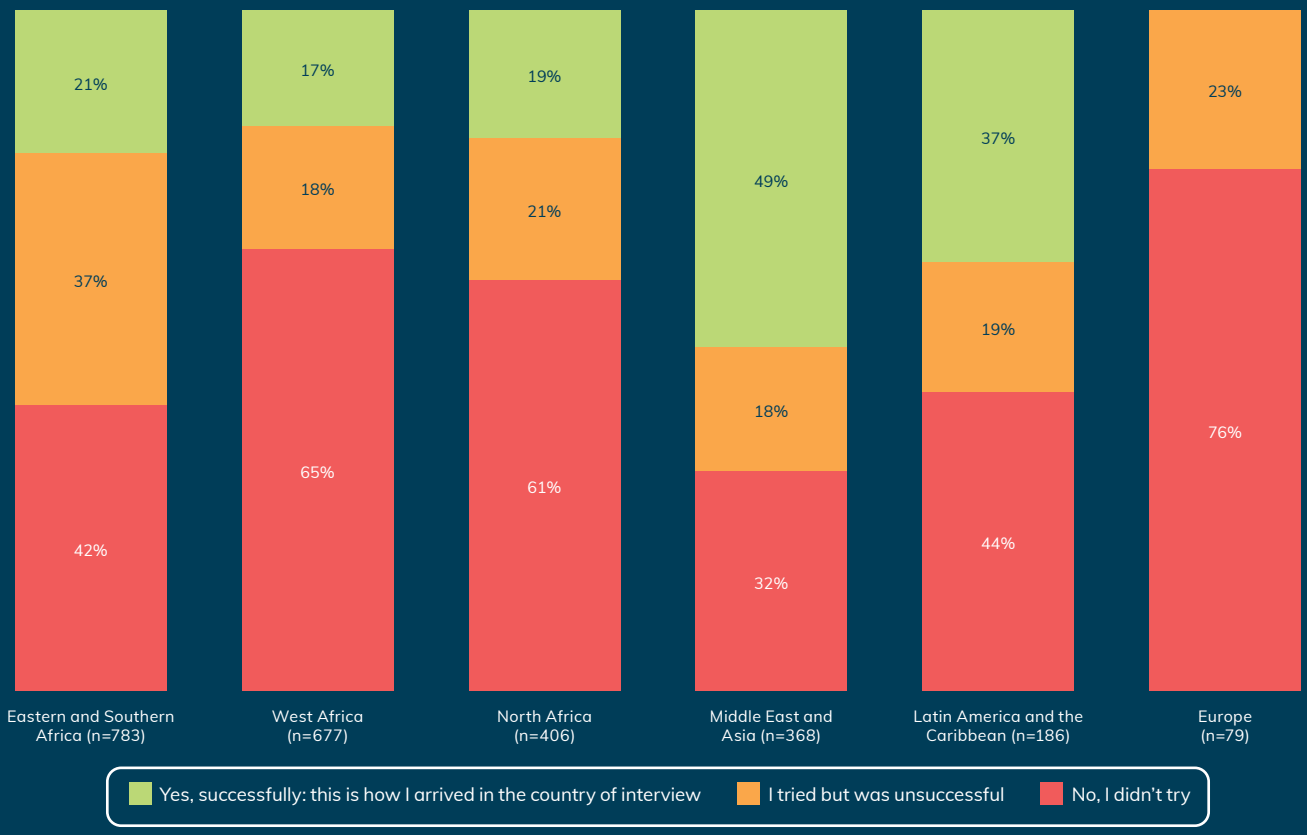
Most people interviewed did not know a legal route existed prior to migrating. Where people were aware of a legal pathway to migrate (n=2,558), this mostly included labour mobility pathways (20%) and refugee resettlement schemes (14%).

However, even when respondents were aware of legal pathways to migrate, this awareness alone did not translate into action. Only half (49%) of those who knew of a legal pathway had attempted to use it before migrating, with half of those unsuccessful in their attempt.

1 Among the 6,237 4Mi surveys analysed in this section, the main nationalities interviewed by region of interview include: Eastern and Southern Africa (n=1,868) - Ethiopia (59%), Sudan (37%), Eritrea (2%), other countries (3%); West Africa (n=1,315) - Nigeria (15%), Burkina Faso (13%), Côte d'Ivoire (11%), Guinea (10%), Togo (9%), Benin (7%), other countries (35%); North Africa (n=1,090) - Sudan (19%), Guinea (11%), Mali (10%), Côte d'Ivoire (8%), Cameroon (6%), Niger (4%), Senegal (4%), other countries (38%); Middle East and Asia (n=1,270) - Myanmar (64%), Somalia (8%), Afghanistan (6%), other countries (23%); Latin America and the Caribbean (n=499) - Venezuela (65%), Bolivia (11%), Colombia (9%), other countries (15%); Europe (n=195) - Gambia (26%), Bangladesh (18%), Mali (13%), Guinea (12%), other countries (30%).

Graphic 1. Did you attempt to migrate using a legal migration pathway?

(By region of interview)



Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Across the regions covered, respondents in the Middle East and Asia most commonly reported that they had successfully used a regular pathway to enter their country of interview (49% of respondents), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (37%). Percentages in other regions were substantially lower (see Graphic 1). Respondents interviewed in Eastern and Southern Africa most commonly reported trying to migrate regularly but being unsuccessful (37%). This was reported roughly twice as commonly as respondents interviewed in other regions, where the percentage of those who tried to migrate regularly but were not successful sat at around 20%.

Respondents in Europe (76%), followed by West Africa (65%) and North Africa (61%), most commonly reported not even attempting to legally migrate.

Widespread barriers prevent the uptake of legal pathways

For most people, regular routes were unknown. In some cases, this is because pathways exist but people have not heard of them. In many others, particularly for those from certain countries of origin or without specific skills, family ties or grounds for protection, there may simply be no realistic regular route to know about. And even those who were aware of regular routes found them largely out of reach. Among those aware of legal pathways who did not attempt to use them, or did so unsuccessfully (n=1,892), the following practical barriers were reported: legal pathways were too expensive (49%), they did not meet the requirements or hold the right documents (37% and 35% respectively), the process was too slow (29%) or did not have enough information (28%). In only a minority of cases, family members (16%) or smugglers (9%) advised against migrating regularly.

However, responses varied by region. Cost was the most commonly reported barrier, cited by 68% of respondents in East and Southern Africa, 55% in Europe and 43% in Asia. Not meeting the requirements was reported often by those interviewed in Europe (54%), North Africa (50%) and Asia (42%) (see Graphic 2). Problems with documentation were common among respondents interviewed in Europe (47%) and East and Southern Africa (44%), while in Latin America the time

involved was among one of the main obstacles (48%). Respondents in Asia (46%) and East and Southern Africa (41%) frequently said they simply did not have enough information. In East and Southern Africa, almost one in four (23%) reported that smugglers had actively advised them against migrating legally, and 30% reported their family had advised against it.

> *"I was forced to leave due to deep poverty and the pressure of helping my family survive. There was no legal way out, so I turned to smugglers... but I had no choice. I carried my family's hope with me."*
>
> **22-year-old Ethiopian man interviewed in Somalia**

Graphic 2. What were the barriers which prevented you from migrating through a legal pathway?

(By region of interview, multi-select)

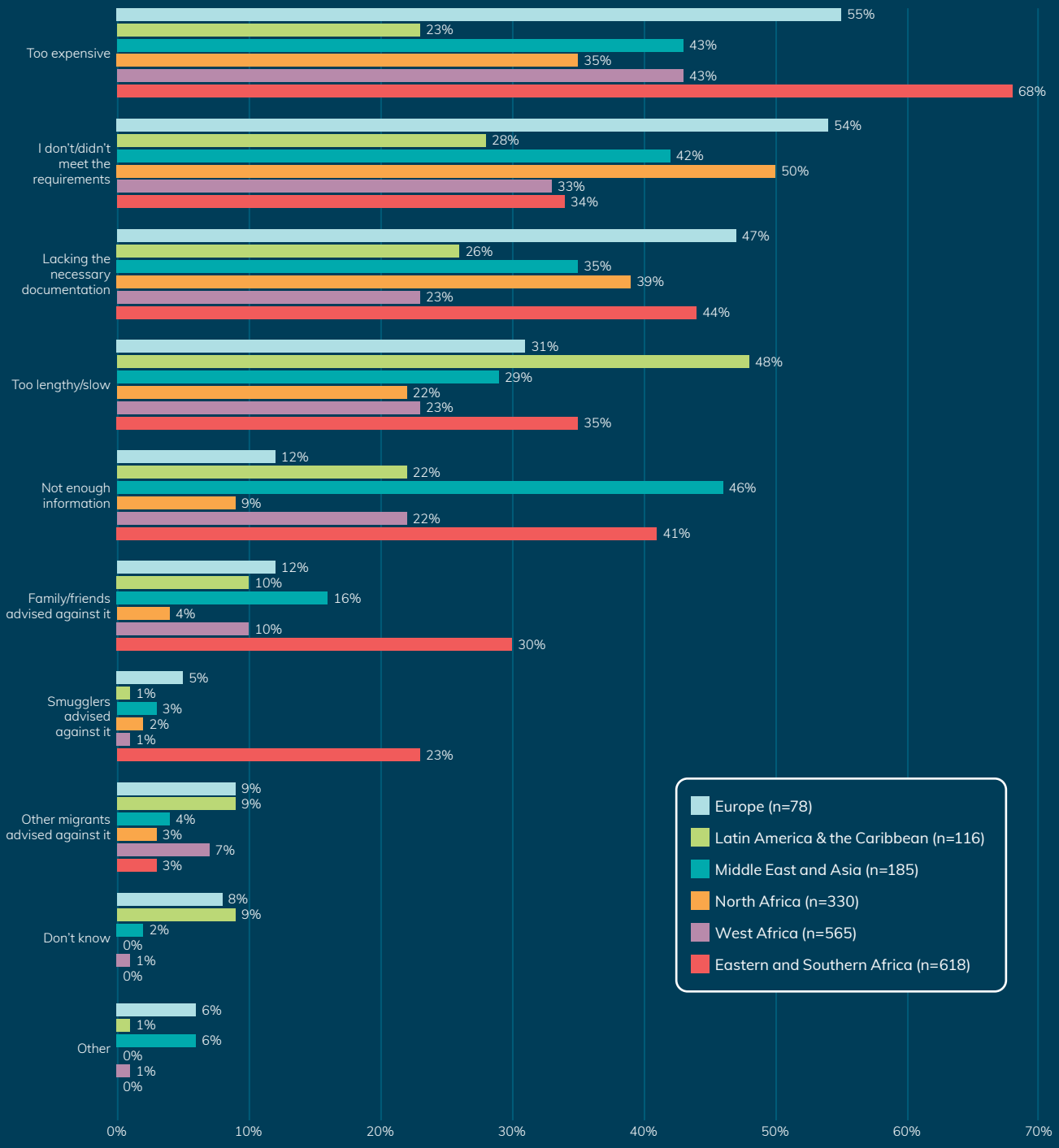


Photo credit: Adam Eastland

A cocktail of factors including the impact of changing demography, climate change, emerging global economic hubs, the impact of automation and AI and cost of living crises, not to mention voters resistant to higher migration, combine to give rise to imbalances of skills and access, distorting the global economy. Here, in Doha, Qatar, migrant workers clean windows of the Al Bidda Tower. (See Essay: *Labour mobility in the age of polycrisis*, p. 218).



The survival trap: why adaptation is not protection in the age of polycrisis

Mustafa Alio[1] *and Rez Gardi*[2]

Across the geography of displacement, a familiar scene repeats. A family sits in a place never meant to become a permanent home: a camp, an overcrowded apartment, a bus station, a transit shelter or an informal settlement. One person is trying to renew a document. Another is searching for work that will not lead to arrest or exploitation. A phone is passed around because it holds the latest information about a border, a registration deadline, assistance, a scholarship or a safer route. The family is adapting.

From a distance, this looks like resilience. Up close, it is exhaustion – and this difference matters.

Adaptation is often what people do when adequate protection and viable alternatives are unavailable. Protection, on the other hand, consists of the rights, institutions, public policies and practices that prevent survival from becoming a permanent fate and allow people to rebuild their lives. Confusing the two risks using refugee resourcefulness to obscure persistent gaps in what protection systems should provide.

For both of us, displacement is not an abstract policy category. Our histories differ but our lives and work have been shaped by becoming refugees, navigating systems designed by others and, later, entering rooms where those systems are debated. We have seen displaced people described as 'vulnerable beneficiaries', 'innovative entrepreneurs', 'security risks' and 'voices' to be consulted. Each description captures something, yet none describes the whole person.

Refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and migrants have distinct legal statuses and protection needs.[3] They often face overlapping risks, particularly along mixed migration routes, but they are not interchangeable legal or policy categories.[4] This essay focuses primarily on refugees and reflects both the argument we are making and the experience from which we write: our own histories of becoming refugees and our work within refugee protection systems.

We acknowledge a shared dynamic within mixed movements: people are frequently required to adapt to overlapping crises and constrained choices when formal systems do not provide timely protection or viable pathways forward. Where wider migration dynamics directly intersect with refugee protection, we address them explicitly, but we do not attempt to offer a broader analysis of migration here.

Polycrisis, without the policy boxes

Polycrisis has become a fashionable word in international policy circles, one of those terms that risks being repeated until it means everything and, therefore, nothing.[5] For displaced people, however, the notion is not theoretical: it describes the way crises collide in a single life.

A conflict destroys a home. Inflation erodes assistance. A funding cut closes a clinic. A drought raises food prices. A policy change makes legal stay precarious. A missing document blocks school enrolment. A parent accepts unsafe work because rent is due. A relative tries a dangerous route because family reunification through legal pathways is inaccessible. These problems compound.

At the end of 2025, 117.8 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide. There were 41.6 million refugees, 9 million asylum-seekers and 68.7 million people displaced within their own countries.[6]

Those figures reveal two different stages of crises. The first is the crisis that forces people to flee. The second is the crisis of what happens after: years, if not decades, trapped in prolonged uncertainty or displacement. These years are often characterised by restricted rights, uncertain status, underfunded services and vanishing forward options, including durable solutions, regular pathways and meaningful integration and participation. The defining challenge is not displacement alone – it is prolonged displacement, irregularity and limbo without a way out.

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2 Rez Gardi is a New Zealand international human rights lawyer and co-founded of the Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies at the University of Auckland and Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT).
3 UNHCR (2017) The10-Point Plan of Action.
4 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) What is Mixed Migration?
5 Tooze, A. (2022) Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. Financial Times.
6 UNHCR (2026) Global Trends.

For many refugees, the defining feature of prolonged displacement, irregularity and/or limbo is not simply poverty or exclusion, but uncertainty. Families cannot make long-term decisions because they do not know whether documentation will be renewed, assistance will continue, children will remain in school, legal status will change, or opportunities for return, resettlement or local integration will ever materialise. In the absence of long-term predictability, adaptation becomes increasingly short-term. Decisions that should be about building a future become, instead, exercises in managing day-to-day uncertainty.

James Milner and Gil Loescher have long argued that protracted refugee situations are not merely humanitarian conditions but political, developmental and protection challenges which cannot be resolved through humanitarian action alone.[7] Yet, despite displacement increasingly lasting years or decades, short-term responses continue to be applied to long-term realities. Protection, ultimately, depends not only on humanitarian assistance, but on sustained political commitment to uphold asylum, share responsibility, strengthen protection and invest in inclusion, access to livelihoods, basic rights and services.[8] Without that commitment, even the strongest humanitarian responses cannot deliver durable solutions.

When emergency becomes permanent

The refugee protection regime was never designed to sustain people indefinitely in displacement. As James Hathaway has argued, refugee protection is not simply the delivery of emergency relief but a legal framework of progressively realised rights, including access to work, education, movement and social protection.[9] Humanitarian assistance remains indispensable, but it was intended to provide a bridge to protection and solutions, not become a long-term substitute for them.

Yet, temporary responses increasingly become permanent realities. Tents become semi-permanent shelters. Temporary documents are renewed year after year. Children born in displacement reach adulthood in places still described as transitional.

Protection should, ultimately, be judged not by whether people survive displacement or move from one administrative category to another, but by whether they acquire real safety, rights and future prospects.

Over time, humanitarian systems have become increasingly effective at helping people survive displacement – but they have been far less successful at helping people leave displacement behind. The challenge is no longer simply delivering emergency assistance: it is ensuring that emergency responses become pathways towards rights, inclusion and durable solutions, rather than destinations in themselves.

Agency under constraint

Policy has often swung between two incomplete images.

The first is the refugee as a passive victim: acted upon, spoken for and saved. The second is the refugee as an endlessly resilient entrepreneur: adaptive, innovative and able to overcome almost any barrier with enough determination. One image denies agency, while the other romanticises it.

Displaced people do make consequential choices: they decide whether to leave, stay, return, move onward, separate temporarily from family, accept informal work, borrow money, use a smuggler, trust a community contact, apply for a scholarship or wait for a legal pathway which may never open. But these are rarely choices made on equal ground, because agency under constraint is not freedom.

That agency is often exercised collectively as well as individually. Refugee-led organisations, community networks and diaspora groups have become essential parts of the protection landscape, helping people navigate systems, share information and respond where formal institutions do not. Their role is not simply to fill gaps in service delivery but, increasingly, to shape how protection is understood and delivered.

Research on refugee decision-making shows that movement in conflict settings involves real calculation and aspiration, even while options are shaped by insecurity, education, legal status, family obligations and available networks.[10] Recent research on refugee economies demonstrates considerable variation in refugees' income sources, assets, labour-market participation, remittances and reliance on humanitarian assistance.[11] Refugees are not economically homogeneous and their strategies differ across places, nationalities, gender and household circumstances.

7 Loescher, G., Milner, J., Newman, E. and Troeller, G.G. (eds.) (2008) Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications. UNU Press.
8 Milner, J. in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and others (eds) (2014) The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies.
9 Hathaway, J.C. (2021) The Rights of Refugees under International Law. Cambridge University Press.
10 Crawley, H. and Skleparis, D. (2017) Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44(1), 48-64.
11 Betts, A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J. and Omata, N. (2016) Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development. Oxford University Press.

Research on refugee economies also challenges the assumption that refugees are isolated from markets or destined to remain economic burdens.[12] Evidence from East Africa, for example, documents refugees' participation in trade, entrepreneurship, employment creation, digital innovation and cross-border economic networks.[13] However, the policy lesson is not that refugees will thrive regardless of conditions – it is that rights and institutions shape what agency can achieve. Freedom of movement, the right to work, access to capital, infrastructure, education and connections to markets all matter.

The recent concept of the 'refugee trap' proposed by political scientist Alexander Betts is especially useful.[14] He describes how refugees can be held in a self-reinforcing cycle created by trauma, dispossession, restricted rights, uprootedness and material poverty. Instead of making this trap disappear, resourcefulness and resilience operate inside it, becoming an obligation imposed on people as institutions retreat from their responsibilities.

This matters even more in the current protection environment. Protracted and multiplying conflicts, shrinking humanitarian resources, pressure on asylum systems and a weakened multilateral response are leaving displaced people and their communities to absorb responsibilities that institutions once assumed. As formal protection becomes thinner or harder to access, people are increasingly pushed to rely on their own networks, resources and capacity to adapt. That may produce greater resilience but should not be mistaken for greater protection.

Yet, adaptation is also cumulative. Every successful coping strategy can make institutional failure less visible. Families borrow as assistance declines or disappears. Communities organise informal schools and services where formal systems are unable to respond. Migrant and refugee-led organisations fill protection gaps left by under-resourced institutions. Informal labour replaces non-existing legal employment opportunities.

These responses certainly demonstrate remarkable agency, but they can also create a dangerous illusion. Because people continue to adapt, the cumulative impacts of prolonged displacement and overlapping crises appear more manageable than they really are. The urgency to address structural barriers diminishes, while the burden of responding to crisis shifts increasingly onto the people experiencing the crises themselves.

Adaptation should, therefore, be understood as evidence of unmet protection needs in an age of polycrisis, not evidence that those needs have been met and resolved.

The architecture of adaptation

When formal systems are inaccessible, slow or distrusted, people build their own.

They reroute. They move in stages. They wait in one place while gathering information about another. They create WhatsApp groups to share warnings about arrests, fraud, changing border rules or registration appointments. They borrow from relatives abroad. They rotate childcare. They translate documents for neighbours. They share rooms, contacts, meals and transport. They work informally. They create small businesses which operate partly outside the law when the law has left no practical option.

These strategies are often called 'coping mechanisms', as though they were small and private. Together, though, they form a real social infrastructure. Diaspora networks transmit money, knowledge and opportunity. Community leaders identify urgent needs. Refugee-led organisations provide information, referrals, shelter, psychosocial support, education and protection, often reaching people who avoid formal institutions because of language, status, discrimination or fear.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, refugee-led organisations around the world were among the first responders in their communities.[15] These responses were not a temporary phenomenon but, instead, demonstrated an established pattern: refugees are frequently the first to organise protection and assistance for others.

Emerging research supports this, demonstrating that refugee-led organisations often reach communities that formal institutions struggle to access. Yet, they continue to receive limited recognition, direct funding and decision-making authority despite their central role in delivering information, referrals and practical support.[16] They may be treated as informal volunteers, community mobilisers or convenient channels for outreach, while established organisations retain the grants, institutional authority and policy access.

A refugee-led organisation may identify a trafficking risk before an international actor becomes aware of it, may know which landlord is exploiting families or might

12 Betts, A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J. and Omata, N. (2016) Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development. Oxford University Press.
13 Betts, A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J. and Omata, N. (2016) Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development. Oxford University Press.
14 Betts, A., Omata, N., Siu, J. and Sterck, O. (2026) The Refugee Trap - The Economics of Displacement. Cambridge University Press.
15 Alio, M., Alrihawi, S., Milner, J., Noor, A. and Wazefadost, N. (2020) By refugees, for refugees: refugee leadership during COVID-19 and beyond. Forced Migration Review.
16 Pincock, K., Betts, A. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2020) The Global Governed? Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance. Cambridge University Press.

understand which rumour is driving people towards a dangerous route. Yet, refugee-led organisations are often invited late to decision-making spaces, asked to validate decisions already made or excluded for lacking compliance systems that adequate funding could help them build.

Community leadership, nonetheless, should not be romanticised. Refugee communities contain inequalities, too, and contested claims to representation. Meaningful participation requires legitimacy, diversity and accountability: meaningful refugee participation is an emerging norm, but its implementation remains uneven and vulnerable to tokenism.[17]

The answer is stronger ecosystems of refugee leadership: diverse organisations, transparent selection, sustainable financing, safeguarding and formal access to decisions.

Refugee-led actors should help define problems, allocate resources, design programmes and help assess whether proposed solutions are credible and practical.

The hidden bill for adaptation

Adaptation is often discussed as though it was free.

It is not.

Its costs are paid through debt, interrupted education, lost earnings, unsafe work, family separation, exploitation, gender-based violence and years of uncertainty. These costs are distributed unequally. People with savings, recognised qualifications or family networks have more room to adapt than those without them; women, children and people with disabilities often carry additional burdens.

These costs can also become life-threatening. On migration routes, IOM recorded nearly 8,000 people dead or missing worldwide in 2025, bringing the recorded total since 2014 to more than 82,000 – figures that are known to be incomplete.[18]

But when legal stay is precarious, assistance disappears, work is prohibited, family reunification is inaccessible and resettlement resembles a lottery with vanishing tickets, a dangerous journey can begin to look like the only remaining option.

This matters particularly as humanitarian resources shrink and aid is increasingly asked to serve wider domestic and foreign-policy priorities. Migration management, including the objective of reducing irregular and onward movement, has become more prominent in the external policies of major donor countries. The risk is that, as resources contract, protection interventions along migration routes are judged less by whether they protect people's rights and offer them viable alternatives than by whether they deter and reduce movement.

It is in this context that debates about deterrence and the route-based approach become critical.

In principle, a route-based approach can improve protection. People face trafficking, violence, detention, extortion and death across countries of origin, transit and destination, therefore better coordination, reliable information, identification of protection needs and access to services are necessary.

UNHCR's route-based framework seeks to promote protection-sensitive, humane and lawful responses to mixed movements across countries of origin, transit, asylum and destination.[19] The challenge, however, lies less in the framework itself than in how it may be interpreted or operationalised. Where implementation focuses primarily on reducing onward movement rather than expanding protection and solutions, protection objectives risk becoming secondary to migration-control priorities. Assistance along routes should expand access to rights, services and viable alternatives, rather than merely shift responsibility geographically or prevent access to asylum.

Without meaningful alternatives for mobility, a route-based approach risks becoming a strategy for managing people away from borders rather than protecting them.[20] Refugee-led organisations must be central partners but participation cannot, by itself, ensure that protection remains at the centre of the approach. It must be accompanied by clear protection safeguards, meaningful access to asylum, independent monitoring and genuine pathways to solutions.

Research from the Mixed Migration Centre, however, has found that externalised border controls, restrictive entry measures and shortages of legal pathways can intensify protection risks rather than eliminate them.[21] Similarly, human rights academics James Hathaway and Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen examined how 'cooperative

17 Milner, J., Alio, M. and Gardi, R. (2022) Meaningful refugee participation: An Emerging Norm in the Global Refugee Regime. Refugee Survey Quarterly, 41(4), 565-593.
18 IOM (2026) Nearly 8,000 Migrant Deaths Recorded in 2025, New IOM Data.
19 UNHCR (2024) Strengthening protection and solutions in the context of mixed movements of refugees and migrants.
20 Alio, M. and Gardi, R. (2025) Protection or prevention? The global refugee system is at a crossroads. The New Humanitarian.
21 Vallentine, J., Frouws, B. and Forin, R. (Eds.) (2025) (2025) How offshore asylum and migration management went global in 2025. Mixed Migration Review, 229-232.

deterrence' shifts migration control into transit or origin states, creating distance between destination countries and the legal consequences of exclusion.[22]

Risk, therefore, is not removed: it is reorganised, delayed and transferred onto people with the least power.

From managing displacement to resolving it

For decades, much of the international response has focused on managing displacement, which remains essential when lives are at immediate risk. However, as displacement becomes increasingly prolonged, management cannot become the end point. The central question is no longer simply how to sustain people in displacement, but how to expand their rights, choices and opportunities to rebuild their lives in safety.

That task is becoming harder. Humanitarian resources are shrinking, many host countries face severe economic and political pressures and anti-refugee narratives increasingly shape public debate and policy. These constraints are real, but they make the distinction between helping people endure displacement and helping them move beyond it even more important.

Responding to that challenge requires progress in four closely connected areas: protection and inclusion; education, livelihoods and opportunities; participation; and mobility pathways.

1. Protection and inclusion

Legal status and documentation underpin access to lawful work, education, housing, services, freedom of movement and justice.

Host countries need greater international support to include refugees in national systems while strengthening services for host communities. Responsibility-sharing cannot mean praising countries for hosting large refugee populations while leaving them to absorb most of the costs.

UNHCR's new '50 by 35' vision reflects a growing recognition that refugee responses must move from managing displacement towards resolving it.[23] This requires shifting from measuring success by how effectively people survive displacement to how effectively they regain rights, inclusion and durable solutions, helping capture the broader direction refugee responses must now take. While approaches will differ, this broader shift in emphasis is both necessary and overdue.

Protection is also shaped by politics. Anti-refugee narratives and pressure on public services increasingly influence asylum and inclusion policies. Governments cannot ignore these pressures, but protection rights cannot depend on political popularity, either.

2. Education, livelihoods and opportunities

People need more than 'permission' to survive, they need the ability to plan.

This requires access to education, recognition of qualifications, decent work, finance and labour protections. Restrictions that prevent refugees from working or studying can create dependency and, as a result, that dependency can be seen as evidence of incapacity.

Economic inclusion can benefit refugees and host communities alike, but rights cannot be reserved for those deemed economically 'useful'. Development financing should, instead, be judged by whether it expands rights, improves household security and strengthens local services.

3. Participation and the ecosystem of refugee leadership

Institutions can create the appearance of participation without redistributing meaningful power. For example, a refugee may appear on a panel but not in the meeting where the agenda was designed. An advisory group may exist without a budget or access to senior decision makers. Refugees may be asked to share personal stories while technical expertise is sought elsewhere.

Meaningful participation requires influence over agendas, policies, budgets, implementation and evaluation. It also requires compensation, because lived experience is expertise which should not be treated as an endlessly free resource.

States and international organisations should, therefore, create sustained mechanisms for refugee participation, include refugee experts in delegations and governing structures and fund refugee-led organisations directly.

The question should no longer be whether refugees deserve a seat at the table. It should be whether the table making decisions about refugees can be

22 Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. and Hathaway, J. C. (2015) Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence. Columbia Journal of Transnational Law, 53(2), 235-84.
23 UNHCR (2026) The 50 by 35 vision.

considered legitimate without them. Importantly, in fact, participation is not the final objective: better decisions, fairer institutions and more effective protection and solutions are – and participation is one means of achieving them.

4. Mobility pathways

Mobility must be treated as part of the solutions architecture, not only as a problem to be controlled.

Resettlement remains essential but it is far too limited a goal to carry the solutions agenda alone. Labour mobility, education pathways, family reunification, humanitarian visas and community sponsorship can provide safer ways for refugees to rebuild their lives.

These pathways must remain additional to resettlement and the right to seek asylum, and they must also reflect the realities refugees face. Documentation requirements, fees and restrictive eligibility rules can turn pathways that exist on paper into options that are inaccessible in practice.

When asylum is the only door even slightly open, people with very different needs will try to enter through it. Expanding credible legal pathways can provide real alternatives to dangerous journeys and prolonged limbo.

Across all four areas, the objective is the same: to move from systems that measure how effectively people endure displacement towards systems that expand their ability to rebuild their lives.

Why deterrence cannot do the work of solutions

Governments have legitimate responsibilities to manage borders, address crimes and respond to public concern and ignoring this weakens the protection argument. However, border management becomes self-defeating when it is treated as a substitute for refugee policy.

Deterrence may change a route, a departure date or the price charged by a smuggler. It may transfer arrivals from one country to another or make journeys less visible. What it does not do, though, is end wars, restore legal statuses, reunite families, create livelihoods or resolve prolonged exiles.

When people have no meaningful opportunity to rebuild their lives, some will continue searching elsewhere. The harsher the route becomes, the more adaptation it demands: new smugglers, longer journeys, greater debt, more secrecy and more dangerous crossings. Policy, then, misreads adaptation as proof that even harsher measures are required.

Real solutions require investment in schools, municipal services, legal systems, labour markets, opportunities for voluntary return where conditions permit, expanded legal pathways, stronger refugee-led institutions and international cooperation. They require governments to share responsibility equitably rather than outsource it.

But if the stated goal is fewer dangerous journeys, then the policy test is straightforward: are people being offered safer and more credible alternatives?

Risk-awareness campaigns will have limited impact when people already understand the dangers but lack credible alternatives. Telling people that the sea is dangerous does not answer the parent whose child cannot attend school, the worker facing deportation or the family separated by a visa system designed for people with passports, bank accounts and predictable lives.

People do not need to be persuaded that survival is difficult – they need viable alternatives to a perpetual cycle of trying to just survive.

Beyond limbo

Adaptation is deeply human: people improvise because they hope, move because they imagine another future, organise because institutions are absent, work because families need food and study because a life interrupted is still a life capable of continuing.

These capacities should be recognised, funded and included in policy, but they should never become an alibi.

There is a danger, in fact, that resilience becomes the benchmark against which protection systems judge success. Resilience is a human response to adversity, but should never be a substitute for institutional responsibility. A protection system should not be evaluated by how much people can endure, but by how quickly it restores their rights, expands their choices and enables them to rebuild their lives.

A refugee who creates a business despite being denied the formal right to work has demonstrated ingenuity, but the policy has still failed them. A community that builds an informal school has demonstrated leadership, but the national system is still excluding migrant and refugee children and denying them the right to education. A family that survives 10 years of legal limbo has demonstrated endurance, but the limbo itself remains an injustice.

An age of polycrisis demands more than a humanitarian system that helps people absorb one shock after another. It demands a protection system capable of expanding their choices.

The future cannot be built around managing displacement indefinitely while expecting displaced people to make the arrangement sustainable through their own sacrifice.

Adaptation may keep a person alive, but it's protection that gives that person rights. It's opportunity that allows them to rebuild, and it's participation that gives them influence.

We should admire the ways refugees and migrants adapt, but we should also build a system in which they no longer have to be endlessly extraordinary merely to live an ordinary life.

Photo credit: See Li / Picture Capital

A speaker from Sudan addresses the All African Women's Group (AAWG) protest in London in May 2026. In the polycrisis, persistent conflicts causing displacement and migration, such as the brutal conflict in Sudan, may be forgotten or ignored. Despite efforts, the international community has been unable to influence or halt conflicts in Sudan (where multiple foreign countries are involved on both sides of the conflict) and South Sudan in recent years. Sudan's genocide received limited international attention and aid budgets from traditional donors have been slashed, including the closure of the US aid agency (USAID) by President Trump in 2025. (See *Keeping Track in Africa*, p. 14 and Essay: *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration*, p. 202).



Interview



Building a network of actors for stronger search and rescue operations at sea

As the leader and founder of organisations dedicated to providing humanitarian responses at sea, **Caroline Abu Sa'Da** shares her thoughts on the current state of international solidarity and migration policy within the area of search and rescue operations.

Former director general of SOS MEDITERRANEE and co-founder and executive director of Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea (FHAS), Dr Caroline Abu Sa'Da is an experienced humanitarian leader, researcher and author.

Could you tell us a bit about the institutions you're involved in right now?

I left Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 2017 to start SOS MEDITERRANEE. In 2024, I left SOS MEDITERRANEE Switzerland to launch the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea, which is now up and running. It's a Geneva-based foundation, federally registered in Switzerland. The interesting part is that the board of the foundation is composed of both the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Chamber of Shipping. We also have the former mayor of Geneva, who knows well the Swiss political landscape, and our president is the former president of SOS MEDITERRANEE, who is very much into the maritime world. So, we have a foundation that has both identities – maritime and humanitarian.

Can you summarise the foundation's objectives?

We have three main objectives. The first one is to organise dialogue platforms with all stakeholders involved in maritime migration: states, the private shipping sector, UN agencies, and search and rescue professionals. The second one is to produce research and to collect and analyse data on the issue of maritime migration in all the routes, not just the Mediterranean. And, lastly, we directly support search and rescue operations. At the moment, we are mainly involved in the Western Indian Ocean region and in the Atlantic route from West Africa to the Canaries. We've already started activities in Southeast Asia, and soon we'll also start in the Caribbean and in the Mediterranean.

So, the foundation's primary objective is not the actual rescue work?

Not so much. I would define the foundation as an enabler which, in the longer term, should be more useful. For example, at the moment, we're working in the Comoros with the state agency in charge to build with them their national search and rescue plan and put together training and capacity development. We don't have ships, but we're trying to support whenever we can. We supported the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative

> **"There's this movement of externalising the management of people to other countries and, at the same time, there's an increase in maritime migration. This trend of increasing numbers is only going to rise across all global migration routes, not just in the Mediterranean?"**

last year, the Maritime Search and Rescue Council, some states and the Red Crescent and Red Cross societies. The idea is really to create a landscape of enabled actors – from the shipping sector to the states, to search and rescue professionals – so that, at the end of the day, people are actually rescued.

How do you respond to critics who argue that search and rescue operations create a pull factor for migration or act as an enabling context for smugglers?

I would suggest that those people actually read a bunch of studies on the topic which prove that search and rescue operations are not a pull factor. The main issues are the situation in the country of departure and the weather conditions, not the fact that there's a tiny NGO vessel or a Coast Guard vessel somewhere lost in the ocean that maybe, probably, perhaps could actually do the rescue. And, anyway, what we know for sure is that the only real difference between there being NGO rescue ships and there being no NGO rescue ships is the migrant death rate at sea. This has been documented.

The Mediterranean has become both a migration route and a humanitarian frontier. What does the situation at sea reveal about the current state of international solidarity and migration policy?

Well, in terms of the policy being pursued, different mechanisms have been implemented, really towards one aim. Generally, the EU is trying to externalise migration issues as much as it can to bordering countries. For example, in 2016, there was an agreement with Türkiye, followed by agreements with Tunisia, Libya and others. They're really trying their best to complete this externalisation, and they have also just passed their EU Pact on migration, which has entered into force recently and is a clear continuation of this externalisation policy. There's this movement of externalising the management of people to other countries and, at the same time, there's an increase in maritime migration. This trend of increasing numbers is only going to rise across all global migration routes, not just in the Mediterranean. For example, we can see huge movements in the Western Indian Ocean region, in the Atlantic route, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. I don't see clear signs of international solidarity. On the contrary, individual countries or blocs are acting independently, mostly with the aim of restricting movement, especially irregular maritime movement.

The idea of a "global polycrisis" suggests that conflict, climate change, inequality, political instability and displacement are increasingly interconnected. Do you agree? And how does migration today reflect these overlapping crises?

We can see that the frontiers between conflict-driven and climate-change-driven displacement have become very thin. When you have conflict over resources in a drought-affected area, how would you classify it? Is it climate change or is it conflict? It's clear that these crises are interconnected, and trying to put people in boxes, perhaps driven by one of these elements rather than another, or categorising situations, does not serve anyone in terms of rescue. We have to accept that all these elements of the polycrisis put great pressure on people and migration will only become greater. In fact, people have been using the word 'polycrisis' more recently, but these forces have been with us for many years, and it's exactly why people feel forced to move and take risks crossing seas. Coming back to your earlier question about whether NGO rescue ships are a pull factor, we can see these forces make up a far stronger push factor for those on the move.

Has the criminalisation of rescue operations changed the nature of humanitarian action?

Not at its core, because the work goes on. States' attempts to criminalise rescue operations have made things harder, created delays and obstacles and, ultimately, caused lives to be lost at sea, when you calculate how much our work is disrupted by these kinds of disingenuous legal efforts. But we carry on, and we fight in the courts. There are signs of a change in attitude as judges throw out some of these cases or rule in favour of NGOs or NGO workers. Perhaps, the states concerned always knew the charges were spurious, but it was a way to exhaust and distract our rescue efforts. I'm not sure, but of course it doesn't change our humanitarian imperative to rescue migrants.

> **"... these crises are interconnected, and trying to put people in boxes, perhaps driven by one of these elements rather than another, or categorising situations, does not serve anyone in terms of rescue."**

What changes when displacement is no longer seen as an exceptional event but as a structural feature of the global system?

Indeed, displacement is a structural feature of the world order as we see it. Mass movements, displacements and people seeking asylum have been going on for

> **People will move, people have to move and I'm sure more will move in the future, but where will they go? The attitude of many governments and their voters is to deny this reality and so there is a dangerous disconnect between policy and what's happening on the ground... and in the seas.**

decades, let alone labour migration that makes up the bulk of human mobility. Of course, we are seeing unprecedented levels of displacement at this time, as these overlapping crises affect increasing numbers of communities. I cannot see how this will get any better in the near future. In fact, it's bound to get worse, but it also works in the interest of states to keep treating displacement as an exceptional event. Categorising events or situations as 'exceptional' or as a 'crisis' allows states to choose which events to respond to or assign a special 'cause' to them. The connection between the global system and the displacement event is separated so that you have a series of different situations around the world that states and authorities can kind of voluntarily assist with, or not. Refusing to see the cause and effect of policies and actions allows states to maintain a kind of moral unaccountability. There are also big differences in how the international community responds to different crises and mass displacement. I was raised in France, but I am of Palestinian origin and watching the world's response to the genocide in Gaza and what Israel has been doing, and continues to do, there and in the West Bank for the past two years is shocking to me. When you watch how we all just do not really react to the crisis in Sudan but have moved very fast to help Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, or even how well millions of Venezuelans have been welcomed initially in South American countries, you see there are different categories of displaced and different categories of crises – some, the international community will support, others, less so.

> **States' attempts to criminalise rescue operations have made things harder, created delays and obstacles and, ultimately, caused lives to be lost at sea, when you calculate how much our work is disrupted by these kinds of disingenuous legal efforts.**

Do you think the traditional humanitarian model developed after the Second World War is fit for the challenges of the 21st century? And if the humanitarian system were being designed from scratch today, what would look fundamentally different?

> **... in many countries, the public's understanding of migration and asylum is stuck in a way of thinking that needs to change.**

The model we have has to work in the 21st century because it's all we have. It is fairly comprehensive, supported by well-drafted legislation and conventions, providing protection in many ways, even if implementing these high aspirations is not always evident. The problem of designing a new humanitarian system today, especially in relation to displacement and asylum, is that states would pull back from existing norms and commitments. If they agreed on a model at all, it would be a far weaker, more diluted version of what we currently have. What we really need is more protections and for existing rights and laws to be upheld. Saving lives at sea, for example, is not an option: it's a legal obligation. Specifically, search and rescue is a state's obligation. There has been some talk recently about opening the Refugee Convention up for review but I think this would be disastrous for refugees because, for sure, states would try to have fewer obligations and reduce protections significantly.

What worries you most about the future of humanitarian action, particularly in relation to mixed migration?

Well, right now we are in a bad place. The political and financial support for humanitarianism and multilateralism is weak. I've never seen it this weak. I'm hoping it is just a temporary phase, so my main worry is that what we now have becomes normalised and continues or gets worse. It mustn't, because it's neither compassionate nor just. People talk a lot about the US pulling funding from USAID and thousands of projects, but in terms of funding, many European countries have been reducing their aid budgets for years. Not just that, but in many countries the public's understanding of migration and asylum is stuck in a way of thinking that needs to change. People will move, people have to move and I'm sure more will move in the future, but where will they go? The attitude of many governments and their voters is to deny this reality, so there is a dangerous disconnect between policy and what's happening on the ground... and in the seas.

> **Categorising events or situations as 'exceptional' or as a 'crisis' allows states to choose which events to respond to or assign a special 'cause' to them.**

Photo credit: AP Tolang

Climate breakdown is a key polycrisis variable (see Essay *Polycrisis and mixed migration in 2026*, p. 160). Here, an aerial view shows the aftermath of massive flooding along the Bhote Koshi River in Devighat, Nuwakot, Nepal in August 2026. A catastrophic flash flood swept through Nepal's northern border region after an ice-and-rock avalanche, reportedly triggered by an earthquake, caused a sudden surge in the Lhende River on the Nepal-China border and sent massive volumes of water, mud and debris downstream into the Bhote Koshi and Trishuli river systems. Thousands died and thousands more remain missing.



Mixed migration futures in polycrisis: scenarios and black swans

Chris Horwood[1]

The opening essay in this Mixed Migration Review (see Essay *Polycrisis and mixed migration in 2026*, p. 160) stated that, according to academic Adam Tooze, the polycrisis thesis rejects the old assumptions that life will return to normal once a crisis is over.[2] This is because, he claims, crises are interlinked and, because of the depth of their interaction, the scene is set for a "new catastrophic potential".[3] This closing essay explores those possibilities, looking beyond what may be considered plausible or desirable, through three mixed migration scenarios.

Woven through the analysis are several wild card, or 'black swan', reflections: rare, high-impact events that could overturn our expectations and deserve more planning attention than their likelihood suggests. Presented in no particular order, they describe developments which could produce radical outcomes and upend existing paradigms.

Three international mixed migration scenarios

The struggle over mixed migration futures at the core of these scenarios is, ultimately, a struggle over global inequality, citizenship, postcolonial power (and structural racism and/or discrimination), global hierarchies and the meaning of human rights in an era of climate change and technological transformation. As the five previous essays in this Review have illustrated, the tensions and pressures around these themes are both exacerbated and magnified in an era of polycrisis – an era whose 'end' is not assured, nor whose outcome can be easily predicted.

Scenario 1: predominantly 'fortress' with limited filters and neglected rights

In this scenario, future migration governance by wealthy nations is increasingly likely to evolve into fortified systems of exclusion with technologically mediated border infrastructures, while still incorporating some selective mobility through designated filter systems. Arguably, this is a pessimistic or dystopian trajectory of fortress jurisdictions with border regimes where deaths regularly occur, and where the normalisation of abandonment and neglect of those in mixed migration movements occurs. It imagines the current trajectory of protection erosion, aid contraction and border militarisation not slowing but consolidating into a durable architecture of exclusion.

Right-wing migration policy ascendancy

Developments towards a Scenario 1 future are viable because recent events occurred in a context where anti-migrant politics (often populist and typically right-leaning) are rising globally and look set to either assume power in many countries, if they haven't already, or at least accelerate and force the mainstreaming of anti-migrant policy more widely.[4] As Abdelhady writes, "the profound impact of right-wing political ascendancy on migration policy and discourse represents far more than a temporary fluctuation in regulatory approaches. It constitutes a fundamental recalibration of how economically advantaged nations conceptualize and operationalize their responses to questions of sovereignty, security, demographic change, and human mobility in an increasingly interconnected yet politically fragmented global environment."[5]

With no certainty when the current era of polycrisis may reduce its intensity or impact, or what will come after it, the current trend of squeezing asylum space, erecting and defending borders, externalising border control and clamping down on irregular or undocumented migrants and those who protect them is likely to continue. The 'normalising the extreme' trend in terms of pushbacks, pullbacks, deportations, detentions, expulsions and even killings of those on the move has been documented by this annual publication since its inception.

Current extreme and illegal actions

Dozens of countries, including many OECD members, are already continually practicing extreme and often illegal

1 Chris Horwood is a project manager, research analyst and migration specialist. He has worked on a wide range of humanitarian, development and rehabilitation-related assignments with governments, UN/multinational organisations and NGOs over three decades in over 20 countries.
2 Tooze, A. (2025) Chartbook 343: Polycrisis and the critique of capitalocentrism. adamtooze.substack.com
3 Tooze, A. (2025) Chartbook 343: Polycrisis and the critique of capitalocentrism. adamtooze.substack.com
4 Abdelhady, D. (2025) The Rightward Shift: Transformation of Global Migration Policy and Discourse. Nordic Journal of Migration Research.
5 Abdelhady, D. (2025) The Rightward Shift: Transformation of Global Migration Policy and Discourse. Nordic Journal of Migration Research.

actions against migrants and asylum-seekers. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, border forces positioned machine guns along their southern border with Yemen and reportedly killed hundreds of Ethiopian migrants looking for work in the kingdom.[6] Iranian border guards have also reportedly shot and killed numerous Afghans crossing into Iran.[7] In August this year, Spain forcibly returned without process most of the 72,000 irregular migrants from Morocco who arrived in a collective rush (mostly swimming) into Ceuta.[8] Throughout 2026, Gulf countries – led by Saudi Arabia – have been arresting and expelling hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals.[9] The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), with budgets tripled since 2024, has snatched, detained and deported more than 350,000 suspected undocumented migrants in the first half of 2026 alone.[10] Lastly, Libya's long-standing notorious treatment of migrants in detention, as well as through maritime pullbacks (with EU support and full knowledge), has been extensively documented and continued throughout 2026.[11]

Black Swan Box 1. Migration becomes a weaponised instrument of state conflict

Building on incidents of migration diplomacy in recent years (e.g. Belarus-Poland; Türkiye-EU; Morocco-Spain; Libya-Europe, etc.), imagine a scenario where several state actors simultaneously and openly use engineered migration flows as coercive geopolitical leverage, deliberately directing or releasing displaced populations towards rival states as a form of hybrid warfare. This collapses the humanitarian/economic framing of migration into a security/warfare framing, fundamentally changing how every state (open, closed or selective) responds, because migrants become instruments rather than agents.

Increasing indifference and necropolitics

There is little to indicate this general trend towards indifference and harsh treatment of unwanted migrants will end or reverse. On the contrary, not only is the international media only partially interested in these events today, but any public criticism or shaming appears to fall on deaf ears, as the world has become inured to distant actions against an essentially invisible and undesired mixed migration cohort who is also seen as a dangerous liability for most politicians and governments. The last decade has offered ample evidence that mistreating people on the move – often breaking domestic and international laws – can be done with impunity. In this scenario, what has happened in the past will pave the way for an equally extreme, or even more indifferent and extreme, future.

Here, radical mobility stratification also becomes the norm – a situation in which different migrants experience dramatically different border realities, with some enjoying frictionless, elite movement, while others deal with heavily surveilled, restricted and precarious mobility. As outlined in this Review (see Essay *Labour mobility in the age of polycrisis*, p. 218), the impact of demographic and technological changes already underway will lead to a highly competitive demand for particular migrant skills. This scenario forecasts technologically embedded border regimes (including AI, automation and robotics) which selectively admit these economically desirable migrants while abandoning unwanted populations to precarity, immobility and/or death. Here, Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics' will be explicit: a situation in which states' immigration policies have power over life and death, deploy governance through abandonment and, ultimately, view populations as disposable.[12] This scenario would see yet more 'necropolitics' than we already see today, characterised by deaths at borders, exposure to danger, abandonment in camps, denial of rescue and 'slow violence' through legal precarity.

Since 2014, IOM has offered a conservative estimate of 84,000 migrant deaths at sea or on land,[13] with at least 72 of them losing their lives in the August mass crossing of migrants from Morocco into Ceuta.[14] Behrouz Boochani, a refugee who was formerly detained in Australia's offshore detention system, discusses this in this Review (see Interview *The violence of border control: the 'Australian model' and its colonial roots* p. 134). Past examples that promote this scenario could include the withdrawal of EU rescue ships in the Mediterranean and subsequent legal harassment of NGO rescue ships;[15] the continual dumping of migrants in Algeria in their

6 Frouws, B. and Horwood, C. (2023) Murderous Border Controls: Killing of Ethiopian migrants at the Saudi Arabian-Yemen border. Mixed Migration Centre.
7 Amnesty International. (2022) Afghanistan: "They don't treat us like humans": Unlawful returns of Afghans from Turkey and Iran.
8 AP. (2026) Runaway online rumors sparked frantic rush by migrants to the Spanish territory of Ceuta. NBC News.
9 Ata, H. (2026) Saudi Arabia deports 12,363 residency violators in one week. Gulf News.
10 Barr, L. (2026) ICE says over 350,000 individuals removed so far in fiscal year 2026. ABC News.
11 United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) & OHCHR (2026) Migrants in Libya victims of "violent business model" of systemic violations and abuses.
12 Mbembe, A. (2003) Necropolitics. Public Culture, 15(1) 11-40.
13 IOM Germany (2026) Missing Migrants Project Brings Migrant Deaths and Disappearances into Parliamentary Focus.
14 Al Jazeera (2026) Migrant deaths in Ceuta rise to 72 after border surge from Morocco.
15 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2025) Search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and fundamental rights — June 2025 update.

desert border with Mali and pushback into Niger without support of any kind;[16] allowing Libya to repeatedly detain migrants in extreme conditions where many have perished or been severely abused;[17] the indifference of successive US administrations to migrants and asylum seekers who die in the borderlands between Mexico and the US;[18] the deliberate abandonment of Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi migrants in the Andaman Sea or the controversial incarceration of asylum seekers by Australia in third party countries (Naoero, formerly Nauru/Manus), to prevent them from claiming asylum on Australian soil.[19] In some of these examples, refugees and migrants disappear administratively rather than visibly, their suffering becoming bureaucratically managed and responsibility becoming diffused across systems and, increasingly, algorithms.

This scenario will reflect a broader transformation from protection-, rights-based governance towards systems structured by exclusion, deterrence and necropolitical management, with the Global South functioning simultaneously as a source of labour, site of containment and zone for externalised border control.

Future fortress systems

The future fortress system would, therefore, be based on militarised borders, deterrence infrastructures, externalised asylum systems and criminalisation of irregular mobility and those who assist irregular migration (since 2018, there have been approximately 40 legal proceedings against NGO rescue crews).[20] Its defining characteristics would be walls, detention centres, surveillance systems, offshore processing and hostile environments – arguably, all currently present throughout the world but perhaps most recently exemplified by the US's militarisation, with the deployment of 20,000 troops in 2026,[21] at its border with Mexico and, at the US's request, Mexico's own militarisation of both northern and southern borders using tens of thousands of troops.[22]

Black Swan Box 2. Climate-driven displacement overwhelms the legal category of migrant or refugee

A cascading climate event, amplifying or compounding as it develops, could produce displacement at such a scale and suddenness that existing legal frameworks such as refugee, asylum-seeker or economic migrant simply become irrelevant because the system cannot process the crisis. It's the collapse of the border as the primary unit of migration policy, likely leading to a breakdown of the categorical system which underlies all three scenarios. States might respond with ad hoc, incoherent, contradictory policies simultaneously (militarised borders in one region, humanitarian corridors in another), because there's no longer a coherent policy paradigm to select from.

Limited 'filtration' systems

Meanwhile, the 'filtration' systems as selective migration governance would see mobility stratified according to class, race, skills, nationality, biometric data and economic utility (also, possibly, by gender). Again, these mechanisms are currently at play, but this scenario envisages a major gearing up of these filters to meet future labour demand without necessarily allowing right to remain, permanence, family reunification and so on – essentially, it would be a tougher, more Gulf States-style utilitarian approach to foreign workers. This scenario is not about stopping all migration, but sorting 'valuable' from 'disposable' mobility using various mechanisms, including a points-based system, AI visa scoring, labour mobility corridors, 'digital nomad' visas, temporary worker programmes and others. This scenario would be indifferent to the unavoidable involuntary immobility it would create for millions of would-be migrants affected by polycrisis factors beyond their control, yet without any possibility of movement.

The effective power of the UN or other international multigovernmental organisations to hold countries accountable for breaches of agreements or conventions (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Refugee Convention, the Global Compacts, Convention on the Law of the Sea and more) will be neutered, and ethical considerations will be secondary to national interests in this scenario. Lip service may be paid to various conventions and legal norms, and limited humanitarian interventions and support for migrants and refugees may still be evident, though this will be mainly performative. The dangers of reducing protection in this way are explored in Daniel Ghezelbash in this publication (see Essay *The protection crisis: a crisis of solidarity and political will* p. 180).

16 Sanderson, S. (2026) Niger: Nearly 15,000 migrants pushed back from Algeria so far in 2026. InfoMigrants.
17 Amnesty International UK (2021) Libya: fresh evidence of 'horrifying' abuse in migrant detention centres – new report.
18 Kerwin, D. and Martínez, D.E. (2024) Forced Migration, Deterrence, and Solutions to the Non-Natural Disaster of Migrant Deaths Along the US-Mexico Border and Beyond. Center for Migration Studies of New York.
19 OHCHR (2025) Australia responsible for arbitrary detention of asylum seekers in offshore facilities, UN Human Rights Committee finds.
20 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2025) Search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and fundamental rights - June 2025 update.
21 Kehrt, S., del Bosque, M. and Roza, D. (2026) A war zone, minus the war: One year later, has the military really secured the US-Mexico border? Military Times.
22 Norton, T. (2025) Mexico Sends 10,000 Troops to Border—What Difference Will It Make? Newsweek.

In summary, all aspects of this dystopian scenario are the amplification of the worst (for migrants) features which currently characterise migration governance as we witness its practice in 2026. As the impact of the polycrisis bites deeper, this trajectory is entirely plausible in coming years. With this amplification and emphasis on harsher policy and explicit self-interest, states will copy one another in a dog-eat-dog race to the bottom, from the perspective of future would-be migrants or refugees in dire need of options.

Scenario 2: solidarity, recentring on rights-based approaches, reform and solid economic sense

This optimistic trajectory imagines a near-future in which the compounding pressures of polycrisis become the catalyst for reform rather than retrenchment, in which the visible failure of the current system generates enough political and moral pressure to recentre rights rather than abandon them.

Shifting away from the status quo

This scenario's premise is that future migration governance could move away from securitisation and exclusion towards systems grounded in migrant solidarity, human rights, mobility justice, climate justice and transnational cooperation. Although current migration governance is dominated by border securitisation and unequal global power relations, emerging forms of migrant solidarity through special mechanisms, mass regularisation of irregular status, deeper integration, South-led governance innovation and rights-based technological infrastructures could produce more open and equitable migration systems. In parallel, they could also make more economic sense in a global context of demographic change, where severe labour shortages are predicted if mobility continues to be obstructed.[23] According to a study conducted by the Centre for Global Development, by 2050 high- and upper-middle-income countries will collectively reach a gap of 667 million workers, while low- and lower-middle-income countries will have a 'surplus' of 463 million.[24] The exact figures are less important than the point to be made that global competition for migrant labour will doubtless be even more of a reality than it is already.

Black Swan Box 3. Mass depopulation reverses the migration calculus entirely

Instead of their current political choice of restriction versus openness, receiving countries might find themselves competing for migrant labour in the event of demographic collapse. They might need to recruit, subsidise relocation or offer fast-track citizenship, while sending countries could start to restrict emigration to retain their own workforce. The polarity of which nation wants to close borders flips: it's no longer rich countries keeping people out; it's low- and mid-income countries trying to keep their own people in, while rich countries try to lure migrants towards them. This breaks our three-scenario axis because 'open versus closed' stops being about receiving country politics and becomes a bidding war.

Who says it is utopian?

Despite evidence of widespread political and populist trends against migrants and refugees publicised by the media, restrictionist political parties and other entities (including rights organisations alarmed by these trends), there is also considerable evidence of the opposite, suggesting that this scenario may not be as utopian as some might assume. In this Review, Anna Knoll writes about "a sharp post-pandemic expansion" with permanent labour migration to OECD countries reaching historically high levels (see Essay *Labour mobility in the age of polycrisis*, p. 218). According to her analysis, labour migration is currently 32 percent above its 2019 level and almost double (over 93%) the levels recorded in 2015, suggesting that the long-term trend sees governments navigating their labour demands while trying to convince their electorate (often unsuccessfully) of their 'toughness' and how much they control their own borders.

This scenario rejects the preceding dystopian vision of the future which serves the restrictionist political argument by making harsh policy look like an inevitable global consensus rather than a choice made by a specific subset of mostly wealthy countries. Arguably, a small number of high-income, media-dominant countries (US, UK, parts of the EU and Australia) have hardened their policy and rhetoric significantly and, because they dominate global English-language media, this creates an exaggerated impression of a universal trend. Public opinion data, however, doesn't support the narrative that

23 OECD (2024) OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2024 Issue 2: Resilience in uncertain times.
24 Kenny, C. (2021) Global Mobility: Confronting A World Workforce Imbalance. Center for Global Development.

the direction is towards harsher policies; it supports a story of high variance between countries, with genuine improvement in some and genuine hardening in others, rather than one dominant global direction.[25]

Positive Convention and refugee attitudes

Meanwhile, the Ipsos/UNHCR's 2026 75th-anniversary Refugee Convention survey found that attitudes towards refugees have remained remarkably stable globally, and some countries have even seen significant increases in support: in terms of support for offering refuge, for example, Japan rose from 23 percent (2019) to 64 percent (2026) and France rose from 43 percent to 68 percent over the same period.[26] In the last few years, two huge groups of refugees – almost 7 million from Venezuela and almost 6 million from Ukraine – have been offered refuge and integration opportunities by a wide selection of countries.[27] It begs the question, then, of where the current demands for Refugee Convention reform are coming from and whether the reasons are genuine or have been weaponised by political groups. In this Review, Catherine Woollard offers insights around these issues (see Interview *Migration as a 'distraction' in the EU's politics of deterrence* p. 112), while Daniel Ghezelbash's essay states that we should reject any framing which suggests an unmanageable or overwhelming 'refugee crisis' and, instead, talk about a 'protection crisis' – a crisis in the "capacity and willingness of systems to deliver the protection the Convention requires. Rather, it is a crisis of solidarity and political will. Responsibility-sharing gives way to responsibility-shifting."

Widespread successful integration

Substantial integration is also happening at scale, much of it in the Global South, which gets far less media coverage in Western media than European/US border stories. There are, nevertheless, ongoing and long-standing illustrations in most countries in every continent. In Germany, for example, approximately 17 million of those permanently living in the country (or 20% of the country's population) were born outside its borders, including 1.2 million refugees who were welcomed in 2015 and 1.3 million Ukrainians subsequently. Some analysis shows the level of labour integration is high and not dissimilar to that of the native German population.[28] Spain's 2026 regularisation drew up to 1.2 million applicants, many of whom have been living and working in Spain for years; Colombia has given regular status to about 2 million Venezuelans through a 10-year protection statute; Türkiye naturalised at least 230,000 Syrians through its 'exceptional citizenship' naturalisation pathway.[29] Kenya's ambitious Shirika Plan and Uganda's self-reliance model (2 million refugees with land, work rights and freedom of movement) are among the most substantively generous refugee policies anywhere, sustained for decades in Uganda's case.[30] The Shirika Plan, in particular, is a 12-year, three-phase initiative (through to 2035) aiming to convert the massive Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, home to over 800,000 refugees, into fully integrated municipalities, for the most part, administered by county governments, rather than isolated UN-run camps.[31] How real is the so-called backlash against migration and resistance to asylum seekers, then, when examples can be drawn from hundreds of cases globally where integration has worked and is working – notwithstanding isolated cases or transition pain which can be publicised disproportionately by the media and politicians?

Migrant and refugee rights' momentum

In other recent developments, the non-binding 2025 Independent Declaration on the Right to Participate affirms the right of people with experience of forced displacement or statelessness to participate in decisions which affect their lives, not as a courtesy but as a right.[32] This is a major milestone not only for meaningful participation but also for refugee and migrant-led policy design and implementation. It builds on earlier commitments towards these goals expressed in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), The Grand Bargain's 'Participation Revolution' (Goal 6, 2016) and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018) – which includes the Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Refugee Participation, originally launched in 2019 ahead of the first Global Refugee Forum. In October 2025, at UNHCR's Executive Committee meeting,[33] 117 refugee-led organisations from 41 countries released an Open Letter jointly calling on UN member states to reaffirm commitments to international refugee, human rights and humanitarian law. All this suggests that the theoretical, legal and ethical gauge is changing – leaning towards a future that could be very different from dystopian Scenario 1, where migrants and refugees live a subordinate, neglected existence with second-class rights.

25 Gallup International Association (2026) The Latest Findings from the World's Longest-Running Global Public Opinion Study.
26 Ipsos (n.d.) Global Opinion Polls.
27 UNHCR (n.d.) Refugee Data Finder.
28 Mellersh, N. (2025) Ten years on: Refugees near German employment levels. InfoMigrants.
29 Mencutek, Z.S. and Barthoma, S. (2025) Governance of Citizenship in Turkey: Exceptional Citizenship for Syrians amidst a Protracted Refugee Crisis. Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies, 23(3), 450-468.
30 Saxafi, I., Boru Halakhe, A. and Wood, M. (2026) From Promise to Practice: Delivering on Uganda's Refugee Model. Refugees International.
31 USCRI (2025) Toward a Shared Future: Advancing Refugee Integration in Kenya.
32 UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law (2025) Independent Declaration on the Right of Persons With Experience of Forced Displacement or Statelessness to Participate in Decisions That Affect Them.
33 Refugee Congress (2025) Refugee-Led Organizations Call on UN Member States to Strengthen International Refugee Protections.

Instead, this scenario could embrace refugee- and migrant-led solutions in a world that has the leadership and political will to defend and reinforce the Refugee Convention and live up to aspirations laid out in the Global Compact for Migration, significantly increasing pathways for legal labour mobility. Here, universal human rights and, particularly, protection and defence of rights will enjoy renewed authority and defence by world leaders as well as through re-valorised institutions such as the UN and rights-focused international agreements. The urgency for these kinds of changes is discussed in detail in this Review (see Essay *The Survival trap: why adaptation is not protection in the age of polycrisis*, p. 230).

The current moment of 'transition pain' and/or 'nativist reflexes' will fade away along with its populist and anti-migrant flag-bearers, as global society moves towards more multicultural societies where labour mobility is celebrated and sought after. Here, states educate and insist that their populations not only understand mobility justice but also recognise the urgent economic necessity of upscaled labour migration if the economy and accompanying standards of living are to be maintained or improved.[34]

Climate justice with climate mobility prevails

In relation to climate, this scenario envisages that, as parts of the world become unliveable and their populations are forced to move, cooler regions will absorb large numbers of people in a planned and welcoming way as part of climate justice – the most ethical and practical way to address climate impacts on vulnerable populations, instead of resisting the forecast displacement of millions, if not billions, of people as huge areas of the world become too hot to live in and too dry (or flooded) to engage in food production.[35] In this scenario, transnational cooperation has been considerably enhanced by more responsible and less cynical political leadership and will work towards addressing the mutual crises which characterise today's polycrisis.

The Global South would not only be seen as a source of migrants, but transnational cooperation would lead to more ethical and international labour systems rejecting racial hierarchies and discrimination. The successful emergence of this scenario would require a mindset which builds on existing alternatives to the status quo, and which offer a raft of possible solutions. Of these, regional free movement systems, city-based citizenship, transnational migrant councils, climate mobility compacts and decolonial migration governance are just a few examples. Also, in this possibly utopian scenario, the world would need to embrace and encourage the growth of transnational solidarity networks which could include migrant unions, diaspora political organising, digital mutual aid systems, sanctuary cities and 'solidarity or humanitarian corridors'.[36] To some extent, many elements of these mechanisms are already happening, but they would be further strengthened and prioritised in this scenario.

Paradigm shifts

Ideologically, there would need to be a shift from 'humanitarianism' to 'political rights', with a shift from charity and emergency aid towards political inclusion, climate justice, labour rights, mobility rights and democratic participation. The inadequacy and moral indefensibility of the current approach to migrants and refugees is argued in this Review by Mustafa Alio and Rez Gardi (see Essay *The survival trap: why adaptation is not protection in an age of polycrisis*, p. 230). Conceivably, the current catastrophic reduction in aid systems globally, detailed in this Review by Bram Frouws (see Essay *The multiplier: foreign aid cuts, polycrisis and the reshaping of mixed migration*, p. 202), could open the door to the rights-based system. Additionally, it would require states and people to reimagine citizenship, with possible future models exploring *inter alia* issues promoting regional citizenship, portable rights, urban citizenship and residence-based belonging.

In this scenario, the role of the Global South would not simply be to service labour needs in the Global North but could be an innovative pioneer of alternative labour governance through, for example, regional labour agreements, cooperative migration pathways and anti-exploitative recruitment systems. The positive role of technology could facilitate migrant organising through encrypted communication, enable transnational remittance cooperatives, support legal aid and documentation access and, potentially, create digital identity systems detached from nation-states. Additionally, again *inter alia*, technology could create digital credential recognition, cross-border worker organising, portable welfare systems and transparent recruitment programmes.

Realism versus aspiration

Some could argue that any reflection of human characteristics and human history would suggest Scenario 1 is far more plausible than Scenario 2, as so much ongoing and publicised evidence points to that trajectory. And yet, a more progressive and reformist-

34 Pritchett, L. (2026) Global Labor Mobility between Shrinking and Growing Labor Forces. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 40(1), 71-92.
35 Vince, G. (2023) Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World. New York: Flatiron Books.
36 Darling, J. and Bauder, H. (eds.) (2019) Sanctuary cities and urban struggles: rescaling migration, citizenship, and rights. Manchester University Press.

focused analysis of history, particularly looking at changes in the Global North since the 19th century (and accelerated after World War II), could highlight major transformational shifts in global human society which give hope for Scenario 2. Universal rights-based values, along with a reduction in discrimination and exploitation, have spread rapidly worldwide, arguably offering Scenario 2 a ready foundation, if only political and civic will and leadership align with it.

History may show us that the current trends and crises will be the herald of more radical alternative models of global cooperation, particularly in the face of more existential threats of climate change – we may even be forced to adapt our models of cooperation and coexistence rapidly because this specific threat is advancing towards us so quickly.

Critically, an optimistic trajectory does not require the disappearance of the underlying polycrisis; it requires only that governance systems become genuinely adaptive rather than reactive, as theorised in recent polycrisis governance scholarship, which calls for decoupling 'crisis connectors' and building deliberate 'synergising connectors' between policy fields.[37] Rather than merely acting defensively, therefore, states, institutions and communities would adopt cooperative strategies.

Nevertheless, given current realities and the factors and trends of the polycrisis, this paper argues that, for mixed migration, a third scenario is most likely to emerge and gain traction in the coming years.

Black Swan Box 4. A migration-enabling technology makes borders partially irrelevant

Widespread remote work infrastructure plus digital-nomad-style legal residency products (already emerging) scale into a parallel system where a large class of remote workers essentially becomes post-national – paying taxes and holding legal status through digital residency programs rather than physical migration. This doesn't fit open, closed or selective migration systems because it removes the physical border crossing as the site of the political conflict entirely – the issues shift to tax jurisdiction and digital identity instead. However, it may also become a way for rich countries with stronger workplace and employment laws to evade responsibility by outsourcing. To what extent this would have a major impact on those who cannot become post-national due to lack of financial resources, education or access in general is debatable.

Scenario 3: bifurcated selective openness, extreme exclusion

This third scenario looks similar to Scenario 1, but it is significantly more nuanced. It allows, in fact, the vastly differing Scenario 1 and Scenario 2 to exist simultaneously: that is, neither uniform solidarity nor uniform fortress-building, but a sharpening bifurcation – in other words, the concurrent, coexisting operation of radically different regimes for different categories of people. Cognitively dissonant from an ideological and ethical perspective, this scenario is an unholy meld of the different forces and realities highlighted in the first two scenarios. It suggests a hardening and narrowing of policy into a formal, permanent and ruthless two-tier system.

Here, future migration governance is likely to become increasingly bifurcated, with states maintaining highly efficient, technologically sophisticated systems of mobility for economically valuable migrants (skilled workers, investors, students and digital nomads), while simultaneously intensifying exclusion, deterrence and externalised border controls against refugees, irregular migrants and climate-displaced populations.

This scenario envisages a stratified global mobility regime in which migration systems function seamlessly for privileged populations but catastrophically for vulnerable ones. As Bauman predicted in his analysis, mobility itself will become the 'central stratifying force' of the late-modern world: not wealth or class in the old sense, but the capacity to move (or not) becomes the key marker of who has power and who doesn't.[38] Being 'local' in a globalised world, he argued, has and will become a mark of social deprivation rather than rootedness.

Strict utilitarianism drives policy

In this scenario, future migration systems increasingly favour migrants who are economically useful, highly educated, digitally mobile, financially wealthy and culturally and ethnically aligned for easier integration. Governments, therefore, expand skilled migration pathways, investor visas, international student recruitment and digital nomad programmes where borders become more open for elite mobility. Mobility continues to become commodified, rights are increasingly linked to economic value and migration policy reflects neoliberal priorities rather than humanitarian obligations in a world where existing trends are consolidated in the global 'race' for talent, human capital migration and stratified mobility.[39] Meanwhile, asylum seekers,

37 Scheffran J. (2025) Systemic risks and governance of the global polycrisis in the Anthropocene: stability of the climate–conflict–migration–pandemic nexus. Global Sustainability, 8:e39.
38 Bauman, Z. (1998) Globalization: The Human Consequences. Cambridge: Polity Press.
39 Walia, H. (2021) Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

low-skilled labour migrants and those displaced by climate or conflict will face accelerating deportation regimes, offshore processing and externalised borders, in which neighbouring or transit states absorb both the population and the burden of exclusion, in exchange for aid or trade concessions.[40] In fact, most of these elements are already in place and being practised, so this third scenario depicts an amplification of current trends.

Inequality-driven exclusion

A key premise of this scenario is that, despite widespread discussion about the flaws of capitalism and the prevailing economic model, neoliberal globalisation will continue to prevail, notwithstanding the (as-yet) unknown distortions that the widespread deployment of AI may cause. Saskia Sassen has argued that the defining feature of the contemporary global economy isn't simply rising inequality, it is outright expulsion: growing numbers of people, places and even entire economies are being pushed out of the systems that used to include them.[41] Using Sassen's analysis, deprivation and expulsion are co-related in an unequal and mobility-stratified world.

Artificial Intelligence: the macro-critical transition

If previous historic trends continue, it is unlikely that the wealth and opportunity that derive from the AI and automation revolution will become more democratically distributed. The opposite might happen, with immense wealth and oligarchy-like power becoming narrowly concentrated, and with global hierarchies between regions and states becoming more extreme, as discussed by Ayşe Zarakol in her interview for this publication.[42] (See Interview *An 'order collapse' like no other? What history tells us about the polycrisis* p. 174). In 2025, a high-level IMF workshop and scenario-planning exercise found that AI should be treated as a 'macro-critical transition' with highly uneven effects across countries, rather than a standard technology shock.[43] The impact of AI on the world of work is unknown but is expected to create new divisions of labour and render large swathes of working people in advanced economies unemployed while significantly reducing the need for migrant labour.[44] The likely impact for this scenario is, therefore, a further narrowing of admission for migrants and refugees and stricter mobility-stratification.

Current border securitisation models, with ever 'efficient' technological mechanisms to effect exclusion and deterrence, in addition to physical barriers, will persist and expand dramatically as irregular movement becomes less tolerated by voting populations in destination countries. Differential inclusion and an absence of mobility justice will characterise this scenario, as hypothesised for Scenario 1.[45]

Hierarchies dominate

However, as mentioned, future borders will operate less as absolute barriers and more as systems of selective sorting, reproducing global inequalities through differential access to mobility, security and rights, while favouring those culturally and ethnically aligned for easier integration. The defining feature of future migration governance may not be restriction alone, but the coexistence of seamless mobility and humanitarian exclusion within the same global system. The future of international migration is unlikely to be uniformly 'open' or 'closed'. Instead, as mentioned, migration governance will become increasingly stratified for economically valuable migrants, while highly exclusionary for displaced and irregular populations. This perspective fits well with the academic analysis of stratification and hierarchies as expressed by Ayşe Zarakol in her 2017 publication, as well as in her interview for this Review.

Despite a possible continued retreat from the earlier international order and rules-based arrangements, the UN, international institutions, non-government organisations and civil society will continue to practice effective advocacy in democratic systems. This will result in a greater recognition of the need for migrant-led solutions and refugee-led management and policies. The perception of the current universal hardening of policy is, partly, a media and political artefact that selects which stories get covered and which issues get politicised, while the reality is a bifurcated world. On the one hand, there are genuine restrictions concentrated in a handful of powerful, agenda-setting countries while, on the other, there is a genuine (if imperfect and strained) expansion of rights and integration happening at significant scale elsewhere – largely, in countries that host the majority of the world's displaced people but, increasingly, spreading northwards as the impacts of climate change bite deeper, forcing people towards more temperate countries.

40 Candiz, G. and Basok, T. (2026) 'The farther away, the better' is the problematic logic behind U.S. third-country deportations. The Conversation.
41 Sassen, S. (2014) Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Belknap Press).
42 Zarakol, A. (ed.) (2017) Hierarchies in World Politics. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
43 Barhoumi, K. et al. (2026) Global Economic and Financial Implications of Artificial Intelligence: Lessons from a Scenario Planning Exercise. International Monetary Fund.
44 Adams, R. (2024) The New Empire of AI: The Future of Global Inequality. Cambridge: Polity Press.
45 Sheller, M. (2018) Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes. London/Brooklyn, NY: Verso.

Human rights will be upheld and, where possible, support for migrants and refugees will strengthen, as cities become more independent and extend sanctuary and protection, irrespective of what their central government policies are. In short, all the progressive and sincere efforts to regularise, integrate, and give independence and agency to migrants and refugees could continue and flourish, theoretically and in practice. This, nonetheless, may be experienced unevenly and mainly by those who have already successfully accessed democratic destination states, as long as it doesn't interfere with the central drive to penalise and deter irregular migration.

A diminishing proportion gains refugee settlement

It's not clear what the impact of Scenario 3 will be on refugees but, while the Convention may remain intact, in practice countries will most likely be more demanding in terms of acceptance criteria. Following years of perceived abuse of asylum systems by migrants short of alternative routes, governments and voters will be less tolerant than ever of 'false claimants'. If crises around the world continue to create record-breaking numbers of displaced asylum-seekers (as they are doing today and as they are fully expected to do in the future with the effects of climate change), in this scenario, the outcome will see a diminishing proportion of them accepted for refugee resettlement. The accumulation of involuntary immobile migrants and frustrated asylum-seekers is not expected to threaten states but is more likely to lead to entrenched immiseration and desperation, epitomising Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics', "where states' immigration policies have power over life and death, deploy governance through abandonment and where populations are rendered disposable."[46]

Hypocrisy as policy design

This scenario is the most psychologically comfortable one for governing elites, because it allows liberal self-image and exclusionary practice to coexist without apparent contradiction: a state can present itself internationally as a defender of human rights and skilled-migration innovation, while simultaneously running one of the most punitive deportation regimes for those deemed economically unproductive. Bifurcation does not require hypocrisy to be concealed: it normalises it as policy design.

Black Swan Box 5. A dominant migrant-sending region undergoes rapid economic convergence

If a major sending region experiences a sustained economic boom – for example, driven by a critical mineral demand, agricultural technology or manufacturing reshoring – outward migration pressure could fall sharply without any policy change at all in receiving countries. Here, migration *demand* disappears, because the drivers to migrate reduce.

Limits of scenario-building and the importance of Black Swans

None of the three pathways described in this essay is likely to unfold in pure form. The value of separating these three scenarios, rather than collapsing them into a single, muddled forecast, is that it forces a clearer reckoning with the ethical stakes each one carries. Ultimately, scenario planning of this kind is not a tool for prediction and the process itself is fraught with well-documented problems which this paper has also failed to avoid.

Primarily, despite being offered the freedom to imagine more widely, scenario-builders anchor their visions in the near-past and salient present. Cognitive and organisational forces push scenario builders toward the plausible-sounding 'middle', with a tendency to extrapolate from what they've recently experienced (the so-called 'availability bias'). Secondly, an institutional fear and social conformity of appearing non-credible by suggesting 'crazed' or unrealistic visions of the future often permeates scenario-building exercises. Thirdly, the normalcy bias leads individuals and groups to assume tomorrow will resemble today and discounts structural breaks and catastrophes, even when warning signs exist. Finally, there is a systematic pull toward discounting 'extreme' scenarios (despite discounted scenarios often transpiring), which is why scenario-planning methodology now builds in explicit safeguards against it. Stress-testing scenarios against the most extreme outcome or outlier events is worthwhile because low-probability/high-impact events deserve disproportionate planning attention relative to their likelihood. The scenario that later becomes reality is usually already flickering at the edges of current events, just not yet taken seriously as a policy-structuring possibility. In the spirit of exploring these 'X-factors', wildcards or 'black swans',[47] which could explode these three scenarios, we placed these five propositions in numbered boxes placed throughout this essay. Some are not so much flickering at the

46 Mbembe, A. (2003) Necropolitics. Public Culture, 15(1): 11-40.
47 Taleb, N. N. (2010) The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable. Penguin Random House.

edges but, arguably, resemble more an 'elephant in the room'. Of course, these wildcard possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and aspects of each could occur simultaneously in the future. Perhaps, the most powerful and not so improbable black swan, according to some analysts, is the proposition of massive climate-driven displacement. What happens if populations are forced to move at scale, driven by the realisation that parts of the world will become genuinely uninhabitable at warming of three degrees centigrade or higher by 2100, as projected by most scientific studies. The impact, especially if no large-scale preparation has taken place beforehand, is that it may simply outstrip the administrative, financial and military capacity of any state to enforce a border policy at all, regardless of which of the three postures it prefers. While the future is uncertain, the reality of today's polycrisis is not, and the need to imagine, promote and enable what will emerge from this era should concern all policymakers and engaged global citizens.

Photo credit: Mariusz Burcz

As the standoff in the Strait of Hormuz between Iran and the US has illustrated, the rise of drones and AI has transformed modern warfare, frustrating USA's military superiority. As AI is also increasingly used in border surveillance there are likely considerable implications for the future management of migration, stratified visa regimes, asylum processing and deportation of undocumented migrants. (See Essay: *Mixed migration futures in polycrisis: scenarios and black swans*, p. 242).



Section 4

Resisting or normalising the extreme?

As every year, the Mixed Migration Review 2026 features two complementary reports: *Normalising the extreme* and *Resisting the extreme*, which chart the negative and positive interventions and policies directly impacting refugees and migrants. In 2026, *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*, which showcases 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.

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As the examples from this year show, the repression of refugees and migrants worldwide cannot be separated from the broader challenges posed to democracy and human rights by authoritarianism, nationalism, and the resurgence of the far-right. Many extremist movements now exploiting migration as a touchpoint issue are doing so as part of a broader assault encompassing homophobia, climate denial, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other exclusionary beliefs. In the **United States (US)**, where the rights of the country's citizens if not its immigrant population have generally appeared secure, the crackdown on undocumented foreign nationals has spilled into violence against activists and protestors as well, with two US citizens killed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel during its highly invasive months-long operation in Minneapolis. Increasingly, the challenge to immigrant rights is evolving into an overarching crackdown on diversity and dissent. This pattern is also playing out in different ways across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, where deep-seated racial hierarchies, the complex legacies of colonialism and economic inequality are all driving migration and asylum policies to even greater extremes.

Refugee protection under threat

The 75th anniversary of the 1951 Convention on Refugees comes at a time when many of its core aspirations appear to be under threat (see Essay: *The protection crisis: a crisis of solidarity and political will* p. 180). While the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has had to confront severe funding cuts and staff layoffs,[1] the political climate appears to be turning against the very principle of refugee protection: the convention itself has faced criticism from those who see it as "obsolete", "either too narrow to meet modern needs or too generous to be sustainable".[2] On the anniversary of its signing, UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted both these dangers and the millions of lives that had been saved as a result of the convention, but also warned that "today, that promise is under strain". At a time when "conflicts are multiplying, persecution persists and growing numbers are forced to flee", he said, "the right to seek asylum is too often questioned, restricted, or denied".[3]

Many of the countries represented at the Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Geneva when the Convention was finalised are now rolling out highly restrictive policies, designed to either prevent refugees from entering their territories or to curb the rights of those already there. While the right of refugees to international protection has always been contested in practice, the increasing willingness of governments across the world to step back from these obligations is close to creating a new global consensus. This was reflected in comments by India's prime minister Narendra Modi in January 2026 in relation to his government's large-scale expulsions of thousands of people, including Rohingya refugees, into Bangladesh. Pointing out that many developed countries – "known to wave the flag of democracy and consider themselves as lords of the world" – were themselves detaining and deporting migrants: "nobody, the world over, accepts illegal immigrants".[4]

The international right to claim asylum is being undermined, first of all, by the fact that in many countries it has become close to impossible to enter the country to do so, which is virtually the only option available to refugees when legal pathways to apply from outside the country or be resettled are steadily shrinking. From India's proposals to use crocodiles and poisonous snakes to prevent entry

1 Santos, A.P. (2026) UN Refugee Agency to cut budget and 3,500 jobs. InfoMigrants.
2 McAdam, J. (2026) At a time of harder borders and 'ruthless' rhetoric, the Refugee Convention is more important than ever. UNSW Sydney.
3 France 24 (2026) UN sounds alarm on politicisation of refugees and asylum.
4 The Hindu (2026) 'Illegal immigrants', 'urban Naxals' threat to national security: PM Modi.

from Bangladesh[5] to the United States' development of a "smart wall" with AI-assisted surveillance,[6] the physical manifestations of border management often attract the most attention. In practice, the increasing emphasis of the US and the **European Union (EU)** on "externalisation" control through partnership agreements (for example, with **Mexico** and **Panama** in the case of the US or multiple North and West African states in the case of the EU) means that unauthorised migration is contained long before it reaches their own borders.

Yet the legal architecture that many countries have now deployed to circumvent their responsibilities to asylum seekers is arguably more significant than the fences and walls which are becoming more commonplace across Europe and the Americas. In the case of the US, during President Donald Trump's second term, the government is now turning away anyone attempting to enter the country at the southern border while also terminating legal asylum pathways established under former President Joe Biden. The announcement in August 2026 that the administration plans to revoke the visas of thousands of people who entered the US legally on temporary work or tourist visas but then claimed asylum further reduces opportunities for individuals to seek protection.[7] This shift is especially striking given that the US has historically provided sanctuary to large numbers of people from across the world. While refugee resettlement in the US reached 100,034 people in fiscal year 2024, the numbers fell sharply to 38,102 in fiscal year 2025 and to 10,258 in the first 10 months of fiscal year 2026.[8] Almost all of these (10,255) are white South Africans who, following a February 2025 executive order prioritising the resettlement of Afrikaners, have controversially been prioritised for resettlement.[9]

In the EU, while externalisation and increased border controls have contributed to the decreasing number of applications that the EU has received – 332,000 in the first half of 2026, 17 percent fewer than the total in the same period of 2025 – recognition rates have also fallen significantly in the past two years. While recognition rates were marginally higher (31%) in the first half of 2026 compared to 2025 overall (29%), both were markedly lower than the annual averages for 2023 and 2024 (42%). This reduction has been attributed in part to the changing composition of nationalities, particularly with the decline in asylum applications among Syrian nationals since the fall of Assad, as well as increasing collaboration between the EU and countries of origin and transit.[10] The proportion of rejected asylum claims will likely only increase as a result of the implementation of the Pact on Asylum and Migration, in particular its provisions enabling states to fast-track applications from nationals of "safe countries of origin", defined as countries where EU recognition rates are lower than 20 percent. By placing a greater burden of proof on nationals of these countries to prove that their circumstances merit protection, the safe country designation risks subverting the principle of individualised assessment.[11] Together with the provision on 'safe third countries', enabling the return of asylum seekers to non-EU countries they passed through en route to Europe, the likelihood of a successful asylum claim could reduce significantly.[12] The Pact's force majeure provisions also allow member states to "request authorisation to apply derogations from the common procedure" – meaning they can significantly delay and restrict their responsibilities in this regard. Experts have highlighted the importance of ensuring that, should the regulation be activated, it is treated as an exception rather than becoming a norm.[13]

Though the return of rejected asylum seekers must always be carried out with respect to their rights and dignity, this does not necessarily undermine the principle of refugee protection in itself, if a fair and transparent system of vetting is in place which also protects related issues, such as the right to family. However, if those fundamental mechanisms are being undermined or weakened, then it is likely that many individuals in need of protection could end up being forcibly returned. In the **United Kingdom (UK)**, for instance, there are concerns that provisions in the June 2026 Immigration and Asylum Bill to replace legally trained appeals officials with adjudicators without a legal background,[14] along with amendments that will significantly curtail the right of rejected asylum seekers to appeal, could seriously weaken due process and undermine their right to protection.[15]

Increasingly, too, those recognised as refugees are now being forcibly returned to their countries of origin despite conditions being unsafe. **Tanzania**, using the language of "repatriations", closed two camps in the first half of 2026 and sent back more than 100,000 Burundian refugees

5 Sharma, Y. (2026) Why is India turning to crocodiles and snakes to 'fence' Bangladesh border? Al Jazeera.
6 Sharma, Y. (2026) Why is India turning to crocodiles and snakes to 'fence' Bangladesh border? Al Jazeera; US Customs Border and Protection (2026) Smart Wall.
7 Saad, N. (2026) US to revoke visas of short-term visitors seeking asylum. BBC.
8 Dayak, S. (2026) Refugee admissions to the U.S. are dropping sharply in Trump's second term. Pew Research Center.
9 Dayak, S. (2026) Refugee admissions to the U.S. are dropping sharply in Trump's second term. Pew Research Center.
10 EUAA (2026) EU+ asylum applications continued to decline in the first half of 2026.
11 Amnesty International (2025) EU: New rules on asylum and 'safe countries' undermine the foundation of refugee protection.
12 International Rescue Committee (2026) What do the latest decisions on 'safe countries' and returns mean for people on the move?
13 Ineli-Ciger, M. (2024) Navigating the Labyrinth of Derogations: A Critical Look at the Crisis Regulation. EU Migration Law.
14 Asylum Aid (2026) Asylum Aid's response to the Independent Appeals Body call for evidence.
15 Fouzder, M. (2026) New asylum appeals body 'will fail to reduce backlog'.

across the border in the face of grave concerns[16] and reports of coercion.[17] These returns do not appear to have been facilitated by an objective determination of whether conditions have improved, but rather political pressures from within both Tanzania and Burundi. **Egypt**, too, has escalated its crackdown on refugees and asylum seekers in the country since the end of 2025, apprehending any foreign nationals without residency permits[18] – including those with UNHCR registration or waiting for long-delayed immigration hearings – and expelling thousands of people, including nationals of conflict-affected Sudan.[19]

Meanwhile, as of the end of August 2026, around 2.7 million Afghans (including many longstanding legal residents and refugees) have left **Pakistan**[20] since October 2023. Over the past three years, authorities have been carrying out a phased process of returns, beginning with undocumented Afghans and then Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders before moving on those with UNHCR-issued Proof of Registration (PoR) cards. While Pakistan is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has carried out repeated deportations of Afghans over the years, including many facing credible risks if returned, this latest iteration represents a fundamental shift away from international protection.[21] The same is also happening in the US, where Temporary Protected Status (TPS) – a form of humanitarian parole that, while stopping short of refugee status, has offered crucial protection for individuals from some of the most unstable or insecure countries worldwide – has been revoked under Trump for more than 1 million people, leaving them at imminent risk of deportation to Afghanistan, Haiti, Somalia, and other crisis-affected countries.[22]

The Chișinău Declaration and the future of the European Convention on Human Rights

The adoption on 15 May 2026 of the Chișinău Declaration by all 46 EU member states was celebrated by the Council of Europe's Secretary-General as "a very strong – and very welcome – signal of firm support for the European Convention on Human Rights".[23] Given that the Convention has long been a source of contention for governments seeking to promote more restrictive immigration policies, the Declaration's affirmation of the "integrity of the Convention system" and its "extraordinary contribution"[24] would appear to confirm this. Yet some of the small print is more troubling – in particular, the reference to "significant, complex, migration-related challenges in various member States which were either unforeseen at the time the Convention was drafted or have evolved significantly since then".[25]

Human rights groups have raised concerns about how aspects of the Declaration appear to qualify or undermine the fundamental principles of protection and its universal application for all individuals, regardless of the circumstances.[26] This is especially concerning in relation to the concept of "non-refoulement", which relates to Article 3 of the Convention and its prohibition on torture and ill-treatment. It also, by referencing "return hubs" and the challenges posed by "instrumentalisation of migration", appears to establish a range of circumstances where the normal protections of the Convention may be "interpreted in the light of present-day realities".[27] The danger, according to Amnesty International, is that these exceptions could pave the way for "a two-tier system where migrants and refugees' rights would receive less protection".[28] This is especially troubling given that the Convention represents the final bulwark for refugees and migrants facing human rights violations in Europe.

16 De Bray, E. (2026) Concerns raised by Burundian refugees about 'coercive' repatriation from Tanzania. United Nations.
17 UNHCR (2025) United Republic of Tanzania Operational Data Portal.
18 Amnesty International (2026) Egypt: Refugees in hiding amid crackdown involving arbitrary arrests and unlawful deportations.
19 Hamad, S. (2026) Egypt asylum shift deepens 'Fortress Europe' concerns. The New Arab
20 IOM (2026) Pakistan — Flow Monitoring of Afghan Returnees — Bi-Weekly Report (16-31 August 2026).
21 Doucet, L. (2026) 'I've never been to Afghanistan': Six million deportees forced to start over under the Taliban. BBC.
22 Im, C. and Hennen, M. (2026) Second Trump administration has ended Temporary Protected Status for most immigrants who had it. Pew Research Center.
23 Council of Europe (2026) Council of Europe foreign ministers adopt political declaration on the ECHR and migration.
24 Council of Europe (2026) Chișinău Declaration.
25 Council of Europe (2026) Chișinău Declaration.
26 Amnesty International (2026) CoE: Declaration on migration paves way for 'two-tier' human rights system – What you need to know.
27 Council of Europe (2026) Chișinău Declaration.
28 Amnesty International (2026) CoE: Declaration on migration paves way for 'two-tier' human rights system – What you need to know.

The shifting geopolitics of migration

For years, Western governments have developed questionable migration partnerships with other countries where containment and border security have been prioritised over basic protections and human rights. Yet, until recently, certain red lines remained regarding who the EU was willing to engage with. However, in the latter part of 2025, certain European countries began to move away from their diplomatic boycott of **Afghanistan**, despite the deepening repression and abuse of the Taliban regime. This apparent volte face was motivated by the desire among a number of EU member states, including Germany and Belgium, to increase the return of Afghan nationals from Europe and culminated in a meeting in Brussels with Taliban representatives in June 2026.[29] This move was widely condemned[30] both for legitimising the Taliban and for promoting forced returns despite the real dangers those deported to Afghanistan might face.[31] While Germany has been able to deport dozens of Afghans over the summer[32], this has come at a cost, with Taliban representatives reportedly expanding their diplomatic presence in Berlin as a result.[33]

A similar situation is emerging in eastern **Libya**. While Brussels has in the past been reluctant to cooperate with authorities there, the uptick in movement along the Libya–Crete maritime corridor has pushed the EU to develop a direct partnership. Through the provision of training and material to eastern Libya's coastguards, the agreement will further expand the existing system of interceptions and forced detentions supported by the EU in the west of the country.[34]

One of the most discussed aspects of US immigration policy under Trump's second term is the use of third-country deportations – a phenomenon that has been described as a "geopolitics of cruelty".[35] Though not unique to the current administration, the scale and intent of these removals is unprecedented. Critics have identified these deportations as a "show of force" intended as a spectacle of deterrence, particularly given the costs and logistical complications involved in sending, for example, Colombian and Peruvian nationals to the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo)**.[36] As of August 2026, more than 22,000 removals to third countries had been carried out since January 2025, with the majority transferred to Mexico (19,000) and Guatemala (1,460), but the administration has also developed partnerships with more than 30 other countries for transfers. In total 28 countries have received deportees, in many cases involving single-digit numbers.[37] A striking feature is the number of African countries that the US administration has been able to pressure through the threat of visa bans, tariffs and deportations of their own nationals from the US, as well as significant cash payments amounting to tens of millions of dollars.[38] These include DR Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan and other countries currently grappling with conflicts, humanitarian crises, or serious governance challenges, making them especially unsuitable as receiving countries for deportees.

Another emerging feature of international diplomacy that reflects the persistence of inequalities between developed and developing countries, as well as the complex ways that migration is entangled in them, is the use of aid conditionality to extract concessions around migration from beneficiaries. While development assistance has often been tied to specific conditions or targets around democracy, governance, and the like, this was fundamentally different to the approach now being deployed more directly against aid recipients to impose the will of donors. **France**, for instance, has announced its intention to make aid to Comoros and six other sending countries conditional on them helping to combat smuggling and accept the return of deported nationals from the EU.[39] **Sweden**, meanwhile, has stipulated that it will only provide assistance to Syria if the government cooperates around the return of Syrian nationals with criminal convictions.[40] The UK also took the unprecedented step of threatening countries for the first time – in this instance, Angola, Namibia, and DR Congo, to accept the return of their nationals from the UK – with visa penalties and restrictions.[41]

29 Connor, R. and Birchard, R. (2026) EU hosts Taliban for migrant return talks in Brussels. DW.
30 Amnesty International (2026) EU must abandon Afghanistan deportation plans and stop readmission talks with the Taliban.
31 ECRE (2026) Joint statement: Afghan and European civil society oppose EU engagement with the Taliban on deportations.
32 Zahidi, B. (2026) Germany Deports 31 Afghans to Kabul on Direct Flight, Including One Without Criminal Record. Kabul Now.
33 Bathke, B. (2026) Taliban expands diplomatic presence in Germany to facilitate returns. InfoMigrants.
34 Amnesty International (2026) Thirty-one organisations call on the EU to urgently end abusive migration cooperation with Libyan authorities; HRW (2026) EU Should End Abusive Migration Cooperation with Libyan Authorities.
35 Campos-Delgado, A. and Trabalon, C. (2026) Geopolitics of cruelty: US expands third-country deportation. Border Criminologies.
36 Loveluck, L. (2026) Banished to alien lands: Trump's secret deportation deals. The Guardian.
37 Third Country Deportation Watch (2026) Banished by Bargain: Monitoring the Human Cost of The U.S. Government's Forced Third Country Transfer Agreements.
38 US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2026) Third Country Deportations Tracker.
39 RFI (2026) France to tie African development aid to efforts to limit migration to Mayotte.
40 Wallis, E. (2025) Sweden and Syria announce cooperation for returns of migrants convicted of crime . InfoMigrants.
41 Duffield, S. (2026) Three African countries agree to UK migrant returns after visa penalty threat. BBC.

Third-country deportations from the US to Africa: an extreme form of deterrence?

While the number of third-country deportations from the US have been relatively limited, several recurrent elements distinguish these from other deportations. The first is the uniquely unsettling experience of being expelled somewhere that is not only not safe, but also unfamiliar. This is particularly the case for those deported to countries in Africa such as Burundi, Equatorial Guinea and Sierra Leone: most of those deported to these countries have had no prior connection and in many instances were not even informed of their destination until they landed, having been chained for the duration of the journey. From a young Iranian female activist deported to the **Central African Republic**[42] to a Venezuelan man deported to **Liberia**, many individual stories have emerged from this seemingly chaotic process.[43] Many involve people who, having been forced to leave their home countries to escape violence or persecution, have been further traumatised by their removal.

Given the high costs involved, with some African countries being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for each foreign national they accepted,[44] some commentators have concluded that these deportations may be specifically intended to add another element of terror to proceedings, creating a "climate of fear" as a deterrent to others.[45] At the same time, they may also be deployed in instances where a court order prevents the government from sending refugees and migrants back to their country of origin directly. By sending these individuals to a third country, the government appears to be attempting to circumvent court orders preventing direct transfers of deportees to their home countries. However, some of those deported are subsequently sent back to their country of origin, a situation that could potentially amount to "triangular refoulement".[46] Immigration lawyers and activists believe the administration is well aware of the legal issues involved in these deportations, but has been carrying on regardless:[47] a lower-court ruling in February 2026 and a subsequent judgement by the appeals court in September both found that the practice was unlawful.[48]

A notable feature of these deportations, carried out by the newly created Office of Remigration – a department focused exclusively on deportations that has largely replaced the protection-focused work of the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration – is the lack of oversight around how the accompanying funding is spent or the long-term treatment of those deported there. This is despite the fact that the governments of many receiving countries in these agreements are authoritarian or implicated in serious human rights abuses, including torture against those held in detention.[49] Many, once transferred to these countries, face the prospect of being detained indefinitely or returned to the countries of origin they chose to leave, often out of fear for their lives. For instance, a group of refugees and migrants deported from the US to **Cameroon**[50] at the start of the year were reportedly detained on arrival and pressured to return to their home country, with two eventually returning and the remainder left in a limbo, unable to work or move freely while their asylum claims were reviewed.[51] Other investigations have highlighted similar incidents, with the case of a Senegalese woman deported to **Ghana** who reportedly drank bleach to prevent being returned but was still sent back to her home country.[52]

The consolidation of the far-right

In recent years, centrist parties have repeatedly tried to win over far-right supporters with increasingly hardline immigration policies of their own. However, this approach has not only failed on its own terms but also served to normalise the more extreme positions of their rivals. Yet in **Italy**, an even more surprising development is now playing out as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni faces a new challenger – not from the left or even the centre, but from the far-right. The rapid ascent of Roberto Vannacci and his self-styled "true right" movement, Futuro Nazionale, has seen her outflanked on the very issues of immigration and nationalism that brought her to power. This phenomenon is not unique to Italy and is also playing out in a different way in the United Kingdom. Reform, a right-wing party under the leadership of Nigel Farage that has been rising steadily in national polls over the past year, is also now

42 Yeung, I. and Krever, M. (2026) She fled Iran. America sent her to Africa. CNN.
43 Solano, G. (2026) Deported from the US to Liberia: 'They had us chained up the whole trip'. El Pais
44 Gedeon, J.and Roth, A. (2026) US paid $32m to five countries to accept about 300 deportees, report shows. The Guardian.
45 Soto, A.G.R. (2026) U.S. Third-Country Deportation Agreements Are More About Fear than Numbers. Migration Policy Institute.
46 Hall, A. T. (2026). Third-Country Deportations: Legal and Ethical Problems. Journal on Migration and Human Security, 0(0).
47 Nakamura, D. and Taylor, A. (2026) How Trump turned a refugee bureau into a $410 million deportation operation. The Washington Post.
48 Al Jazeera (2026) US judge rules Trump policy of 'third country' deportations unlawful.
49 Nakamura, D. and Taylor, A. (2026) How Trump turned a refugee bureau into a $410 million deportation operation. The Washington Post.
50 Blaise, E. (2026) Trump deportees to Cameroon face life of uncertainty. DW.
51 Seibert, L. (2026) Abuses in Cameroon After US Deports Third-Country Nationals. Human Rights Watch.
52 Loveluck, L. (2026) Banished to alien lands: Trump's secret deportation deals. The Guardian.

facing what is arguably its greatest threat – not from the long-established centre-left Labour party or the right-wing Conservatives, but from a far-right splinter group called Restore Britain. Set up (like Futuro Nazionale) by a disaffected former member, Restore has embraced a far more extreme agenda, heavily infused with ethno-nationalism and the ideology of "remigration".[53]

How Meloni and Farage respond to these challenges remains to be seen, though Italy's suspension of the Schengen agreement with Spain in the wake of the Ceuta crisis was widely interpreted as an attempt to reaffirm the government's anti-immigration credentials and claim back the territory ceded to Vannacci.[54] If past developments are anything to go by, then the fragmentation of the right, far from undermining the hardline immigration agenda, appears to be accelerating its adoption: the general momentum in Europe and beyond has been for the centre to cede ground to the right rather than the other way round. To a larger extent, the fact that many far-right movements are so extreme in their views on immigration to render them "unelectable" – though the Alternative for Germany (AfD)'s September 2026 victory in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt is a reminder of how quickly this definition can shift – may be part of their point. Their primary purpose is to push the so-called Overton window on what is acceptable to the right,[55] with the result that their centrist or more moderate right-wing rivals end up adopting at least some of these positions themselves.

By this logic, the primary concern around Futuro Nazionale's proposal to make a signed declaration of assimilation to Greek, Roman and Christian civilisation a requirement for attaining citizenship is not necessarily that the party could win power in future. Rather, it is that their rhetoric will impact on the wider political environment and increase the risk that the ruling party seeks to emulate at least some of its talking points to retain the loyalty of their base. In the case of **Germany**, since taking power in 2025, Chancellor Friedrich Merz has embarked on a comprehensive reversal of the open and solidarity-based asylum system overseen by his predecessor Angela Merkel, cancelling resettlement commitments to Afghan refugees and overseeing a sharp reduction in asylum acceptance rates. Yet these measures have conspicuously failed to win over the growing body of far-right voters who have helped swell the ranks of the AfD in recent years.

Sweden is another example of a country where the hardline immigration policies have come to infuse much of the spectrum of mainstream politics too, with the most recent example being the so-called 'snitch law' passed in June 2026. This legislation not only removes the 'firewall' between public services and immigration enforcement by requiring certain categories of public servants to report undocumented migrants to the police, but also introduces a new "good behaviour" provision which can lead to a legally resident migrant having their visa revoked for non-criminal issues such as unpaid debts.[56] Yet despite the fact that many of the policies put forward by then Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and his Moderate Party between 2022 and 2026 were described by one commentator as "a new era of cruelty",[57] the far-right Sweden Democrats have still been able to develop more extreme propositions to set themselves apart. For instance, when the government introduced a USD 37,000 one-off payment for migrants with legal residency to return voluntarily to their country of origin, the Sweden Democrats proposed that the offer should be extended to Swedish nationals with an immigrant background, provided they were willing to revoke their citizenship.[58]

While the dynamics of the European far-right cannot simply be transposed wholesale to other regions to explain the political mobilisation of immigration in Africa or Asia, for instance, there are some common trends that can be observed across the world.[59] The case of **Japan**, for instance, illustrates how far-right templates can be "imported" into contexts where, despite conditions being very different, readymade tropes around foreigners can be effectively exploited.[60] Sanseito, a hard-right organisation with a "Japanese First" agenda, made significant electoral gains in 2025 on the back of an anti-immigration campaign. By tapping into an assortment of relatively low-level concerns – including anxieties around overtourism and Chinese property investment – the party has developed a potent narrative around the need to counter "the silent invasion of foreigners".[61]

The "politics of powerlessness"[62] that is driving anti-migrant politics in Europe is also evident in places like **South Africa**, where the ongoing legacy of apartheid and the continued exclusion of large sections of the population has fuelled a vicious wave of xenophobia during 2026, resulting in a number of deaths, widespread displacement, and the departure of tens of thousands of refugees and migrants from the country. While this is not

53 Neilan, C. and Simpson, J. (2026) 'A new home for old fascists': Restore Britain steals a rightward march on Reform. The Observer.
54 Giuffrida, A. (2026) Rise of far-right leader Roberto Vannacci challenges Meloni as she celebrates Italian milestone. The Guardian.
55 Schaefer, P. (2026) Remigration hits the EU's legal limits. And that may be the point. The Parliament.
56 EPSU (2026) Sweden's 'snitch law' is an assault on public service ethics - and the EU must not mirror it.
57 Gelin, M. (2026) How Sweden lost its soul – and stopped being Sweden. The Guardian.
58 Ahlander, J. (2026) As election looms, Sweden's government is paying immigrants to leave. Reuters.
59 Archer, N.N. (2026) Does Africa have a far right? It's complicated. openDemocracy.
60 Kobayashi, T. (2026) How Japan's anti-immigration politics runs on imported narratives. East Asia Forum.
61 Khalil, S.and Ng, K. (2025) The rise of the far-right 'Japanese First' party. BBC.
62 The Guardian (2026) The Guardian view on the far right's real weapon: it is the politics of powerlessness.

the first outbreak of anti-migrant violence in the country, this latest phase is notable for the level of support that street-level vigilante movements such as March on March have enjoyed from sections of the media and some high-ranking politicians.[63]

The far-right focus on citizenship

While anti-immigration discourse has often focused on the number of arrivals in a country, the issue of citizenship has also become increasingly contested too. Perhaps the most high-profile example of this is the attempts of the current US administration to revoke birthright citizenship, a constitutional right granted to anyone born on American soil regardless of the nationality or legal status of their parents. Despite the Supreme Court ruling against the proposal in June 2026, the administration subsequently proposed a narrower interpretation targeting "birth tourism" (defined as when someone travels to the US specifically to have their baby there) and the denial of citizenship to children whose parents are "enemy aliens", though this was barred again by another court in September.[64] While the White House has previously justified its policy push as "protecting the meaning and value of American citizenship",[65] there is evidently a strong ethnonationalist drive behind it, too. The chief architect of the policy, Steve Miller, who has repeatedly said that "if you import the Third World, you become the Third World", responded to the Supreme Court ruling with an outburst: "People from all over the world from third-world nations – nations that on their own would have never invented the wheel, let alone modern technology, let alone medicine, let alone air travel – they can just come into the country, have a baby, and then that baby is automatically a citizen?"[66]

The fact that a sitting government rather than a fringe opposition party is attempting to push this agenda puts the proposals by various far-right groups in Europe into sharper relief. While anti-immigration parties have in the past been careful to frame their positions as pragmatic and patriotic rather than racist, white supremacist ideology is much more explicitly articulated in the manifestos of today's far-right groups. In Germany, the AfD's[67] distinction between "biological" and "passport" Germans, as well as its ambitions to encourage the return of ethnic Germans abroad, reflect its blood-based definition of citizenship – one defined by ancestry and ethnicity, rather than place of birth or long-term residence.[68] While distinct from the AfD's position, Italy's Futuro Nazionale also establishes a two-tier system of citizenship which elevates Italian-born citizens over those who acquire it, with the latter subject to specific conditions and restrictions. These include, besides a waiting period of up 20 years before naturalisation, the possibility of Italian nationality being revoked and their "remigration" to their country if the naturalised citizen commits a violent crime in future.[69]

Though increasingly visible in Western politics, this strand of ethnonationalism is not confined to North America and Europe alone. India, for example, against a backdrop of deepening Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has also taken steps to define Indian citizenship around religion, with its large Muslim minority increasingly excluded and disenfranchised.[70] In this spirit, its sustained crackdown on "Bangladeshis" (as well as Rohingya) in border areas has seen thousands of Muslims deported, reportedly including many Indian citizens, across the border. One Indian citizen who was deported by police to Bangladesh on suspicion of being Bangladeshi was then arrested and detained by Bangladeshi authorities as an Indian "infiltrator".[71]

Hostility towards humanitarian workers and the judiciary

Despite the ongoing rise in deaths and disappearances at sea, search and rescue operations continued to be targeted with legal proceedings (see Interview: *Caroline Abu Sa'Da* p. 238). Between June 2025 and June 2026, 19 new cases were filed by Italy against humanitarian NGOs undertaking rescues. To some extent, however, this is not a new phenomenon. Since 2017, almost two in three rescue vessels active in the Central Mediterranean have been subjected to legal proceedings at least once.[72] In many cases, this has been done by blurring the lines

63 Malik, N. (2026) How did South Africa produce an anti-African movement? The Guardian.
64 Drenon, B. (2026) Judge blocks another effort by Trump to limit birthright citizenship. BBC.
65 The White House (2025) Protecting The Meaning And Value Of American Citizenship.
66 Blumenthal, S. (2026) Stephen Miller is outraged over birthright citizenship. His arguments are nonsense. The Guardian.
67 RTE (2026) What is the AfD? Germany's far-right party, explained.
68 Ruy, D and Buelte, E. (2026) A Far-Right Breakthrough? Germany's Afd on the Brink Of State-Level Governance CSIS.
69 Zanotti, L. (2026) Futuro Nazionale is redefining what it means to be Italian. LSE.
70 Al Jazeera (2024) India implements 'anti-Muslim' 2019 citizenship law weeks before election.
71 Chakraborty, S. (2025) Bangladeshi here, Indian there: Amir, on Independence Day-eve, riddle for migrant worker Telegraph India.
72 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2026) Search and rescue NGOs in the Mediterranean continue to face legal action.

between irregular migration and rescue operations.[73] In July 2026, an investigation by the right-leaning Figaro newspaper accused the NGO Sea-Watch of "collusion" with smugglers in relation to a rescue it carried out on 11 May, a charge the NGO strongly denied. Sea-Watch described the allegations as a "campaign by the right – which describes itself as an investigation" and highlighted that the only crime that took place that day occurred shortly after the rescue, when militias associated with the Libyan coastguard opened fire on the vessel.[74]

This incident on 11 May, in which the Libyan coastguard, endangered the lives of both the Sea-Watch crew and the 90 refugees and migrants it had rescued, was not an isolated event. According to monitoring by a coalition of rescue organisations known as the Justice Fleet, at least 79 incidents of extreme violence involving the Libyan coastguard have occurred since 2016, with 21 of these occurring in 2025 alone.[75] This included an event on August 2025 when Libyan coastguards carried out a sustained attack on the boat Ocean Viking, a widely publicised incident that was enabled by impunity.[76] Yet, in contrast to the repeated legal actions and penalties carried out by the Italian government on search and rescue organisations, there has been little evidence of substantive public action against the Libyan coastguard in the wake of these incidents.

Greece, too, has repeatedly targeted NGOs and migrant support groups, with the February 2026 Promotion of Legal Migration Policies law the latest piece of legislation to expose activists to the risk of elevated criminal penalties in the course of their work. In particular, it raises misdemeanours such as the facilitating of illegal entry – a charge that has repeatedly been applied to criminalise the activities of aid workers[77], including rescues[78] – to the status of felonies, punishable with sentences of up to 10 years in prison and fines of EUR 60,000.[79] The policy has been framed as the latest effort by the government to intimidate humanitarian workers.[80] Of the 110 individuals charged across the EU in 2025 for solidarity-based acts such as providing assistance to refugees and migrants, almost half (49) were prosecuted by Greece.[81] In February 2026, continuing this pattern, the Greek government issued a European arrest warrant on charges of human trafficking against a Norwegian humanitarian worker,[82] though a Norwegian court ultimately blocked his extradition.[83] The government has doubled down on criticism of its various policies, with Minister for Migration and Asylum Thanos Plevris saying in June that, "The more Amnesty International, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or UN envoys are irritated by our migration policy, the more I view it as a badge of honour."[84]

UNHCR was also the target of a highly successful misinformation campaign in Libya during 2026 that saw the agency accused of facilitating the large-scale resettlement of refugees in the country, a false rumour widely circulated on social media. Protestors called for the agency to be expelled from Libya and in June 2026 blockaded its headquarters in Tripoli with piles of sand. Accusations were amplified by announcements of further expulsions, crackdowns[85] and the imposition – in eastern Libya – of entry bans for nationals of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.[86] Reports emerged in September of renewed attacks in Tripoli, this time of "deeply aggressive acts" against the headquarters of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).[87]

Another frontline for governments seeking to intimidate or undermine migrant activism is around legal assistance. In the US, where official rhetoric against immigrant rights and "left-wing" groups has become increasingly hostile,[88] the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights – a non-profit supporting unaccompanied migrant children – reported unannounced visits and unlawful efforts in June 2026 to secure sensitive documentation by ICE staff which it condemned as a "flagrant abuse of power".[89] In other contexts, such as the UK, NGOs and activists are being systematically targeted by organised far-right groups.[90] In 2025, the charity City of Sanctuary was targeted with a misinformation campaign by a far-right blogger which was subsequently picked up in sections of the national media. This culminated in an MP filing a legal complaint with the Charity Commission against them,

73 Tondo, L. (2021) Refugee rescuers charged in Italy with complicity in people smuggling. The Guardian.
74 Carretero, L. (2026) 'Using the term collusion is a lie': Sea-Watch rescue NGO denies contact with smugglers. InfoMigrants.
75 Van Baarsen, R. (2026) EU expands Libya cooperation despite repeated warnings over violence at sea. The New Humanitarian.
76 Mixed Migration Centre (2025) Mixed Migration Review: Migration in the context of geopolitical turmoil, p.107.
77 Cossé, E. (2026) Greek Immigration Bill Demonizes Civil Society. Human Rights Watch.
78 Whewell, T. (2026) Aid workers cleared of human trafficking charges in Greece. BBC.
79 ANSA (2026) 56 NGOs ink statement condemning Greece's proposed amendments to immigration code. InfoMigrant.
80 Statewatch (2026) Greece: Criminal law used to target civil society organisations.
81 PICUM (2026) Criminalisation of solidarity with migrants in the EU.
82 Nielsen, N. (2026) Greece moves to arrest Nordic aid worker supporting migrants. EU Observer.
83 Smith, H. (2026) Norwegian court blocks extradition to Greece of migrant rights activist. The Guardian.
84 Gatopoulos, D. and Khaled, F. (2026) Greek minister calls criticism of tougher migration policies a 'badge of honor'. The Independent.
85 Amnesty International (2026) Libya/EU: Rival authorities intensify xenophobic and racist crackdown on refugees and migrants in Libya as EU seeks to deepen ties.
86 Human Rights Watch (2026) Libya: Anti-Migrant Rhetoric Fuels Abuses.
87 Janjevic, D. (2026) UN condemns ransacking of Tripoli migrant center. InfoMigrants.
88 Singh, M. (2025) Immigrant rights activists braced for crackdown as Trump threatens to target 'leftwing' groups. The Guardian.
89 Amica (2026) Trump administration deploys federal agents to intimidate legal services nonprofits representing unaccompanied immigrant children.
90 Taylor, D. (2025) More than 150 lawyers and refugee NGOs report being 'pressured into silence' by far-right protesters. The Guardian.

an action described as "the latest in a series of 'culture war' complaints" by right-leaning politicians against charities seen to be pursuing a "woke" political agenda.[91] Despite being cleared of any wrongdoing in April 2026, the organisation continues to receive death threats and racist abuse.[92]

Yet the undermining of independent legal support can also be carried out more insidiously. In Greece, in the wake of other policy reforms, lawyers providing legal assistance to asylum seekers will receive a EUR 250 bonus if their client chooses to return – a move incentivising them to encourage asylum seekers to leave. Alternative Intervention, a grouping within the Athens Bar Association, condemned the offer as unethical and responded "Not for €250, not for €250 million".[93] A similar proposal was announced in Italy in April 2026,[94] though the government subsequently withdrew it in the face of widespread opposition.[95]

Technological innovation

New and emerging technologies, such as AI and social media, are being used to repackage established stereotypes about refugees and migrants in innovative ways. The power of memes or viral footage, often misrepresented or fake, to push alarmist narratives about immigration has been boosted by the increasing deployment of artificially generated content. Though far-right groups are responsible for some of this output, there is also evidence that hostile governments may be engaging in its creation to sow disruption.[96] Misinformation is also a lucrative income stream for online entrepreneurs who, through deepfakes and algorithm-led monetisation, have been able to make hundreds of thousands of dollars spreading false and inflammatory content about immigration.[97]

The ability of inflammatory online content to create real-world consequences was illustrated by the outbreak of protests in the UK around the police response to the fatal stabbing of a young man, Henry Nowak, by Vickrum Digwa, a Sikh. Though the facts of the case were undoubtedly distressing – Novak was handcuffed by police as he lay dying on the pavement after Digwa accused him of being racially abusive – the incident was subsequently exploited by far-right groups to mobilise protests in June 2026 against "two-tier policing".[98] When, days later, a knife attack by a Sudanese refugee in Belfast on a stranger in the street left him blinded in one eye, this was again exploited – despite pleas from the victim's family that the attack should not be used "to divide people or fuel hostility"[99] – by far-right groups to mobilise violent protests. For several nights, masked men engaged in rioting, terrorising minority communities and setting fire to homes where immigrants lived.[100]

In **Spain**, too, online rumours and misinformation played a major role in triggering the Ceuta crisis at the end of July 2026,[101] when up to 80,000 refugees and migrants crossed the border from Morocco into the city. In the aftermath, hundreds of online accounts – some with suspected links to Russia[102] – spread a far-right narrative of the "invasion" that had taken place, omitting to mention that the large majority of those who entered had returned to Morocco within days. The apparent coordination between these different accounts suggests a level of sophistication behind these accusations.[103] If one of the aims of this messaging was to sow discord within Europe, then the campaign was a success: EU member states turned on each other, with Italy in particular imposing border restrictions on the EU and criticising Spain's recently enacted regularisation programme. That national governments were themselves unable to provide a coherent and unified response to this misinformation, but instead legitimised some of the same talking points, demonstrates how insidious online content can be.

As with social media, the use of AI in migration management can often be deployed to provide a misleading perception of objectivity and due process to discriminatory practices such as profiling. In India, where the government has been carrying out large-scale deportations of alleged migrants – the majority of them Muslim, including Indian civilians[104] – reports that the state government of Maharashtra is planning to roll out an AI tool to "identify" Bangladeshis and Rohingya through tone, word choice and accent have caused alarm,[105] particularly in a context where the chief minister

91 Butler, P. (2026) Charity cleared after false claims online over migrant welcome project. The Guardian.
92 The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2026) Sinister calls and threats against schools: How a migrant charity was targeted by the right.
93 Psaraki, N. (2026) 'Not for €250, not for €250 million': Greek lawyers reject bonus for persuading asylum seekers to leave. The Press Project.
94 ECRE (2026) Italy: Prime Minister offers to amend controversial 'repatriation bonus scheme' for asylum lawyers.
95 Giuffrida, A. (2026) Italian lawyers could win 'wild west-style bounties' if immigration clients go home. The Guardian.
96 Spring, M. (2026) Anti-immigration AI videos traced to overseas fakers, BBC finds. BBC.
97 Mahdi, M., McIntyre, N. and Sellman, M. (2025) King of slop: How anti-migrant AI content made one Sri Lankan influencer rich. Bureau of Investigative Journalism.
98 Singh, S. (2026) There is no such thing as a safe minority. openDemocracy.
99 CBC (2026) Family of victim urges Belfast knife attack not be used 'to fuel hostility' after fiery scenes.
100 PBS (2026) Thousands rally in Belfast to condemn anti-immigrant rioting that followed stabbing.
101 Applebaum, A. (2026) The far right is distorting Ceuta. The Atlantic.
102 Down, A. (2026) Russia-linked accounts spread far-right narrative online during Ceuta migration crisis, analysis finds. The Guardian.
103 Alkazaz, A. (2026) How a social media campaign triggered huge migrant surge on Ceuta. Al Jazeera
104 Human Rights Watch (2025) India: Hundreds of Muslims Unlawfully Expelled to Bangladesh.
105 Maitra, S. (2026) India is Using AI to Police Identity and Expel Minorities. Tech Policy Press

has vowed to "free Mumbai from Banglaseshis".[106] Similar concerns have emerged around the UK's use of facial recognition software to determine whether undocumented migrants are children, a process that is already notoriously inaccurate and has resulted in many children being incorrectly designated as adults.[107] Critics fear that the use of AI could end up lending a veneer of reliability to a system which is marred by "flawed and racialised" decision making, reinforcing existing bias within the system.[108] The EU, too, is expanding its investments in biometric testing, lie detectors and other technologies which risk undermining the human rights of refugees and migrants.[109]

While the US is massively escalating its use of tools such as GPS-linked bracelets to monitor and track almost 54,000 foreign nationals as of August 2026 (more than three times the number in early 2025)[110] authorities will also be subjecting all documented immigrants to checks of their online activity and collecting their social media handles.[111] At the same time, the government appears to be using invasive surveillance through facial recognition, license plates, and databases to track and catalogue not only immigrants, but also US citizens perceived to be engaging in anti-ICE activity.[112] With ICE and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) now enjoying unprecedented budgets, spending on the use of sensors, spyware, facial recognition and data-scraping tools have all increased dramatically. While much of these investments have initially been made at the southern border with Mexico, these tools are also being deployed in increasingly invasive ways in cities within the US itself, including the use of drones in neighbourhood raids.[113]

Set against these developments, the launch of a series of immigration-themed arcade games on the White House website in September 2026 may appear relatively inconsequential. Yet these plagiarised versions of popular games such as Tetris – repurposed here as "Build the Wall", with players charged with preventing a "zombie border siege" – nevertheless reflect a similar dehumanising view of refugees and migrants.[114]

Ultimately, the greatest fears are that AI could be misused or exploited to create adverse outcomes for everything from employment to human security, and that it is often piloted first on refugees and migrants. In Germany, for instance, the AfD has proposed that "culturally alien" foreign labour should be replaced by a combination of AI and automation, with support promised to businesses who phase them out,[115] yet it is not hard to see how such an approach could, if successful, ultimately disenfranchise many "biological" Germans in the workforce too.

106 Gangan, S.P. (2026) Maharashtra govt with IIT-Bombay building AI tool to 'identify' illegal Bangladeshis. Hindustan Times.
107 Dorling, K. (2025) Serious safeguarding scandal: New data shows that hundreds of child refugees continue to be wrongly treated as adults. Helen Bamber Foundation.
108 Ahmed, K. (2026) AI tool will lead to more child refugees being treated as adults, charity warns. The Guardian.
109 Schafer, P. and Vecchia, M.D. (2026) At Europe's borders, AI is testing the limits of EU rights. The Parliament.
110 Bhuiyan, J. (2026) ICE is now tracking nearly 54,000 immigrants via ankle monitors. The Guardian.
111 Ayoub, E. (2026) Trump Administration Will Collect Social Media Handles from Legal Immigrants and U.S. Citizens. Brennan Center for Justice.
112 Lonsdorf, K., Joffe-Block, J. and Anderson, M. (2026) ICE has spun a massive surveillance web. We talked to people caught in it. NPR.
113 Mansoor, S. (2026) 'We should be worried': report sheds light on ICE's booming arsenal of hi-tech surveillance tools. The Guardian.
114 MacDonald, K. (2026) The Trump White House's fetish for gamer culture has moved up a level with new arcade. The Guardian.
115 Harkavy, R. (2026) Analysis: AfD victory puts foreign workers in an uncomfortable position. ICLG.

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

At a time when the rights of refugees and migrants appear to be retreating on every front, it is salutary to remember that this narrative is itself a weapon of the far right. The perception that the increasing restrictions imposed on fundamental rights such as asylum, often in violation of international law, are necessary or inevitable risks becoming self-perpetuating when even mainstream, centrist parties repeat this as truth. Yet as documented here, governments, lawyers, journalists, activists and everyday citizens are in different ways demonstrating that the protection of refugees and migrants is not only possible, but essential too. From landmark legal cases to local acts of solidarity, ground-breaking investigations to innovative approaches to integration, the examples here tell a very different story to the despair and anger that dominates newsfeeds.

Reaffirming the right to international protection

On the 75th anniversary of the signing of the 1951 Convention on Refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Barham Salih, highlighted its achievements: "For three-quarters of a century, it has saved countless lives and offered sanctuary to those who had nowhere else to turn to".[1] These aspirations are reflected in ongoing efforts to provide long-standing refugee populations with greater opportunities for autonomy and equitable participation in their host countries. In **Ethiopia**, the Makatet Roadmap – developed in 2025 and launched in June 2026 – offers the possibility of a different approach to refugee management for a country that has for decades hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers. The Roadmap envisions a transition from the camp-based and segregated provision of humanitarian assistance which has traditionally characterised refugee management to an integrated approach where refugees receive the same services and opportunities as Ethiopian nationals through the provision of full work and residency rights.[2] This framework is already being deployed with some success in Ura settlement, where thousands of displaced Sudanese are now accessing the same benefits and support as the local community.[3]

Some questions remain as to how this programme will be funded when humanitarian aid everywhere is facing severe cuts, as well as the persistence of protection gaps for Eritrean nationals who are currently ineligible for refugee protection.[4] Nevertheless, the Roadmap offers the potential to radically transform the situation of Ethiopia's large refugee population at a time when the country's own resources are increasingly stretched, with potential to be replicated elsewhere. In neighbouring **Kenya**, a similar approach has already been launched with the 2025 Shirika Plan, now in the process of implementation. Progress so far has highlighted the challenges as well as the potential of this vision, in particular around managing social cohesion and ensuring adequate resources are in place to fill the gap left by aid provision. Yet the United Nations has been working with the Kenyan government to support this process and ensure the necessary investments are in place to facilitate the shift.[5]

1 UNHCR (2026) High Commissioner's Speech Marking the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention.
2 United Nations (2026) Ethiopia Launches Groundbreaking "Makatet Roadmap", Ushering In An Era Of Refugee Inclusion.
3 Dadi, S. (2026) UNHCR chief hails refugee courage and Ethiopia's inclusion on World Refugee Day. UNHCR.
4 Riggan, J. (2026) Ethiopia Crafts a Roadmap for Refugee Inclusion Amid Global Aid Cuts.
5 OHCHR (2026) UN Human Rights project transforms refugee camps into communities.

Elsewhere, in **Syria**, the government is also working with UNHCR as it begins to implement its Syria Without Camps initiative, with the aim of addressing the country's internal displacement crisis by the end of 2027 through the delivery of alternative housing to the 1 million Syrians currently living in tents.[6] While focused primarily on internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country, it will also help provide an enabling framework for returning refugees and former refugees already back in Syria to go back safely to their places of origin. The programme, which has already garnered substantial international funding and the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,[7] will not only focus on shelter provision but also promote integration, access to services and livelihood training to ensure returns are sustainable.[8] It remains uncertain whether the government will be able to meet its ambitious targets in full, given the ongoing challenges Syria faces in maintaining security and sustaining its economic recovery.[9]

Incorporating climate change into protection frameworks

A key gap in international law is that there is still no refugee recognition for those displaced by climate change, despite the increasing numbers of people being forced to move as a result of natural disasters, catastrophic crop failures and other impacts. Nevertheless, there is increasing momentum among various countries to redefine the scope of protection to incorporate environmental risk.[10] Increasingly, commentators are arguing, this blind spot in the global protection framework needs to be addressed to reflect the "slow violence" of climate change and the mismatch between longstanding refugee definitions and the reality of disaster-induced displacement on the ground.[11]

Unfortunately, many regions and countries have yet to explicitly recognise the links between climate change and displacement in their own laws. In the **European Union (EU)**, for instance, the newly implemented Pact on Migration and Asylum contains only a brief mention of climate change and does not outline in greater detail its specific role as a driver of displacement, nor describe any specific protection responsibilities which might arise as a result.[12] In the **United States (US)**, meanwhile, the current administration's scepticism about both climate change and the value of international protection means that those displaced by disasters or other environmental impacts in Central Africa and beyond now have little recourse to access asylum in the US.[13]

However, a number of national and regional initiatives in recent years have helped lay some of the groundwork for a broader consensus on climate-induced displacement and its accompanying protection needs. This included, in March 2026, the inauguration of the Pacific Regional Guidance on Planned Relocation,[14] a forward-looking strategy on climate-related resettlement and the first regional framework of its kind.[15] Developed by governments in the Pacific, it offers a holistic roadmap to guide the future resettlement process in response to sea-level rise and extreme weather, drawing on international law and spanning a range of areas including customary land systems and Indigenous rights. Its value lies not only in its role as a guiding framework for the Pacific, but also its potential for replication in other contexts where climate change is also driving displacement.

Latin America is another region where climate change is uprooting communities. In **Colombia**, alongside ongoing conflict and violence by armed gangs, flooding and drought are also major drivers of displacement. In response, the Colombian government passed new legislation in May 2026 which recognised displacement from climate impacts, disasters and environmental degradation as a distinct category, with specific legal and humanitarian protections. Among its other provisions, it is notable for its focus not only on climate-induced displacement once it has occurred but also on anticipating and responding to its effects before they happen. The legislation also provides a comprehensive package of support for those displaced, from registration and emergency assistance to resettlement and compensation. While some concerns remain about the extent to which it will be implemented in future, it nevertheless represents the latest positive step for a country that has undertaken climate action for decades.[16]

6 Daily Sabah (2026) Syria, UN step up efforts to implement 'Syria Without Camps'.
7 UNHCR (2026) UNHCR's Salih urges global solidarity as Syria reaches pivotal moment for return and recovery.
8 Arab News (2026) Syrian leader receives UN refugee chief in Damascus.
9 Al-Estiklal (2026) Closing camps and rebuilding Syria: A realistic goal or an impossible challenge?
10 Hattem, J. (2026) "Climate refugees" Do Not Exist as a concept – But Countries Are Testing New Approaches to Offer Protection. Migration Policy Institute.
11 Khan, B.A. (2026) Climate Wars and the Limits of Refugee Protection. Refugee Law Initiative.
12 Tabak, S. (2026) The Climate Blind Spot in Europe's New Migration Pact. Carnegie Europe.
13 Millman, O. (2026) 'Every day it's more barriers': How the US is shutting out climate refugees. The Guardian.
14 Pacific Resilience Partnership (2026) The Pacific Guidance on Internal Planned Relocation.
15 Human Rights Watch (2026) Pacific Islands: World's First Regional Guidance on Climate Relocation.
16 Gamboa, L. and Ober, K. (2026) Colombia's Climate Displacement Law Can Be a Model for the World. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Defending rights and protections in the court

In many countries, the legal system remains the last recourse for refugees and migrants targeted with hostile or discriminatory policies. In the context of the US, while the Supreme Court has in many cases ruled in the administration's favour, it has nevertheless been instrumental in blocking a number of immigration-related proposals, including the government's attempt to restrict birthright citizenship.[17] Federal courts have also postponed the administration's termination of Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for several national groups (including Haitians,[18] Somalis,[19] and Syrians[20]), even if these blocks were ultimately overturned by other courts. Most recently, in September 2026, an appeals court largely upheld an earlier ruling in February 2026 that the administration's practice of third-country deportations without legal counsel or due process was unlawful. At the time of writing, the case was expected to go to the Supreme Court (see Interview: *Guerline M. Jozef* p. 80).[21]

In **Germany**, similarly, where a special admissions programme for hundreds of Afghan refugees stranded in **Pakistan** was abruptly ended in December 2025 – a move subsequently approved as legal by a lower court – the country's Federal Constitutional Court ruled in July 2026 that the government still needed to consider visa applications on an individual basis.[22] While the ruling did not guarantee either the plaintiff or others in a comparable situation entry to Germany, it at least affirmed that the government could not revoke its previous resettlement pledges en masse without consideration of each individual case.[23]

In a different context, the weaponisation of criminal proceedings by EU member states against humanitarian workers and activists has been countered in the courts. In February 2026, two separate court rulings in **Italy** were issued in favour of the humanitarian NGO Sea-Watch – repeatedly targeted by the administration of Giorgia Meloni for its work – with the Italian government ordered to pay EUR 76,000 to the organisation and release a vessel that authorities had previously impounded.[24] In **Greece**, meanwhile, the prosecution of 24 humanitarian workers on "bogus charges" came to an end after seven years when a court acquitted them in January 2026.[25] In March 2026, meanwhile, Tommy Olsen – a Norwegian humanitarian worker who had been issued with an international warrant on charges of facilitating illegal entry into Greece – was arrested at his home and faced imminent extradition. However, in May, a Norwegian court took the extraordinary step of dismissing the extradition request on the grounds that the actions Olsen took as a member of Aegean Boat Report were lawful.[26]

The power of the courts to delay or hold anti-immigration legislation, particularly when it undermines fundamental human rights or constitutional principles, explains why the judiciary continues to be attacked by governments seeking to roll back protections for refugees and migrants. In the case of Italy, the courts have played an important role in providing legal oversight to the government's immigration policies, including in March 2026 when a regional court in Lazio ruled that the government needed to release information relating to its plans to implement the Pact on Migration and Asylum in response to a freedom of information request.[27] Repeated legal challenges by domestic courts appear to have been the motivation behind a high-profile national referendum initiated to carry out sweeping reforms of the judicial system – amendments that critics said would undermine its independence – were rejected by 54 percent of voters.[28] The result was interpreted by some commentators as a repudiation of the government's narrative that the various challenges its immigration policies had faced was due to left-wing judges rather than the legal and practical inoperability of the proposals themselves.[29]

The courts can also play an important role in upholding the rule of law in response to immigration-related unrest and violence, particularly in contexts where the government is failing to take adequate action itself. In the case of **South Africa**, a Johannesburg high court issued a ruling in November 2025 calling for the anti-migrant vigilante group Operation Dudula to desist from preventing foreign nationals from accessing education and health care.[30] While this was not enough to prevent the subsequent outbreak of violence during 2026 against migrants across the country, it nevertheless demonstrates the importance of the judiciary in upholding the fundamental rights of refugees and migrants. In Kenya, on the other

17 Zurcher, A. (2026) US Supreme Court has dealt heavy defeats to Trump, while expanding his power. BBC.
18 Saad, N. (2026) Judge temporarily blocks axing deportation protections for Haitian migrants. BBC.
19 All Africa (2026) Somalia: U.S. Judge Halts Trump Move to End Deportation Protections for Somalis.
20 Pieder, R. (2026) Supreme Court allows Trump to end protected status for Haitian and Syrian immigrants. BBC.
21 Al Jazeera (2026) US judge rules Trump policy of 'third country' deportations unlawful.
22 Van Brunnersum, S-J. (2026) Germany: Top court rules on Afghan migrant policy. InfoMigrants.
23 Murray, M. and Wacket, M. (2026) Top German court says Afghan resettlement pledges cannot be revoked en masse. Reuters.
24 Santos, A.P. (2026) Italy: Courts issue back-to-back rulings in favor of Sea Watch migrant rescue organization. InfoMigrants.
25 Van Esveld, B. and Cosse, E. (2026) Humanitarians Cleared of Bogus Charges in Greece. Human Rights Watch.
26 Smith, H. (2026) Norwegian court blocks extradition to Greece of migrant rights activist. The Guardian.
27 Rondi, L. (2026) Patto migrazione e asilo: il Tar del Lazio smonta (di nuovo) il muro di gomma del Viminale. Altreconomia.
28 Orlandi, G. (2026) Italians vote on constitutional justice reform to reshape judiciary. Euronews.
29 Mellersh, N. (2026) Meloni, migration and the EU Parliament's vote on 'return hubs'. InfoMigrants.
30 Ngcobo, K. (2025) Anti-migrant group ordered to stop blocking foreigners from South African healthcare. BBC.

hand, a government directive at the end of July 2026 barring asylum registration for nationals of Eritrea and Ethiopia was suspended by a court in October, ultimately forcing the authorities to change position and consider applications from these countries on an individual basis.[31]

International court cases bring hope for displaced Rohingya

The military junta in **Myanmar** has yet to be brought to account for its role in the genocide of the Rohingya population, a long persecuted and stateless minority who today are either contained in internment camps in the country or displaced by successive waves of violence against them into Bangladesh and other countries in the region. However, in April 2026 a Rohingya community member in Indonesia filed a legal case there against the head of the junta, Min Aung Hlaing, on charges of genocide. The complaint was made possible by a change in Indonesian law to reflect the principle of universal jurisdiction, meaning that anyone responsible for gross human rights violations can be prosecuted in its courts, regardless of where the crimes themselves took place.[32] Similar charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity were lodged against the Myanmar military in February 2026 in a court in **Timor-Leste**.[33]

While host countries such as **Bangladesh** and **Malaysia** have repeatedly raised the issue of repatriation, conditions in Myanmar mean that a safe and dignified return for the Rohingya still remains a very long way off. In the context of ongoing civil conflict and the continued repression of the Rohingya, justice for the numerous crimes committed against the community remains an essential pre-requisite to any long-term prospect of return. Though representing a small step, the recent court rulings offer the possibility of finally holding the perpetrators of these abuses to account.

Regularisation and integration

While much attention is focused on the actions and policies of *national* governments around asylum and immigration, often in the context of new restrictions, the picture on the ground in *cities* is generally very different. Many municipalities are instead focused on the development of innovative and inclusive solutions for their refugee and migrant populations, as highlighted in the most recent iteration of the Call to Local Action for Migrants and Refugees, announced during the 2026 International Migration Review Forum (IMRF).[34] More than 40 local governments brought new financial commitments to support better outcomes for their immigrant communities, bringing the total number of pledges to 181, mobilising more than USD 90 million combined and benefitting some 240 million residents.[35] Their work demonstrates how, far removed from the rhetoric of division and exclusion, many cities are playing a prominent role in welcoming refugees and migrants – often in direct contradiction to the official stated position of their national governments.

This pattern is also evident in the many US cities actively resisting the anti-immigrant agenda of the current administration. In Philadelphia, for instance, the city council has restricted its cooperation with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) through the passage of ICE Out legislation in May 2026. Among other provisions, the new laws prohibit ICE operations being carried out on city property, limit data sharing with immigration enforcement personnel and bolster existing anti-discrimination protections.[36] A group of cities, led by New York, is also suing the administration over proposed new legislation that will authorise immigration personnel to refuse entry on the basis of their potential future use of non-cash pubic benefits such as food vouchers. As New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani's representatives put it, the legislation "throws out more than a century of settled law and decades of federal guidance and gives officers wide latitude to make decisions that are inconsistent and discriminatory".[37]

Local governments are also well placed to provide tailored support to refugees and migrants, who often have complex and wide-ranging needs which can be highly context-specific. In **Germany**, for instance, the eastern state of Brandenburg piloted an Opportunity Centre in June 2026 to provide foreign nationals with an unclear status – for example, those without the legal right to remain who are also unable to return to their country

31 Kiplagat, S. (2025) Kenya clarifies Ethiopia, Eritrea asylum restrictions after outcry. The East African.
32 CIVICUS Lens (2026) Indonesia's genocide case: A landmark test of universal jurisdiction.
33 Bauchner, S. (2026) Myanmar Expels Timor-Leste Diplomat over War Crimes Case. Human Rights Watch.
34 Mayors Migration Council (2026) Cities Bring over 50 New Pledges to 2026 UN Migration Forum.
35 Local Coalition for Migrants and Refugees (2026) Localizing the Global Compact for Migration: Third Report on Local Action for Migrants and Refugees – 2026.
36 Fay, L. (2026) Philadelphia City Council's "ICE Out" bills become law, limiting city cooperation with immigration enforcement. CBS News.
37 Hurwitz, S. (2026) States and cities sue to stop Trump's immigrant "wealth test" rule before it takes effect. Mother Jones.

of origin – with a pathway to temporary employment and education. With an initial caseload of 200 people in its first year, the programme will provide them with assistance in the interim and potentially offer a pathway to regularisation in the long-term.[38]

It is also the case that national governments are facilitating legal protection pathways for refugees, even in the midst of rolling out other policies which actively disadvantage those wishing to seek asylum. These are often designed in partnership with non-governmental actors such as faith groups, universities and civil society organisations. In the **United Kingdom (UK)**, despite government policy becoming increasingly hostile towards refugees and migrants, the government announced the launch of two humanitarian programmes which will enable community groups and academic institutions to sponsor refugees.[39] Italy, despite its restrictions on immigration, has had longstanding 'humanitarian corridors' in place with Christian groups to enable selective refugee arrivals. In September 2025, a new agreement was made with faith organisations the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy and the Waldensian Table to facilitate the arrival of 1,000 refugees over the next three years.[40]

Legal migration pathways also provide an important form of protection and opportunity for those who might otherwise attempt to travel irregularly to their destination country. In this regard, recent efforts to expand labour and vocational training pathways through bilateral agreements (for example, between the UK and Bangladesh[41], Italy and Ethiopia,[42] and Germany and Kenya[43]) offer a meaningful alternative to irregular migration. Meanwhile **Morocco**, notwithstanding the restrictions irregular migrants face, recently agreed to a mobility agreement with Mali that would relax some entry restrictions for Malian nationals and promote more opportunities for business, scholarships and other exchanges.[44] In May 2026, **Togo** also announced that nationals from all African Union member states would be permitted to enter the country visa-free for up to 30 days[45] – a significant development at a time when sentiment towards refugees and migrants appears to have become increasingly negative across the continent.[46]

At the same time, for the sizeable population of refugees and migrants living in host countries without documentation, regularisation pathways have a critical role to play. The most high-profile programme in 2026 was carried out by **Spain**, which offered an amnesty for foreign nationals already in the country to apply for legal residency. In total, between mid-April and the end of June, almost 1.2 million people had registered.[47] The country's relatively open approach to immigration, in stark contrast to the increasingly restrictive policies being enacted across much of Europe, was justified by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in both humanitarian and economic terms as an opportunity to "build the rich, open and diverse Spain that we are and to which we aspire".[48] A similar justification, balancing humanitarian and economic imperatives, was made by the government in **Türkiye** in June 2026 when it announced that around 2 million foreign nationals under temporary protection – the majority of them Syrians – were granted work exemptions.[49] The return of hundreds of thousands of Syrian nationals since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, while apparently welcomed by many in Türkiye, has left businesses struggling with a labour shortage[50] which is already having a significant negative impact on the national economy.[51]

Promoting counter-narratives

Far-right populist politics, with its potent brew of scapegoating, misinformation and "rage bait" around immigration issues, typically presents itself as a reflection of popular will. Political uncertainty, social fragmentation and economic malaise can certainly contribute to a desire for blame and othering, but there is evidence too that many voters are disenchanted with the toxic narratives dominating discussions of asylum and immigration. In the United Kingdom (UK), where migration remains a highly charged issue, a survey by the International Rescue Committee found that well over half (59%) felt that there was too much focus on how refugees arrive in the UK and not enough on why they are doing so. In addition, 63 percent expressed sympathy for those fleeing conflict, persecution or other dangers and 76 percent agreed that it was important to distinguish this group from the wider debate on migration in general. These findings "point to public appetite for a more constructive debate: one that recognises concerns about arrivals while also explaining

38 Santos, A.P. (2026) Germany: Opportunity Center opens for those in 'limbo' status. InfoMigrants.
39 Santos, A.P. (2026) UK: Plans for safe and humanitarian routes for refugees, based on community sponsors. InfoMigrants.
40 ANSA (2025) Italy: New deal scheduled to bring 1,000 refugees via humanitarian corridor. InfoMigrants.
41 Sanderson, S. (2026) Britain hoping to create more legal routes to migration from Bangladesh. InfoMigrants.
42 Arletti & Partners (n.d.) Italy-Ethiopia Agreement on Migration and Mobility.
43 Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs (2026) MoU with key Germany entities to advance the Kenya-Germany Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement.
44 Mixed Migration Centre (2026) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: North Africa: Quarter 2 2026.
45 Togo First (2026) Togo introduces visa-free access for African Union citizens.
46 Mapenzauswa, S. (2025) Most Africans oppose employment of immigrants, admission of refugees. Business Day.
47 Al Jazeera (2026) Spain immigration scheme sees 1.2 million apply for legal status; Hedgecoe, G. (2026) Spain approves plan to give around 500,000 undocumented migrants legal status. BBC.
48 Rennolds, N.(2026) 22 EU leaders call for emergency talks over Ceuta migrant crisis. Euronews.
49 Türkiye Today (2026) Türkiye grants work permit exemption to over 2M Syrians under temporary protection.
50 RFI (2026) As Syrian workers return home from Turkey, local businesses feel the loss.
51 France24 (2026) Turkey's economy hit as Syrians return home.

the conflicts, persecution, and crises that force people to seek safety".[52]

A global survey carried out by Ipsos with UNHCR in 2026 also suggests a more nuanced perspective on immigration issues than much of the political and social media rhetoric would suggest. The poll found, firstly, that support for the principle of refugee protection remained largely unchanged overall and that around two-thirds (66%) of respondents agreed that refugees should be able to seek asylum in another country – even if almost half (49%) also supported closing borders to refugees entirely. But a number of specific data points offer a rejoinder to the assumption that anti-refugee sentiment is both inevitable and growing. Bucking this trend, some countries have seen an increase in support for refugees, including **Japan** (64%, up from 23% in 2019) and **France** (68%, up from 43% in 2019). At the same time, paradoxically, the countries with the highest levels of support for refugees (**Sweden** and **the Netherlands**, both at 78%) are associated with highly restrictive asylum and immigration policies.[53]

Increasingly, it is government-led crackdowns and the vigilantism of far-right groups – for instance, the multiple days of rioting that broke out in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in June 2026 after a man was stabbed by a Sudanese national – that garner the most attention. Yet it is also the case that migrant rights groups and civil society organisations have often demonstrated against these actions with counter-protests which present a very different message of unity and solidarity. For instance, in the wake of the violence in Belfast, thousands gathered in the city to stage a rally to oppose racism and the far-right.[54] In **Tunisia**, meanwhile, a demonstration by civil society activists in Tunis in April 2026 protested against an uptick in hostile rhetoric which framed migrants and refugees as demographic and security threats.[55] In the US, in response to the highly militarised operations carried out by ICE in cities across the country, local residents have displayed solidarity with at-risk immigrant communities and protested enforcement crackdowns.[56] In March 2026, protesting against a number of issues including the Trump administration's immigration policies, "No Kings" demonstrations were held in cities across the country.[57] It is also the case that resistance to far-right narratives can be driven by ordinary citizens who, while going about their everyday lives, choose to draw a line in the sand. In the case of Sweden, where anti-migrant messaging has become increasingly pervasive, the adverts posted by the party on public buses – including slogans such as "Do you miss Mogadishu? The repatriation grant will help you get home" – were only removed after drivers refused to use vehicles displaying them.[58]

Ultimately, though, the most powerful rejoinder to exclusionary narratives comes from refugees and migrants themselves. Following a meeting of activists for the 2026 World Social Forum meeting, held in Benin, the survivor-led Cotonou Declaration was published. This powerful manifesto is levelled not only against the EU and the US for their "outsourced war on human mobility", but also international agencies (whose "smooth vocabulary of 'risk analysis', 'border management', 'voluntary return' and 'cooperation'... conceals a deadly project") and African governments (who have "participated in the hunting, detention, deportation and abandonment of Africans on African soil"). Instead, the declaration calls for justice for survivors and the families of victims, the dismantling of the architecture of externalisation and containment, and realisation of "the full economic, social, and cultural benefits of migration" through free movement.[59]

Reporting and investigations

Finally, in the face of intimidation, harassment, and criminal prosecution, journalists and researchers across the world have played a critical role in shining a spotlight on some of the worst abuses being carried out against refugees and migrants. Their work is critical in providing truth and transparency against a growing backdrop of disinformation about refugees and migrants, including repeated falsehoods from governments themselves. Their value has also been to communicate the real human impact of restrictive or cruel immigration policies. In the case of third-country deportations being carried out by the US, for example, news outlets such as The Guardian[60] have helped uncover the reality of a deliberately opaque process by tracking down the victims of deportations to third-countries such as the **Central African Republic** to highlight the trauma and brutality that they have experienced as a consequence of this policy. Besides larger outlets, smaller news services are also playing a critical role engaging directly with immigrant communities in the US.[61]

52 International Rescue Committee (2026) Brits want a more constructive debate on refugees, new IRC polling finds.
53 Ipsos (2026) Global attitudes towards refugees remain stable, while questions about implementation persist.
54 PBS (2026) Thousands rally in Belfast to condemn anti-immigrant rioting that followed stabbing.
55 Business News (2026) La rue pour briser le silence : mobilisation citoyenne contre le racisme à Tunis.
56 Kaplan, O. (2026) Anti-ICE protesters are following same nonviolent playbook used by people in war zones across the world to fight threats to their communities. The Conversation.
57 Wise, A. and Duster, C. (2026) At 'No Kings' rallies, anti-Trump protesters speak out against ICE 'cruelty,' Iran war. NPR.
58 Bryant, M. (2026) Swedish election: centre-left parties lead by just a single seat with most votes counted. The Guardian.
59 Alarme Phone Sahara (2026) Our bodies are not your bodies! The Cotonou Manifesto for Freedom of Movement.
60 Loveluck, L. (2026) Banished to alien lands: Trump's secret deportation deals. The Guardian.
61 Carra, M. (2026) These journalists share vital reporting with thousands of US immigrants – all by text and WhatsApp. The Guardian.

Investigative outlets such as Lighthouse Reports play a major role in uncovering abuses and human rights violations against refugees and migrants, from the death and displacement of civilians in **Sudan**[62] to **Israel**'s ongoing campaign in southern **Lebanon**. The latter, exploring the mass displacement of more than 1 million people and the systematic destruction of their homes, infrastructure, and farmland, highlighted a situation where "returning home has become more and more unimaginable".[63] It also released an exposé of the capsizing of a migrant vessel en route to **Mayotte** after it was violently intercepted by French police.[64] Other recent investigations have highlighted less visible but nevertheless insidious aspects of asylum and immigration policy, including the use of unreliable AI algorithms to determine the age of asylum seekers in the UK,[65] racial profiling by ICE agents in anti-migrant raids,[66] and the exploitation of visa applicants with "weak" passports from Africa, Asia and the Middle East by the vast outsourcing company VFS.[67] With support from dozens of local and national media organisations and civil society groups, their work has been widely disseminated across the world.

62 Lighthouse Reports (2026) No exit from El Fasher.
63 Lighthouse Reports (2026) Making southern Lebanon unliveable.
64 Lighthouse Reports (2026) Caught on camera: French police cause capsize.
65 Lighthouse Reports (2026) Asylum by algorithm.
66 Lighthouse Reports (2026) License to profile.
67 Lighthouse Reports (2026) The visa empire: Borders as a business.

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The Mixed Migration Review 2026 examines how polycrisis is reshaping mixed migration dynamics: who can move, how they move, to where and at what cost. The impacts of climate change, conflict, economic inequality, a fracturing geopolitical order and the rapid decline of aid systems are not felt in isolation. Rather their impacts interact and compound throughout interconnecting global systems.

Within this setting migration is both a byproduct and an instrument. While the drivers of migration increasingly interlink and intensify, migration itself is wielded as a political tool that wins and loses elections, signals strength and dictates relationships between states. In the era of polycrisis, state responses rely heavily on containment: borders are pushed outward, responsibilities outsourced and exceptions to the rule are increasingly becoming standing policy.

This year's Review examines current mixed migration dynamics through the lens of polycrisis. It explores the deepening protection crisis for people on the move amid a rupture in multilateralism; the consequences of dwindling foreign aid on people and migration dynamics; the widening tension between demographic decline and limited labour mobility pathways; and, critically, what all of this means directly for migrants and refugees.

MMR 2026 draws on feature interviews with leading migration thinkers, essays from established experts alongside emerging writers from the Global South, and regional and global updates. Analysis of 4Mi survey interviews and in-depth personal accounts from migrants and refugees around the world explores how the polycrisis is felt and responded to firsthand, while five essays from young Global South writers offer analytical and personal perspectives often missing from global migration discourse. Together, these deliver key insights into how the age of polycrisis is shaping mixed migration now and how it may continue to do so into the future.

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