

• GLOBAL POLITICS AND SECURITY •

Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana and  
Colleen Boland (eds)

# Moving Towards Europe

**Diverse Trajectories and Multidimensional  
Drivers of Migration across the Mediterranean  
and the Atlantic**



PETER LANG

Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana and Colleen Boland (eds)

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Population movements taking place in past decades in different regions of the world, including those eventually reaching the European Union, defy straightforward and simplistic conceptions of drivers, trajectories and forms of migration. Approaching migration journeys as non-linear processes, this book looks into the conditions, dynamics, legal and policy frameworks in transit contexts, host countries and different destination alternatives, to provide a more nuanced understanding of mixed migration. It also takes a comparative approach, time- and space-wise. It looks at specific migratory trends towards the European Union before and after the so-called 'migration crisis' (2009–2020) and at broad spaces of mobility interlinking several origin, transit, destination and host contexts in South/Central/Western Asia, Eastern/Central/Western Africa, as well as Central and South America. Finally, it also pays particular attention to gender- and sexuality-specific dynamics, conditions and patterns.

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## Moving Towards Europe

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# Contents

List of Figures .....	7
List of Tables .....	9
<i>Lorenzo Kamel</i>	
Foreword .....	11
<i>Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana, Colleen Boland, Daniela Huber, Daniel Morente and Elena Sánchez-Montijano</i>	
<b>Chapter 1</b> Introduction .....	15
<i>Asli Selin Okyay</i>	
<b>Chapter 2</b> Fragmented Afghan journeys towards Europe: Caught between insecure lives, precarious livelihoods and restrictive policies .....	41
<i>Flavia Fusco</i>	
<b>Chapter 3</b> Following mixed migration trajectories from Iraq: When, how and why Europe became a major destination for Iraqis .....	69
<i>Daniela Huber</i>	
<b>Chapter 4</b> Syrian refugees' trajectories: From civil war through insecure livelihoods in transit/host contexts to fortified European borders .....	91
<i>Jacopo Resti</i>	
<b>Chapter 5</b> Why do so many Eritreans flee their country? Drivers of Eritrean migration in countries of origin, transit and destination .....	117
<i>Luca Barana, Colleen Boland and Daniel Morente</i>	
<b>Chapter 6</b> Mali's migratory complexity: A tale of shifting migratory movements on three routes .....	137

*Luca Barana*

- Chapter 7** Nigeria: The impact of economic struggles and conflict on fragmented migratory routes ..... 163

*Silvia Colombo*

- Chapter 8** Understanding migration from Tunisia: Domestic marginalisation, regional instability and the EU's over-securitisation approach ..... 187

*Colleen Boland and Daniel Morente*

- Chapter 9** Morocco's influence on WMR and WAR transit: Key relationships with Africa and Europe and growing geopolitical weight ..... 207

*Daniel Morente*

- Chapter 10** The legacies of the armed conflict, regional dynamics and Spain's immigration and asylum policies in the shaping of migration from Colombia ..... 235

*Colleen Boland and Elena Sánchez-Montijano*

- Chapter 11** Increasingly exacerbated crises in Honduras ..... 261

*Colleen Boland and Elena Sánchez-Montijano*

- Chapter 12** The continued Venezuelan exodus ..... 287

*Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana, Colleen Boland, Daniela Huber, Daniel Morente and Elena Sánchez-Montijano*

- Chapter 13** Conclusions ..... 309

Abbreviations ..... 333

Notes on Contributors ..... 337



# Figures

Figure 1.1:	Irregular border-crossings on the EMR 2009–2020 (land and sea total) .....	23
Figure 1.2:	Irregular border-crossings (IBCs) on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	26
Figure 1.3:	Irregular border-crossings (IBCs) by sea and land on the WMR by case studies, 2009–2020 .....	30
Figure 1.4:	Irregular border-crossings (IBCs) on the WAR, 2009–2020 .....	32
Figure 1.5:	Foreign population from LAC residing in Spain, 2009–2020 ....	35
Figure 2.1:	Apprehensions of irregular migrants in Turkey: Afghan nationals / total apprehensions (2014–2020) .....	47
Figure 2.2:	Afghan first-time asylum applications in the EU (2009–2020) .	48
Figure 2.3:	Afghan first-time asylum applications by major recipient EU countries (aggregated 2009–2020) .....	49
Figure 2.4:	Afghan first-time asylum applications over time in the top five recipient member states .....	50
Figure 2.5:	Afghan asylum applications in the EU by gender .....	51
Figure 3.1:	Asylum applications in the EU-28 countries by Iraqi nationals, 2009–2019 .....	75
Figure 3.2:	Asylum applications in the EU-28 countries by Iraqi nationals, 2013–2019 (gender breakdown) .....	76
Figure 4.1:	Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (as of 2021) .....	94
Figure 4.2:	Routes of Palestine refugees, 2009–2020 .....	96
Figure 4.3:	Asylum applications by Syrian nationals by gender in EU-27, 2009–2020 .....	97
Figure 4.4:	Syrian asylum applications by country, 2009–2020 .....	97
Figure 4.5:	Syrian asylum applications over time in major destination countries in the EU, 2009–2020 .....	98
Figure 5.1:	Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Eritrean nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	121
Figure 5.2:	Asylum applications of Eritrean nationals in Europe, 2009–2020 .....	122
Figure 6.1:	Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	142
Figure 6.2:	Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Italy, 2009–2020 .	143
Figure 6.3:	Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020 .....	145

Figure 6.4: Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009–2020 .....	146
Figure 6.5: Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Spain, 2009–2020 .....	147
Figure 7.1: Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Nigerian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	169
Figure 7.2: Asylum applications of Nigerian nationals in Italy, 2009–2020 .....	170
Figure 8.1: Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Tunisian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	194
Figure 9.1: Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020 .....	213
Figure 9.2: Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the CMR and WMR, 2009–2020 .....	214
Figure 9.3: Asylum applications of Moroccan nationals in Germany, Italy and Spain, 2009–2020 .....	216
Figure 10.1: Migration from Colombia to the top EU country destinations, 2010–2019 .....	241
Figure 10.2: Asylum applications of Colombians in EU member states, 2010–2020 .....	243
Figure 10.3: Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009–2020 .....	245
Figure 11.1: Immigration to top EU country destinations by individuals with Honduran citizenship, 2010–2019 .....	268
Figure 11.2: Honduran nationals residing in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, 2009–2020 .....	270
Figure 11.3: Honduran asylum applications to EU member states, 2010–2020 .....	272
Figure 11.4: Asylum applications to Spain by nationality, 2009–2020 .....	273
Figure 12.1: Immigration to top EU country destinations by individuals with Venezuelan citizenship, 2010–2019 .....	292
Figure 12.2: Venezuelan nationals residing in Spanish cities, 2009–2020 ...	293
Figure 12.3: Asylum applications from Venezuela to the EU, 2010–2020 ...	294
Figure 12.4: Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009–2020 .....	296

## Tables

Table 2.1: Crossings of Afghans on the EMR (sea and land total), 2009–2020 .....	46
Table 3.1: Crossings of Iraqis on the EMR (sea, land and total), 2009–2020 .....	74
Table 4.1: Crossings of Syrians on the EMR (sea and land total), 2009–2020 .....	95
Table 5.1: Detections of Eritrean nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	121
Table 6.1: Detections of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	141
Table 6.2: Detections of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009–2020 .....	143
Table 6.3: Detections of Malian nationals on the WMR (sea and land), 2009–2020 .....	144
Table 7.1: Detections of Nigerian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	168
Table 7.2: Ranking based on total asylum applications of Nigerian citizens in Europe, 2009–2020 .....	171
Table 8.1: Detections of Tunisian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020 .....	193
Table 9.1: Detections of Moroccan nationals on the WMR (sea and land), 2009–2020 .....	215
Table 10.1: Asylum applications of Colombians in Spain, 2010–2020 .....	242
Table 11.1: Honduran asylum applications to Spain and the EU, 2010–2020 .....	271
Table 12.1: Venezuelan asylum applications to Spain and the EU, 2010–2020 .....	295



Lorenzo Kamel

## Foreword

This volume addresses dynamics connected to migratory movements towards Europe from the African, Asian and American hemispheres. As the volume focuses on the factors that have driven and shaped such migration in the past decade, it looks at what it terms non-linear or fragmented journeys. This foreword provides a historical context to this volume, as the history of migration towards Europe as such has also been *non-linear and fragmented*. In particular, in the modern era, migration between Europe and these major world regions has been deeply influenced by slavery and colonialism. Although the former (slavery) would seem to be linked and rooted in a far-away past, it is actually a key component for a deeper understanding of present-day dynamics in and beyond the field of ‘migration studies’.

Here it is enough to mention that under the system that was practiced in Africa and other parts of the world in previous centuries, children of enslaved persons did not *ipso facto* acquire the same status. The people who were enslaved in the historical phases preceding the Atlantic trade were thus socially and politically ‘mobile’ (in 1279, the former slave Qalāwūn, like all other ‘Burji’ and ‘Bahri’ sultans, became the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt), that is, generally not subject to any hereditary bonds of slavery. Moreover, and contrary to the case of the Atlantic trade, in Africa people found themselves enslaved because they had been captured in wars or raids or as punishment for crimes.

Two significant aspects distinguished the original British slave system from the system that later ‘took root’ in America. Unlike Virginia and other North American states, Great Britain never codified slavery in its legislative system. In contrast to what occurred in America, moreover, the British slave system was not based exclusively on belonging to a given ‘race’. In fact, Britain enslaved people of all colours, even ‘buying’ human beings from Barbary pirates: the latter enslaved thousands of individuals from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and even Asia.

The transatlantic slave trade – organised and carried out by ‘sable destroyers of human rights,’<sup>1</sup> to use the expression adopted by abolitionist and former slave

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<sup>1</sup> Equiano, Olaudah (1816), *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, Norwich, The Author, 1794, p. 39, <https://www.loc.gov/item/44015764>.

Olaudah Equiano (1745–97) in his autobiography – has assumed unprecedented importance for several other reasons. It laid the foundations for modern capitalism, decisively influencing the industrialisation processes of a large part of Europe and contributing to generating the idea of an ‘Atlantic space’. Conversely, the transatlantic slave trade impacted negatively on a large part of Africa and its well-established market economies, depriving extensive areas of the continent of their best resources (human and non-human) with inevitable repercussions on the social fabric of ethnic groups and local communities as well.

More locally, the deportation of millions of enslaved Africans represented a fundamental element in the birth and development of European colonies in Central and South America and, later, North America as well: about 65 per cent of enslaved Africans who crossed the Atlantic were brought either to Brazil (the last country in the Western hemisphere to abolish slavery) or to the Caribbean colonies, compared to less than 6 per cent brought to the present-day United States. And yet, by 1860, about two thirds of all ‘New World slaves’ lived in the American South (Southern United States).

More than half of all those falling victim to the Atlantic trade were enslaved during the eighteenth century, with Great Britain, France, the Netherlands and Portugal (the first and the last European colonial power) competing for the lucrative trade in human lives from West Africa. Still in the first half of the nineteenth century, over 3.5 million human beings were forced to cross the Atlantic to serve in the colonies of the ‘New World’. A meaningful percentage of the inheritors of these people are today known as ‘African Americans’, while ‘white Americans’ are rarely if ever addressed as ‘European Americans’. James Baldwin once said that ‘to be African American is to be African without any memory and American without any privilege’.<sup>2</sup> While ‘African American’ is a misnomer, Baldwin was right in reminding us how the denial of inclusion is a scar that human beings can and do carry with themselves for many generations.

Turning the lens back to Europe and colonialism, for many centuries Europe contributed to intercontinental migration more than any other continent: between 1820 and 1930 more than 60 million Europeans emigrated toward Australia, New Zealand, North America and a number of other areas defined by

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<sup>2</sup> Cit. in Marsh, Akeem Nassor et al. (2022), ‘Let’s Talk about Race’, in Akeem Nassor Marsh and Lara Jo Cox, eds, *Not Just Bad Kids. The Adversity and Disruptive Behavior Link*, London, Academic Press, p. 575, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818954-2.00014-6>.

the ‘father of Environmental History’ Alfred W. Crosby as ‘Neo-Europes.’<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, migrants from other continents rarely chose Europe as a destination.

Much has changed during the twentieth century due to a few practical historical junctures and reasons. Pieter C. Emmer and Leo Lucassen, in particular, have focused on five of these.<sup>4</sup> The first is linked to the period of the two World Wars, when hundreds of thousands of non-Europeans (mainly from China, North Africa, Indochina and Madagascar) served as temporary labourers in Europe and/or as soldiers with the allied forces in France, Germany and a number of other countries (including soldiers from India in the case of Britain, and from the Maghreb in the case of France).

The second juncture coincided with the decolonisation processes and the related collapsing of a number of colonial states, when millions of Europeans and their local allies from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Indochina (in the case of France), Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique (in the case of Portugal), the British colonies in southern Africa and South Asia, as well as the Dutch East Indies, moved to Europe.

Other three reasons for the increase in the volume of migration to Europe during the twentieth century are directly linked to the rising demand for labour following the end of the Second World War (particularly the British Commonwealth), the growing quest for political asylum (from the often-violent process of state-building), and cultural and educational purposes. All this is part of what Pamila Gupta defined as ‘the sheer physicality of colonial demise and the amount of stuff that got moved.’<sup>5</sup>

Thus, contemporary migration towards Europe – the focus of this book – has a longer historical trail. And yet, still in 1990, migrants from West Africa, where many of the current migratory waves directed to Europe stem from, represented only 0.005 per cent in the annual population growth in Europe, which at the time was 0.184 per cent. The upsurge of net migration from the late 1990s has much to do with the combination of climate change and demographic growth (according to the United Nations, more than half of global population growth between 2015 and 2050 is expected to occur in Africa). At the same time, local

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<sup>3</sup> Crosby, Alfred W. (2004), *Ecological Imperialism. The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 304.

<sup>4</sup> Emmer, Pieter C. and Leo Lucassen (2012), ‘Migration from the Colonies to Western Europe since 1800’, in *European History Online*, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/emmerp-lucassen-2012-en>

<sup>5</sup> Gupta, Pamila (2019), *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World. History and Ethnography*, London/New York, Bloomsbury, p. 17.

economies remain locked into (semi)peripheral positions not least also due to the (never so) well organised exploitation of Africa, mainly at the hands of single European countries and companies (as also confirmed by the Panama Papers), with the connivance of corrupted local leaderships.<sup>6</sup>

It should also be mentioned here that several Western countries rely on a large net appropriation of resources from Africa (as well as from a number of areas in Asia and South America), including 10.1 billion tons of raw materials and 379 billion hours of human labour.<sup>7</sup> Such countries take significantly more resources and labour from Africa than they give. This net appropriation is not accompanied by a net payment of funds. On the contrary, high-income states maintain a monetary surplus in trade, by commanding high prices for their own resource exports, while appropriating resources from the rest of the world for well below global average prices.<sup>8</sup> Thus, these are macro-economic structures which are directly influenced by Western European states and in which local individual migration decisions are then taken.

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<sup>6</sup> Kamel, Lorenzo (2018), 'To Stop Migration, Stop the Abuse of Africa's Resources', in *Al Jazeera*, 15 February, <https://aje.io/3rq7g>.

<sup>7</sup> Hickel, Jason (2021), 'The Anti-Colonial Politics of Degrowth', in *Political Geography*, Vol. 88, Article 102404, DOI 10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102404.

<sup>8</sup> Dorninger, Christian et al. (2021), 'Global Patterns of Ecologically Unequal Exchange: Implications for Sustainability in the 21st Century', in *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 179 (January), Article 106824, DOI 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106824.



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## Chapter 1 Introduction

**Abstract:** The introduction defines the understanding of migration adopted in this study, and describes the scope of the research as well as the methodology and data used. Taking into account the non-linear nature of cross-border movement and dynamically shifting migration decisions en route, the analysis is grounded in the premise that mixed migration journeys towards Europe cannot be seen in isolation from the conditions and developments in the wider regions across which they unfold. Therefore, besides inquiring into migration drivers in countries of origin, the study also examines the social, economic, political and security conditions in countries that act as transit, destination and host contexts for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, paying particular attention to policies and gender- and sexuality-specific dynamics. The introduction also provides an overview to all routes observed in this book.

**Keywords:** mixed migration | Europe | decision-making | transit | destination | host context

Migration has been typically seen as a function of a set of push factors operating in an origin country paired with pull factors operating in a destination context. This reading is often accompanied by an understanding of cross-border mobility as a 'direct movement from A to B' (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016: 12; see also Schapendonk 2013: 12). Such approach attributes little importance to what happens *en route* and how changing conditions across the contexts in which journey(s) are conducted inform migration processes, patterns and outcomes. Often implying a narrow focus on the crossing of a single border, such reading also tends to totalise diverse forms and experiences of migration under the regular/irregular binary, depending on whether that single border-crossing was authorised or unauthorised in nature. Further, the need to make sense of different forms of population movements from a conceptual and analytical point of view as well as a public policy perspective leads to classification exercises that rely on a clear-cut separation of human mobility into that motivated by political reasons, persecution and conflict on the one hand, and that driven by social and economic reasons (e.g., escaping poverty, accessing livelihoods, or for education or family-related factors) on the other. These categories often fall short of matching the complexity of real-life migration, the intertwined motivations underpinning human mobility, including from a gender- and sexuality-sensitive perspective,

and of morphing plans, motivations and intentions shaped by conditions faced and experiences lived throughout the journeys (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

Population movements taking place in past decades in different regions of the world, including those eventually reaching the external borders of the European Union, defy such straightforward and simplistic conceptions of drivers, trajectories and forms of migration. Instead, the notion of ‘mixed migration’ has been gaining increasing traction, emphasising the multiplicity, diversity and dynamically shifting nature of the factors motivating migration, the means and modalities of travel throughout the journey(s), and the legal statuses, rights and vulnerabilities of people involved in contemporary population movements (see Mixed Migration Centre 2021).

Indeed, these movements can be better seen through the lens of ‘fragmented journeys’, ‘broken into a number of separate stages, involving varied motivations, legal statuses and living and employment conditions’ for those who are undertaking them (Collyer 2010: 275). Therefore, a focus on the structural conditions and contextual factors in the countries of origin, while necessary, is not sufficient to understand what drives and shapes fragmented journeys or ‘serial migration of consecutive movements’ (Crawley et al. 2016: 28). Neither does a static understanding of a single destination leave room for the modification of plans and intentions vis-à-vis changing conditions during such journeys. Further consideration should be given to the conditions, dynamics, legal and policy frameworks in transit contexts, host countries and different destination alternatives for a more complete and nuanced understanding of mixed migration. Besides placing greater emphasis on secondary drivers informing onward movement (Crawley et al. 2016), approaching migration journeys as non-linear processes unfolding in, and being shaped by different contexts also requires paying attention to the (changes in) opportunity-constraint structures that facilitate, hinder or alter the pathways of cross-border mobility (e.g., entry-exit regulations, border control measures, availability of and access to migrant smuggling services in restrictive border regimes).

The main focus of this study is therefore on the drivers that inform (changing) patterns of migration from a set of origin countries mainly, but not exclusively, relevant for mixed flows arriving in the EU. In identifying key patterns, the analysis therefore places particular emphasis on irregular arrival trends and asylum applications in the EU in the period between 2009 and 2020. Taking into account the fragmented nature of cross-border movement and dynamically shifting migration decisions *en route*, the analysis begins from the premise that these movements cannot be seen in isolation from the conditions and developments in the wider regions, across which journeys unfold. Therefore,

besides inquiring into migration drivers in the countries of origin, the study also examines the social, economic, political and security conditions in countries that act as transit, destination and host contexts for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Particular attention is paid to how such conditions across different contexts combine and interact in informing migration dynamics.

Indeed, whilst the single chapters depart from one country of origin and view the EU in its role as a point of (last) destination, they conceive of the context in which migration journeys unfold as a broad space of mobility interlinking several origin, transit, destination and host countries in South-Central and Western Asia, the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)<sup>1</sup> and Europe. Beyond geographical proximity, it is also the interlocking of the political, economic, security and (migration) policy landscapes that make these different contexts part of common spaces of mobility.

Beyond structural conditions, policies on and beyond migration play a role in shaping the multiple contexts in which migration journeys are conducted.<sup>2</sup> In particular, EU migration policies have increasingly been oriented towards prevention through a mixture of internal and external measures. Growing

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<sup>1</sup> This terminology diverges from strictly geographical references and some of it carries some colonial ‘baggage’. The term Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is used in order to best represent the expansive region of diverse origin countries on the ‘Atlantic Route’. The authors consulted with regional experts and examined data from a total of 52 countries collectively defined as the LAC region, according to the United Nations Population Division. These countries draw from North, Central and South America and informed our overall analysis of the Atlantic Route; ultimately, the case study countries are selected from Central and South America. Regarding the Horn of Africa and Sahel, these denominations are widely – and formally – accepted, including by African organisations, and denominated areas which cannot be strictly defined as ‘West Africa’ (such as Mali for example). Finally, instead of the widely used term Middle East which reflects a Euro-centric reading of the region, we prefer to use the geographic and thus less politically loaded term Western Asia.

<sup>2</sup> While a lengthy discussion of policy effects on migration dynamics is beyond the scope of this introduction, it should be noted that scholarship has underlined the limited capacity of migration policies to generate their intended effects particularly in terms of ‘the overall volume and long-term trends of migration’, and pointed out ‘substitution effects’ of restrictive policies, e.g., diversion of flows to contexts with less restrictive policies, redirection of migration channels from regular to irregular, expediting or postponing the timing of movement, or discouraging return (de Haas 2011:25–27). The academic literature has instead attributed greater influence to non-migration policies, e.g., in the labour, macro-economic, welfare, foreign, trade or aid realms (Czaika and de Haas 2013: 489).

externalisation of such measures generates a closer interplay with policies developed in origin, transit, destination and host countries. The analysis therefore also seeks to shed light on the implications of EU policies and their ripple effects on migration governance in the contexts connecting Africa, Asia and the Americas to Europe. Across the chapters, attention is paid to how national policies have been developed, changed or enforced (also) as part of migration cooperation with the EU, and how these might have influenced certain migration dynamics in combined – and sometimes unintended – ways. In particular, the aim is to shed further light on the ways in which the interplay between EU and non-EU migration policies influence conditions, alternatives and opportunity-constraint structures for those considering (onward) migration, including in gender- and sexuality-specific ways. While covering the entire set of non-migration policies is beyond the scope of this volume, to the extent possible, consideration is also given to the implications of the wider set of EU foreign, security and development policies – which are increasingly interlinked with EU migration policy objectives – for the contexts making up the space(s) of mobility under consideration.

Starting from the research focus and analytical framework outlined above, this introductory chapter will now briefly explain the rationale of the case selection and the data used in all chapters, before providing an introductory overview of mixed migration dynamics in the wider spaces of mobility connecting the three macro-regions to Europe via five major routes observed in this book.

## 1.1 Case selection and data sources

In order to gain a better grasp of the conditions and policies informing the patterns and trajectories of mixed migration flows relevant both for the EU and from an interregional perspective, this study focuses on three larger spaces of mobility connecting Europe with South-Central and Western Asia via the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR); with the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel via the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and the Western Africa Route (WAR); and with Latin America and the Caribbean via the Atlantic Route (AR).

*Along the EMR*, we have chosen three case studies, namely Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. This is firstly because the movement of Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians – the latter exclusively in the last decade – not only constituted the bulk of mixed flows in the immediate regions where they are situated, but also represented a large share of spontaneous arrivals on the EMR particularly in the second half of the 2010s. Also, while conflict and insecurity feature predominantly in shaping

migration from all three countries, they also present differences in terms of the inflection points of the conflict and the extent to which it has been protracted so as to generate deeply ingrained implications for the overall political and economic context. Beyond origin countries, the main components of this mobility space are as follows: Turkey acts both as a destination and host country, mainly for Syrian refugees but also for Afghans and Iraqis, and as a transit context for westward movement for all groups. Iran has been a major destination hosting a sizable Afghan population and a smaller group of Iraqis, while acting as a transit country for Afghans moving westward. Pakistan is another major host country for Afghan populations, which, to a lesser extent than Iran, also constitutes a crossing point for westward movement. Lebanon is among the major host countries for Syrian refugees, whereas Jordan has been highly relevant for subsequent waves of Iraqi migration, and the relatively more recent Syrian refugee movement. The EU, while receiving a smaller share of mixed flows relative to the countries in the regions, also witnessed increasing arrivals from these origin countries in the past decade, and especially during the large-scale movements that took place in 2015–16.

*Along the CMR, the WMR and the WAR*, this book focuses on Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Some cases, especially Eritrea and Nigeria, represent origin countries from which a large share of migrants and asylum seekers have irregularly entered the EU territory in the last decade mainly via the CMR, while Mali constitutes a relevant origin country for movements shifting between the CMR and the WMR. Most countries also show differences in terms of how structural drivers operate in informing migration, shedding some light on the interaction between socio-economic and political-security factors. For instance, in some cases protracted and/or localised conflict situations or prolonged political repression act in tandem with socioeconomic challenges (e.g., Mali, Nigeria and Eritrea). In others, a combination of social, political and economic drivers sustains EU-bound out-migration (e.g., Morocco and Tunisia). The case studies will also look at how drivers in origin countries interact with social, economic and political developments in transit (e.g., Niger, Algeria, Libya and Morocco) and destination contexts (e.g., Libya, Italy and Spain), and how factors in transit countries can shape secondary movement to the EU independently from the drivers operating in origin countries. Developments in certain countries of transit and destination (such as Niger, Libya, Italy or Spain) could be relevant for more than one origin country among those identified as case studies: this is due to the complex geography and fragmented nature of routes connecting the macro-regions to Europe.

*Along the AR*, the gradual decrease and then increase in immigration and foreign nationals in residence, as well as the continually increasing and recently significant number of asylum seekers in the EU stand out. Moreover, there seems to be a changing demography in terms of gender. These overall patterns are examined in this book in further detail in three case studies: Colombia, Honduras and Venezuela. These cases have been selected because they represent the most important migrant patterns to the EU in the last five years, and are related to the significant growth of international protection applications. As the data and literature reflect that Spain is the leading destination in the EU for Latin American and Caribbean mixed migration, the case of Spain receives particular emphasis.

In terms of the *time frame*, the main focus is on the period between 2009 and 2020, while attention is paid to historically contextualising migration. This time frame has been selected due to the availability of systematic and complete data on spontaneous arrivals and asylum applications in the EU, and as it provides us with multiple observation points before and after the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in Europe. Further, the second half of the decade consequently saw significant developments in terms of EU migration governance, generating effects for the wider political and policy context shaping human mobility. Such policy changes have also taken place beyond the EU, as several countries have had to tackle growing population movements in the last decade.

In order to have a comprehensive perspective on the patterns of mixed migration in the EU over this period, the analyses use publicly available Frontex data on detection of irregular border-crossings on the EMR, CMR, WMR and WAR. Frontex data have been chosen due to their systematic and complete nature when it comes to spontaneous arrivals at all EU external borders in the period under consideration (provided at monthly frequency, broken down into nationalities in the majority of cases). Yet, as is the case with all apprehension figures, which can act only as considerably reliable approximations for irregular migration (Triandafyllidou 2010), Frontex data can only serve as an estimate of the actual volume of mixed flows reaching the EU. Moreover, Frontex data reflect the number of what the Agency refers to as ‘detections of “illegal” border-crossings’<sup>3</sup>: as the same person may be apprehended multiple times while crossing the border, the figures are thus likely to reflect a number higher

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<sup>3</sup> While ‘illegal’ is the term used by Frontex and will therefore be used throughout the book when making direct references to Frontex data sources (and other secondary sources) using this term, we do not endorse the use of the notion of illegality when referring to unauthorised border-crossings or stays. When referring to the crossing of international borders, entry or stay in the territory of a state other than one’s country

than that of actual persons who were apprehended while crossing the border.<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that some nationalities go unnoticed, as they are lumped in the unknown/unspecified category, such as the Palestine refugees from Syria in secondary displacement on the EMR. On the CMR/WMR/WAR, Frontex data signal a large number of persons detected at the external border with unspecified Sub-Saharan nationality. Besides apprehension data, annually aggregated data on asylum applications (at the EU and member state level) provided by Eurostat are used in order to complement the analysis with a focus on asylum-related patterns.

On the AR, migration takes place via air travel. Thus, attempting to determine irregular migration is difficult, as at the time of entry into the EU many migrants have at least temporary legal documentation for what may ultimately end up being a longer and irregular stay. Thus, on this route, alongside a qualitative literature review, data from Eurostat, Spain's National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, INE) and the United Nations Population Division are triangulated. In looking at Eurostat trends, a limitation includes that the nationalisation procedures established with origin countries (e.g., bilateral agreements between Spain and several LAC states allowing migrants residing in Spain to naturalise in as little as two years) can affect immigration statistics. Eurostat data and indicators (immigration and asylum applications) therefore must be qualified to an extent.

The analyses focusing on the AR also utilise statistics on Spanish municipal registrations of Colombian, Honduran and Venezuelan nationals (municipal registers are annually updated by the INE). One of the drawbacks of this data is that foreign nationals who have not renewed their registration are automatically removed from the register every two years (Oliveau et al. 2019). The aforementioned 'expedited' pathways to nationalisation mean that after acquiring Spanish nationality these individuals are no longer accounted for in the numbers on registered foreign nationals (*ibid.*), which makes it necessary to work with data on place of birth rather than nationality.

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of citizenship, the terms 'irregular', 'unauthorised' and 'undocumented' are used in this book instead.

<sup>4</sup> Frontex data do not specify whether the persons apprehended while irregularly crossing the EU borders had international protection in a third country or whether they lodged an asylum application after entry into EU territory. Yet, given the mixed nature of the flows, these figures include border crossings by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

Finally, with regard to data on most population movements examined in this book, there is a ‘need for socially disaggregated data (gender, age, marital status and nationality) that help us to better understand the changing flows and trajectories and the implications for policies concerning transit, reception and relocation’, as argued by Kofman (2019: 2186). While Eurostat asylum application statistics are sex-disaggregated (and are analysed in this volume), no such breakdown is provided by Frontex data on irregular crossings. The scattered and non-systematic nature of disaggregated data has been a major shortcoming in particular with regard to arrivals in Europe, as underlined by Shreeves (2016: 4): ‘Data collection on arrivals is problematic and disaggregated figures for all land and sea arrivals are unavailable’ (see also Fry 2016). Beyond limited sex-disaggregated data, accessing systematically collected quantitative data on (the experiences of) migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who are single men/women, self-identifying as LGBTQI+, of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, travelling with/without children, or on male/female (accompanied and unaccompanied) children on the move is even a bigger challenge.<sup>5</sup> The contributions in this volume will therefore seek to provide qualitative data and analyses accounting for such social differences and to reflect on the ‘gendered experiences of mobility’ (Kofman 2019: 2188), to the extent possible.

## 1.2 The Eastern Mediterranean Route

While in maps dotted with arrows the EMR is often depicted as starting from South-Central and Western Asia and directly connecting to the eastern borders of the EU, it represents merely the last crossing point of a larger and diversified space of mobility. Before uniting in this culmination point, journeys often follow splintered, non-linear directions. Nevertheless, movement from Afghanistan typically follows passes through Iran (sometimes after a detour via Pakistan) and Turkey, while unauthorised movement from Iraq and Syria to Turkey mainly takes place at the respective land borders. Most spontaneous arrivals in the EU are recorded at the borders of Greece, and to a lesser extent, those of Bulgaria and Cyprus. Border control measures, mobility restrictions and the limitation of legal channels typically augment the need to use facilitation services at different stages (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012; Fargues 2017). Episodes of route (re)diversion between the sea and the land borders separating Greece from

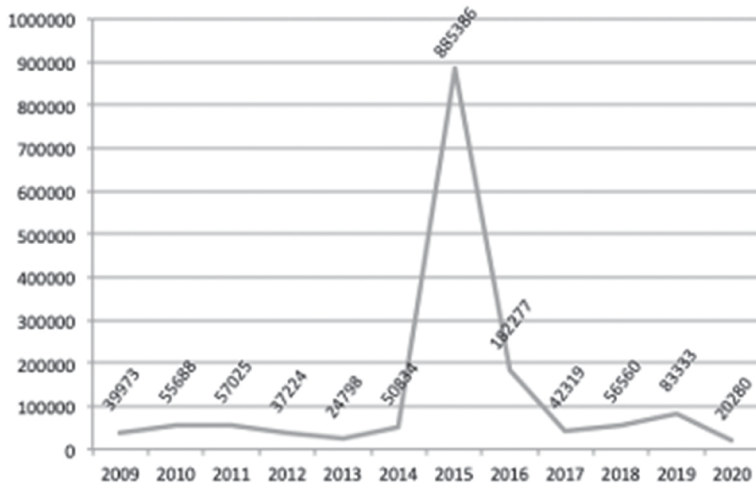
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<sup>5</sup> For further information, see Migration Data Portal: *Gender and Migration*, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration>.



Turkey in the past decade manifest ‘substitution effects’ of restrictive migration policies (de Haas 2011: 25–27), which typically lead migrants and smugglers to seek adaptation strategies, rather than halting mobility (Karaçay 2017).

Informed both by the diversion of some of the movement from Africa mainly towards the EMR due to reinforced border controls by Italy and Spain and an increase in mixed flows from different regions in Asia, irregular crossings at the EMR increased in the 2000s (Fargues and Bonfanti 2014). In the period between 1995 and 2009, journeys reaching the EMR via Turkey were mainly undertaken by Iraqis, Pakistanis, Iranians, Afghans and Palestinians (İçduygu 2011: 5). In the 2010s, Bangladesh and North African countries (e.g., Morocco and Algeria) also ranked among the top origin countries for this route, while migrants and asylum seekers from East Africa (Somalia and Eritrea in particular) had been increasingly using the EMR in the early 2010s.<sup>6</sup> The aftermath of the Syrian war changed the picture both in terms of the overall volumes (see Figure 1.1) and, to a certain extent, also the composition of irregular arrivals in the observed period, with Syrians ranking as the first nationality since 2013 with the exception of 2019, when Afghanistan topped the list.



**Figure 1.1:** Irregular border-crossings on the EMR (land and sea total), 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex (2021) statistics.

<sup>6</sup> Based on authors’ analysis of Frontex (2021) statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’.

The so-called ‘migration crisis’ was largely baptised as such following the 2015 peak on the EMR, composed mainly by the movement of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis – and others who were either on the move or considering migration, and whose movement was arguably facilitated by the temporary opening of a transit corridor between the EMR, the Western Balkans and the EU countries to the west and north, which was likely to be influenced by the large-scale Syrian refugee movement (see Fargues 2017: 11). While gender-disaggregated data is scarce when it comes to arrivals, there has been an initial increase followed by a drop in the share of female asylum seekers and children during the large-scale movements in 2015–16, as demonstrated by Kofman (2019: 2189): from the summer of 2015 on and particularly in the autumn of 2015, the share of women and children arriving in Greece (predominantly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq) significantly increased. With the entry into force of the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the gender balance tilted back to favour men, with their share increasing from 38 per cent in February to 47 per cent in April, and 63 per cent in June 2016 (*ibid.*). The relative decrease in the number of women and children is considered to be caused by the fact that the crossing became more difficult and dangerous after the EU-Turkey Statement (*ibid.*).

On the EMR, the three origin countries observed in this book – Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – are all marked by conflict. This choice comes at the expense of taking into account other contexts in which no active conflict is present, but where migration represents a coping strategy in the face of political repression, violation of human rights, lack of rule of law, wide economic inequalities, and inability to access decent jobs and livelihoods. This situation is typically also a result of colonial/imperial history, geopolitical rivalries, ongoing foreign intervention and low-level conflict or slow violence. Some such cases in the macro-region under consideration include Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey and further away Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Furthermore, the mixed flows received by the EU in this period are largely overshadowed by the scope of the population movements in the regions in which the main countries of origin are situated. Despite the overall reduction in the volume of mixed flows reaching the EU in the second half of the 2010s partially as a result of the policy measures elevating the hurdles to mobility at and beyond the EMR, many migrants and asylum seekers continued moving towards (and between) countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran and Pakistan. For example, Turkey has witnessed growing irregular arrivals since 2016, particularly of Afghan nationals, with record highs in the number of apprehended irregular migrants in 2018 and 2019 (see Okyay

in this book). Turkey has also been receiving an increasing number of Iranian migrants moving regularly (e.g., through buying property) particularly since the financial and economic crisis in Iran following the US sanctions in 2018 (Ziabari 2021). At the same time, in the aftermath of the 2016 attempted coup and in a context of democratic backsliding, in the period between 2017 and 2020 Turkey also ranked among the top five countries from which irregular crossings on the EMR originated.<sup>7</sup>

In short, human mobility in this large mobility space is more complex and diverse than the movement of the three main nationalities this book focuses on. Beyond arrivals in Europe, mixed flows, often driven by intertwined reasons – but essentially marked by human insecurity in the wider sense of the term – continue to unfold following various trajectories, albeit receiving relatively less scholarly and policy attention in the EU. Yet, further bordering work and preventive policies largely dominate the current landscape, while legal and safe mobility options to the EU or other destinations in the macro-region remain limited. This is against a background of sustained, if not augmented, political, security and economic challenges in many origin, transit and host countries in the wider region. This picture is likely to have implications for the mixed migration journeys on the EMR and the regions connected to it, as well as for the risks and precarity involved for the persons undertaking them.

### 1.3 The Central Mediterranean Route

The Central Mediterranean Route is conventionally described as one of the major corridors chosen by irregular migrants headed towards Europe from multiple areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel. The route transits through Libya or Tunisia and finally reaches Malta and Italy, after crossing the Mediterranean Sea. While usually framed as a linear trajectory, the CMR should be better understood as part of composite migratory trails converging at certain transit points on the Mediterranean coast of Africa. Moreover, flows reaching the CMR are closely linked to complex migratory dynamics at the regional level.

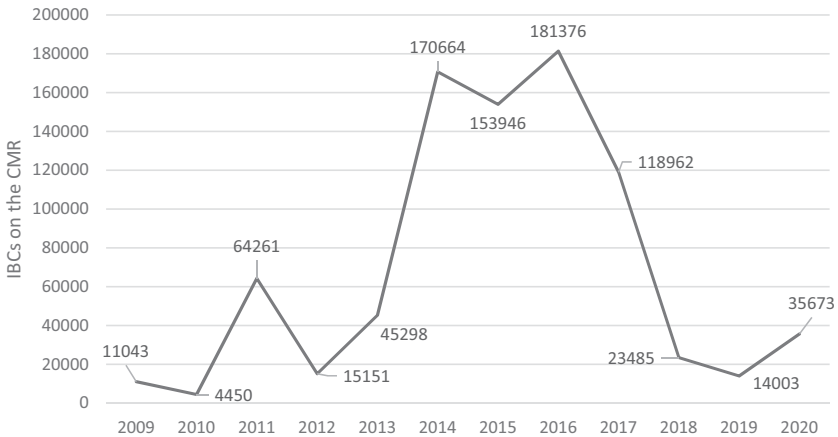
The CMR has not always been the key corridor for irregular migrants to arrive in Italy, as its development into a ‘route’ is relatively recent and mainly coincides with the period analysed in this book. Over the last decade, the CMR

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<sup>7</sup> Based on authors’ analysis of Frontex (2021) statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’.

decisively took centre-stage in European policy-making due to the sudden and significant increase in irregular arrivals. During this period, the passage of the Mediterranean Sea has been labelled as the ‘deadliest’ journey in the world (UN News 2017), underlining the deadly risks faced by migrants not only on the sea trail to Europe, but also on the previous corridors crossing the Sahara Desert.

At first Italy showed some resolve in tackling the humanitarian costs of the CMR, for instance by deploying the naval mission Mare Nostrum in 2013. Yet, the agenda of many European governments and institutions has then further shifted towards the priority of stemming irregular arrivals, especially as movement along the CMR intensified over the years.



**Figure 1.2:** Irregular border-crossings (IBCs) on the CMR, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex (2021) statistics.

The most prominent national groups heading towards Italy along the CMR in 2009–20 have been by far Eritreans (119,128 arrivals, 14.21 per cent of the total) and Nigerians (99,056 arrivals, 11.82 per cent), followed by Tunisians (64,390 arrivals, 7.68 per cent). Although conventional wisdom has depicted the CMR as a linear trajectory from African countries to destinations in Europe, large numbers of non-African migrants have also used this route: for instance, Syrians have ranked fourth among the national groups on the CMR in the observed period (63,651 arrivals, 7.59 per cent). Another relevant non-African flow originates in Bangladesh. The rest of the nationalities ranking in the top ten in the past

decade come from the African continent (Somalia, Mali, Gambia, Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire).<sup>8</sup>

The functioning of the CMR – and of the various legs composing it – also presents a gendered dimension: gender can have significant consequences for the experience of migrants from many African countries, as migrant women report a high vulnerability to abuse in countries of origin, transit and destination (IOD PARC 2018). Gendered effects are also reflected in the higher travel costs faced by women compared to men: it has been estimated that on average migrant women pay 31 per cent more than men on the same trajectory, which makes gender a 'statistically significant determinant of the cost of the journey' (UNDP Africa 2019: 42).

Available datasets from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the time frame of our analysis indicate that the proportion of male migrants arriving by sea in Italy along the CMR has consistently remained above 70 per cent since 2016, when the flow was at its peak. Women's relative share among registered migrants arriving in Italy across the Mediterranean Sea reached the highest point in 2016 with 13 per cent (UNHCR 2016). Children have also been travelling along this dangerous route – 20 per cent of the total flow in 2019, the most significant proportion over the last few years (UNHCR 2019).

While over the last decade the CMR's visibility has grown for European observers, it should be noted that EU-bound movements on the trails composing the CMR are just a component of much larger and complex spaces of mobility unfolding in regions like West Africa, the Sahel or the Horn of Africa. Moreover, despite the widespread focus dedicated by politics and media to Europe as the supposed ultimate destination of African asylum seekers and refugees, many states sitting in the geographies connected to the CMR, such as the Sahel or Eastern Africa, host a significant share of displaced people from neighbouring countries.

Furthermore, it must be emphasised that recent EU policy measures aiming at enhancing cooperation on migration management with countries of origin and transit along the different legs of the CMR follow a decades-long history of European engagement with the African continent, which is rooted in the colonial past of many EU member states. While it is not possible here to detail the political, economic and social consequences of European actions in several African countries, two general aspects need to be emphasised to better contextualise the analysis on drivers. First, the structural factors influencing migration

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<sup>8</sup> Based on authors' analysis of Frontex (2021) statistics.

decisions have been impacted to varying degrees by the policy initiatives of European actors over decades in multiple fields (trade, investment, development, peace and security, etc.). Second, the deepening cooperation on migration management between the EU and a number of African countries is grafted onto an established – and often imbalanced – relationship, which still provides the EU with many policy tools to leverage its position on migration vis-à-vis its African partners.

#### 1.4 The Western Mediterranean Route

The WMR refers to the corridor that migrants choose in entering Europe via travel from North Africa into Spain, either via the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco's Tangier to Spain's Tarifa, or crossing the Moroccan land border into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. The WMR inherits a history of broader mobility between North Africa and Europe related to colonial ties, geographical proximity and political, economic and social conditions; between the 1960s and 1990s, this mobility was even viewed favourably as mutually beneficial for both regions (Lahlou 2018).

In the period between 2009 and 2020, apart from nationals of Morocco and Algeria, Sub-Saharan countries of origin that regularly rank in the top ten nationalities engaging in irregular border-crossings on the WMR include Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Gambia.<sup>9</sup> Out of these nationalities, some periodically fall out of the top ten (Cameroon in 2019 and 2020, Nigeria in 2012 and 2013, Burkina Faso in 2011–13 and Gambia in 2013, 2014 and 2020).<sup>10</sup>

In the past few decades, the volume and pathways of movement on the WMR have varied in tandem with shifting migratory patterns and governance dynamics, and the route has become popular with migrants from increasingly diverse origin countries. In terms of North Africa, interregional relations, including political disputes between Morocco and Algeria, often translate to fragmented migration management. Within West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States underpins interregional cooperation and migration regulation to some extent, with most countries in the region working on their own migration policy (Devillard et al. 2015).

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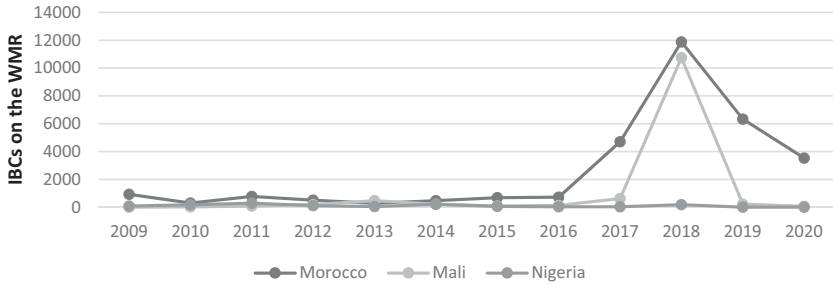
<sup>9</sup> Based on authors' analysis of Frontex (2021) statistics.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Spanish and EU border control initiatives including securitisation and externalisation policies, as well as international political and humanitarian interventions, can affect all stages of the journeys along the route. The EU and its member states have employed militarisation and deportation at land and sea borders as forms of migration control on the WMR (Topak and Vives 2020). Apart from these measures attempting to manage irregular migration from Africa, in a post-9/11 context mobility from the geographies under consideration can also be conflated with Islam and terrorism (Lahlou 2018). Such securitisation discourses, often gendered, may not only be applied to frame the flows coming from North Africa to Europe, but can also shape North African perceptions of Sub-Saharan migration (Natter 2014).

At the same time, EU migration policies have increasingly targeted origin and transit countries sitting along the trails culminating in the WMR, engaging in partnerships with Sub-Saharan countries pivotal to the route like Mali (currently engaged in 2020–4 joint programming), and offering these countries funding and resources for migration management (Andersson and Keen 2019). Simultaneously, the United Nations and other international actors, also with security and development agendas, engage in missions and programmes in West Africa. All of these measures, besides informing the WMR flows, generate effects on informal economies revolving around transit migration in cities acting as mobility hubs in West Africa, while having repercussions in terms of political and societal conflict (Moretti 2020).

In the ten-year time frame under examination, these international actors have become especially attentive to the WMR, particularly with reference to a peak in flows in 2018. In parallel with this overall trend, the route registers similar patterns of crossings of nationals of the case countries examined in this book, as illustrated in Figure 1.3 below. The number of border crossings in the case countries on the WMR more than doubles in 2017, and doubles yet again to reach a drastic peak in the year 2018. While crossings decrease from 2018 until 2020, the volume remains much greater than in the years 2009–16. In parallel with this overall trend, the route registers similar patterns of crossings of nationals of the case countries examined in this book, as illustrated in the figure. The factors behind and implications of these trends are further examined at the country level in the following chapters.



**Figure 1.3:** Irregular border-crossings (IBCs) by sea and land on the WMR by case studies, 2009–2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex (2021) statistics.

Journeys on the WMR typically start in Sub-Saharan origin countries before proceeding to the desert path, and then reaching North Africa and the Mediterranean. The International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix particularly highlights Gao in Mali and Agadez in Niger as two transit places on the WMR (Bensaâd 2003). The paths from these two cities usually meet in Tamanrasset, Algeria, before proceeding on through other Algerian cities and entering Morocco. Meanwhile, Senegalese traditionally transit through Mauritania on their way to Morocco (*ibid.*). Again, it should be highlighted that these trails remain in constant flux.

It should also be qualified that travel along the WMR does not necessarily entail a final destination in Europe, with interregional mobilities characteristic of livelihoods in areas of origin and transit. The WMR overlaps with interregional migration characteristics of Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly West Africa, with movements related to negotiating limited economic opportunities, poverty, subsistence and harsh environments, as well as aspirations, among other factors. Indeed, with regional mobility patterns motivated by informal work in seasonal mining, the socioeconomic ecosystem of the region is heavily intertwined with the business of migration (Bolay 2021).

Besides the desert journey, the sea journey can also be dangerous. Apart from the sea passage, crossings into Ceuta and Melilla often attract political, media or humanitarian attention, particularly in Spain, as sometimes several hundred migrants have attempted to cross the six-metre barbed wire densely equipped with surveillance technology and manned by police patrols (Idemudia and Boehnke 2020). In 2018, the Spanish government announced it would remove the humanitarian-condemned barbed wire in selected areas, opting for a higher



fence instead, though this remains to be materialised (Europa Press 2018). Migrants also attempt a dangerous and deadly method, swimming to these enclaves.

As a final key consideration, on the WMR, it is estimated that at all stages of the journey from Africa to Europe, most migrants rely on smuggling organisations or are subject to trafficking, which takes different forms as kidnapping, extortion, forced labour, slavery, sexual exploitation, organ trafficking and detention (Malakooti 2020; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012; Lahlou 2018). While there are intermittent efforts to curb these practices, they seem to be on the rise, and are perpetrated by smuggling organisations linked to different local criminal groups, which may also collaborate with state authorities or European criminal organisations (Ventrella 2017).

## 1.5 The Western African Route

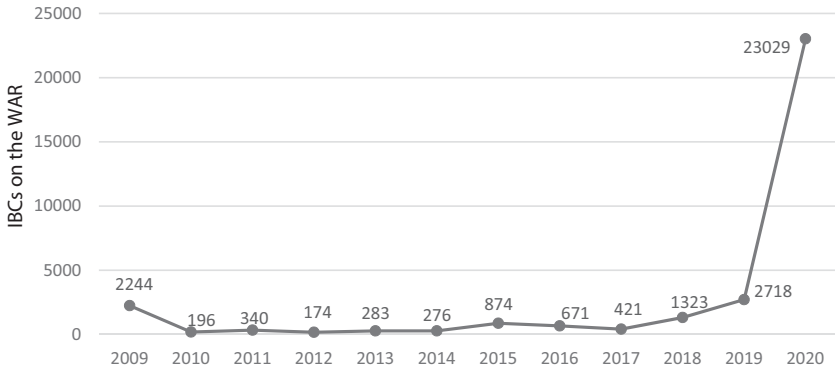
More recently, the WAR has served as an alternative to the WMR traditionally utilised by migrants from North, West and Central Africa. This route includes a multitude of departure points on the West Coast of Africa, Morocco, the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal and sometimes Gambia. Some of these points are more than 1,500 km away from the ultimate destination of the Canary Islands, Spain. The journeys can vary from one or two days if travelling from Tarfaya in southern Morocco, to eleven or twelve days from Senegal, depending on conditions (Monreal Gainza and Paredes 2021). Regardless, the journey is also risky and dangerous, often conducted in small fishing boats. The route's profile is predominantly male, although recent trends indicate a possibly diversifying profile (*ibid.*).

It goes without saying that movement on this route is less intense than on the WMR, although it has been experiencing a substantial increase in crossings from 2018 forward. The top ten countries of origin for migrants tracked by Frontex as irregularly crossing the border on this route from 2009 to 2020 consistently include Morocco, Senegal with the exception of the year 2016 (where strikingly there was only one Senegalese migrant recorded) and Mali with the exception of 2016 (with no record of Malians) and 2017 (only one Malian being recorded). Gambia and Guinea often rank in the top ten as well, while occasionally falling out of the list.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Based on authors' analysis of Frontex (2021) statistics.

Most notably, in looking at recent trends, the final months of 2020 saw a significant and exponential rise in migratory flows to the Canary Islands (see Figure 1.4), most likely linked to border closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The exceptional year of the pandemic has also witnessed further diversification of nationalities on the WAR. It should be noted, however, that even such growth in volume may not reflect the actual number of those who set out on the journey in the first place.



**Figure 1.4:** Irregular border-crossings (IBCs) on the WAR, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex (2021) statistics.

### 1.6 The Atlantic Route

From the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been a slight acceleration of migratory movements from LAC countries<sup>12</sup> to Europe. The addition of these new arrivals to migrants remaining in Europe despite the 2008 crisis implies that sizeable populations from the LAC countries reside in Europe. The vast majority is concentrated in Southern Europe with almost 59 per cent living in Spain in 2020, where they either remain or proceed on to settle elsewhere thanks to established networks throughout Europe. Italy hosts 14 per cent of all LAC nationals, followed by France with almost 7 per cent and the Netherlands and Germany with 5.8 and 5.3 per cent, respectively. Despite mobility restrictions

<sup>12</sup> The LAC region referred to here is defined according to UN Population Division (2020) to include a total of 52 countries.

in the pandemic context LAC migration experienced only a slight decrease in 2020, as people continue to search for better living conditions.

In general terms, growing migration towards Europe can be characterised by a young and feminised demographic profile, with many of these immigrants working in low-skill occupations, being overqualified or underemployed in European destination countries. The diversity of migration from LAC countries tends to be diluted in terms of socioeconomic background as a consequence of the limits of the labour insertion, networks and opportunities provided by European destination countries. At the same time, socioeconomic mobility can be facilitated by social networks' aid in social and cultural reproduction, rights claims, employment opportunities and maintaining relationships with origin countries (Yépez and Herrera 2007). Despite the importance of this migration to Europe, it should be noted that of the 43 million LAC nationals who have migrated globally, almost 60 per cent (25.5 million) reside in North America whereas 26.3 per cent of LAC migrants (11.3 million) are located in another LAC country, and only 11.2 per cent have settled in EU member states (UN Population Division 2020).

The AR, both historically and currently, reflects a diverse history between the LAC region and Europe (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Avila-Tàpies 2019). While also clearly tied to international markets and labour dynamics, migration from LAC countries to Europe, and backwards, is highly characterised by 'transgenerational' migration, understood as the migration of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of emigrants who moved in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. From the late nineteenth century until World War II, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese emigration to the region was prevalent (Yépez and Herrera 2007). Overall, historical migration patterns reflect colonial ties and networks, and consequent varying dynamics of immigration and emigration, between the LAC region and Europe.

From 1990 onwards, larger economic migration came first from Peru, Dominican Republic and Cuba to Italy and Spain, and later included Dominicans, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Colombians and Bolivians who often settled in Italy, Spain and Portugal (Yépez and Herrera 2007). Financial crises in 1999 in Ecuador and 2001 in Argentina spurred greater migration, followed by more arrivals from Colombia given the economic situation, displacement and violence (Martínez and Golias 2005); in fact, in the period examined in this study, there has been a gradual increase in international protection applications. From the destination context perspective, particularly labour migration patterns can be explained by significant demand for migrant workers in care work and construction in Spain, while it could also be attributed to potentially attractive conditions

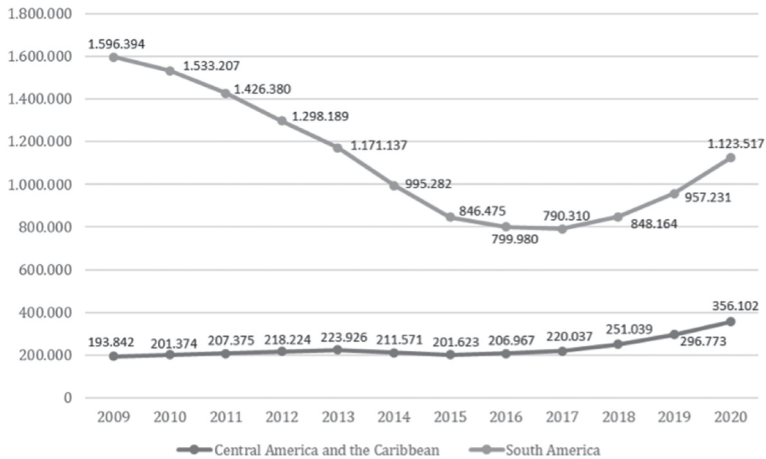
in Spain, including the absence of entry visa requirements, common language or culture, or previous social ties.

This modern labour migration has often been characterised by feminisation, and particularly the Spanish case is described as a family-orientated welfare state with a societal preference for Latin American care workers, based on common language among other factors (Sassen 1998; Martínez and Golias 2005). The recession following the 2008 financial crisis in Spain was thus of significant importance for feminised migration patterns, in that migrant domestic workers faced increased competition and stratification among domestic workers (Hellgren and Serrano 2019). In the past decades, family reunification is affecting the demographics, which currently reflect higher percentages of male migrants.

The financial crisis, unprecedentedly affecting migrant employment in Europe, led to changes in the demographic profile of LAC migrants. However, legal uncertainty and similarly worsening economic situations in various LAC countries, as well as an increasingly restrictive immigration policy in the United States, have also implied continued LAC emigration to Europe. Moreover, the literature notes that migration from LAC to Europe (and specifically Spain) does not represent a simplistic labour or economic dynamic, but is rooted in historical ties in combination with globalisation or transnational networks that facilitate multiple identity and belonging (Pérez-Caramés et al. 2019).

Despite the difficulties of obtaining reliable data to analyse recent trends along the AR, UN data on LAC nationals in EU member states is useful in shedding some light on the trends in the past decade: LAC migrants residing in the EU-27 first fell from 4,080,277 in 2010 to 3,932,524 in 2015, rising again to a total of 4,793,959 in 2020, with migration to Spain making up 58.81 per cent of all migration to the EU that year. The gender breakdown included 41.7 per cent male and 58.3 per cent female migrants.

Focusing on Spain, as the prominent case in illustrating these patterns, the Spanish INE provides information on LAC nationals residing in the country. In Figure 1.5 below, the number of South American nationals gradually decreases over the decade until 2017, when the number of registrations rise again. As for Central America and the Caribbean, the numbers rise until 2013, then decrease until 2015, to steadily increase from that point on. As observed in the literature, these patterns are likely to be related to decreasing immigration as a result of the Spanish 2008 recession and the ensuing crisis, growing return migration, and increasing naturalisation of LAC nationals in Spain. The latter factor is facilitated by a fast-track process for residents and the Historical Memory law entitling those with Spanish grandparents to acquire citizenship with relative ease (Bayona-i-Carrasco et al. 2017).



**Figure 1.5:** Foreign population from LAC residing in Spain, 2009–2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on INE data.

Turning from immigration to asylum applications, the numbers reflect a gradually rising trend in the analysed time frame.<sup>13</sup> In terms of destination countries, when looking at the averages between the years 2010, 2015 and 2020, member states receiving the largest LAC applications (in order) are: Spain, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany Sweden and the Netherlands. In 2020, applications from the LAC states made up 19.29 per cent of all asylum applications to the EU (91,020 out of 471,900) with a 50–50 breakdown of male and female among those applications recording gender. These numbers reflect a substantial increase from the earlier benchmarks, with a total of 4,240 and 7,295 asylum applications from LAC states in 2010 and 2015 respectively.

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<sup>13</sup> Authors' analysis based on Eurostat (2021) data.

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Asli Selin Okyay

## Chapter 2 Fragmented Afghan journeys towards Europe: Caught between insecure lives, precarious livelihoods and restrictive policies

**Abstract:** While migration is deeply ingrained in Afghan history, population movements have occurred in a context of conflict and political turmoil since 1978. While Iran and Pakistan have been the main recipient and host countries, westward movement has relatively intensified over the past two decades, leading to a diversification of destinations including Europe and Turkey. Afghan movement in this space has been characterised by fragmented journeys involving border-crossings and stays in several countries that might changeably act as destination, host and transit contexts. Afghan mobility in the past decade was thus informed not only by the drivers in Afghanistan, but also by the conditions and migration and asylum policies in these contexts. In Afghanistan, protracted conflict, fragile security and political transition, and dwindling socioeconomic development combined in generating direct threats to life, insecure livelihoods and overall uncertainty, underlining the multidimensional nature and intertwined operation of drivers. Legal precarity, irregularisation and poor livelihoods have characterised most Afghans' experience in Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, informed both by the policy context and by macro-economic challenges in these countries. In all destination/host contexts including the EU, Afghan refugees and migrants have encountered an increasingly restrictive policy landscape oriented toward minimising new arrivals and preventing long-term residence through mobility control, limiting access to asylum and a sharp focus on returns. Beyond informing the patterns and directions of movement, the combined operation of these conditions and policies has generated significant implications for Afghan refugees' and migrants' living conditions and access to rights, including to protection.

**Keywords:** Afghan refugees and migrants | fragmented journeys | multidimensional drivers | transit mobility | restrictive policies

Afghanistan is a landlocked country interfacing South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. While migration from Afghanistan has significantly grown in volume and been linked to conflict and political instability since 1978, human mobility is a deeply embedded feature of Afghan history. Such mobility, mediated by transnational networks, has typically been circular and cyclical in nature, while these 'multidirectional, cross-border movements' in turn nurture

transnational networks and practices, constituting a key livelihood strategy for both those who move and those who stay put (Monsutti 2006: 7).

Geopolitical complexities, contentious domestic political dynamics and macro-economic challenges have significantly shaped the wider context informing migration and displacement. Owing to its location, domestic politics in Afghanistan have been inextricably linked with regional geopolitics of South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, where great power involvement – including foreign interventions – interlock with regional dynamics (Strand et al. 2017). The governance of ethnic diversity and social differences has been a major domestic challenge, also having a bearing on conflict dynamics. While the country is composed of several ethnic groups, it is widely assumed that Pashtuns constitute the largest group, followed by Tajiks and Hazaras (*ibid.*). Despite such diversity, political power has traditionally rested with the Pashtuns, making inclusiveness, representation and power-sharing contentious issues. The rural-urban divide, the secular-religious cleavage and the division between the local and the central, which interlock with ethno-religious fault lines, also act as sources of tension (International Crisis Group 2011). At the same time, ethnic, religious and kinship ties linking, for instance, Pashtun communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or the Hazara to Iran, inform transnational social and political dynamics, including cross-border human mobility. Protracted conflict has had a heavy toll on social and economic development in Afghanistan. The economy has remained largely based on low-productivity agriculture, while high aid dependence and a burgeoning illicit sector aggravated economic fragility (World Bank 2021). Creating livelihoods has been a major challenge, exacerbated by a fast-growing population and a young age structure.

In the past decade, protracted conflict, a frustrated security and political transition process, and dwindling socioeconomic development, alongside droughts and absorption and reintegration challenges in the face of large-scale returns have set the macro-context, generating adverse effects on physical security, livelihoods, fundamental human rights and access to essential services, feeding into overall insecurity and uncertainty, and driving migration from Afghanistan. Migration drivers deriving from such macro-context should thus be seen as multidimensional, combining in complex ways when translating into individual decisions. Such complexity defies neat categorisations of Afghan mobility as one of either voluntary or forced migration (Monsutti 2006).

Afghan migration has been predominantly regional, with Iran and Pakistan being the main host countries. Albeit much smaller in scope, from the 1990s onwards the European Union also received a growing number of Afghan asylum-seekers and migrants, with the large majority irregularly arriving in Greece via

the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR). Arrivals and asylum applications in the EU increased from the late 2000s on, peaking during the large-scale movements in 2015–16, and subsiding significantly afterwards. Turkey acted as a hub for Afghan transit movement to Europe until the 2010s, while in the past decade it has also become a country of destination and residence for a larger number of Afghans. Afghan movement in this space has been characterised by ‘fragmented journeys’ (Collyer 2010) that involve multiple border-crossings and stays of differing length in several countries and are shaped by ‘separate or serial migration decisions’ (Crawley et al. 2016: 42). The dynamics of Afghan mobility in the past decade were therefore informed not only by the drivers in Afghanistan, but also by the conditions and migration and asylum policies in these destination/host/transit contexts in which journeys unfold. This chapter examines the combined operation of these conditions and policies in informing the patterns of Afghan movement in the region and towards Europe.

## 2.1 Putting Afghan mobility in historical context

Migration has long linked Afghanistan with Pakistan and Iran. Social ties, nomadic practices and commercial networks informed human mobility between Afghanistan and British India (Kronenfeld 2008). Seasonal migration of Pashtun communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been a constant mobility pattern linking the two countries. While circular economic migration to Iran dates back to the nineteenth century, the 1970s witnessed a remarkable increase in temporary labour migration to Iran, which was informed both by the effects of the drought in Afghanistan on livelihoods and the oil-led construction boom in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook 2006).

The 1978 coup by the Marxist People’s Democratic Party followed by the Soviet invasion in 1979 kicked off an era marked by conflict and political crises that radically changed the volume and the patterns of migration. Informed by several turning points in the political and security landscape in Afghanistan and refugee policies of Iran and Pakistan, several episodes of displacement and return migration took place from the late 1970s to the 2010s. In the first phase from 1979 until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, armed conflict between the Soviet-backed communist regime and the *mujahideen* fighters backed by the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia displaced 3.3 million Afghans to Pakistan and another 3 million to Iran (Turton and Marsden 2002). Informed both by geopolitical interests and by cultural and religious affinity, both Iran and Pakistan initially adopted liberal admission and protection regimes.

Key turning points in the next phase were the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the 1992 *mujahideen* victory against the communist regime and the evolution of factional fighting among *mujahideen* groups into a civil war. Following the fall of the communist regime, displacement – mainly of those affiliated with the regime – and return migration from Iran and Pakistan took place simultaneously. The civil war led to a new wave of displacement, mainly of urban middle classes (Monsutti 2006). The end of the civil war in 1996 marked the beginning of the Taliban rule. In this period, the population not only suffered the repressive regime (affecting particularly women and minorities) and the fighting between the Taliban and armed resistance, but also the lack of essential services and livelihoods (International Crisis Group 2011). The 1998 drought additionally hit livelihoods. Internal and international displacement consequently continued.

The 1990s also saw a crucial turn in the international community's and the host countries' attitude towards Afghan refugees. As the issue was geopolitically downgraded in the post-Cold War context, international humanitarian aid was downsized from the mid-1990s onwards. 'Asylum fatigue' set in in Iran and Pakistan in the face of mounting domestic economic and political pressure (Ashrafi and Moghissi 2002). By the end of the 1990s, both countries stopped granting refugee status on a *prima facie* basis to newly arriving Afghan nationals (Turton and Marsden 2002). Despite growing restrictions, the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran was estimated at 2 million (Kronenfeld 2008) and 1.3 million (Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook 2006) respectively at the beginning of the 2000s.

The US-led invasion and the Taliban's fall in 2001 marked another turning point. The fighting between the US-led coalition forces and the Taliban initially led to displacement. As expectations for peace and reconstruction grew following the formation of the interim administration, the deployment of the International Assistance Security Force and the inflow of massive international aid, outmigration slowed down and the pace of returns increased. Returns also gained pace, given that Iran, Pakistan, the interim administration and the international community prioritised large-scale repatriation. As a result, an estimated 3.5 million refugees returned from Pakistan (2.7 million) and Iran (800,000) between 2002 and 2005 (Monsutti 2006: 6). Re-migration to Iran and Pakistan and circular cross-border mobility nonetheless continued in this period, owing to reintegration difficulties encountered by returnees, and enduring socioeconomic discrepancies between Afghanistan and its neighbours.

Security deteriorated in the second half of the 2000s. Generalised violence escalated due to the Taliban attacks as well as indiscriminate bombing by the US-led coalition forces. Iran and Pakistan nonetheless sustained their focus on

repatriating refugees and restricting newcomers' access to asylum. Consequently, returns to Afghanistan took place simultaneously with re-migration of returnees and new arrivals to Iran and Pakistan. Despite continued inflow, due to the barriers newcomers faced in accessing asylum, the number of registered refugees decreased, while the undocumented migrant population grew in both countries. By the early 2010s there were 1 million registered refugees in Iran and 1.9 million in Pakistan (IOM 2014: 98–9), in addition to the 1.5 million undocumented Afghan migrants in Iran (Human Rights Watch 2013: 18), and another 1 million in Pakistan (Cibea et al. 2013: 35).

Although to a much smaller degree, countries and regions beyond Iran and Pakistan also received an increasing number of Afghan refugees in the post-1978 era. Afghan migration to Europe, the US, Canada and Australia before this period was limited to the movement of small groups of students and business people (IOM 2014). In Europe, Afghan asylum applications – lodged in the EU and European Free Trade Association countries – increased in the 1990s, peaking at over 50,000 in 2001 (Cibea et al. 2013: 33). Following a notable drop until the mid-2000s, Afghan asylum claims in these countries then started to rise again, peaking at around 23,000 in 2009 (*ibid.*). The large majority of Afghan migrants and asylum-seekers the EU received in the late 2000s arrived irregularly in Greece via the EMR, after long and risky journeys through Iran and Turkey (Dimitriadi 2013). The rise was informed both by the worsening situation in Afghanistan and by the adverse effects of the restrictive policy context on the living conditions of Afghan refugees in Iran. Indeed, until 2012, Iran was the country of last residence of a majority of Afghan nationals arriving in Greece (Dimitriadi 2018a: 34). Turkey received a small number of Afghan refugees in the 1980s through a 'transportation and settlement arrangement' (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018: 490). Arrivals in and transit mobility through Turkey also scaled up in the 1990s and 2000s, paralleling the intensification of Afghan movement towards Europe.

## **2.2 Migration and asylum trends in the EU and beyond (2009–2020)**

The Afghan diaspora worldwide is estimated at 6.5 million persons, corresponding to over 18 per cent of the country's population (Meshkovska et al. 2020: 8). The overwhelming majority live in Iran and Pakistan. In Europe, the largest Afghan community (263,000) is in Germany, while the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Austria also host sizable populations (Sayed 2021: 2). The number of Afghan migrants and refugees living in the United States, Canada

and Australia is estimated at around 70,000, 28,000 and 23,000 respectively (UN Population Division 2020).

As of 2020, there were 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees globally, an overwhelming majority being in Pakistan (1.4 million) and Iran (780,000) (UNHCR 2021a). Only 13 per cent of Afghan refugees (338,000) resided in Europe, with Germany hosting 44 per cent of these (*ibid.*). More than half of the nearly 240,000 Afghan asylum-seekers worldwide were in Turkey (*ibid.*). In addition to registered refugees, an estimated 2.2 million undocumented Afghan migrants, and nearly 600,000 Afghans with student and family visas lived in Iran (UNHCR 2021b). Pakistan hosted an estimated 1.5 million undocumented Afghan migrants (IOM 2019).

In terms of the irregular arrival patterns of Afghan nationals via the EMR in the past decade, Frontex data (see Table 2.1) suggest an upward trend in 2010–11, and a substantial increase in the peak year of 2015. Monthly figures for 2015 and 2016 show a concentration of border-crossings between the summer months of 2015 and March/April 2016. While a sharp decrease relative to 2015 was recorded in 2016, a significant drop also in absolute terms was noted in the second half of the decade, with the exception of 2019. Despite ebbs and flows, in each year of the past decade Afghan citizens ranked among the top three national groups who were reported to be irregularly crossing via the EMR.

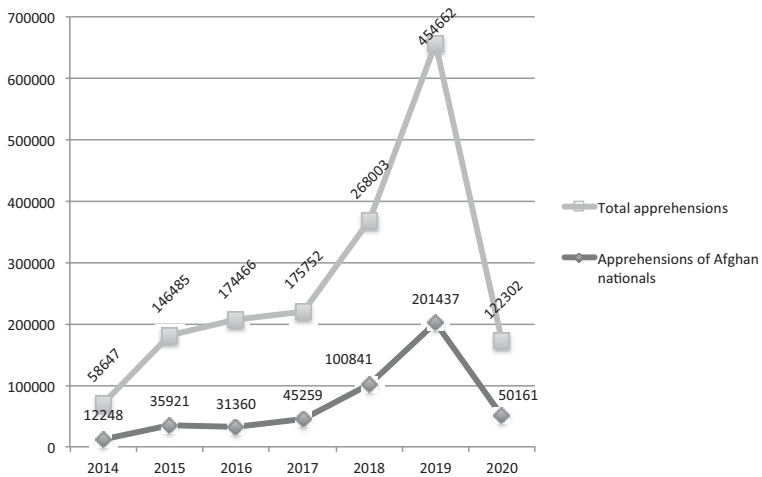
**Table 2.1:** Crossings of Afghans on the EMR (sea and land total), 2009–2020

Year	Irregular crossings by Afghans	total crossings	Afghans as % of total crossings
2009	12,397	39,973	31.01
2010	22,762	55,688	40.87
2011	19,618	57,025	34.40
2012	9,566	37,224	25.70
2013	6,129	24,798	24.72
2014	12,475	50,834	24.54
2015	213,635	885,386	23.66
2016	43,120	182,277	46.4
2017	3,985	42,319	9.42
2018	10,738	56,560	18.99
2019	28,693	83,333	34.43
2020	3,927	20,280	19.36
<b>Total</b>	<b>387,045</b>	<b>1,535,697</b>	<b>25.20</b>

Source: Author's elaboration based on Frontex (2021).



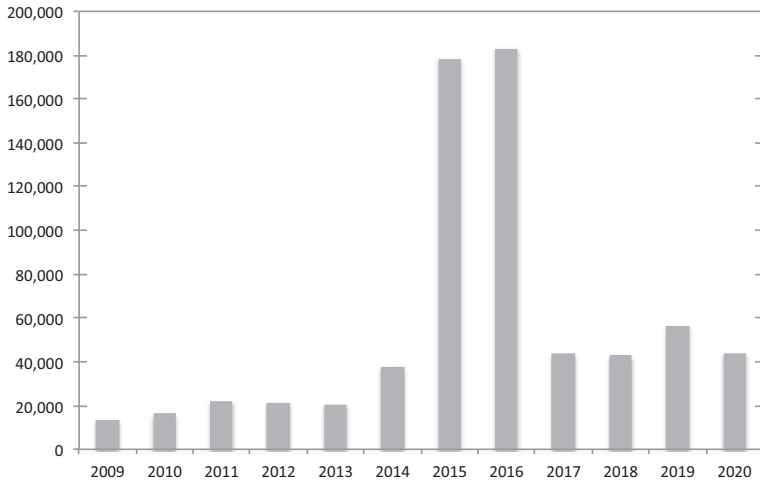
Data on irregular migrants apprehended in Turkey (including unauthorised border-crossings and stays) show a steady increase in the number of apprehended Afghan nationals since 2016, while the year 2019 marks a record high, followed by a significant drop in 2020 (see Figure 2.1). This suggests that even if their access to EU territory was considerably limited after 2016, westward movement of Afghan migrants and refugees largely continued.



**Figure 2.1:** Apprehensions of irregular migrants in Turkey: Afghan nationals / total apprehensions (2014–2020)

Source: Author's elaboration based on DGMM (2021).

There are clear parallels between the trend of first-time asylum applications lodged by Afghan nationals in the EU (see Figure 2.2) and that of the irregular crossings – also considering that reported crossings can only act as an estimate of the actual number of individuals who irregularly arrived in the EU, and the time-lag between one's arrival and filing of an asylum claim. This indicates that most Afghan nationals who irregularly arrived in the EU in the past decade did so in search of protection.

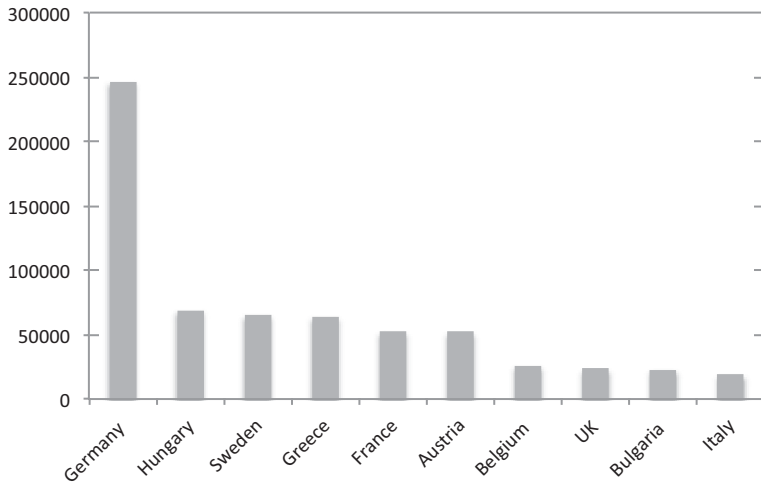


**Figure 2.2:** Afghan first-time asylum applications in the EU (2009–2020)\*

\* The figures between 2009 and 2012 reflect EU-27 (excluding Croatia), those between 2013 and 2019 reflect EU-28, and that for the year 2020 reflects EU-27 (excluding the UK).

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

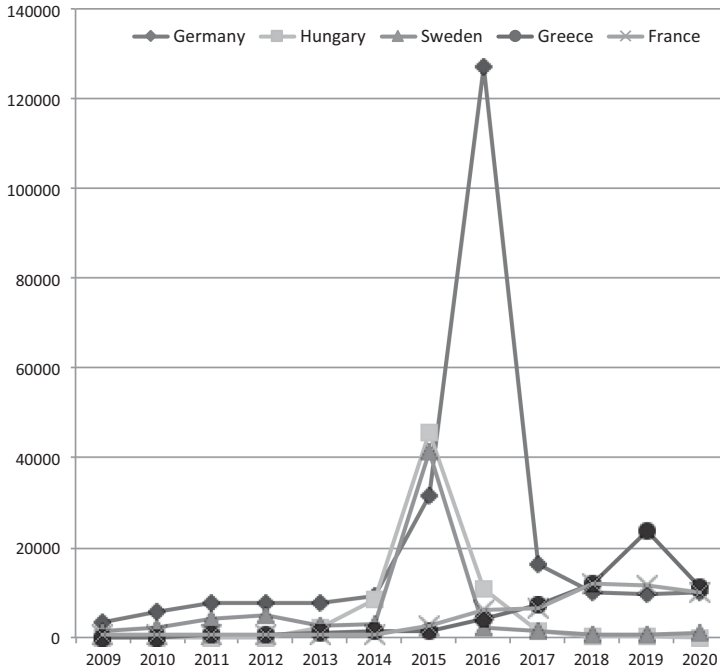
Among the member states, Germany emerges as the country that received by far the largest share of Afghan asylum applications over the past decade, followed by Hungary, Sweden and Greece (see Figure 2.3).



**Figure 2.3:** Afghan first-time asylum applications by major recipient EU countries (aggregated 2009–2020)

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

A look into the temporal distribution of claims (see Figure 2.4) shows that applications in Germany, Hungary, Sweden and Austria were largely concentrated in 2015–16, followed by a significant drop afterwards. The claims lodged in Greece and France instead show a steady rise between 2015 and 2019, representing an increasingly larger share of all applications in the EU: Greece's share increased from less than 1 per cent in 2015 to 42 per cent in 2019, while that of France went up from 1 per cent in 2015 to 21 per cent in 2019.

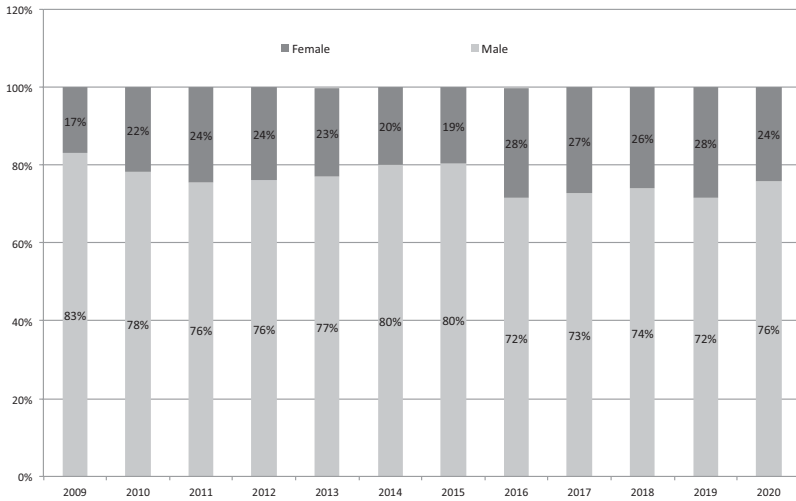


**Figure 2.4:** Afghan first-time asylum applications over time in the top five recipient member states

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

In terms of the gender composition of Afghan asylum seekers in the EU, the share of male applicants has been clearly larger, constantly remaining above 70 per cent in the entire period (see Figure 2.5). The share of female applicants had grown from 19 per cent in 2015 to 28 per cent in 2016, and remained above 25 per cent in the following years, except for 2020.

Afghan nationals have also represented a considerably large share among unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) irregularly arriving and seeking asylum in the EU. While this was the case already before 2015, the number of Afghan UASC significantly increased in 2015. Half of the 90,000 UASC who arrived in Europe in 2015 were Afghans, the large majority being boys (International Rescue Committee 2016). Sweden received more than half of the asylum applications submitted by Afghan UASC in that year (UNHCR 2016).



**Figure 2.5:** Afghan asylum applications in the EU by gender

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

UASC constituted a smaller share (34 per cent) of over 100,000 children who arrived in Europe in 2016 (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM 2017). Of over 60,000 children who arrived in Greece, an estimated 5,000 were UASC (*ibid.*), 27 per cent of them being Afghan children (UNICEF and REACH 2017: 51). Research indicates that the majority of Afghan UASC and young adults comprised (mostly undocumented) ethnic Hazara refugees in Iran and Pakistan and young males from rural areas in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan (Donini et al. 2016).

## 2.3 Combined operation of conditions and policies across origin, transit, host and destination contexts in the past decade

### 2.3.1 An increasingly fragile political and security transition process: Deepening insecurity of lives and livelihoods in Afghanistan

The deterioration of security in the 2010s significantly informed migration and displacement from Afghanistan. A number of factors played a role in this. Already in the late 2000s, bombing attacks and fighting between the Taliban, which had resurged in 2006, and the Afghan security forces supported by the

US/NATO troops intensified (Bizhan 2016). Following the US decision to scale down its military presence in Afghanistan, the numbers of US and NATO troops were cut from 140,000 in 2011 to 13,000 in 2014 (*ibid.*: 6). The withdrawal of all NATO combat troops at the end of 2014 meant that despite significant capacity challenges, the Afghan Security Forces assumed full responsibility for security provision. Benefiting from the thorny security transition and societal discontent, the Taliban and affiliated groups expanded their territorial hold, at the expense of areas controlled by the government: between 2015 and 2017, the share of districts under government control decreased from 72 to 57 per cent (International Crisis Group 2017).

The post-2014 period was marked by intensifying fighting between the insurgents and the Afghan Security Forces, leaving a heavy toll on local populations. Civilians living in or near Taliban strongholds were also heavily affected by instances of indiscriminate US/NATO bombing (Gopal 2021). The number of civilians killed and injured increased from 5,969 in 2009 to 10,535 in 2014, and stayed over 10,000 annually in the second half of the decade (UNAMA and OHCHR 2021: 12). Targeted persecution by the Taliban, of citizens working for the Afghan government and those collaborating with the coalition forces also increased. Minorities and women faced 'increased risks and threats to their lives and livelihoods' in a context marked by the 'absence of rule of law, weak governance, abuse of power, re-emergence of warlordism and generalized unpredictability' (Donini et al. 2016: 3). Also informed by this security landscape, among Afghan nationals arriving in Greece, the share of those who departed from Afghanistan grew after 2012 (Dimitriadi 2018a).

The 2010s were also marked by an increasingly thorny democratisation process, political instability and eroding governance capacity of the state. Informal governance structures rivalling the Afghan state flourished along with the illicit economy, as the Taliban, other insurgents and warlords acquired territorial control and power. Widespread corruption among rent-seeking elites forming part of what Strand et al. (2017: 45) call the 'semi-informal state' further weakened the legitimacy and governance capacity of the Afghan state. The thorny power transition process following the end of Karzai's term deepened political instability. The factional fragmentation that characterised domestic politics translated into a bitter power struggle between two candidates in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. The results of both elections were disputed, leading to fragile power-sharing arrangements (Quie and Hakimi 2020).

The past decade also saw backsliding in social and economic development. The decline in international development aid since the early 2010s had significant effects on the heavily aid-dependent Afghan economy. The average annual

economic growth rate fell from 9.4 per cent in the period between 2003 and 2012 to 2.5 per cent between 2015 and 2020, affecting employment, livelihoods and incomes (World Bank 2021: 4). The pace of progress in human development that was recorded in the 2000s considerably slowed after 2012 (UNDP 2021). The drought starting in 2018 caused further loss of livelihoods and growing food insecurity in an economy where nearly half of the workforce is employed in the agricultural sector, while the Covid-19 crisis exacerbated urban poverty, inflation and food insecurity (World Bank 2021).

External actors' failure to provide the support needed for catalysing a sustainable political and economic reconstruction process also played a major role in this picture. The predominant role played by the US and NATO in post-conflict reconstruction implied that their security concerns – closely linked to the 'war on terror' – took centre stage, while governance, democratisation and development goals were overshadowed (Strand et al. 2017). Despite large amounts of overall international assistance, there has been 'only a limited impact either on poverty reduction or social indicators', as the funding priorities clearly favoured security over governance and development (*ibid.*: 37). The US spending on Afghanistan confirms this: in the period between 2001 and 2019, Washington spent a total of 978 billion US dollars on security, compared to 36 billion allocated to governance and development (Hakimi 2021).

The absorption and reintegration challenges posed by large-scale returns in the second half of the decade put additional strain on an already fragile political, economic and social context. The rise in returns was a result of both active repatriation and deportation policies pursued by host countries (i.e., Iran, Pakistan, EU member states and Turkey) and deteriorating economic conditions in some of these contexts (see below). Between 2016 and 2019, over 3 million people were returned from these and other countries (Quie and Hakimi 2020: 11). This compounded already existing employment challenges, infrastructure gaps and shortcomings in the provision of essential services.

In short, an increasingly fragile political and security transition process, stagnating social and economic development, and diminishing institutional capacity to provide security, livelihood opportunities and essential services set the broader context in Afghanistan in the 2010s. Accounts by those who left the country in this period provide insights into how this macro-context translated into individual reasons motivating departure. While conflict and violence were cited by a large majority of Afghans as the main reason to leave (REACH 2016), insecurity often acted in combination with insecure livelihoods. REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017: 13) found that: 'war and violent conflict [...] were not reasons enough for them to leave their country, but the

violence coupled with a lack of employment possibilities made it impossible to stay and maintain any type of livelihood'. A 2016 study by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted with UASC in Sweden showed how the effects of generalised and targeted violence were combined with the lack of access to education in motivating departure (UNHCR 2016). Besides direct threats to physical security, it is therefore also those devastating effects of war on livelihoods, infrastructure and access to basic services that informed departures from Afghanistan. As argued by Crawley and Skleparis (2018: 53), as conflicts get protracted, it becomes 'more complicated' and 'difficult to unpack' 'the ways in which political and economic factors come together to shape the experiences of those living in times of war'.

Drivers deriving from this macro-context need to be also seen as operating in particular ways at the intersection of gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, or educational and professional attainments in shaping migration decisions. For instance, the Mixed Migration Centre (IOD PARC 2018) found that while insecurity was the overarching reason for most Afghan women, this was often accompanied with the job insecurity particularly experienced by women, political instability and persecution by the Taliban, lack of access to essential services for them and their children, as well as gender-based violence experienced in familial settings and the perception of a repressive social environment. Kofman (2019: 2190) also points to the interplay between gender, professional and marital status: for women 'working as professionals', targeted attacks by the Taliban, including the threat of forced marriage, informed departure. Gendered effects of the conflict were not limited to women. The risk of forced conscription by the Taliban, other insurgents or the government acted as a gendered and age-selective driver motivating the departure of young men and boys (Donini et al. 2016).

### **2.3.2 Secondary drivers in non-EU destinations**

Iran and Pakistan host an overwhelming majority of Afghan refugees and migrants. Iran has been a key transit hub for movement further west, while secondary movement of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran towards Europe and Turkey has also intensified over the past two decades (Dimitriadi 2018a; Buz et al. 2020). Despite its relevance as a destination and host context, onward movement from Pakistan to Europe and Turkey has been relatively limited (Dimitriadi 2018a). While Turkey mainly acted as a hub for Afghan transit movement to Europe until the 2010s, unauthorised entries and asylum applications have increased since then, contributing to the growing size of the Afghan population in the country (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018). Even if most Afghans arriving in



this period were considered to 'have intentions of moving further to the west, to Europe' (*ibid.*: 11), Turkey has also become a preferred destination (IOM 2018).

At the same time, the 'fragmented' nature of Afghan journeys implies that migration intentions change, and disparities emerge between intended and de facto destinations. Such changes in migration plans are informed by the (policy-informed) conditions encountered in different destinations and the opportunity-constraint structures (e.g., entry barriers, cost of onward movement) mediating mobility en route. The macro-context as well as migration and asylum policies in these countries – that might changeably act as destination, host and transit contexts – thus play an important role in shaping Afghan mobility.

In the past decade, Afghan nationals have encountered an increasingly restrictive policy landscape in all three countries. In Iran and Pakistan, the move from a liberal protection regime to a restrictive framework gained further momentum after 2001, and has been sustained since then. In Turkey, Afghan nationals could benefit from limited protection from the onset, while in the second half of the past decade, they faced a harsher policy context, oriented at stemming cross-border and inland mobility, limiting access to asylum and augmenting returns. These policies affect the rights and living conditions of Afghan asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants, while informing onward movement. However, they should also be put in perspective considering the macro-economic challenges these countries face, aggravated in the past decade by shocks such as the 2018–19 recession in Iran or the currency and debt crisis Turkey has plunged into since 2018. More importantly, these policy shifts should be seen in light of the disproportionate protection responsibility these countries have been shouldering – for over four decades in the case of Iran and Pakistan, and against the background of the post-2011 Syrian displacement in the case of Turkey. The EU's prevention-focused approach, which relies on delegating protection responsibility and mobility control to host/transit countries, adds further strain to their already stretched protection capacities, while contributing to the expansion of policy approaches oriented at prevention and deterrence along the routes.

Iran is party to the 1951 Geneva Convention, albeit maintaining reservations on employment and freedom of movement (Zetter 2018). Afghan refugees, admitted as 'involuntary religious migrants' before 1993, benefited from permanent residence permits and extensive social and economic rights (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005: 16). A more restrictive regime was put in place after 1993. Access to asylum was restricted for new arrivals, and those whose claims were accepted were granted only temporary residence rights, while the range of rights for refugees already resident in Iran had been narrowed down. This trend accelerated after 2001, when all refugees – including pre-1993 arrivals – were required

to re-register and given temporary residence permits (*Amayesh* cards) and their access to employment and education were further limited (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2008). The policy line oriented toward preventing new arrivals through enhanced border control and limited access to asylum, while encouraging returns by restricting rights and elevating administrative hurdles to obtaining documentation, has remained largely intact since then.

Pakistan is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention. In the absence of a national law regulating international protection, the 1946 Foreigners' Act provides the framework applied to refugees. Until 2001 Afghan refugees were hosted in camps and were entitled to work and to access education. Pakistan stopped granting refugee status to those coming after 2001 on a *prima facie* basis, and encouraged repatriation through systematic camp closures and limiting access to education (Turton and Marsden 2002). With the launch of the Proof of Registration (PoR) card system in 2007, all refugees were, for the first time, required to register and evidence their status through documentation. All refugees holding a PoR card were asked to return by 2009 (Dimitriadi 2013). Effectively enforcing repatriation on such a scale proved, however, challenging and the PoR scheme has been extended six times since 2007. Nonetheless, short-term validity of these permits and ambiguity about the prospects of their renewal – largely at the authorities' discretion and contingent on the ups and downs in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations – acted as factors sustaining legal uncertainty for registered refugees (Siddiqui 2019).

Despite being a signatory of the Geneva Convention, Turkey maintains the geographical limitation, and hence reserves refugee status for European claimants. The 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection created three protection statuses for non-European claimants: temporary protection, conditional refugee status and subsidiary protection. Temporary protection currently applies only to Syrian refugees. Most non-Syrian nationals, including Afghans, are recognised as conditional refugees, which entitles them to temporary residence until their resettlement in a third country – a dim possibility given shrinking resettlement opportunities globally (Leghtas and Sullivan 2017). Claimants' access to legal documentation, formal employment and public services is conditioned upon their registration and continued residence in one of the designated provinces (satellite cities), while their movement outside these provinces requires permission by authorities. Besides these limitations embedded in the legal framework, since 2017–18, Afghan migrants also report encountering greater hurdles to register in practice, with single men in particular being denied registration (Karadağ 2021), as they 'are considered as economic migrants' (Buz et al. 2020: 48).

In all three countries, the policy context led to growing irregularisation of the Afghan population. In Iran and Pakistan, restricted access to asylum combined with new registration requirements (i.e., *Amayesh* and PoR cards) blocked access to legal documentation for those arriving after the cut-off dates. Those who were already resident before the cut-off dates and failed to register or renew their permits lost their legal status. Re-registration and regularisation schemes were launched in 2010 and 2017 in Iran, and in 2017 in Pakistan. Yet, the scope of rights actually extended to regularised refugees remained unclear, while these schemes also provided an opportunity for host governments to facilitate future repatriation (Zetter 2018). With a few exceptions, such as Iran's 2015 decision to admit undocumented Afghan children to public schools (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2016), undocumented migrants' social and economic rights remain very limited in both countries. In Turkey, the policy linking legal documentation to registration and residence in satellite cities implies that many Afghans do not register due to the lack of livelihood opportunities or social support networks in these cities, thus depriving them of access to services, formal employment and humanitarian assistance (Buz et al. 2020). Abovementioned hurdles to registration that Afghans encounter in practice also push them into irregularity.

Insecure livelihoods characterise the experience of most Afghan refugees and migrants. In Iran, *Amayesh* cardholders are entitled to temporary work permits in a limited set of sectors (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2016), while the large majority (particularly the undocumented) work in the informal sector. In Pakistan, even if PoR cardholders can access formal employment, the great majority (documented and undocumented) are left to the hands of the informal sector (Zetter 2018). In Turkey, most Afghans work in the informal sector, where '[t]hey get paid daily and extremely low wages' and are exploited by employers who take advantage of the migrants' irregular situation and the lack of effectively enforced employer sanctions (Karadağ 2021: 31). In all three countries, hurdles to access education persist, while child labour is a widespread negative coping mechanism in the face of insecure livelihoods, causing school drop-outs. Crises, such as the 2018 economic downturn in Iran or the Covid-19 fallout, hit Afghan refugees and (undocumented) migrants particularly hard. These shocks deepened existing vulnerabilities by leading to further job and income losses, as illustrated by the economic effects of the pandemic in Turkey (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021). In Iran, the effects of the 2018 crisis on already insecure livelihoods also triggered large-scale returns to Afghanistan (Quie and Hakimi 2020) and secondary movement to Turkey (Buz et al. 2020).

Despite worsening security in Afghanistan, host countries continued to focus on returns in the past decade. In Iran and Pakistan, returns took place within

and outside the scope of voluntary repatriation programmes targeting registered refugees. Questions remain, however, on whether all these returns were free from coercion. For example, Human Rights Watch (2017: 1) reported that hundreds of thousands of registered refugees and undocumented migrants were 'pushed out' of Pakistan due to 'deportation threats and police abuses' in 2016 (for Iran, see Human Rights Watch 2013). In Turkey, the policing of migrants in an irregular situation intensified following the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement (see below), and returns increased. In 2018, 17,000 Afghans were reportedly deported, whereas according to the official line, these were voluntary returns (Karadağ 2021: 27). Overall, in the four years between 2016 and 2019 a total of 2,140,045 Afghans were returned from Iran, 850,785 from Pakistan and 115,880 from other countries, the bulk of these being from Turkey (Quie and Hakimi 2020: 11). Intensification of policing and (voluntary and involuntary) returns in these countries deepened the insecurity experienced particularly by undocumented migrants and others in an irregular situation.

Finally, the perception and experience of growing societal hostility also affects Afghan communities, while informing onward movement in some cases. For example, hostility, xenophobia and discrimination were among the main reasons reported by Afghan migrants (particularly ethnic Hazara) to move on from Iran to Europe (Crowley et al. 2016) or Turkey (Buz et al. 2020). In all these contexts, the effects of growing economic hardship also exacerbate (real or perceived) competition between local populations and refugees and migrants over limited resources and jobs. Anti-migrant media and political framing, such as Afghan refugees' representation as being associated with terrorism in Pakistan (Siddiqui 2019), or the 'massive Afghan arrival' narrative in Turkey (Sanderson 2021) also fed into negative attitudes and growing hostility.

### **2.3.3 Europe as a desired but hard-to-reach destination: EU policies restricting mobility and access to protection**

Research conducted with Afghan refugees and migrants demonstrates that what makes Europe a preferred destination is the perception that it offers prospects for reaching physical safety, accessing protection and obtaining a secure legal status, finding employment and accessing essential services, particularly education (REACH 2016; Dimitriadi 2018a; Seefar 2019). Germany, Austria, the UK and the Scandinavian countries are seen as offering these prospects to a fuller extent than others (e.g., Greece). Hence, these countries are desired destinations for most, as opposed to Greece, which is seen as a transit country in Europe (REACH and Mixed Migration Platform 2017; Donini et al. 2016; Dimitriadi

2018a). This confirms that the ‘historical, economic and reputational factors’ (Thielemann 2004: 1) play a more relevant role than migration and asylum policies – particularly those aimed at deterrence to which the EU increasingly resorts – in shaping destination intentions.

However, opportunity-constraint structures mediating (i.e., facilitating or impeding) mobility – and shifts in these structures – largely shape whether and how intended destinations can actually be reached. This is particularly the case for fragmented journeys involving multiple border-crossings against different sets of hurdles (or lack thereof), such as those characterising Afghan mobility towards Europe. Indeed, such shifts in the opportunity-constraint structures mediating Afghan movement towards and within Europe significantly informed the substantial rise in Afghan arrivals via the EMR and asylum applications in the EU during 2015–16, and the subsequent drop afterwards.

Largely informed by the sheer intensity of the Syrian refugee movement, a window of opportunity was presented by the opening in 2015 of a temporary corridor facilitating movement between Turkey, Greece, the Western Balkans and destinations further west. As for reaching Turkey, even if Ankara gradually hardened its border, earlier stages of the Syrian war and displacement witnessed a higher degree of border permeability (Okuyay 2017), and ‘Afghans also have taken advantage of this flexible Turkish border policy’ (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018: 10). As the Syrian refugee movement from/via Turkey to Greece intensified and others followed, the rise in the demand for smuggling services was met with growing supply in Turkey’s western coastal areas, leading prices to decrease (REACH 2016). As for reaching Greece, Syrians’ movement played a pioneering role, by demonstrating to others considering movement that it was possible to cross. Indeed, Fargues (2017: 11–12) demonstrates that between January and November 2015, while growing in volume, sea arrivals in Greece progressively also included other nationalities, and concludes that ‘Syrians initiated the movement and were followed a few months later by Afghans, then by Iraqis and a few other nationalities’. Beyond Greece, instead of the sea route to Italy, Syrians moved towards North Macedonia to then get to Serbia, which opened a (new) transit mobility corridor further west to be used also by others, including the Afghans (Dimitriadi 2018a). Further west, despite bordering and policing by Hungary, overall, ‘[t]ransit in the summer months of 2015 and early autumn, became the norm within and outside the Schengen space’ (*ibid.*: 182). In short, the opportunity-constraint structure shifted entirely so as to enable movement up until desired European destinations, informing the decisions of Afghans considering embarking on, or continuing the journey.

Between autumn 2015 and spring 2016, the EU internally and externally rolled out a combination of mobility control and asylum policies, which significantly limited Afghan nationals' movement to and within the EU, and hence, their access to the asylum procedure and protection on EU territory. Direct control over transit mobility constituted a major pillar of this response. Physical barriers were elevated, while surveillance and policing of movement was boosted on the corridor linking Greece to the Western Balkans and EU countries further west (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017). The crackdown on smuggling networks made movement more costly, and thus less accessible, while raising the risks of the journey (REACH 2016). North Macedonia's closure of its border with Greece to Afghans in February 2016 was decisive in impeding Afghan movement beyond Greece (Dimitriadi 2018a). The March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement led Ankara to further invest in stemming irregular migration in order to deliver on its commitment of reducing irregular crossings to the EU, and to prevent itself becoming the final destination of large-scale mixed flows (Okay 2019). Besides continuing to fence its borders with Syria and Iran, Turkey also tightened control over entries and exits at its eastern and western borders respectively. The policing of migrants' mobility within Turkey (e.g., between provinces or close to embarkation points) also intensified (Işleyen 2018).

Aimed at dissuading new arrivals, a set of measures turned Greece into a de facto destination, transformed the Greek islands into dead ends, and limited access to asylum in and particularly beyond Greece for those arriving via the sea. The functioning of the hotspots on the Greek islands was linked to that of the EU-Turkey Statement, as the deal foresaw the return of all newly arriving irregular migrants – who did not apply for asylum, whose application was deemed inadmissible or was rejected – to Turkey. Changes to the national law enabled Greece to return people to Turkey based on inadmissibility under the bilateral Greek-Turkish readmission agreement (Dimitriadi 2018b). Eligibility for inclusion in the EU relocation scheme was restricted to those nationalities with a recognition rate (EU average) above 75 per cent (Danish Refugee Council 2017), which limited access to relocation only to those Afghans deemed vulnerable (e.g., pregnant women, single-parent families, UASC). Transfers from the Greek islands to the mainland were restricted to vulnerable asylum-seekers eligible for relocation, turning the hotspots into detention facilities (Dimitriadi 2018b).

This period also witnessed decreasing recognition rates for Afghan asylum-seekers: from an EU average of 66.9 per cent in 2015 to 56.8 per cent in 2016, and 46.3 per cent in 2017 (Parusel 2018). This should be seen as part of the crystallising distinction between 'legitimate' refugees and economic migrants that has increasingly shaped political discourse and policy responses in the

post-2015 EU context (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), as Afghans increasingly found themselves placed in the latter category. In some cases, the questioning of Afghan asylum claims' legitimacy also had effects on reception and integration assistance. For instance, in some German federal states, Afghans were excluded from integration courses or assistance provided to asylum-seekers of other nationalities (Ruttig 2017).

Returning Afghan nationals with no right to legal residence in the EU – which should be seen in light of decreasing recognition rates – became a priority from 2016 on. Member states concluded bilateral agreements for Assisted Voluntary Return, despite the controversial nature of considering Afghanistan (or parts of it) as safe from an international refugee law perspective (Amnesty International 2017). At the EU level, cooperation on return was embedded in the 2016 'Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues between Afghanistan and the EU' (JWF), (European Union and Afghanistan 2016). In line with the objective of curtailing movement before it reaches EU external borders, the JWF foresaw the channelling of development aid to addressing the root causes of migration. It also conditioned the amount and continued inflow of aid on Afghanistan's effective cooperation on readmission, and development of a policy framework on sustainable reintegration and migration management. Given the power asymmetry, a heavily aid-dependent Afghanistan did not have much choice but to give in to EU demands, even if these issues were not among the priorities of the Afghan government struggling to tackle a challenging security and economic situation (Quie and Hakimi 2020). Promoting peace, strengthening governance, supporting human and economic development, and addressing migration challenges constituted the pillars of the EU's Afghanistan policy (EEAS 2017). Yet, the prioritisation of return and migration management is likely to have indirectly contributed to exacerbating state and societal fragilities in Afghanistan, revealing inconsistencies with the EU priorities on governance, peace and sustainable development, while arguably inadvertently aggravating some macro-challenges driving migration.

## 2.4 Conclusions

While migration is deeply ingrained in Afghan history, population movements have occurred in a context of conflict and political turmoil since 1978. In the past decade, protracted conflict, an increasingly fragile security and political transition process, and dwindling socioeconomic development combined in generating direct threats to life as well as insecure livelihoods, hurdles to accessing essential services, and insecurity and uncertainty in overall terms. Factors

driving migration from Afghanistan over the past decade should therefore be understood in their multidimensionality and intertwined nature, combining in complex ways with ascribed characteristics and social divisions when translating into individual reasons to depart. Such complexity defies neat categorisations of Afghan mobility as one of either voluntary or forced migration (Monsutti 2006), and thus sits uneasily with the juxtaposition of ‘legitimate’ refugees to economic migrants. Yet, such juxtaposition has come to dominate political discourse and policy responses in Europe and other host countries, where Afghans increasingly found themselves being placed in the latter category.

Legal precarity, irregularisation and insecurity of livelihoods have characterised most Afghans’ experience in Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, informed both by the increasingly hostile policy context and (aggravating) macro-economic challenges in these countries. The hurdles they faced in accessing asylum, legal residence, social and economic rights exposed many Afghan refugees and migrants to economic exploitation and the risk of deportation, deepening their vulnerability and insecurity. These policy-informed conditions also acted as secondary drivers informing return and onward movement. This restrictive policy landscape should however also be seen in light of the stretched protection capacities of these countries given the disproportionately high responsibility they bear compared to affluent regions, including Europe. By enhancing this asymmetry, the EU’s externalisation of protection feeds into the policy framework geared towards preventing new arrivals and encouraging departures (also) by limiting access to, and lowering the quality of protection. By shouldering its own share of responsibility more equitably, the EU should therefore contribute to expanding the protection space also in its wider region.

In a context of rising populism and owing to the failure of the member states to agree on a coordinated and integrated EU policy response to the large-scale arrivals, the prevention-oriented approach has gained further traction since 2015–16. Elevating the hurdles for Afghans to reach and seek protection in the EU, these policies considerably limited Afghan movement via the EMR. Judging by the sharp rise in arrivals in Turkey since 2017, policies limiting Afghan’s access to the EU seem to have generated a ‘substitution effect’ (de Haas 2011), which in turn played a role in Turkey’s enhanced focus on prevention and deterrence. Yet, (restrictive) migration and asylum policies have little effect on the political, economic and reputational factors making EU countries preferred destinations. Measures targeting origin countries mainly aim to prevent (the factors underpinning) departures. However, the Afghan case indicates that those very measures (e.g., conditioning aid to cooperation on return and migration management, focusing on the ‘root causes’ of migration in defining aid priorities)



might in fact exacerbate already existing macro-challenges – and inadvertently aggravate migration drivers. While the Afghan case underlines the need for a more nuanced understanding of the structural challenges informing migration decisions, these challenges should be understood as having a bearing first and foremost on human development and security. This calls for enhanced coherence between the EU's migration and asylum policies and its comprehensive foreign policy goals of peacebuilding, good governance and sustainable development.

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Flavia Fusco

## Chapter 3 Following mixed migration trajectories from Iraq: When, how and why Europe became a major destination for Iraqis

**Abstract:** Before becoming predominantly a country of origin, Iraq represented a place of refuge for many. Yet, from the 1970s, discriminatory and persecutory policies towards minority groups, recurring war and socio-economic deprivation led tens of thousands to leave Iraq mainly for neighbouring Iran, Turkey, Jordan and Syria. Growing restrictions and worsening living conditions in the neighbourhood, coupled with the deterioration of the security environment in the region in the 1980s, gradually changed migratory trajectories. EU-bound migration from Iraq turned from an elite phenomenon into a larger-scale movement, with the number of Iraqis crossing and seeking asylum in the EU reaching unprecedented numbers during what has been defined in Europe as a ‘migration crisis’. Yet, despite the significant decrease in the numbers following the peak in 2015–16, the EU’s hyper-securitised approach towards migration governance endured. Regardless of the shortcomings of its policies in addressing the multiple drivers of migration across origin, transit and destination countries on the one hand, and of the negative effects these have on migrants and asylum seekers, on the other, instrumental cooperation with Iraq and transit countries to stem migration outflows and augment voluntary and non-voluntary returns remain the main focus of the EU’s action in the migration domain.

**Keywords:** Iraqi refugees | minority groups | war-induced displacement | securitised approach | European borders

Located at the heart of Western Asia, within the Tigris-Euphrates River system and between the Mediterranean Levant and the Persian Gulf, the patch of land known today as Iraq has historically been a cradle of civilisations and a busy crossroads for human mobility. Nowadays, Iraq still represents a crossing point for thousands and, most importantly, an origin country for more than 2 million people (UN Population Division 2019) out of a population of approximately 40 million (UN Population Division 2020).

Before becoming predominantly a country of origin, Iraq has long represented a place of refuge and a destination country for many. Armenians fleeing persecution during the genocide, Palestinians displaced post-1948 as well as Iranians seeking asylum after the revolution in 1979, found a safe place in Iraq (Minority Rights Group 2017; Barghouti 2018; Hakimzadeh 2006). Most recently, during

the Syrian war, more than 250,000 Syrians – mostly of Kurdish origin – sought protection in Iraq and mostly settled in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2011–17 (Warda et al. 2020). Besides asylum migration, in less recent times and in a different economic climate, Iraq also witnessed significant inflows of labour migrants from the region, with many Egyptians, Palestinians, Sudanese and Yemenis seeking employment opportunities in the thriving, nationalised Iraqi oil industry in the 1970–80s (Chatelard 2009).

Yet, it was precisely in the 1970s that Iraq turned into a country of emigration (Batatu 1978). While forced displacement of minority groups has occurred since the 1930s, it reached unprecedented levels involving tens of thousands in the 1960–70s. This, together with recurring wars from the 1980s, helps explain the shift in human mobility from (rather than to) Iraq which brought a high 5.4 per cent of the national population to be a migrant or a refugee in 2017 (JRC 2019).

War-induced displacement, both within (internal displacement) and outside Iraqi borders (asylum migration), prevailed in the last decades, to the point that it was defined as a ‘near-constant feature of Iraq for at least the past 35 years’ (Thibos 2014: 2). Moreover, recurring episodes of violence acquiring or implying ethno-sectarian connotations have made a corresponding reading of Iraqi forced migration dynamics prevalent. Yet, if it is true that the recent history of Iraq has been marked by harsh sectarian violence led by state and non-state actors and this has been partly reflected in the composition and direction of migrant and refugee flows, it is also true that a purely ethno-sectarian reading of Iraqi migration dynamics proves to be simplistic. While the shrinking over time of communities such as the Christian and Mandaean ones has corresponded with a ‘massive exodus’ of these groups from the country in 2006–10 (Oehring 2017: 14), several additional political, social and economic factors should be considered to fully grasp the complexities of human mobility within and from Iraq, whereby a clear distinction between forced and voluntary migration cannot be drawn. Indeed, political dispossession and socio-economic deprivation, in their multidimensional relation with war and international interventions,<sup>1</sup> contributed to pushing many of those Iraqis who had been spared from targeted violence to leave their country.

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<sup>1</sup> Among these, worth mentioning are the long-term dramatic effects on the Iraqi population caused by the international embargo imposed on Iraq in the 1990s (Chatelard 2005) and the aggressive neoliberal reforms under the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority post-2003.



### 3.1 Historicising migration from Iraq

Since its existence as a modern state (and in continuity with the colonial rule), Iraq's diverse social fabric has been perceived more as a problem than as a richness by the (mostly Sunni-Arab-dominated) ruling class. Seeking to fit into the Western nation-state model and consolidate the newly achieved independence in 1932, a national identity centred on the minoritarian Sunni-Arab community was created. This led to processes of exclusion and weaponisation of identities which materialised into targeted discrimination, persecution and deportation of minority groups. Since the early 1930s, thousands of Shiites, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Yazidis were forced to flee Iraq towards neighbouring countries, especially Syria and Iran (Ozaltin et al. 2020).

This violent pattern endured and reached new heights under the Ba'athist regime. From the 1960s onwards, Arabisation campaigns in northern Iraq and the drainage of the marshlands in the south were implemented with the explicit objective of expelling and replacing 'non-Arabs', targeted minorities and political opponents. As a result of Arabisation campaigns, half a million Iraqis (mainly Kurds and Shiites) were displaced in Iran from 1960 to the 1980s (Chatelard 2009), as well as between 60,000 and 150,000 Kurds in Turkey in 1988–90 (Ozaltin et al. 2020).

Parallel to and intertwined with domestic persecutory policies, recurring war added to previous internal and international displacement situations. The impressive numbers characterising displacement during the Iran-Iraq conflict and the Gulf war<sup>2</sup> were driven further up with the uprisings in northern and southern Iraq in the 1990s and the brutal repression that followed. Hundreds of thousands especially among Shi'ites and – to a lesser extent – Kurds were killed and thousands displaced in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan and Lebanon (AIJ and FIDH 2003). Yet, while the majority of the 2 million Kurds who had found refuge in Turkey and Iran were able to return to their land after the establishment of the no-fly zone, tens of thousands of Shi'ites were internally displaced

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<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, almost 200,000 Shi'ite families (Ozaltin et al. 2020) along with tens of thousands of Iraqi Christian families (AIJ and FIDH 2003) were deported to Iran. About 100,000 Iraqi Kurds sought asylum in Turkey (Daniş 2011) and some 40,000 marshland Arabs found refuge in Iran after the conflict (Chatelard 2009). During the Gulf war, almost 200,000 Shiite Arabs (*ibid.*) and 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds fled towards Iran (Thibos 2014), 500,000 Iraqis entered Turkey (Daniş 2011), 200,000 headed towards Jordan and some 40,000 crossed the Iraq-Syria border (Chatelard 2009).

to the marshlands in the south – soon targeted again by a new wave of drainage – and 1.2 million Iraqis fled to Iran (Rajaei 2000).

At the end of the Gulf war, two thirds of the Iraqis who had left their homeland were in neighbouring countries or other Arab states, while only one third sought refuge in Europe (Chatelard 2009). Yet, a policy shift in Iran together with the closure of borders with Saudi Arabia, Syria and Kuwait during the Gulf war started to change migratory trajectories. Following the massive influx of refugees fleeing the Afghan and Gulf wars, Iran reversed its internationally lauded, open refugee policy in 1994 and stopped admitting refugees in its territory, instead assisting neighbouring countries facing humanitarian crises directly on their soil or in border areas (Rajaei 2000). Due to this policy shift, only a relatively low number of Kurds (75,000) entered Iran during the intra-Kurdish rivalry in northern Iraq in 1994–96, and almost all of them returned to Iraq once the violence ceased (Rajaei 2000).

Nevertheless, as one of the only two signatories of the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol in the region, and the only one granting Convention refugee status to people fleeing from within the neighbourhood,<sup>3</sup> Iran remained the main host country for Iraqis, especially Kurds and Shiites, until 2003 (IOM 2019). Yet, the abovementioned policy shift together with domestic concerns and a worsening domestic socio-economic situation gradually turned Iran into a transit country, the crossing of which mainly concerned those middle-class Iraqis who could afford to continue their journey towards Europe or Australia (Chatelard 2009). Movement from Iraq started to be redirected towards other neighbouring countries, which, however, were also becoming more and more difficult to access.

Among them, Jordan – which had traditionally been a destination for mainly economically tied migration (*ibid.*) – witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of Iraqis displaced by the war in the 1990s, as it left its border with Iraq open throughout 1990–2003. Being unable to obtain protection under domestic or international regulations, Iraqis in Jordan found their lives made extremely difficult, with many remaining irregular once their residence or work permits expired and facing the risk of being deported (*ibid.*).

Exit policies in Iraq also influenced migration flows. Two examples are the shift in Saddam Hussein's repressive policies against Shi'ites from expulsion to targeted 'imprisonment or physical elimination' inside Iraq after the Gulf war, for fear of a strong Shi'a opposition outside the country (*ibid.*), and the restrictions

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<sup>3</sup> Turkey, despite being part to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, applies geographical limitations and only grants refugee status to Europeans.

imposed over the mobility of (upper/middle-class) Iraqis towards Jordan to limit the outflow of capital and entrepreneurs (Daniş 2011).

In post-2003 Iraq, while many Iraqi refugees were planning their return, another 2.2 million people fled the country (UNHCR et al. 2008). At that time, Jordan and Syria became the primary destinations (IOM 2019) overtaking the role historically played by Iran, which became ‘increasingly intolerant of refugees and immigrants’ (USCRI 2002). Both host countries, however, adopted restrictive approaches as the number of displaced Iraqis grew on their territory. Jordan pursued a de facto closed-door policy by imposing entry bans on single young men, repatriations and strict requirements for visa and travel documents (International Crisis Group 2008). The measures were justified as legitimate security concerns following the terrorist attacks carried out in Amman in November 2005 by the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida. For its part, Syria introduced visa requirements for Iraqis and made it nearly impossible for those already in the country to work and obtain a residence permit from 2007. This represented a ‘sharp and controversial break from its longstanding policy toward Arab nationals’ (*ibid.*: 16). In the neighbourhood, also Turkey witnessed significant migration inflows from post-2003 Iraq. However, those Iraqis who benefitted from the easing of mobility restrictions and entered Turkey mainly irregularly were not granted international protection (Chatelard 2010).

Growing restrictions and worsening living conditions in neighbouring countries coupled with the deterioration of regional security pushed more and more people to see Europe, once representing a destination only for upper/middle-class Iraqis, as the only viable option. There, asylum applications lodged by Iraqis had been growing since the 1980s (Thibos 2014) and peaked in 2001–2. After a significant, yet temporary, decrease in asylum applications until 2005, a new height was reached in 2006–7 before decreasing again after 2008. The following section takes a closer look at the main trends in EU-bound population movements from Iraq in 2009–19.

### **3.2 Statistics and trends of EU-bound migration from Iraq in 2009–2019**

According to Frontex data, Iraq was one of the top ten countries of origin for irregular arrivals in Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) in 2009–19, and one of the top three between 2014 and 2017. Overall, following a decreasing trend in the number of irregular land and sea crossings recorded by Frontex in 2009–13, unauthorised border-crossings by Iraqi nationals began

to rise significantly from 2014 and peaked to a total of 92,72 in 2015. From that moment, recorded crossings slowed significantly each year (-69.83 per cent from 2015 to 2016, -74.26 per cent from 2016 to 2017, -50.38 per cent from 2018 to 2019 and -85.58 per cent from 2019 to 2020) with the only exception of 2018. That year, due to a significant rise in crossings at the land border (from 785 up to 2,941) a slight overall increase (+24.55 per cent) was registered.

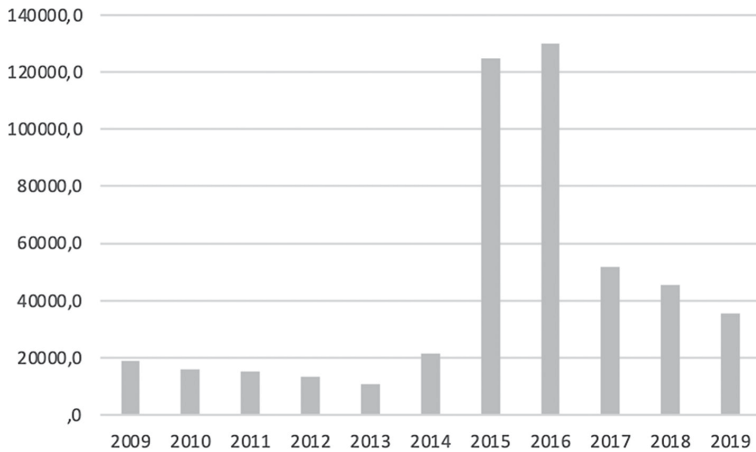
**Table 3.1:** Crossings of Iraqis on the EMR (sea, land and total), 2009–2020

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Sea	631	176	76	47	57	382	90,130	26,573	6,417	6,029	3,741	470
Land	2,674	2,704	1,054	987	372	483	2591	1,405	785	2,941	710	172
Total	3,305	2,880	1,130	1,034	429	865	92,721	27,978	7,202	8,970	4,451	642

*Source:* Author's elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

Zooming in on monthly data during the peak in 2015, the number of Iraqis heading towards Europe constantly increased starting from March 2015 until December 2015, with the only parenthesis of slowdown registered in November 2015. More than 97 per cent of the irregular crossings by Iraqis in 2015 took place at the sea border (90,130 out of 92,721), a novelty destined to last in migration trajectories linking Iraq to the EU via the EMR, which had traditionally been tied mainly to land routes. Table 3.1 shows how the clear predominance of crossings at the land border until the peak in 2015 is reversed and then maintained until 2020, with crossings at the sea border surpassing by far those at the land borders every year since 2015.

Notably, the slowdown in the volume of irregular arrivals of Iraqis in Europe via the EMR from 2016 was counterbalanced by an increase in asylum applications, which reached their peak that year with 130,000 requests. This can be explained by the lag between the arrival and lodging of an asylum application in the EU's overburdened asylum systems in 2015–16. The number of Iraqis applying for asylum in the Union, however, had already substantially grown in 2015 (+82.90 per cent compared to 2014) (Figure 3.1). In line with the trend of irregular crossings recorded by Frontex on the EMR, asylum applications also began to decrease considerably and continuously after the peak in 2016, recording a decrease of 60.19 per cent compared to the previous year in 2017, another drop by 12.54 per cent in 2018 and a further fall by 21.79 per cent in 2019.



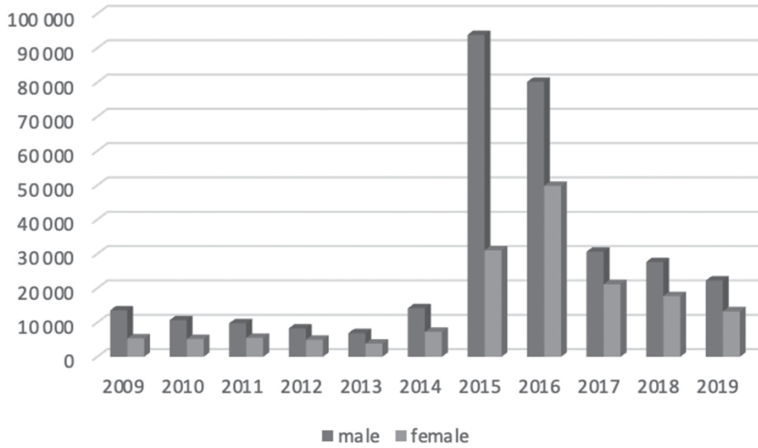
**Figure 3.1:** Asylum applications in the EU-28 countries by Iraqi nationals, 2009–2019

*Source:* Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

The decreasing trend in asylum applications continued in 2020, with a 24.69 per cent reduction compared to 2019. In absolute terms, however, the number of Iraqis applying for asylum in Europe in the post-2015 period remains higher than in the pre-2015 period, with the number of applications in 2019 (31,320) being above and in 2020 (19,440) only slightly below those recorded in 2014 (20,420) when they began to rise before peaking in 2015–16. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have contributed to a further reduction, with fewer Iraqis applying for asylum in February 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 (-40 per cent) (EUAA 2021).

From a gender perspective, male asylum seekers represent the majority of applicants throughout the last decade, reaching a high of 75.1 per cent in 2015. However, the ratio of female asylum migrants first increased in 2010–12 and then again in 2016 to 38.28 per cent and in 2017 to 40.82 per cent, to subsequently decrease from 2018 (Figure 3.2). Given time lags between actual migration and asylum applications, these data corroborate Kofman's findings concerning the shift towards more women, children and families arriving in Greece before late 2015 and the beginning of 2016, whereas 'following the EU–Turkey Statement concluded on 18 March 2016, a more male adult profile re-emerged' as the crossings became riskier (Kofman 2019: 2187). Pickering and Powell (2017: 108) relate the increase in women and children migration to the belief that 'they

are more likely to be granted asylum (compared to male and/or adult asylum seekers) and can then pave the way for family reunification.’



**Figure 3.2:** Asylum applications in the EU-28 countries by Iraqi nationals, 2013–2019 (gender breakdown)

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

### 3.3 Unpacking complexities in the EU-bound migration from Iraq along the EMR

To understand the complexities of patterns of mixed migration originating from Iraq and arriving in the EU, a closer look at the drivers of migration, and how they play out throughout the different contexts in which the journey unfolds (i.e., origin, transit, arrival), is necessary. The following paragraphs analyse the main factors that individually and more importantly in their interaction contributed to shaping the trajectories followed by the Iraqis who left their country over the last decade.

#### 2.3.4 Deciding to leave: Violence, uncertainty and socio-economic injustice at home

The recent history of conflict and violence in Iraq represents the background against which thousands of Iraqis – with differing degrees of exposure to direct and indirect effects of conflict, violence and socio-economic backgrounds – made the choice to leave their country. Even if it is difficult to establish a direct

correlation between conflict and migration, the two elements are certainly related and fed each other in the Iraqi context.

Following the civil war in 2006–8, tensions, even if occurring at a slower pace, were far from having disappeared. The many deadly attacks launched by armed groups in the months accompanying and following the US withdrawal from Iraq – which began in June 2009 and was completed in December 2011 (Markey 2013) – likely played a role in the high numbers of people attempting to irregularly cross to the EU via the EMR. These, although lower when compared to previous years, remained high in absolute terms. However, the rapid escalation of violence in 2013–14 was immediately reflected in an increase in arrivals or asylum applications either at the EU external borders or in the region. While this confirms that an intensification of violence per se does not automatically translate into rising migration, the direct and indirect effects of a fragile security situation on the population likely contributed to the perception of dim prospects for the future together with socio-economic insecurity and fed into the decision of many to leave Iraq.

This also applies to the spillover effects of the Syrian war and the peak in arrivals in Europe in 2015–16. Starting from the end of 2013, ISIS gradually expanded its control over important areas of Iraq, seizing as much as a third of the country's territory including its second-largest city, Mosul. Brutal human rights abuses on civilians and minority groups, especially women (Marczak 2018), were committed and massive displacement took place. More than 6 million people have been displaced in Iraq due to the war and over 1 million people are still unable to return to their homes.

As noted by Costantini and Palani (2020: 3), a relationship between internal displacement and forced migration exists. The boundaries between the two have proved to be not necessarily clear-cut, and the two phenomena are not mutually exclusive. In the Iraqi case, internal displacement has sometimes transformed into displacement beyond national borders. Long-lasting, exhausting internal displacement, together with poor living conditions, have led the majority of Iraqis involved in Costantini and Palani's research to 'desire to leave Iraq' specifically while experiencing displacement within the country.

Unsurprisingly, different experiences of and exposure to violence impacted migration aspirations and patterns. This is true for both minority groups that have suffered from persecution and internal displacement the most – such as Yazidis (Costantini and Palani 2020; Crawley et al. 2016) – and for Iraqis coming from governorates particularly impacted by the war – namely Anbar and Ninewa

provinces.<sup>4</sup> The violence experienced in Iraq in its recent history is also gendered. Sexual and gender-based violence has been described as a constitutive element of ISIS's idea of a 'hyper-masculine' Islamic state (Ahram 2015). Yet, as Al-Ali (2018: 10) notes, the genocidal dimension of gender-based violence as it has been pursued by ISIS does not happen in a vacuum and needs to be contextualised in the 'historical background of broader sexual and gender-based violence' in both pre- and post-invasion Iraq. This has partly reflected the composition of migration outflows, with more men than women being able to leave the country as a result of women's restricted 'access to and control over the resources needed to migrate' (Neumayer and Plümper 2021: 2) due to 'the strong patriarchal tradition which often impinges the rights of women' (Ullah 2017: 59).

Following the internationally backed military counter-offensive against ISIS, Iraqi prime minister al-Abadi declared victory over ISIS in December 2017. In 2015–17, the non-linear decreasing violence in Iraq<sup>5</sup> was partially reflected in the equally non-linear reduction in the volume of irregular crossings recorded by Frontex on the EMR and in the number of asylum applications. This probably matches some restoration of Iraqis' hopes for the future following the symbolic declaration of victory over ISIS.

However, in 2018 unauthorised crossings on the EMR increased again by almost a quarter, pointing out that the lack of physical security is not the only, nor necessarily the major driver for migration. Once the armed conflict was over and the emergency management of the crisis gave way to ordinary politics, the inability and unwillingness of the ruling class to face Iraq's structural problems became clear to the public. Poor infrastructure and basic services and the lack of accountability and employment fuelled massive protests in Basra in 2018 and channelled towards a systemic contestation in the October revolution in 2019 (Ali 2019). In both cases, protests were met with harsh repression and many had to flee Iraq. Despite being a phenomenon of relative magnitude, the recent asylum migration of Iraqi activists towards Turkey is worth mentioning (Davison and Aboulenein 2019; Kullab 2021). While not yet constituting a trend (in a narrow sense), this recent pattern in migration dynamics from Iraq adds to

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<sup>4</sup> As emerges from disaggregated data from an IOM study conducted in 2015 (IOM 2016a), most of the Iraqi migrants and asylum seekers interviewed in the study were from the Anbar and Ninewa provinces, two of the hardest hit by conflict-related violence.

<sup>5</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program, *UCDP database: Iraq*, <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/645>.



previous waves of politically motivated out-migration and reiterates the sense of uncertainty still present in today's Iraq.

Growing discontent with the political system alongside socio-economic hardship and injustice constitute the wider context in which the Iraqi society finds itself today whereby the 'lack of hope' in the future already there in 2015 (IOM 2016c: 2) is more present than ever. Socio-economic drivers have always been part of the complex set of factors informing migration outflows from Iraq. While understood not as the very first reason in 2015 (*ibid.*), they have become increasingly important in the following years. In parallel, security-related drivers, especially in their complex relationship with socio-economic marginalisation and its connection with the re-emergence of ISIS in peripheral areas, remain important in understanding migration patterns from Iraq. Furthermore, the spillover effects of the US-Iran geopolitical confrontation and its manifestation on Iraqi soil add further strain to the country's insecurity.

### **2.3.5 Out of Iraq: Material and immaterial barriers in the neighbourhood**

For those leaving Iraq, Turkey represents the gateway to Europe. Besides flight connections, there are two main ways to enter Turkey from Iraq, both by land: through the Ibrahim Khalil crossing in Iraqi Kurdistan and through Syria. Thus, Turkey and Syria are the two main transit countries for Iraqis along their journey towards Europe. This section analyses how the context in these two countries has evolved throughout the last decade and how the emergence and/or production of immaterial and material barriers in transit countries have affected EU-bound migration from Iraq.

In 2011, by the time the Syrian conflict began and the US troops had completed their withdrawal from Iraq, the majority of the 1 million Iraqis outside their homeland were in Syria (Chatty and Mansour 2011). There, they made up 93 per cent of all refugees in the country, which remained the top destination for Iraqis until 2015 (UN Population Division 2015). Yet, the conflict soon turned Syria into a transit country, the crossing of which became extremely risky and expensive specifically because of the war. Many reported trying to enter Syria more than once (even up to nine or ten attempts) and once there, smuggling services became essential to get around and cross ISIS-controlled territories (IOM 2016a). Moreover, it is estimated that the average cost for the journey was as expensive as 1,200 to 1,500 US dollars in 2016 (*ibid.*).

After crossing Syria or the Turkish-Iraqi frontier, the subsequent section of the journey towards Europe occurs in Turkey. Although part of the 1951 UN

Convention on the Status of Refugees, Turkey retains a geographical limitation to ‘events occurring in Europe’ for its application, meaning that Iraqis cannot be granted full refugee status but must rather refer to the Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection. Precarious immigration status combined with inadequate social services, exclusion from the labour market, and/or insufficient salary has pushed many Iraqis to refrain from settling in Turkey, conceiving of it as mainly a transit country (Leghtas and Sullivan 2017; Crawley et al. 2016) and continuing their journey towards Europe. In February 2022, only 4,565 Iraqis were refugees in Turkey (UNHCR 2022) but 162,760 more were seeking asylum in the country, representing the top nationality of asylum seekers in Turkey. The length of procedures both for obtaining the right to be resettled to a third country (MacGregor 2019) and for gaining protection in Turkey (Leghtas and Sullivan 2017) has ended up extending the stay of many Iraqis dealing with the Turkish asylum system for years, turning Turkey into a *de facto* country of settlement.

While at the beginning of the Syrian war Turkey did not apply border restrictions and was more inclined to provide protection, as the war prolonged and the numbers peaked in 2015, a tougher approach was applied and the living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers deteriorated. Turkey’s “open-door” policy started to be replaced by a “closed-door” policy in practice, which was already operative since 2012 but then became more visible also thanks to NGO reporting (Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019: 18). Poor living conditions got worse during the Covid-19 pandemic when refugees confronted a ‘double emergency’ trying not to contract ‘the virus on the one hand, and [...] access basic needs and livelihoods on the other’ (Kirişci and Yavcan 2020). This became more and more challenging, as 63 per cent of the participants in a study on Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Turkey conducted in Spring 2020 said they had ‘difficulty in reaching food’ and 53 per cent in ‘meeting their basic hygiene requirements’ (SGDD-ASAM 2020: 13). Moreover, border closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic are believed to have potentially added ‘to the drivers that fuel human smuggling, making migrants and refugees more vulnerable to exploitation’ (Adal 2021: 15).

Pressures coming from the EU for more efficient border and migration management, formalised in the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, together with domestic political and economic pressures, were soon translated into material and immaterial barriers at entry and exit points in Turkey. Physical barriers to the external Turkish borders were built, with the erection of a security wall along the border with Syria completed by December 2017, works in progress for the construction of a barrier at the Iranian border and rumours about the

willingness for similar border management strategies for the Iraqi and Armenian borders (Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019).

Changes in visa policies also help explain shifts in migration dynamics. Before September 2016, there was no need to request a visa in advance for Iraqis willing to enter Turkey from the Iraqi Kurdistan, and more than two-thirds of those who entered Turkey in 2015–16 did so legally (Crawley et al. 2016). With the tightening of controls and requirements in 2016 (IOM 2016b), the routes followed and modalities used by Iraqis to cross Turkey and get to Europe were impacted. Moreover, while the EU-Turkey Statement sought to crack down on smuggling and to create safe alternatives for migrants on paper, it paradoxically ‘encouraged new practices among smugglers, such as changing prices and means of transport [...] and increased violence against and exploitation of migrants by the smugglers for some cases’ (Yıldız 2021: 151). In this regard, the Black Sea route was emerging as an alternative back in 2016, especially for those Iraqi nationals who turned to smugglers to get to Romania and then Europe from Iraq (Hilton and Cupolo 2017).

Following the EU-Turkey Statement, exiting Turkey became increasingly difficult due to stricter controls, especially at the sea border. In addition, through EU pressure on and ‘cooperation’ with the Western Balkan countries and Greece, the exits from Greece to these countries, as well as border-crossings throughout the Western Balkans region, were made more difficult, resulting in the closure of the Balkan route.

### **2.3.6 Experiencing disillusionment about an idealised Europe**

The perception of European countries as being generally safe, respectful of human rights and open has long been in place among Iraqis and certainly played a role in their decision to attempt a journey towards the EU. However, it was the lack of safe alternatives in the region that turned Europe into the main destination for Iraqi asylum seekers and migrants in 2015 (IOM 2016c).

The high expectations, even idealisation, of Europe were often not met by the reality experienced on the ground. Disappointment and frustration regarding the length and unpredictability of the asylum process as well as poor living conditions were commonly reported (IOM 2016b). The lack of adequate information, mainly obtained via word of mouth, social networks and the internet, has contributed to producing distorted images of the intended destination for asylum seekers and migrants heading towards Europe (IOM 2016c). Once in the desired destination, many found themselves in a completely different situation from that pre-experienced in their imaginary future, such as in the case of many

Iraqis arriving in Finland in 2015 who, attracted by the idea of building a new life in a peaceful, democratic Nordic country, ultimately had their asylum request rejected (Koikkalainen et al. 2020).

Moreover, LGBTQI+ refugees experience specific challenges. They are requested to fit themselves into Western-defined categories for receiving asylum (Nasser-Eddin et al. 2018: 183). Refugees' burden to prove their 'gayness' is particularly problematic not only because it plays on 'gendered stereotypes of homosexuality' but also because not all persons with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity identify with LGBTQI+ categories or they might not want to come out. For women, the closing of legal routes for family reunification has not only left mothers and children in precarious situations in origin, host and transit countries where they are more likely exposed to gender-based violence (Roupetz et al. 2020: 10), but the hardening of the EU's borders 'has rendered refugee women increasingly at risk of violence and exploitation' by smugglers, but also by 'guards and volunteers in reception centres' (Holvikivi and Reeves 2020). The Common European Asylum System and existing asylum policies remain gender-blind and insufficient to protect women from gender-based violence and trafficking (Boland and Tschalaer 2021).

Considering the period 2009–20, there have been over 482,775 asylum applications from Iraqi nationals, of which almost half were lodged in Germany, followed by Sweden (40,505), Greece (32,655) and Finland (31,930). While Germany, Sweden and Finland have long represented countries of refuge for Iraqis, with Germany recording the highest number of asylum applications in the EU every year throughout the last decade, and Sweden always in the top ten, many EU countries saw the number of asylum applications from Iraqis peak in 2015. The most evident example is Greece, a country that went from the thirteenth ranking in 2015 to third in 2016, and subsequently remained in second position until today.<sup>6</sup> The establishment of the geographical restriction prohibiting asylum seekers from leaving the place where they first applied for protection turned Greek islands into hotspots and de facto destinations (Dimitriadi 2016). In the German case, it was after Merkel's *Willkommenspolitik* announced in September 2015 that the number of Iraqi asylum applications peaked, to decrease again in 2017. A survey conducted in 2016 among Iraqi migrants who travelled along the Western Balkan route reveals that Germany was the preferred destination for 70 per cent of them; and for 26 per cent of respondents on the Aegean islands, the reason for choosing Germany was family reunification (REACH 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> Author's own analysis based on Eurostat data.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Despite the slowdown in border-crossings and new arrivals of Iraqis in Europe over the last few years, enduring insecurity, socio-economic injustice and recurring human rights abuses in the country make the discussion on migration outflows from Iraq far from outdated.

If pandemic-related border closures and travel restrictions (IOM 2020) seem to have contributed to reducing the numbers, with fewer Iraqis applying for asylum in February 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 (-40 per cent) (EUAA 2021), in the medium to long run the multidimensional impact of the pandemic on the structural fragilities of the country will likely feature among the factors leading more Iraqis to consider leaving their country. On top of that, climate change effects, by intensifying water insecurity and fostering increasingly frequent dust and sand storms, droughts, heatwaves and flooding, are already affecting thousands of livelihoods in what the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) defines as the ‘fifth-most vulnerable country to climate breakdown’ (IOM 2022a: 5; UNEP 2019). According to the IOM, more than 20,000 Iraqis were displaced due to water scarcity at the end of 2021 (IOM 2022a: 5). Yet, the magnitude of the phenomenon is probably greater as many others who remain invisible to data may have also left their homes as a coping strategy vis-à-vis climate change effects.

The analysis of factors driving migration from Iraq highlights their structural nature, calling for a holistic, multidimensional and long-term approach. Yet the EU, for its part, has recently confirmed the predominance of a hyper-securitised rationale informing its approach to migration and asylum governance. This features in its recently approved 2021–7 multi-annual financial framework that enormously increases the share of public European money dedicated to the Integrated Border Management Fund (+131 per cent) and agencies such as Frontex and Europol (+129 per cent) compared to the previous budgetary cycle (Jones et al. 2022). It also redirects development aid towards migration management and, most importantly, does not provide any funding for search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean (*ibid.*).

Following the general approach and in line with the (mis)management of the EU-Belarus border crisis in November 2021 (Human Rights Watch 2021), the EU is now focussing its cooperation with Iraq in the migration domain on voluntary and non-voluntary returns, pressuring Iraqi authorities to collaborate more decisively on the latter by also playing the card of implementing visa restrictions for Iraqi nationals (European Commission 2021). This makes the management of the ongoing massive return migration to Iraq even more

difficult, as it concerns almost 5 of the 6 million Iraqis who had been displaced during the war against ISIS and have gone back to their homes, or what is left of those, in 2014–21.

The disruption of social relations, insecurity, difficulties in accessing housing, land and property as well as livelihoods and economic security, represent, according to the IOM, some of the greatest obstacles to reintegration facing Iraqi returnees (IOM 2022b, 2021). Yet, the current EU strategy vis-à-vis migration governance in Iraq as formalised in the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and operationalised in the recent Operational Coordination Mechanism for the External Dimension of Migration (Statewatch 2022), focuses on returns without adequately addressing any of these issues, nor the drivers of migration in origin and transit countries. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, complemented by bilateral cooperation agreements with Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Germany as well as informal arrangements with Syria and Turkey pursuing the same logic, envisages – at least on paper – a ‘comprehensive dialogue on all migration-related issues, including illegal migration, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, as well as the inclusion of the migration concerns in the national strategies for economic and social development of the areas from which migrants originate’ (European Union and Iraq 2012). However, the lack of legal channels for migration and adequate assistance to and protection of people leaving their countries, including from abuses linked to human trafficking and smuggling, do not figure as a priority in the EU’s action, which instead remains centred on externalising border and mobility control, regardless of the dramatic consequences for populations in third countries.

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Daniela Huber

## Chapter 4 Syrian refugees' trajectories: From civil war through insecure livelihoods in transit/host contexts to fortified European borders

**Abstract:** While Syria has historically been a place of refuge, migration from Syria was already growing before the revolution in 2011, mainly driven by the aggressive liberalisation of the Syrian economy in combination with an authoritarian upgrading of Bashar Al-Assad and his repressive policies, as well as mounting conflicts and tensions in Syria's neighbourhood (Iraq but also Lebanon) as a result of US geopolitics in the region. With the onset of the war in Syria, the majority of refugees initially sought shelter in the direct neighbourhood, but from 2013/14 onwards the refugee flow towards Europe also augmented, as the war turned increasingly violent while access to and livelihood conditions in host countries (less in Turkey, more in Jordan and especially in Lebanon under multiple crises) also became more difficult, particularly for men. In response to the so-called 'migration crisis' in 2015, the European Union has toughened up its borders through three principal practices: the building of walls/fences, the crackdown on 'smuggling networks', and the use of illegal push-backs which all make the journey extremely dangerous, particularly for women and children; as well as the hotspots approach on the Greek islands where refugees are detained in inhumane conditions.

**Keywords:** Syrian refugees | geopolitical context | multiple crises | gender | European borders

Syria has historically been a 'place of refuge' (Chatty 2017: ix) since the time period in which the Ottoman Empire began to disintegrate, as Western powers and with them the idea of the 'nation state' penetrated the region (Kamel 2019). A time of enormous upheaval, dispossession and displacement came in various waves, lasting until today. The first waves of migrants, driven out by ethnocentric violence of new nationalist projects, included the European Muslims from the Caucasus and the Balkans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Greeks of Crete, Russians after the Bolshevik revolution, Armenians during World War I and the Palestine refugees in 1948 (and in 1967). The war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 also generated a temporary but important wave of departure towards Syria. A next wave of refugees came with the end of the Cold War when

the US established its military power on the Arabian Peninsula. There were various smaller waves such as refugees from Kuwait in 1990, but there has also been the significant refugee wave from Iraq, following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which constantly augmented the more the war became sectarianised, particularly in 2006–07 (see chapter on Iraq in this volume).

Vis-à-vis all these waves, Syria upheld a long regional tradition which Dawn Chatty (2017: 9) has described as ‘local cosmopolitanism or conviviality’, integrating successive waves of refugees into its societal fabric. Thus, on the eve of the Arab uprisings, Syria acted as a destination country, mainly for refugees from the region, hosting 568,730 Palestine refugees (UNRWA 2022) and 500,000 Iraqi refugees in 2011 (De Bel-Air 2016: 4). About 1.5 million Iraqis ‘have transited through Syria between 2003 and 2011’ (*ibid.*). Syria also represented a host and transit country from Asia and Africa, hosting refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Pakistan (JRC 2019). In addition, it received some inward economic migration for domestic work from Asian countries (75,000–100,000) (De Bel-Air 2016: 4).

In terms of being an ‘origin country’, before the onset of the conflict, one can differentiate various waves. As Samir Aïta has pointed out, the first wave happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to the Americas. ‘More than one quarter of the then Syrian population emigrated’ (Aïta 2010: 238). A next wave emerged in 1958 with the founding of the United Arab Republic, the short-lived pan-Arabist Union between Egypt and Syria which led to the leaving of industrialists, bankers and businessmen to Lebanon. Another wave from 1960–81 went to the Arab oil-producing states, but was stopped by policies in those states to limit such migration. The third wave, between 1990 and 2004, has been ‘different in nature, as it was a circular non-permanent migration mainly to Lebanon and Jordan (non-qualified workers), but also to the Gulf countries (mostly qualified)’ (*ibid.*).

After 2005, an increasingly complex picture has emerged in which individual migration decisions were taken in a context of highly conflictual geopolitics in the region, authoritarian restructuring and repression in Syria, as well as a deteriorating economic situation, which have all intensely impacted the daily life of Syrians. Regionally, the US-led invasion into Iraq caused a massive Iraqi refugee flow which put pressure on the Syrian labour market. Further to that, the Bush administration also pushed Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon in 2005, followed in 2006 by a war between Hezbollah and Israel. Both events led to attacks on Syrian workers in Lebanon, a reduction of circular labour migration to Lebanon, as well as the inflow of refugees from Lebanon into Syria. Nonetheless, it is estimated that before the war in Syria, about half a million Syrians worked

in Lebanon (Mehchy and Doko 2011: 3), representing about one seventh of the Syrian labour force.

This happened at the same time as the country's economy was aggressively liberalised, following IMF-recommended structural adjustment policies which were combined with an 'authoritarian upgrading' pursued by Bashar Al-Assad. Raymond Hinnebusch has described this as a transition from a populist form of authoritarianism to a neo-liberal version, in which authoritarian 'power was now used to pursue economic liberalization and privatization, in the process shifting public assets to crony capitalist "networks of privilege"' (Hinnebusch 2012: 95). For ordinary Syrians, however, this has meant the loss of jobs in agriculture and industry and an increase of informal and precarious employment, while the social safety net was not expanded: 'the unemployment rate in 2007 was estimated at 22.6 % (14.5 % for men, and 53 % for women)' while '41 % of the working had informal jobs' (Aïta 2010: 205). Women in particular 'have lost around 50 % of their total jobs, and were pushed away from the labour force' (Aïta 2010: 202). Augmented by a devastating drought between 2006 and 2009, this has led to an internal migration from rural to urban areas, increased reliance on non-state actors for social safety, and discontent, principally met by repression and torture through the feared *mukhabarat*.

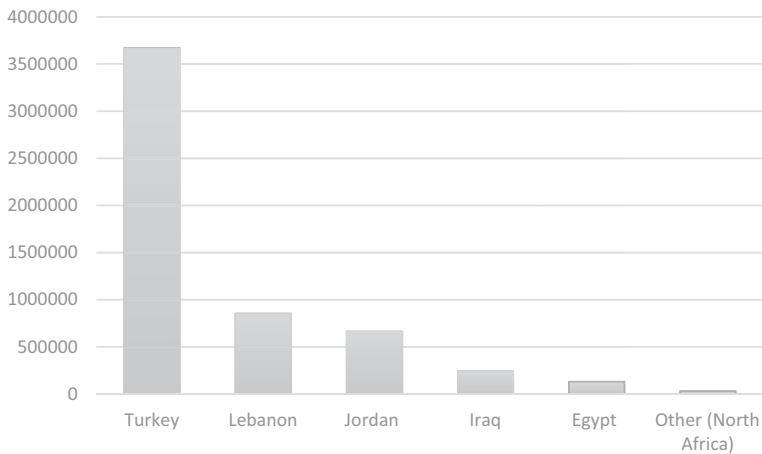
As a result of all these overlapping factors, it is estimated that outward migration from Syria rose from a rate of 0.1 per cent in the early 1990s, to 0.17 per cent in 1995–2000, to what Aïta estimated as between 0.51 per cent and 0.72 per cent in 2009 (Aïta 2010: 239). Besides circular labour migration with Lebanon, as of 2010 major destinations have been Saudi Arabia (700,000), Kuwait (500,000) and the United Arab Emirates (150,000) (Seeberg 2012: 3–4). The share of European member states has been rather low.

In short, while Syria has historically been a place of refuge for many migrants, migration from Syria was already growing before the revolution in 2011, mainly driven by the aggressive liberalisation of the Syrian economy in combination with an authoritarian upgrading of Bashar Al-Assad and its extremely repressive policies, as well as mounting conflicts and tensions in Syria's neighbourhood (Iraq but also Lebanon) as a result of the Bush administration's geopolitics in the region. Thus, outward migration before 2011 can – as in other case studies of this book – not be neatly placed into either 'voluntary' or 'forced' migration, where the former is associated with economic motives, and the latter with political ones. Rather, individual decisions regarding migration also need to be seen in the context of the impact of Western geopolitical and economic policies, as well as an authoritarianism which has become increasingly repressive in Syria.

## 4.1 Syrian displacement in the Middle East and Europe

In 2011, the Syrian revolution began, only to be subsumed in a ravaging civil war. In early 2011, the population of Syria was about 22 million. At the time of writing (April–August 2021), there are 6.7 internally displaced Syrians and 6.6 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2021a). An estimated 362,266 Syrians were killed over the course of the war.<sup>1</sup>

As of today, 5.6 million Syrians have found refuge in the direct neighbourhood, that is, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (as well as Iraq and Egypt). Of all Gulf states, it seems to be only Saudi Arabia which has seen an arrival of perhaps 420,000 Syrian nationals since 2011, as Françoise De Bel Air (2015: 8) has estimated, but it is difficult to access concrete data. The EU hosts over 1 million Syrian refugees, 59 per cent of them in Germany and 11 per cent in Sweden (UNHCR 2022). Thus, the EU hosts about 15 per cent of all Syrian refugees. These numbers are different for the Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS). Currently up to 280,000 PRS are displaced in Syria, and 120,000 have become refugees outside of Syria. Estimates are that ‘between 2011 and 2016 nearly 85,000 PRS sought asylum in Europe’ (Tucker 2018: 2). Concrete numbers are difficult to obtain since Palestine refugees register as ‘stateless’, ‘unknown’ or ‘Palestine’ in the EU and so might also originate from Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Given that UNRWA estimates that about 31,000 PRS currently remain in Lebanon (UNRWA 2021), it is likely that the EU hosts about 70 per cent of the Palestine refugees from Syria.



**Figure 4.1:** Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (as of 2021)

Source: UNHCR (2021a).

<sup>1</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program, *UCDP database: Syria*, <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/652>.



When looking at the ‘irregular’ crossings of Syrian refugees into the European Union in the last decade, data provided by Frontex (see Table 4.1 below) suggest that the numbers slightly increased with the onset of the war. However, the majority of refugees in the initial phase of the conflict sought shelter in the direct neighbourhood of their country.

**Table 4.1:** Crossings of Syrians on the EMR (sea and land total), 2009–2020

Year	Irregular crossings by Syrians	total crossings	Syrians as % of total crossings
2009	538	39,973	1.35
2010	634	55,688	1.14
2011	1,292	57,025	2.27
2012	7,122	37,224	19.13
2013	12,727	24,798	51.32
2014	31,673	50,834	62.31
2015	496,340	885,386	56.06
2016	84,585	182,277	46.4
2017	16,395	42,319	38.74
2018	13,906	56,560	24.59
2019	19,604	83,333	23.52
2020	4,696	20,280	23.16

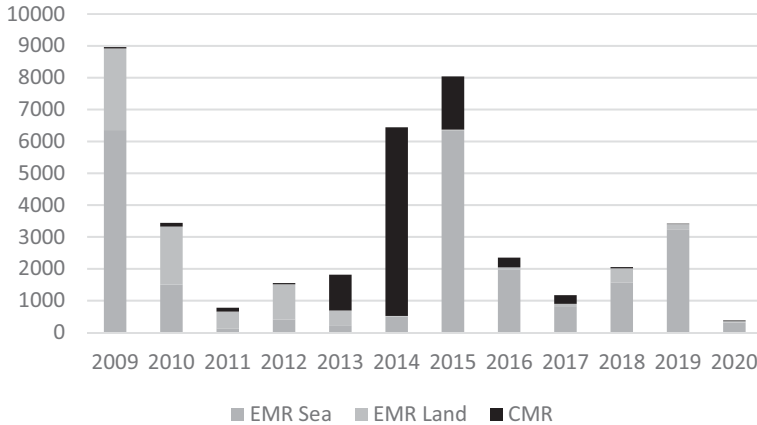
*Source:* Author’s elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

The summer periods of 2013 and 2014 saw more Syrian refugees coming through the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) than through the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR). This changed in 2015, which saw a massive increase of crossing into the EU, mainly through the sea border at the EMR, particularly from April 2015 through early 2016 when it decreased, with a further drop in 2017, and then in particular in 2020.

The curve is different for the Palestine refugees.<sup>2</sup> As evident in Figure 4.2, one can note a marked increase of Palestine refugees seeking refuge in the EU already in 2014, and the figure also shows a marked shift from the EMR to the CMR in

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Frontex data are not split by the country the Palestine refugees previously resided in; rather, these individuals are registered as ‘Palestine’ or ‘stateless’. Thus, Palestine refugees could be from Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan

2013, and back to the EMR particularly in 2014 after which the crossings at the CMR ebb slowly off.



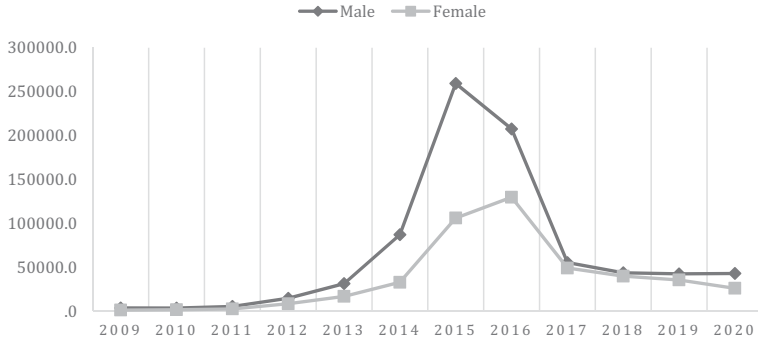
**Figure 4.2:** Routes of Palestine refugees, 2009–2020

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

Statistics on asylum applications by Syrian nationals in the EU in the 2009–2020 period show clear parallels to the timing and volume of irregular arrivals, illustrating the predominantly conflict-driven nature of the population movement from particularly 2013 onwards. Furthermore, it is notable that the more the curve of Syrian asylum applications increases, the higher the male ratio becomes in the curve, as seen in Figure 4.3. It should be noted here that while ‘women and girls make up half of the world’s refugees and half of global migrants’, when it comes to the EU, only around 32 per cent of all asylum applicants have been women (Passey 2017). For the Syrian refugees the ratio is higher.

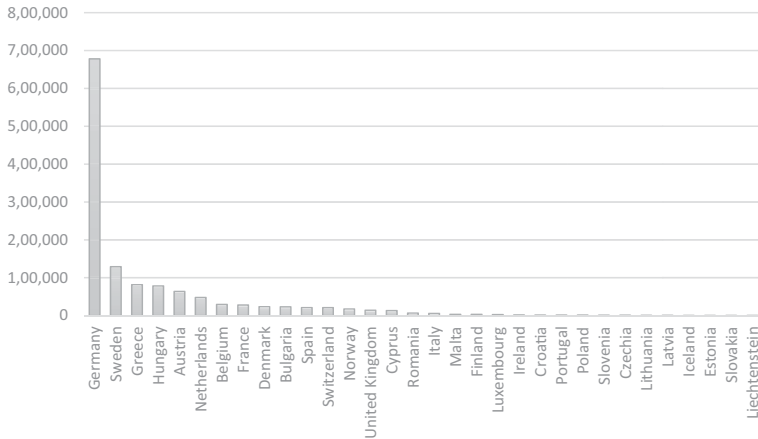
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or elsewhere, but the numbers still give an indication on their origin. For example, the arrival of Palestine refugees in 2009 is most likely connected to the 2009 Israeli war on Gaza and its blockade (other wars on Gaza happened in 2014 and 2021). In the 2013–14 period, these are likely Palestine refugees from Syria, coming directly from Syria but also Lebanon.



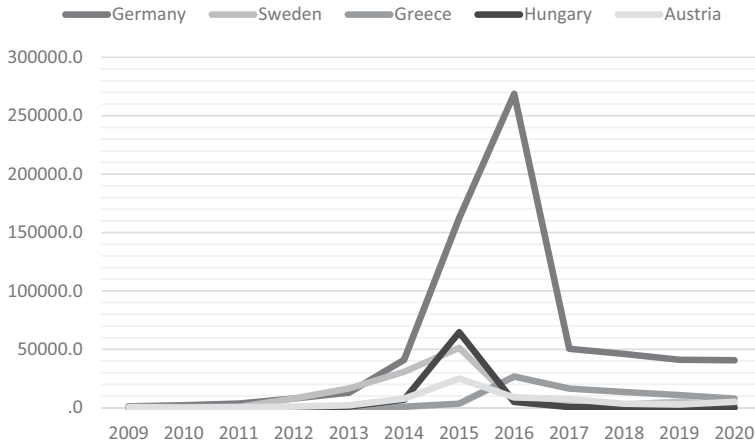
**Figure 4.3:** Asylum applications by Syrian nationals by gender in EU-27, 2009–2020  
*Source:* Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

In terms of the overall number of asylum applications lodged by Syrian nationals in different EU member states in the period under consideration, Germany and Sweden top the list, followed by Greece, Hungary, Austria and the Netherlands.



**Figure 4.4:** Syrian asylum applications by country, 2009–2020  
*Source:* Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

Whilst Germany (and to a lesser extent Sweden) has been the key country in which Syrian nationals lodged their asylum applications, Hungary and Austria figured highly during 2015–16, but were then overtaken by Greece in 2016, which remained the second country until 2020. Also Cyprus sees continuing relative high numbers from 1,020 in 2015, to 2,665 in 2019 and 1,760 in 2020.



**Figure 4.5:** Syrian asylum applications over time in major destination countries in the EU, 2009–2020

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

Summing up, the most notable trends are that the EU hosts only 15 per cent of the Syrian refugees (and an estimated 70 per cent of the PRS), chiefly in Germany and Sweden, as well as – particularly since 2016 – in Greece. The refugee flow from Syria augmented in the 2013–14 period (through the CMR), but the massive increase came in the EMR in 2015 through early 2016 when it decreased with notable drops in 2017 and in 2020.

## 4.2 Analysis of drivers across origin, transit, host and destination contexts

### 4.2.1 The evolution of the war in Syria as the primary driver

In terms of Syria as an ‘origin country’, as seen in the first section of this chapter, outward migration was already accelerating before the onset of the war, connected

to the very same dynamics which set a (geo)political and socio-economic context in which the war eventually evolved in different phases.

Almost immediately with the onset of the revolution in 2011, the government responded with violent force, leading opposition groups to accept foreign funding and arms. From 2012 onwards, there was a rapid proliferation of armed non-state actors, the state lost control over various areas and Syria became territorially fractured. The rivalry between opposition forces and their external funders further aggravated violence (Hokayem 2013). As a result, numbers of deaths began to escalate from 2012 onwards, and particularly in 2013–14.

2014 was a changing moment, as the dramatic increase in foreign fighters and the rise of ISIL further escalated violence as ISIL seized large swaths of Syrian territory. Both the US and Russia entered the war and the group has been defeated only in 2018. Turkey engaged in direct military interventions in Northern Syria from 2016 onwards. The Syrian government, supported by Russia and Iran, gradually recaptured territory and controls most of it today, while Russia and Iran remain militarily present. At the time of writing, two main areas in Syria are not under government control, that is Idlib and the Turkish-occupied area in Northern Syria, as well as the Kurdish Democratic Autonomous Administration in the north-east which also features a US presence.

From the very beginning, civilians were deliberately targeted by the Assad regime, one of the most horrific examples being the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus in 2013 (UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic 2013). During the course of the war, war crimes including forced displacement attest to widespread demographic engineering policies, particularly around what President Bashar Al Assad framed as ‘useful Syria’, ‘which included the most important and connected governorates under the regime control’ (Alijla 2021: 161). All non-state actors, including Kurdish militias, also enforced demographic change.

Furthermore, some population groups such as the PRS were also particularly exposed to violence, and three of the twelve UNRWA refugee camps (Yarmouk, Dera’a and Ein el-Tal) in Syria have been almost completely destroyed (MacCloskey 2020). Also, some people were specifically targeted or particularly exposed, such as political activists, men who feared being conscripted to state or non-state military forces, or wealthier Syrians who are more at risk of being kidnapped for ransom (Crawley et al. 2016: 41). LGBTQI+ communities have been persecuted in the war in Syria particularly by the Islamic State (Kivilcim 2017: 26). Whilst there is not sufficient research on the situation of women in Syria and on gender discrimination as a factor driving migration from Syria,

Nour Abu-Assab has pointed out that women challenged patriarchy in the Syrian revolution, but

while shifts in gender dynamics have occurred, and took place in the case of Syria post- 2011, these shifts are limited in nature and will not necessarily have a long-lasting impact. [...] [W]hen circumstances changed women were pushed back into the private sphere again, due to security concerns. (Abu-Assab 2017: 25)

Beyond the direct threat to physical safety, the conflict has also led to a massive destruction of infrastructure (housing, schools, hospitals, factories, power, water, sanitation, transport, communication). Generally speaking, some regions such as Aleppo and Idlib have been heavily affected and others less so, such as Damascus centre, Tartus or Lattkia (Abu-Ismaïl et al. 2020: 51). The impact on the economy has been massive, and the jobless rate has risen from 8 per cent in 2010 to 55 per cent in 2017 (75 per cent among youth) (Abu-Ismaïl et al. 2020: 65). As a result of all these factors and developments, internal and international displacement have been exponentially growing in the Syrian conflict, between 2013 and 2017 in particular.

Initially, people sought refuge in the neighbouring countries, probably also assuming the conflict might cease. When, instead, it became increasingly violent and also clear that it would not end soon, refugees attempted to reach the EU directly. Crawley et al. (2016: 25) highlighted that a considerably big portion of people who arrived in Greece in 2015 (45 per cent of their sample) arrived in less than one month after leaving Syria, indicating that many in that period had left Syria with reaching the EU in mind and only crossed through other countries on the way.

The evolution of the Syrian conflict clearly has been a primary driver to which the international community has failed to respond as Russia has blocked the UN Security Council, while the EU has engaged in humanitarian policies, but has diplomatically/politically largely ignored the conflict, including after the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015. However, the refugee flow to the EU also increased in the 2013–15 period due to secondary drivers (Crawley et al. 2016), that is due to the conditions in hosting countries, which will be examined next.

#### **4.2.2 Secondary drivers: The situation in host/transit countries in Syria’s direct neighbourhood**

At the dawn of the Syrian civil war Lebanon and Jordan were already major refugee-hosting countries. The two countries host a large number of Palestine refugees (479,537 and 2,307,011 respectively) (UNRWA 2022). Since the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon also host an increasing

number of Afghan and Iraqi refugees. With the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey has become the country that hosts the largest refugee population in the world, while Lebanon holds the largest refugee population per capita in the world. Lebanon and Jordan have never signed the Refugee Convention (due to the Palestine refugee issue), while Turkey has signed it but limits its geographical application to Europe. Nonetheless, it should be noted that all of them are evidencing a comparatively high degree of societal hospitality.

Furthermore, all the serious policy shortcomings, which will be evidenced in the following, also need to be seen in light of challenging economic contexts evolving in Turkey, Jordan and particularly Lebanon. Turkey is a newly industrialised country which is economically far better situated than Jordan or Lebanon, and it also has strong state capacities to respond to a refugee emergency in which it does not necessarily need the support of UNHCR or the EU – which makes it relatively less dependent on these actors as compared to Lebanon and Jordan. However, since 2018, Turkey has entered into a currency and debt crisis with high inflation and rising unemployment and poverty, also augmented by the Covid pandemic. Jordan is an emerging market economy, but economic growth in the country has significantly slowed; under the Covid-19 pandemic its economy has further contracted and unemployment has grown (among youth to 50 per cent) (World Bank 2022). Lebanon is a lower-middle-income economy but since 2019 has been facing an existential financial crisis, Covid-19 and the devastating explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020.

In terms of their admission policies, at the beginning of the war in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey adopted an *open-border* attitude towards refugees from Syria. Lebanon initially adopted a non-policy towards the refugees, referring to them as displaced persons rather than refugees, and adopting a ‘no camp policy’. As a result, refugees from the very beginning had to stay with families or friends, pay for housing, or live in informal camps such as tent settlements in the Bekaa valley, or in the Palestine refugee camps. Jordan has provided recognition of the Syrian refugees based on a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR in which it recognised the refugee definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention (including the principle of non-refoulement). It has set up three camps (plus two temporary camps) which host about 18 per cent of the refugee population (Abu-Ismaïl et al. 2020: 27). The effects of the refugee inflow on the local economies in both countries have been significant. For example, in border zones in Jordan rental prices have tripled or quadrupled (Achilli et al. 2017: 14), while in some parts of Lebanon they rose ‘by more than 200 per cent in a period of six months’ (Masri and Srouf 2014: 38).

Regarding Turkey, due to its geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention, non-European beneficiaries of international protection, including Syrians, do not benefit from full refugee status (Okyay 2019: 8). Turkey initially referred to the Syrian refugees as “guest[s]” who only enjoy temporary protection, thereby granting them no legal rights and assuming a short stay (İçduygu and Millet 2016: 2–4). In 2013, Ankara enacted the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which introduced the temporary protection status for the Syrian refugees (Okyay 2019: 8). The status was further specified in the Temporary Protection Regulation of October 2014. As İçduygu and Millet (2016: 4) have pointed out, this approach ‘keeps Syrians under “temporary protection” and therefore hinders their ability to integrate and acquire permanent settlement in Turkey’. At first, a bigger share of the refugee population was provided shelter in camps; gradually camps were closed and refugees have spread across Turkey, with no comprehensive housing assistance.

With the intensification of the war in Syria, all three countries began to realise that the refugees would not be temporary, while the impact of the war and the refugee crisis on the neighbouring host countries was increasingly felt. The rise of ISIS, in particular, was also perceived as a threat in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. A new phase commenced in which all countries became more restrictive to deter and thwart new arrivals, and in the case of Lebanon also to incentivise returns or departures to other destinations.

In 2013 Lebanon began to tighten border control, particularly restricting Palestine refugees from Syria, which further intensified in May 2014 when the entry of all PRS was prohibited. Also, Jordan introduced restrictions in 2013, specifically against unaccompanied men without family ties, people without documentation, Palestine refugees or Iraqi refugees in Syria. While Syrian refugees in the region fall under the UNHCR’s protection mandate, this does not apply to the PRS who – in Jordan and Lebanon (but not in Turkey) – fall under UNRWA’s mandate. As opposed to UNHCR, however, UNRWA does not have a protection mandate. Thus, there is a protection gap of Palestinians in secondary forced displacement (Erakat 2014). Basic services are denied to PRS, who are in continuous danger of deportation. They are also more vulnerable as they do not have the same labour networks and rights as Syrian refugees (in terms of employment and property ownership). These conditions and restrictive policies specifically targeting PRS are likely to have played a role in the fact that a higher percentage of PRS were attempting to cross directly to the EU already in 2013–14.

In 2014, Lebanon introduced additional restrictions for all refugees from Syria. Also, the discourse vis-à-vis the refugees changed to representing them as a national economic and security burden (Fakhoury 2017; Rahme 2020b: 16).



In May 2015, the government asked the UNHCR to stop registering refugees. Most of the Syrian refugees now reside ‘illegally’ in Lebanon, which makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation, arrest and detention. From 2016 onwards, political elites also started to call for the return of Syrians and while there is no official policy frame on this, Lebanon’s security agencies and non-state actors (such as Hezbollah or the Free Patriotic Movement) are providing ‘logistics for return’ (Fakhoury 2021). The set of Lebanese policies and non-policies – increasing bureaucratic hurdles and costs which make it harder to find work and sustain life, increasing entry barriers and deteriorating conditions in all of Lebanon – seem to have pushed some refugees to either return or move on to another destination, such as Turkey and then the EU.

In the same time period, also other states such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia ‘imposed harsher visa restrictions on Syrian nationals, and increasingly policed their informal border crossings. By the spring of 2015, this restriction on possible exits out of Syria left Turkey as the main route to escape’ (Crawley et al. 2016: 32). Thus, from the perspective of the Syrian refugees, the constraints on their movement increased on all fronts. In 2015 also Turkey closed down the border, but informal crossings continued (*ibid.*). Turkey cracked down on smugglers, while Syrians have been reportedly imprisoned or pushed back (Hoffmann and Samuk 2016). In 2016, Turkey introduced visa requirements for Syrians and built a 900 km wall at its Syrian border. These policies also need to be seen in the context of the EU-Turkey deal. Turkey also became directly involved militarily in the conflict. It has become engaged in Idlib to prevent a renewed refugee flow to Turkey, and also began to create a buffer zone to which it seeks to return Syrian migrants and where it also engages in demographic engineering (Adar 2020).

However, it is not only admission policies which have acted as secondary drivers, but also insecure livelihoods in host/transit contexts. In all three hosting states, Syrian refugees have access to public health and schooling. A majority of Syrian refugees are children or youth. They can attend public school, but the older Syrian refugee kids become, the more likely they are to drop out of school. Correspondingly, child labour is rather high, particularly for boys. Early marriage for girls is another coping mechanism of refugees. Child labour and early marriage indicate high levels of poverty. UNHCR has estimated poverty of the Syrian refugees at 85 per cent in Jordan (UNHCR 2018), comparing to a poverty rate of 67 per cent among Syrian refugees in Turkey (UNICEF 2017). In Lebanon, poverty has skyrocketed, from 55 per cent of Syrian refugees’ households living under the extreme poverty line in 2019, to 89 per cent in 2020 according to UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP (2021: 82). It should be noted that

access to education is one of the most important factors ‘influencing the decision to travel to Europe, both for those with children and those without’ (Mixed Migration Centre 2016: 4).

The humanitarian response to the crisis has been extremely gender-biased. As Lewis Turner has pointed out regarding the experience of Syrian refugee men in Jordan, whilst ‘women and children are understood as objects of humanitarian care’, ‘men are imagined as power holders who operate in the public, political (i.e., non-humanitarian) sphere’ (Turner 2019: 598). This obscures men’s actual experiences, for example in terms of exploitation, while at the same time controlling women’s experiences through humanitarian governance.

Most refugees work informally in all three countries, which makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. In none of the three hosting states have refugees been able to escape this trap. Most informal work happens in low-skilled positions in sectors such as agriculture, domestic services, construction, textiles and clothing, wholesale/retail trade/repair, accommodation and food. While those with lower education found work in the informal sector often in professions in which they have worked before, those with higher education had difficulties to have their degrees accepted and thus to find work in the respective sectors, even informally, which has likely influenced decisions to move to the EU.

Furthermore, the sudden increase in the offer of informal work has impacted labour markets in all host countries. Jordanians have particularly been crowded out of construction and wholesale/retail trade. Unemployment has also increased for Jordanians from 14.5 to 22.1 per cent between 2011 and 2014 (Stave and Hillesund 2015: 6), particularly for the younger Jordanians (from 19 to 35 per cent in the group aged 15–24 years), lower-educated and poorer sectors of Jordanian society. In Turkey, the effect on the labour market has been multiple, but there has particularly been a displacement ‘from the informal sector due to the arrival of the refugee population’, as well as a ‘net displacement of women and the low educated away from the labour market’ (Pinedo Caro 2020: 2). Employers benefit from a situation in which refugees are forced to accept lower wages and longer working hours, while employers do not pay social benefits.

While employers profit, in a context of the larger macro-economic challenges outlined above, hostilities between the refugee and host communities increase (International Crisis Group 2018), with hostilities typically hitting men harder than women.<sup>3</sup> In Turkey, refugees were initially welcomed by a larger share of

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Rahme has pointed out for Lebanon that men generally report more fears around passing checkpoints or being arrested/detained. ‘Indeed, male refugees are generally

the public, but this attitude has gradually declined (Kirişçi 2021). Increasingly, the country witnesses – so far singular but growing – incidents of community hostility and even xenophobic violence against Syrian refugees (International Crisis Group 2018; Bellut 2021). Particularly exposed to discrimination are also LGBTQI+ refugees, both in host and refugee communities (Odlum 2019). As Kivilcim (2017: 38) has pointed out, this puts them in a particularly vulnerable situation where they need to hide their sexuality while their access to resettlement necessitates an exposure of it: thus, ‘Syrian LGBTs facing violence and discrimination in Turkey consider resettlement in third countries as the only option for a decent future’ (Kivilcim 2017: 38).

The Covid pandemic has further impacted precarious livelihoods, intersecting with other crises, as particularly evident in Lebanon hit by multiple crises. Refugees often live in a housing situation of high density, making social distancing difficult. Furthermore, as Karadağ and Üstübcü point out, refugees are often at ‘risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus in packed workplaces’ (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021: 93). Access to health services has also become more difficult, particularly in the context of Lebanon where hospital services and medication became unaffordable or even unavailable (Trovato et al. 2021: 42). Furthermore, Syrian refugee women are already ‘at heightened risks of SGBV in their host communities’ (Roupetz et al. 2020: 10), and during the pandemic incidences of gender-based violence (GBV) have reportedly also increased in Syrian refugee camps (Diab 2020: 93). Seen in the larger context of the structural violence women refugees are exposed to in host contexts, few ‘exit strategies’ remain for them: leaving for Europe or surviving ‘under solutions suggested by cultural essentialism and local hierarchies’ (Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017: 56). As the pandemic led to an economic downturn (Turkey/Jordan) or happened in an outright economic descent (Lebanon), refugees also lost access to jobs in all countries. In Lebanon in particular, the intersecting crises ‘pushed almost the entire refugee population below the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket’ (Trovato et al. 2021: 26). This has clearly impacted their economic ability to make independent mobility decisions.

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demonised and criminalised in public discourses, a narrative linked to the history between Lebanon and Syria where Syrian men were perceived either as soldiers or as menial workers prone to criminality’ (Rahme 2020a: 33).

### 4.2.3 EU containment strategies vis-à-vis host/transit states: From a humanitarian to a developmental approach

As the refugee crisis in the region has been continuing over a sustained period of time, there has been a shift from a humanitarian emergency response towards a developmental integration approach in host states which has been driven by the UN-led framework of the Global Compact for Refugees, but also represents a containment strategy for the EU. Since the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2015, the EU has principally attempted to make hosting states ‘resilient’. To promote ‘resilience’, the EU has engaged in a significant amount of funding.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Turkey, the EU-Turkey deal was agreed in 2016 to stop irregular migration to the EU; to facilitate the return to Turkey of those irregular migrants who did not apply for asylum, or whose asylum claims were found inadmissible or rejected, and link such return to resettlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey in the EU; to accelerate visa liberalisation for Turkey; and to support Turkey in its integration of refugees through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey.

From 2015 onwards, Jordan has also gradually shifted from a humanitarian to a developmental approach. The 2015 Jordan Response Plan for the Syria crisis ‘represented a paradigm shift’ and from 2016 onwards the Plan focused on the role of the labour market in the integration process (Seeberg 2022: 200). Under the 2016 EU-Jordan Compact, the Jordanian government committed to opening up the labour market to 200,000 Syrian refugees in exchange for more EU aid and a relaxation of EU rules of origin for Jordanian products. However, as Peter Seeberg has pointed out, ‘the Jordan–EU cooperation at the practical level represents solutions which are far from satisfactory’ (Seeberg 2022: 206).

As opposed to Jordan, Lebanon has resisted the EU’s ‘resilience’ approach which aims at normalising the presence of the refugees (Anholt and Sinatti 2020). The 2016 EU-Lebanon Compact does not commit the Lebanese government to open up the labour market to Syrian refugees, and ‘focuses on job creation and business development for the Lebanese’ (Anholt and Sinatti 2020: 325). In Lebanon, there has not been a larger political attempt towards the integration of refugees, and policies have remained ad hoc.

Indeed, as the previous section has highlighted, the life of refugees has remained extremely vulnerable particularly in Lebanon, but also in Turkey and

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<sup>4</sup> As the Commission points out, since 2011 it has spent 27.4 billion euro (ECHO 2022). There have been five Brussels Conferences on the Future of Syria which have mainly focused on humanitarian and development aid (in the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 as the political anchor).

Jordan, despite these countries' shift to a 'development approach', and so might act as a potential driver for secondary movements in the near future. Thus, there is a necessity for the EU to move from the idea of 'containing refugees' to 'responsibility-sharing' beyond financial assistance, and from 'developing others' to a 'multilevel partnership'.

#### **4.2.4 The trajectory towards the EU and EU border practices**

The EU offers a particular socio-economic model that has been of interest particularly for university-educated migrants from Syria. This trend continued when the refugee flow increased, including because of the labour context for the educated in host countries in the region where they have difficulties in having their degrees accepted and finding work in the appropriate sector. Hoffmann and Samuk (2016: 9) found that 'it was primarily the more educated Syrians who sought to travel to Europe, due to lacking work opportunities in Turkey'. Furthermore, as Cummings et al. (2015: 35) claim, Syrians were relatively wealthier than other migrant groups, having greater capacity/resources to migrate or make it to the EU.

Furthermore, the case of the Palestine refugees from Syria also highlights a very diverse opportunity-constraint structure in terms of how existing networks and experience/knowledge about their particular status in the EU, combined with their extreme vulnerability in Syria itself, as well as in hosting states such as Lebanon and Jordan, made them more likely to directly attempt going to the EU. For the PRS, Germany and Sweden have been preferred destinations, since both countries have an 'institutional memory' (Tucker 2018: 3) of how to deal with these stateless refugees who already arrived in the wake of the Lebanese civil war or the waves of war in Iraq.

In terms of diverse opportunity-constraint structures for women and men, revolution and war in Syria, as well as the experience in host states, has also impacted gender roles as women often took over the role of breadwinner (Mixed Migration Centre 2016: 4). Furthermore, women and men faced diverse threats at 'different moments of their migration' (Passey 2017): men were more immediately exposed to the direct violence of war, as well as to hostilities in host states. Along the journey to the EU, they actually 'face greater risk of assault, theft, physical violence, detention, kidnap and forced labour' (Mixed Migration Centre 2016: 5), but women are at higher risk of sexual exploitation and GBV, even while this risk also applies to men who might be more reluctant to speak about it (Nakba FilmWorks 2014). Furthermore, the 'temporary separation of families' with men moving first, and the impact of a growing network on female migration

also needs to be considered (Mixed Migration Centre 2016: 3). Furthermore, women are not more likely to have their asylum claim accepted. In contrast, according 'to figures from Eurostat, 51 % of female asylum applicants were rejected by EU states in 2015, compared to 49 % of male applicants' (Passey 2017).

Finally, the risks for both women and men increased significantly as the EU fortified its borders. This was happening already before the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 which did not stop the movement of people, but led to a shift in routes, or made it more dangerous to move, and thus fed into the growth of smuggling/facilitation services. For example, in 2014, the Mare Nostrum Operation of the Italian government focused on Search and Rescue was replaced by the EU-Operation Sophia in 2015–20 (mainly focused on cracking-down on smugglers) and Irini in 2020–21 (mainly focused on enforcing the UN arms embargo in Libya vis-à-vis Turkey). As Libya also became more dangerous around 2014 and other MENA states closed their borders as well, Turkey might have become the only option and smuggling networks adapted fast (Crawley et al. 2016: 32). As Okyay has pointed out, 'migrant smuggling practices adapt to restrictive measures, rather than being eradicated as a result of them' (Okyay 2019: 7).

Smuggling networks consist of a 'system of flexible and independent organizations that enter into partnerships with one another for short periods' and that lack centralised and hierarchical structures (Achilli 2018: 83). Refugees and migrants are often included at mid-level (see also Crawley et al. 2016; Mandić and Simpson 2017: 78). This also explains how the network could expand rather quickly in 2015. In dangerous journeys across the sea and land, the role of smugglers can be essential to save lives, but they are also costly so only a certain sector of the refugees can actually afford to pay them. It should be pointed out that this also has a particular gendered dimension because 'when women face environmentally hazardous conditions [...] they are often more likely to succumb to physical difficulties including drownings and exhaustion' (Pickering and Powell 2017: 120).

In response to the 'refugee crisis', the EU began to make its borders fiercer through three principal practices. Firstly, the building of various walls and/or fences proliferated along the Balkans, Greece/Turkey and Turkey/Syria borders (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017). The harder borders became and the more states moved against smugglers, the more dangerous and fatal the journey became as smugglers let refugees travel by themselves. 'Border crossings where smuggler repression was highest (e.g. Serbia-Hungary) accounted for deadlier risks than crossings where repression was relatively weaker (e.g. pre-border closure Syria-Jordan)' (Mandić and Simpson 2017: 80). Furthermore, the journey has become

more costly for families with children or elderly than for single men (Mandić 2017: 33). This might also explain a higher share of men in the overall arrivals.

Secondly, illegal push-backs and violence against refugees now constitute a de facto border policy of Greece (Amnesty International 2021), as well as of Cyprus where they have also led to chain refoulements as Syrian refugees were first denied entry to Cyprus, pushed back to Lebanon where they have been detained, while some have then been deported back to Syria (EuroMed Rights et al. 2021). Pallister-Wilkins et al. have also highlighted how ‘the pandemic and the general ban on travelling’, as well as the ‘highly controversial practice of “pushbacks” in the Aegean’ have beyond doubt ‘contributed to the considerable reduction of irregular entries to the islands’ (Pallister-Wilkins et al. 2021: 26).

Thirdly, the change to the hotspot approach and the effects of the EU–Turkey deal led to the transformation of Greece from a transit to a de facto destination (Dimitriadi 2016; Okyay 2019: 11). In a fenced-in Greece, the detention of refugees in extremely inhumane conditions in refugee camps has become normality. Repeatedly, the UN General Rapporteur had to remind the EU of the ‘catastrophic humanitarian standards’ on its own territory (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly 2019) to which, however, the EU and Greece have hardly reacted over a sustained period of time which indicates that this is a policy of choice.

### 4.3 Conclusions

In light of the analysis above, several policy recommendations emerge as key. Firstly, regarding the primary driver – the Syrian civil war – it is notable that the EU still has no policy vis-à-vis the conflict besides its humanitarian aid. From the perspective of the Syrian refugees and also of the future stability of the whole region, the issue of comprehensive peace-building in Syria, protecting the rights of all Syrians and the country’s territorial integrity, remains one of utmost urgency. In this respect, research has outlined major conditions for their return, that is a political transition that assures ‘their *safety and security*, access to *justice*, and *right of return* to areas of origin’ (Yahya et al. 2018: 1, italics added).

Coming to secondary drivers in host/transit countries and the EU’s policy shift towards supporting development policies and refugee integration in these countries, as could be seen, the EU has tended towards ‘responsibility shifting’ rather than responsibility sharing. Responsibility sharing implies that refugees are not politically instrumentalised by any side, that the EU lives up to financial and other commitments (trade, visa liberalisation, resettlement, humanitarian admission, etc.), and that it makes sure the governance of funds is inclusive – that

is, it brings in not only the involved states, but also municipalities, civil society and refugees (Aydın-Düzgit et al. 2019).

Finally, regarding its own border practices, the EU needs to make sure it complies with international human rights and humanitarian law. This makes it necessary to stop the normalisation of illegal push-backs, to reflect on applying measures such as the Temporary Protection Directive also in cases of large-scale refugee arrivals at its southern borders, and to end the gender-blindness of its current border practices.

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Jacopo Resti

## **Chapter 5 Why do so many Eritreans flee their country? Drivers of Eritrean migration in countries of origin, transit and destination**

**Abstract:** Eritrea is one of the top refugee-generating countries in the world. Eritrean refugees abroad are estimated at more than half a million, close to 15 per cent of the country's population. In terms of arrivals in the EU, Eritreans have been one of the top national groups and the main nationality travelling via the Central Mediterranean Route. Yet key questions remain: Why do so many Eritreans flee their country? What are the key determinants of Eritrean migration in countries of origin, transit and destination? How have the latter influenced Eritrean migration trends and routes in the past decade? This case study provides an overview of the most salient drivers and trends of Eritrean EU-bound migration from 2009 to 2020. Eritrea appears as a special case characterised by deeply rooted and long-standing migration drivers that fuel predominantly asylum-related outflows. These patterns are highly sensitive to reception conditions in countries of transit, where weak protection systems and limited prospects of integration prevent Eritrean migrants from achieving decent living standards and durable solutions. These conditions, combined with the lack of legal pathways and recourse to smuggling networks, provide an incentive structure for onward migration to Europe that is likely to persist in the near future.

**Keywords:** Eritrean refugees | Central Mediterranean Route | migration drivers | protection systems | smuggling networks

### **5.1 Eritrea: A special case in the migration landscape**

Eritrea has an estimated population of 3.5 million (UN Population Division 2019). Almost one third (998,000) live in the capital Asmara. Population estimates vary significantly as Eritrea has never conducted an official government census. Eritrea is a highly fragile state and ranks 180th out of 189 countries and territories in the Human Development Index with a score of 0.459 (UNDP 2020).

In the context of migration, Eritrea represents a special case, as it is characterised by deeply rooted and long-standing migration drivers. Since ancient times, the country has entertained close political, trade and cultural ties with its neighbourhood, which witnessed significant population movements

across the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> More recent emigration phenomena, both in the region and to other continents, date back to the exile triggered by Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962 and grew in the following decades. After a thirty-year liberation struggle which led to independence in 1993, Eritrean emigration has peaked again between 1998 and 2000, during the border war with Ethiopia in the region of Badme. Since 2001, Eritreans have fled the increasingly authoritarian and militarised state of President Isais Afeworki (Clapham 2017). They are mostly young men (18–24 years), fleeing mandatory conscription, forced labour and lack of economic livelihoods. Most leave the country using smugglers' networks, to bypass strict state emigration policies and exit visa requirements. They originate from all over Eritrea, especially from conflict-prone and underdeveloped regions, such as Debub in the south and Gash Barka in the south-west. They seek refuge in neighbouring countries in the Horn and northern Africa (Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt), but then often seek onward migration to Europe because of weak protection systems and limited prospects of integration in the country of first displacement. Countries of transit are particularly important in the context of Eritrean migration to Europe, which mostly involves secondary movement after Eritreans have spent years in transit countries without achieving decent living conditions.

This long exodus has produced a large diaspora, estimated at some 2 million people in 2019,<sup>2</sup> which established strong networks with family members in Eritrea. The large majority of the diaspora (around 70 per cent) is estimated to have settled in the Greater Horn of Africa region (i.e., Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya), whereas North America has become the main destination outside the continent (10 per cent). Eritrean households have benefitted greatly from diaspora's remittances, estimated by the International Monetary Fund at 37 per cent of GDP at their highest between 1993 and 2003 (Amahazion 2019). The Eritrean state has managed to tax the diaspora to subsidise its national budget, by imposing a 2 per cent levy on diaspora income.

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<sup>1</sup> Eritrean regional influence and people-to-people relations have been documented since the 1st century A.D., when the Red Sea was commonly known as the Eritrean sea. One of the best known ancient descriptions of regional geography, people and society from Hellenic times is the Greco-Roman manuscript *Περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθραίας Θαλάσσης* [Periplus of the Erythraean Sea].

<sup>2</sup> Recent estimates by the Eritrean government on the size of the diaspora were published in an official report in *Tigrinya* by the Social Affairs Office of the Eritrean People's Democratic Party. For a summary in English see EPDP (2019).



Eritrea is primarily a country of origin and is mostly characterised by asylum-related migration, being one of the top refugee-generating countries in the world. Eritrean refugees abroad are estimated at 522,000 (UNHCR 2021a), close to 15 per cent of the Eritrean population. By contrast, migration to Eritrea is negligible. The country is home to some 200 refugees, originating from Somalia and neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa. Around 60 per cent of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are found in neighbouring Ethiopia (170,231) and Sudan (125,115). Over the last decade, Europe has become the third destination, with Germany hosting the largest share of Eritrean asylum seekers (55,000). Eritreans were among the top ten nationalities of migrants and refugees arriving in Italy in 2017–2018, and were in the top five as of June 2021 (Italian Ministry of the Interior 2021).

Nevertheless, Eritrean migration is not only bound to neighbouring countries or Europe. Israel also became a popular destination for Eritrean migrants from the mid-2000s. Eritrean asylum-seekers continued to flow into Israel until the latter sealed its border with Egypt in 2013. Very few Eritreans have been granted refugee status in Israel, and they enjoy limited access to basic services and employment. Since 2014, a reverse trend has been observed which has reduced the number of Eritreans in need of protection in Israel from more than 30,000 to around 21,000 in 2021 (UNHCR 2021b). This has been mainly the result of detention-oriented government policies and shrinking protection space for refugees and asylum-seekers.<sup>3</sup>

A labour-related emigration pattern has long been observed with Eritrean migrant flows to the Gulf States, particularly to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where Eritreans are not registered as refugees and reside with a residence permit. Eritreans have migrated to the Gulf States for decades along with other nationalities from the Horn, including Ethiopians and Somalis. In the past few years, aggregate numbers of East Africans travelling through Yemen have sometimes exceeded those directed to Europe via the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), reaching a high of 138,000 in 2019 (IOM 2020). However, as far as Eritreans are concerned, this trend has significantly reversed since 2018, as thousands voluntarily returned to Eritrea and to other African countries from Saudi Arabia in the wake of new nationalist policies foreseeing unaffordable expat taxes for foreign-born workers in Saudi Arabia, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief outlook on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Israel see the website of the America Team for Displaced Eritreans: *Surviving in Israel*, <https://eritreanrefugees.org/?p=119>.

degrading working conditions and protection risks for Eritrean migrants (Cole 2020). Eritrean migration movements along the eastern corridor to the Arab Peninsula have now decreased and the few directed to Yemen often cross again back to Sudan, to continue along the CMR (IOM 2020).

Eritrean migration legislation and policies provide mainly for administrative rules and procedures regarding entry, residence, exit and issuance of stay permits. Eritrean law also prohibits human trafficking, slavery and forced labour.<sup>4</sup> However, provisions are scarcely enforced and generally fail to ensure protection of victims of trafficking and the prosecution of perpetrators. Internationally, Eritrea is not party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and has yet to ratify the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

Eritrea is part of the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative, also known as the Khartoum Process. Initiated in 2014, it seeks to tackle the challenges of human trafficking and smuggling of migration between the Horn of Africa and Europe. The initiative aims to develop cooperation between origin, transit and destination countries to stem irregular migrant flows through technical assistance, law enforcement assistance, capacity building, information sharing and protection of migrant rights.

## 5.2 A decade of trends (2009–2020) in Eritrean EU-bound migration

According to Frontex data (Frontex 2021a), Eritreans have been one of the top national groups in terms of irregular arrivals in the EU through the CMR and other routes from 2009 to 2020 (128,293 on aggregate). Overall, Eritreans have been the main nationality travelling through the CMR in the same period (119,128 on aggregate, see Table 5.1), appearing among the largest nationalities almost each year. With the exception of 2019–2020 (overtaken by Sudan), Eritrea has always been the most represented nationality from the Horn of Africa along the CMR. Eritrean arrivals in Europe through the CMR have risen steadily since 2010 and peaked in 2015 (38,791, see Figure 5.1). Since 2016, the number has declined steeply, reaching its lowest in 2019 (479). Figures have almost doubled in 2020 (909).

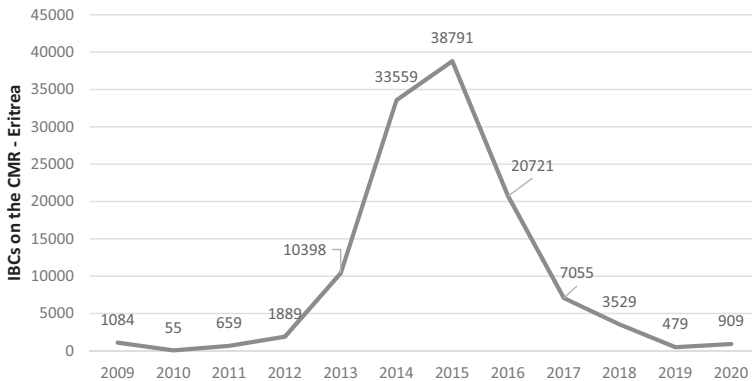
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<sup>4</sup> Eritrean national legislation includes the Transitional Criminal Code (Article 605 and Article 565 on trafficking in women and young persons for sexual exploitation and slavery), the New Criminal Code (Articles 315–316 on trafficking), the Labour Proclamation 118/2001 and the 1992 Proclamation on Immigration.

**Table 5.1:** Detections of Eritrean nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Year	Detections of Eritrean nationals	Total detections	As % of total detections
2009	1,084	11,043	9.82
2010	55	4,450	1.24
2011	659	64,261	1.03
2012	1,889	15,151	12.47
2013	10,398	45,298	22.95
2014	33,559	170,664	19.66
2015	38,791	153,946	25.20
2016	20,721	181,376	11.42
2017	7,055	118,962	5.93
2018	3,529	23,485	15.03
2019	479	14,003	3.42
2020	909	35,673	2.55
<b>Total</b>	<b>119,128</b>	<b>838,312</b>	<b>14.21</b>

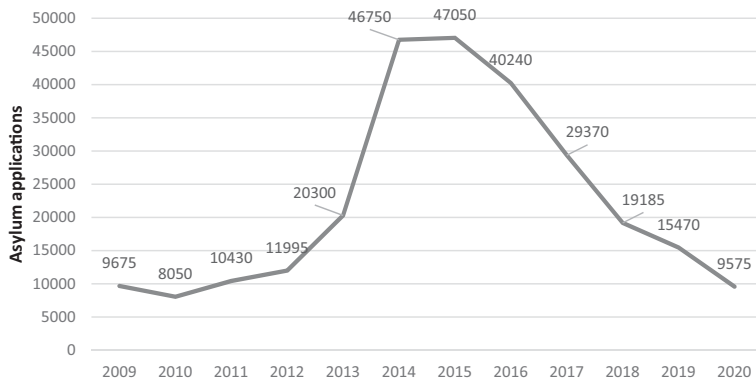
Source: Author's elaboration based on Frontex (2021a) data.

**Figure 5.1:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Eritrean nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Source: Author's elaboration based on Frontex (2021a) data.

The abovementioned trends are reflected by Eurostat data on Eritrean asylum applicants in Europe, which report the highest numbers between 2014 and 2016 (above 40,000 each year, see Figure 5.2), declining significantly in the following

years with the lowest score in 2020. Although Italy is the main country of arrival for Eritreans through the CMR, in the period 2011–2019, on average, less than 10 per cent of all Eritreans asylum-seekers have submitted their asylum application in Italy. The majority applied in other EU member states, albeit not the first countries of arrival (Germany 28 per cent and Sweden 14 per cent). The first non-EU European country for Eritrean asylum-seekers is Switzerland, which registered more than 40,000 Eritrean asylum applications in the same period. Around 70 per cent of asylum applications to the EU have come from Eritrean males (similar ratios apply to Italy and to other member states).



**Figure 5.2:** Asylum applications of Eritrean nationals in Europe, 2009–2020

*Source:* Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021) data.

The main route followed by Eritrean migrants to Europe has been the CMR. The peak of Eritreans arrivals in 2014–2016 coincides with increasing overall flows along the CMR during the same period. Accounting for more than 90 per cent of all Eritrean arrivals in the EU between 2009 and 2020, the CMR is by far the most popular migration route to Europe. The second (minor) route is the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR), which accounted for 6 per cent of Eritrean flow to the EU in the period 2009–2020. Eritrean flows through the EMR were affected by the border closure between Israel and Egypt in 2013. As a result, travel by land has almost entirely stopped and smaller numbers arrived through the EMR by sea. All other routes remain negligible.

### **5.3 Asylum-related and socio-politically driven: Understanding key drivers of Eritrean EU-bound migration**

Eritrean EU-bound migration is shaped by multiple factors in origin, transit and destination countries. While drivers in the country of origin and destination are mostly structural and predate 2010, factors in transit countries have been more fluid and relevant to migration routes and trends. Nonetheless, it is rather the interaction of these drivers that contributed to the shifts in trends on the CMR observed in the last decade. Major shifts in Eritrean irregular arrivals in the EU include the post-2012 increase, peaking in 2016; the sharp decrease since 2017; and a small rebound in 2020.

Before having a closer look at the drivers of Eritrean migration, it is worth remarking that the following analysis provides an account, albeit non-exhaustive, of the main drivers which are relevant to illustrate, specifically, recent trends in Eritrean EU-bound migration. These drivers do not necessarily apply to all Eritrean migration patterns or movements within Eritrea, the Horn of Africa region or to other non-EU destinations. This could be the case, for instance, concerning drivers related to climate change, whose effects such as drought and land degradation largely account for Eritreans' migration movements within the country or in the region, especially among pastoralist and nomad communities. Climate-related effects, often mixed with socio-economic drivers, are also behind seasonal migration patterns, as is the case for seasonal crop labourers, along the borders between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. However, these movements are mostly limited to internal or regional displacement and are often performed as adaptive strategies to climate change. Therefore, even though climate-related drivers may add to or mix with other prominent structural factors, their relevance for EU-bound Eritrean migration has still to be fully understood.

Furthermore, as for other African countries in the region, economic hardship and lack of livelihoods can also contribute to shaping Eritrean EU-bound migration. Nevertheless, compared to the political factors examined below, it can be argued that economic drivers are also dependent on the political and institutional setting and dynamics inherent to the Eritrean state. As elaborated in this section, it is often the indefinite duration of the national service or the regime's tight political control over the economy and business environment that are ultimately responsible for the dearth of economic livelihoods. On this point, it is also important to add that, more than any other African nationality, Eritreans' mostly undisputed refugee status determination makes their decision to migrate primarily socio-politically driven, rather than based on economic considerations.

This is also reflected by their long-term migration journeys aiming at settling in a third country, which contrasts other short-term and economically driven migration patterns in the region, such as from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf States. Such observations are also confirmed by surveys among Eritreans migrants heading to Europe, which have highlighted the importance of political and institutional drivers for their migratory decision-making: in 2018, 60 per cent of respondents from Eritrea declared that ‘a lack of rights’ was a driver of their decision to leave the country (IOD PARC 2018). However, other investigations suggest that economic drivers can still influence migratory processes unfolding along the trajectories connecting the Horn of Africa to Europe and North Africa, even if to a lesser extent than migration to the Gulf (Horwood et al. 2018).

In light of the above, what follows is an overview of what can be arguably considered as the most influential drivers shaping Eritrean EU-bound migration over the last ten years. Two drivers in each category (origin, transit and destination) are examined.

### **5.3.1 Home sweet home? A militarised state with strict emigration policies**

Since the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia in 1998, Eritrea has become an increasingly militarised state. The (real) threat posed by Ethiopia has been instrumental to President’s Afeworki political tactics of rallying the ruling elite against a common enemy and cracking down on political opponents. The state of emergency was introduced in 1998 and never lifted ever since, as it provided grounds for the infinite prolongation of the national service. The historic peace agreement with Ethiopia signed in 2018 – which failed to involve the TPLF leaders of Tigray who rejected the deal – did not have any impact on reforming the national service and its effects were limited to a temporary reopening of borders with Ethiopia: in the following months, at least 15,000 people crossed the frontier to Ethiopia, mainly to reunite with their families or for trade (Horwood et al. 2019). Despite promises by Eritrean officials to bring the national service back to its origin, no changes have been implemented to date (EASO 2019).

Since 1995, the national service (*Hagerawi Agelglot*) has been disciplined by the National Service Proclamation, which establishes that the service must be performed by all Eritreans aged between 18 and 40 for a statutory term of 18 months. Students attending their final high school year are subject to mandatory training and service at the Sawa military and educational camp. After training, young conscripts are assigned to military or civilian service according to the government’s priorities and needs.

The national service, with its mandatory and indefinite conscription, is commonly acknowledged and reported (EASO 2019) as the main structural driver of Eritrean emigration, notably affecting young males and unaccompanied minors. In some European countries, such as the Netherlands, the largest group of unaccompanied refugee minors originates from Eritrea (van Es et al. 2019). The current framework for national service is the most striking feature of the state's political repression which has fuelled the outflow of Eritrean asylum-seekers in the last decade and is likely to persist as long as the regime clings to power.

At the same time, the limited social and political freedom experienced by Eritrean citizens, with particular reference to young women's education, has been related to shaping migratory attitudes among women in the country (Belloni 2019a). As noted above, irregular arrivals recorded in Italy in 2009–2020 have been predominantly male, but the role of women in Eritrean society – and their attitudes towards emigration – is also affected by the restrictive political regime and its main manifestations, like the national service. Not coincidentally, Eritrean women who have left the country declare the fear of indefinite conscription into national service as an important factor shaping their migratory choices (IOD PARC 2018).

Linked to the national service are the strict state emigration policies and exit visas. Entry/exit requirements and the exit visa regime are regulated by Proclamation 24/1992 and by Regulation 4/1992. Article 17 of the Proclamation defines the fulfilment or exemption from national service as a precondition for the issuance of exit visas. Moreover, according to the provisions set in the Regulation, regular exit is permitted only to certain population groups such as government officials, former freedom fighters and their families, men above fifty-four years of age, children below thirteen and persons in need of health treatment abroad (EASO 2019).

Eritrean emigration policies represent a strong incentive shaping irregular exit of young Eritreans, and have contributed to the proliferation of smuggling services on the border with Sudan and Ethiopia in the last decade. Small smuggling networks and local 'facilitators' have become even more endemic in recent years and able to ensure undetected border crossing and onward journey to neighbouring countries and Europe, sometimes relying on colluding Eritrean officials and border guards (MGSOG 2017).

### 5.3.2 Rough neighbours: Weak reception conditions and exploitative smuggling networks in countries of transit

Once having crossed the strictly monitored frontiers of their home country, the fragmented paths followed by Eritreans moving along the CMR usually pass through the urban centres and regions of Kassala, Khartoum and Dongola in Sudan, and converge in Libya transiting through AlKufra, Bani Walid and Tripoli or Benghazi. Border controls along the way are a key element to factor in when analysing the transit of migrants through these countries. For instance, the effectiveness of border surveillance between Libya and Sudan has varied over the years and mainly depends on the amount of financing received by the Sudanese paramilitary and militias such as the Rapid Support Forces: in times of enhanced controls at the Sudanese border, Eritrean migrants may also enter Chad before crossing into Libya.

Reception conditions in countries of transit for Eritrean asylum-seekers constitute another important element to better understand their migratory choices. Such conditions have been generally poor over the last decade, regardless of domestic political turmoil or regime change, and governments' efforts have been directed to tackling irregular migration rather than strengthening protection guarantees. Recent internal political developments (such as the political transitions unfolding in Ethiopia in 2018 and in Sudan in 2019) and geopolitical shifts occurring in the Horn of Africa and in other relevant countries for Eritreans' migratory paths, such as Sudan and Egypt, did not fundamentally alter the conditions of their national reception systems. Rather, as they lack durable solutions in the camps hosting them, only a limited number of Eritreans register as refugee in neighbouring countries, in northern Ethiopia (Shire)<sup>5</sup> and eastern Sudan (Shagarab). The majority seek onward migration to urban areas in Sudan and Libya, and ultimately to Europe (Marchand et al. 2017).

Apart from Libya, which is not part to the 1951 Refugee Convention,<sup>6</sup> all transit countries (Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt) are signatories of the main international and regional legal instruments (the 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa).

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<sup>5</sup> Prior to the outbreak of conflict in Tigray in November 2020, many Eritreans moved to refugee camps in the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia before engaging in long-term migration trajectories.

<sup>6</sup> Although Libya has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Government of National Accord allows UNHCR access to persons of concern from nine nationalities, including Eritreans.



However, convention protection standards have remained scarcely implemented, largely due to the absence of adequate monitoring mechanisms, capacities and political will. Only Egypt grants Eritrean asylum seekers the right to work and move outside the refugee camps, while Ethiopia provides Eritreans with limited access to basic services and out-of-camp movement (Horwood and Hooper 2016; Horwood et al. 2019).

Even though Eritreans may spend years stranded in transit, the low priority given to their protection, as well as the existing gaps in protection standards with regard to the EU, have provided a strong incentive for Eritrean migrants for onward migration to Europe (Horwood and Hooper 2016). As mentioned, the reception conditions in the first countries of transit met by Eritrean migrants have not changed over the last decade, and so do not serve to explain the shifting trends in irregular arrivals at the European external frontier on the CMR.

In addition to weak protection systems in countries of transit and the lack of durable solutions even for registered refugees, Eritrean migrants have to face protection risks related to exploitative smuggling networks in Sudan and Libya, whose practices are increasingly associated with human trafficking. Commonly reported protection risks for Eritreans include torture, kidnapping and being sold to other smuggling networks, with girls and women being vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking for forced labour and sex exploitation (Hovil and Oette 2017). A specific concern is the high incidence of Eritrean unaccompanied minors on migration routes to Europe (Cossor et al. 2016). Limited access to legal documentation and migration pathways in transit countries (not only in Eritrea) has been a strong incentive for Eritreans to engage with smuggling networks, which provide the only reliable way, albeit fraught with danger, to secure onward migration and arrival in Europe (UNHCR 2019). The lack of legal pathways in transit countries is particularly relevant for EU-bound Eritrean irregular migration, as in most cases Eritrean asylum-seekers would be eligible for refugee status determination in Europe, as the EU's high rate of acceptance of Eritreans' asylum applications demonstrates. However, Eritrean migrants do not have access to legal pathways until their asylum application is submitted to the first EU country of (irregular) arrival.

When analysing context-specific situations in countries of transit affecting irregular arrivals in Italy in 2009–2020, special consideration is recommended for Libya. The security situation in the country has mediated the crossing and arrivals of Eritreans along the CMR.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the fall of Qaddafi and the

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<sup>7</sup> Analytical projections of future scenarios in Libya can be instrumental to foresee developments in Eritrean migrant flows and protection risks. See for instance ACAPS and IFRC (2017).

ensuing civil war had a twofold effect. On one hand, it deteriorated safety and living conditions of Eritrean migrants in the country and accounted for route diversion through Egypt and to Israel in 2011–13. Specifically, even if prioritising the tackling of irregular migration over protection, Egypt has sometimes offered higher protection guarantees for Eritreans. This has made Egypt a country of destination of Eritrean asylum-seekers, besides a country of transit to Europe and Israel. Most importantly, on the other hand, instability in Libya provided better chances for Eritreans to reach Italy, by resorting to a vast array of smuggling networks. These networks provided Eritrean migrants with a relatively safe journey through Libya and to Italy, as they faced few restrictions or control by border authorities. Unrestricted smuggling networks in Libya have contributed to the steep increase in irregular arrivals between 2012 and 2016 through the CMR. Israel's decision to seal its border with Egypt in 2013 further consolidated this trend by diverting former migration from the EMR to the CMR.

In 2017, the decline in arrivals was accompanied by strengthened cooperation between the EU (and Italy) and Libyan authorities on countering smuggling and human trafficking activities.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, EU support and technical cooperation on border management was swiftly extended to other countries of transit, including Egypt and Sudan. As a result, smuggling activities were curbed and reduced to fewer competitive networks. However, their exploitative practices against migrants (ransom, detention, force labour) persisted and developed as coping strategies to respond to the lack of resources, longer journeys and increased controls *en route*. In Libya, for example, Eritreans appear to be among those most vulnerable to prolonged captivity at the hands of smugglers, throughout their journey. Smuggling and trafficking networks perceive Eritrean refugees as 'valuable' migrants as they can pay more for ransom, given their wealthy diaspora communities and likelihood of obtaining refugee status upon reaching the EU. Therefore, since prolonged captivity can be a source of income for smugglers, extortion practices against Eritrean migrants through multiple kidnappings, torture and bonded labour have become common (UNHCR 2019).

EU policies and measures countering smuggling and trafficking activities in countries of transit have seemingly been successful in reducing Eritrean arrivals since 2017. This has come at the cost of exacerbating migrants' protection risks, extending the length and hardship of the journey and increasing the number

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<sup>8</sup> Please refer to the chapters on Nigeria and Mali for further elaboration of the role played by EU policies in Libya and the contrasting effects of the various phases of the conflict on EU-bound irregular flows crossing the country.

of stranded migrants along the CMR. However, EU-bound migration has not completely stopped: as long as legal pathways remain limited, these developments may induce Eritrean migrants to reroute their journeys to Europe through alternative western routes.

In 2015, the Valletta Summit on Migration launched the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa. The EUTF for Africa is worth over 5 billion euro, with almost 88 per cent of the contributions coming from the EU, and around 12 per cent from EU member states and other donors. EUTF interventions tackle the root causes of irregular migration and aim at improving migration management in the Sahel region/Lake Chad area, the Horn of Africa and North Africa. A total of 1.8 billion euro finances the Horn of Africa operational window, of which 151.75 million euro supports the implementation of ten EUTF projects in Eritrea, now suspended due to the Tigray conflict (European Commission 2021). After five years, it can be argued whether local interventions have improved migration management, conflict prevention, employment opportunities and community resilience.

Despite declining arrivals in Europe in the last few years, thousands of Eritreans continue to leave the country. On top of long-standing structural drivers, this suggests that EU policies and interventions tackling the 'root causes of migration' in the country of origin have been less effective than those implemented in contexts of transit, or that they have not delivered the expected outcomes in the short term. Often, the 'root causes' represent an ill-defined category of drivers in the country of origin which are problematic to identify and tackle in practice. Even when alleged 'root causes' of migration are effectively measured and addressed (e.g., poverty or underdevelopment), the implications for migration are mixed and may well foster migration movements, rather than curbing them, as an immediate effect in the short term (Fratzke and Salant 2018).

### **5.3.3 Attractive destinations: An established Eritrean diaspora and international protection in EU countries**

A major actor linking drivers of migration in countries of origin and transit with contexts of destination is the diaspora. The long record of emigration provides Eritrean migrants with a safe and well-established network of compatriots abroad. The diaspora has been a structural driver of Eritrean migration since independence and has continued to fuel emigration in the last decade regardless of the actual number of arrivals on European shores.

EU countries with a significant Eritrean diaspora include Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Other non-EU European countries include Norway,

Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK). This diaspora is composed of now second- and third-generation Eritreans, whose relatives migrated to Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, as well as a more recent wave of asylum-seekers. The former component is rooted in countries such as Italy and the UK, not least for colonial legacies, while the latter characterises countries such as Germany and Sweden, which are among the most attractive for Eritrean asylum applicants, as illustrated by their highest rate of acceptance of asylum requests. Nevertheless, in most European countries the Eritrean diaspora's current composition reflects a combination of refugees, foreign citizens and national citizens of Eritrean origin, generating a certain ambivalence towards homeland politics, ranging from patriotism to disenchantment and staunch opposition (Belloni 2019b).

The Eritrean diaspora remains one of the strongest drivers of Eritrean migration in destination countries in the EU and beyond. This overseas network, one of the largest in the world considering the diaspora/country of origin population ratio (UNHCR 2021a), is often decisive in migrants' decisions for a twofold reason: it offers the opportunity for family reunifications and concrete prospects of integration in the host country; and it provides reliable contacts, financial resources (that can be exploited by criminal networks to extract ransom) and information both ahead of and during the migration journey.

A second driver of Eritrean EU-bound migration is the high acceptance rate of first-time Eritrean asylum applicants in the EU. Acceptance rates over the last decade have been above 80 per cent on average, the highest rate for any African country and the third highest overall after Syria and Venezuela (Eurostat 2021). EU member states have usually granted Eritrean asylum seekers refugee status, or at least some degree of protection, based on the multiple human rights violations suffered in their home country. These include political repression, mandatory conscription, discrimination, exploitation and forced labour. The human rights principle of *non-refoulement* guarantees that no Eritrean is returned to a country if she or he would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. In sum, besides being aware of the higher standards offered by the EU protection system, Eritreans have good reasons to assume that gaining access to the system is likely for them.

Only in some cases have acceptance rates decreased significantly since 2017, as a consequence of EU member states' more restrictive asylum policies. Italy, for instance, reduced the acceptance rate of Eritrean applications to around 50 per cent in 2018, down from an 80–90 per cent high in 2014–15 (Eurostat 2021). However, acceptance rates in Eritrean top destinations for asylum, such as Germany, the UK (then an EU member) and Sweden, remained high. This also

explains why lower rates in Italy did not affect Eritrean inflows to the EU, given its transit role for Eritreans' movements to northern European destinations in 2014–16. Most importantly, the general decrease in the number of asylum applications is strictly correlated to the drop of Eritrean arrivals in the EU, as applications are submitted in the country of destination rather than in the country of transit. Moreover, even when the number of asylum applications had been higher in Italy, it could be assumed that Eritreans were filing their request in the country to relocate in northern Europe, as provided by the EU Relocation Scheme launched in 2015.

Higher figures for asylum applications than for irregular arrivals are a general trend which applies beyond Eritrean nationals and is usually explained by the existence of multiple asylum applications submitted by third country nationals (typically the case for Eritreans), the use of fraudulent documents, travel to the EU or to the Schengen Associated Countries (SAC) area by air (IBCs include only arrivals by land and sea) and the presence of nationals of visa-exempt countries among asylum applicants (Frontex 2021b).

#### **5.4 Where have all the migrants gone? Declining Eritrean arrivals (in the EU) in times of chronic emigration and displacement**

The analysis of Eritrean migration drivers suggests that those unfolding in Eritrea and EU countries of destination are likely to persist, as they are generally structural and deep-rooted. Drivers in EU countries, notably the Eritrean diaspora and the high acceptance rate of Eritrean asylum applications, are unlikely to lose their attractive force in the foreseeable future and could be strengthened if the political and security situation in Eritrea deteriorates. At the same time, drivers in the country of origin, such as mandatory conscription and strict emigration policies, are embedded in the political and institutional setting and will probably fuel migration flows along the CMR as long as the current regime survives. Eritrea's stability is also dependent on the upheavals of a volatile neighbourhood, which witnesses Sudan's fragile institutional setting and Ethiopia's ethnic turmoil in Tigray and other border regions. Growing instability and conflict in the Horn of Africa is likely to exacerbate drivers in the country of origin, leading to forced displacement to neighbouring countries and beyond.

Against this backdrop, drivers of Eritrean migration in countries of transit deserve greater attention, as they tend to be less monolithic, providing more leverage to national policies and EU migration cooperation initiatives. Moreover, countries of transit are particularly important in the context of Eritrean

migration to Europe, which features secondary movement from countries of first displacement, where Eritreans can spend years without achieving decent living conditions.

EU cooperation with countries of transit has attempted to improve the rule of law along migration routes. The decline in arrivals in the last five years is partly the result of EU migration policies tackling irregular migration and enhanced border cooperation with transit countries, including with Libya and Sudan. These initiatives, at times debated with respect to migrant rights, aimed at countering smuggling and human trafficking networks in multiple ways, building capacities of local authorities and sharing information on migration flows among origin, transit and destination countries. Other factors identified as contributing to the decline in irregular arrivals of Eritreans in Europe since 2017 are increased interception, detention and deportation by Sudanese forces, as well as a tougher stance against migratory flows transiting through Egypt (IOD PARC 2018). These cases underline the influential role played by policy developments in countries of transit. Interestingly, it has also been argued that this declining trend could be related to the increasing number of Eritreans settling in key transit urban hubs, rather than opting for onward migration to Europe (Frouws 2017). This further underscores that declining trends in Eritrean irregular arrivals in EU countries of destination do not necessarily equate to fewer Eritreans fleeing their country. In this regard, further research and evaluation of EU policies and interventions tackling the ‘root causes of migration’ is desirable, questioning their effectiveness and better assessing their effect on migration outflows, especially in the short term (Fratzke and Salant 2018).

Finally, while developing integrated border management remains a priority, the lack of protection systems in countries of transit has not received much attention. As shown, the poor reception conditions and limited protection guarantees provided to Eritrean asylum-seekers, as well as the lack of legal pathways, fuelling migrants’ engagement with smuggling networks, provide Eritreans with strong incentives for onward migration to Europe.

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## Chapter 6 Mali's migratory complexity: A tale of shifting migratory movements on three routes

**Abstract:** Mali has suffered from growing political instability and insecurity over the last decade, with widespread consequences on internal displacement and international mobility. Framed within broader patterns of regional mobility, EU-bound irregular migration has unfolded along different corridors towards Italy and Spain, following non-linear trends on different routes. In this chapter, several drivers contributing to shaping such trends are analysed, starting with the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions of the country, which – together with economic and environmental factors – has affected patterns of forced displacement, but also the activities of smuggling and mobility facilitation networks. The case study on Mali also shows how migratory corridors to key countries of transit such as Niger and Algeria have proved resilient to the introduction of restrictive national policies, and how the conflict in Libya has had a multifaceted effect in terms of secondary drivers, at times enhancing irregular movements through the country or hindering the activities of smuggling networks. Lastly, EU's Italy's border policies on the Mediterranean Sea are assessed, investigating their potential role in diverging the migratory movements towards Spain after 2017.

**Keywords:** instability in the Sahel | European border policies | Libyan conflict | smuggling | Algeria

Mali has received international attention due to the deepening political instability affecting the country over the last decade. The widespread consequences of internal displacement and international mobility have inspired policy responses at the national and international level. Trends of 'irregular border crossings' (IBCs) at the EU's external frontiers and of asylum applications in Italy and Spain signal how mixed flows of Malian migrants along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and the Western Africa Route (WAR) in 2009–20 have intensified, despite their wavering strength in different moments of the decade on different routes. In particular, the major shifts on the CMR during this period can be identified in a first, limited, wave of arrivals in 2011; the sudden intensification of irregular crossings in 2014–17, with a momentary reduction in 2015; and the significant drop starting in 2018. In Spain, the most significant turning points have been the momentary surge

in asylum applications in 2013, their new, gradual increase since 2017 and the growth in irregular arrivals registered in 2018 on the WMR. Meanwhile, rising numbers of Malian nationals have been recorded on the WAR from 2018 to 2020 (although this route reflects much less volume than the WMR and CMR), with the higher numbers of arrivals recorded at the beginning (2009) and at the end (2020) of the period under analysis. These fluctuating trends on diverse routes reflect the multifaceted impact of social, political and economic drivers in countries of origin and transit, whose development, alongside their complex interaction with national and international policies, will be examined in this chapter.

## 6.1 Migration profile

Mali, a landlocked country in the Sahel, is a low-income economy, vulnerable to widespread poverty and food insecurity: the extreme poverty rate stood at 42.3 per cent in 2019 (World Bank 2022). The country displays a rapid demographic growth (5.88 children per woman in 2018) and an extremely young population: 47 per cent of Malian citizens are under fifteen and 53 per cent are under eighteen (EASO 2018). The rate of gross primary school enrolment stands at 77.1 per cent (JRC 2019), highlighting the need for further investment in access to basic services. Mali is usually conceived as divided between the north, scarcely populated and poorer, and the south, where the main cultivated areas are concentrated. Since colonial times, the southern region has been considered the area where economic dynamism has taken place, fuelling feelings of abandonment and unrest in the north. However, this imbalance appears to be less pronounced than conventional wisdom suggests, especially when the informal and extra-legal economic sector is accounted for. The urban-rural divide is another important cleavage in the Malian social fabric.

Mali has suffered from growing political instability and deepening insecurity in the last decade, with widespread consequences for internal displacement and international mobility. The country has faced an armed rebellion in the north in 2012, followed by a peace agreement in 2015, and combined threats of insurgency, clashes with armed forces and attacks on civilians in various regions (especially at the border with Niger and Burkina Faso) in the following years.

Malians share an established history of mobility and migration, dating back to precolonial times, which has been described as a response to cyclical downswings and food insecurity (Findley 2004). The political economy of French West Africa contributed to enhancing migration pressures in order to respond to labour shortages for extensive agriculture in neighbouring areas. While emigration towards France began to grow after World War II, the country has traditionally experienced a high degree of population mobility, both internally and across its borders. The main internal dynamic concerns population movements towards

major urban areas, in particular the capital Bamako. Mali has also been involved in relevant patterns of circular migration at the regional level, as Malian labourers have sought agricultural employment on a seasonal basis in neighbouring countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, but also Senegal and Gambia. Pastoralist populations have been engaged in circular movements from the north to the south of the country and in neighbouring states. The number of individuals involved was estimated at approximately 500,000 in 2013 (Cartier 2013). Both internal and interregional movements also reflect labour opportunities at key artisanal mining sites within Mali, as well as the influences of climate change and environmental degradation on livelihoods and food security (Bolay 2021; Hegazi et al. 2021; van der Land and Hummel 2013). In the past decades, Mali has also hosted different waves of refugees from other countries in the region, notably Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. Regulations approved in 1998 equate the access of refugees to health, education and labour markets to that of nationals (IOM 2018). At the same time, Mali state authorities have been criticised for a lack of migration regulation and enforcement or *laissez-faire* approach, as well as for their absence in development efforts, with civil society stepping in to fill these gaps (Trauner and Deimel 2013; Hegazi et al. 2021).

Official figures in 2001 counted more than 920,000 Malian citizens living abroad (8.4 per cent of the Malian resident population), with the large majority (80.6 per cent) in African countries, in particular 56.6 per cent in Côte d'Ivoire. (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2010). Outside the region, long-term emigration flows have mainly targeted France, which in 2001 hosted 94.3 per cent of Malian residents in Europe (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2010). During the 1990s emigration outside Africa diversified and the United States emerged as another preferred destination, alongside France (Findley 2004). Mali signed various cooperation agreements on circulation, stay and co-development with France (1994, 1998 and 2000) and on immigration with Spain (2007).

At the same time, the importance of Mali as a transit country has increased in the 2000s, both for trans-Saharan and Europe-bound mixed migration flows. As a consequence, Mali has gained a significant position in European policy-making not only as a migration-sending country, but also as a transit country for migrants departing from other Sub-Saharan states. The city of Gao has become a relevant departure point (Cartier 2013). Transit through Mali is facilitated by its membership in ECOWAS (Economic Community of Western African States) and by the provisions of the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, which entails visa-free entry for ECOWAS citizens throughout the region. Furthermore, Malians have been exempted from visa requirements in several countries in the Maghreb, such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2010: 5). Thus,

in most cases migration flows crossing Mali are not considered irregular, but they become so further down the route towards Europe or other destinations.

Moreover, due to a readmission agreement established between Spain and Mauritania since 2003, deportees from the Canary Islands are often expelled to the African country, where they are then returned to the borders of Senegal or Mali without any assistance (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021: 27). In fact, with respect to all routes (including both WMR and CMR), due to increasing criminalisation in Northern and Western Africa, alongside inter-African deportations and refoulements laid out by several states (including Libya and Algeria), returnees often end up in Mali, which accepts returns of non-Malians as well (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Trauner and Deimel 2013).

The increasing relevance of Mali as a transit country has deepened the challenge posed by human smuggling, usually linked to illegal trade and activities of cross-border criminal networks. Human trafficking of Malians and migrants of other nationalities has also been worsening. While internal exploitation of Malian victims is a key matter of concern, international migrants crossing the country are also highly vulnerable to sex and labour exploitation, especially Nigerians. Malian women are vulnerable to sex trafficking in Western Africa, but also in Tunisia and Libya, and to domestic servitude in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia (US Department of State 2020).

To respond to these growing concerns, Mali adopted an Anti-Trafficking Law in 2012, while a National Migration Policy was approved in 2014, with the goal of aligning migration management to international standards and enhancing the benefits of the migration-development nexus (IOM 2018). The new policy also reinstates the importance of enforcing the free circulation provisions of ECOWAS.

## **6.2 Recent trends in EU-bound migration: 2009–2020**

Due to the distinctive migratory profile of Mali, EU-bound irregular migration has unfolded along different corridors over the last decade. In particular, during the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2014–17, Malians mainly moved along the various trails composing the CMR, while from 2018–20 their presence grew along the routes heading to Spain. The following two sections highlight major patterns of mobility and migration of Malians along these passages.

### **6.2.1 Recent trends on the CMR**

Malians constitute the sixth national group among irregular arrivals on the CMR in 2009–20 (38,663 arrivals, 4.61 per cent of total detections), which contributes

to explaining the relevance that the country has gained in European (and Italian) policy-making. However, there is a deep gap between the number of arrivals from Mali and those from other key countries of origin in Sub-Saharan Africa in the same period, such as Eritrea (119,128 detections, 14.21 per cent) and Nigeria (99,056 detections, 11.82 per cent).

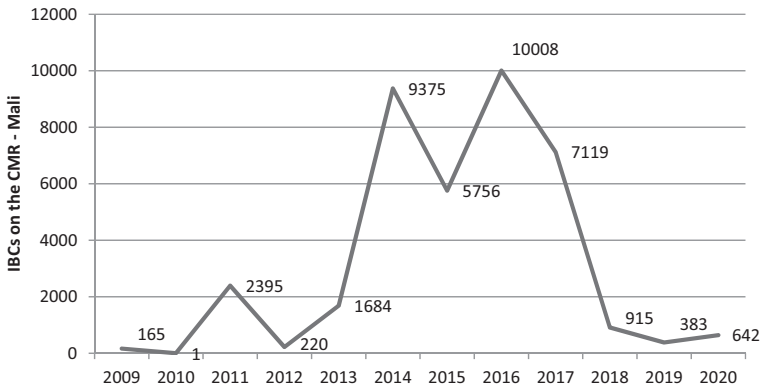
At first glance the number of irregular arrivals from Mali appears to follow the general trend for the route, with the peak year being 2016 (10,008 Malians detected, 5.52 per cent of total arrivals). Numbers of Malians on the move clearly intensified during the 2014–17 ‘crisis’. Looking at the national groups reaching Italy, Malians appeared among the top-ten nationalities in seven years during the 2009–20 timeframe, but never in an apical position. In 2014 Mali was the fourth country of origin in terms of arrivals, and Malians reached their highest share of the total number of arrivals in 2017 (5.98 per cent).

The trend in irregular arrivals in 2009–20 has not been linear however. From a relatively low base (and a first wave of almost 2,400 detections in 2011), the numbers of Malians increased dramatically in 2014, then dropped significantly the next year, and climbed again to their peak in 2016. After 2017, arrivals from Mali declined again to a few hundreds. The share of Malians in the total number of arrivals on the CMR dropped as well (from 5.98 per cent in 2017 to 1.8 per cent in 2020).

**Table 6.1:** Detections of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Year	Detections of Malian nationals	Total detections	As % of total detections
2009	165	11,043	1.49
2010	1	4,450	0.02
2011	2,395	64,261	3.73
2012	220	15,151	1.45
2013	1,684	45,298	3.72
2014	9,375	170,664	5.49
2015	5,756	153,946	3.74
2016	10,008	181,376	5.52
2017	7,119	118,962	5.98
2018	915	23,485	3.90
2019	383	14,003	2.74
2020	642	35,673	1.80
<b>Total</b>	<b>38,663</b>	<b>838,312</b>	<b>4.61</b>

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).



**Figure 6.1:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

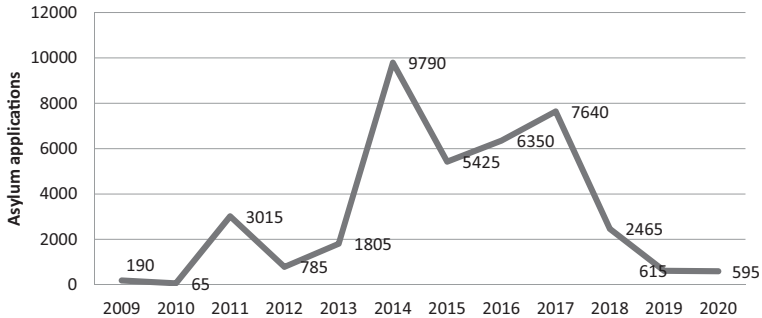
*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

Although the figures on the CMR indicate that Malians have not always constituted a pivotal priority for Italian authorities in terms of yearly irregular arrivals, asylum applications show a different picture. During the last decade, Italy received 49 per cent of all asylum applications filed by Malians in the EU-27, and it has been the top European destination for Malian asylum seekers (38,740 requests in 2009–20) along with France, the traditional destination country in Europe (23,420 requests). Another key fact from the figures on asylum applications concerns the male/female ratio: flows of asylum seekers in Italy have been predominantly male. For each year that we have analysed, the percentage of male asylum seekers has been well above the 90 per cent threshold. On average, women have accounted for just 2.44 per cent of asylum applications in Italy. Nonetheless, a slight shift might be occurring, as an increasing female presence among asylum seekers has emerged in 2019 and 2020, when their share (7.32 per cent and 6.72 per cent respectively) has risen to its highest point of the last decade.

While the stock of asylum seekers at the end of the decade clearly points to Italy as the top destination in Europe, yearly flows of applications followed the pattern described earlier for irregular arrivals: after a first wave in 2011 (3,015 requests), the number of asylum requests peaked in 2014 (9,790) and then



remained at a high level (more than 5,000 requests per year) until 2017. A significant decrease followed, especially in 2019–20.



**Figure 6.2:** Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Italy, 2009–2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on 'Asylum and first time asylum applicants' (Eurostat 2021).

### 6.2.2 Recent trends on the WMR and WAR

While flows are not as significant on the WMR as the CMR, Malians are among the top five nationalities in IBCs along the WMR land routes in the ten-year period under study for all years except 2015 to 2017, and rank in the top five nationalities in combined WMR sea and land routes from 2018–20 (Frontex 2021). Moreover, as noted earlier, Spanish or interregional involuntary returns often end up in Mali, making it another pivotal country on the WMR (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021).

**Table 6.2:** Detections of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009–2020

Year	Detections of Malian nationals	Total detections	As % of total detections
2009	555	2,244	24.73
2010	1	196	0.51
2011	2	340	0.59
2012	5	174	2.87
2013	54	283	19.08
2014	24	276	8.70
2015	14	874	1.60

(continued)

**Table 6.2:** Continued

<b>Year</b>	<b>Detections of Malian nationals</b>	<b>Total detections</b>	<b>As % of total detections</b>
<b>2016</b>	0	671	0.00
<b>2017</b>	1	421	0.24
<b>2018</b>	11	1,323	0.83
<b>2019</b>	48	2,718	1.77
<b>2020</b>	290	23,029	1.26
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,005</b>	<b>32,549</b>	<b>3.09</b>

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

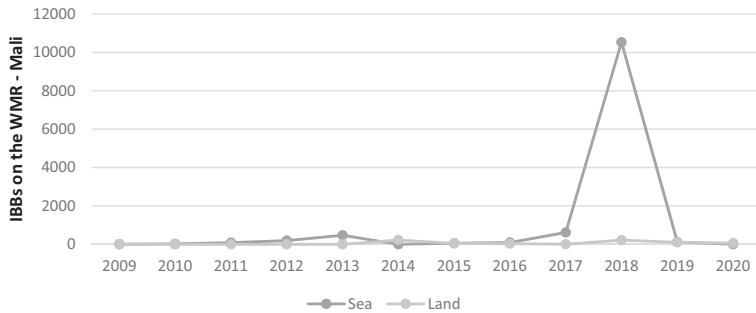
**Table 6.3:** Detections of Malian nationals on the WMR (sea and land), 2009–2020

<b>Year</b>	<b>Detections of Malian nationals</b>	<b>Total detections</b>	<b>As % of total detections</b>
<b>2009</b>	3	6,642	0.05
<b>2010</b>	20	5,003	0.40
<b>2011</b>	87	8,448	1.03
<b>2012</b>	194	6,397	3.03
<b>2013</b>	467	6,838	6.83
<b>2014</b>	219	5,654	3.87
<b>2015</b>	97	7,004	1.38
<b>2016</b>	125	9,990	1.25
<b>2017</b>	624	23,063	2.71
<b>2018</b>	10,747	56,245	19.11
<b>2019</b>	216	23,969	0.90
<b>2020</b>	66	17,228	0.38
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,865</b>	<b>176,481</b>	<b>7.29</b>

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

In light of Mali's return to the top nationalities on WMR land routes in 2018, as well as its emergence among the top five nationalities on sea routes, and given the increase in 2018 IBC detections of Malians indicated in the graph below, 2018 seems to mark a significant year. Malians make up 19 per cent of total sea and land detections on the WMR that year. Specifically, in 2018, Malian nationals rank third behind those from Morocco and Guinea in sea crossings, and also

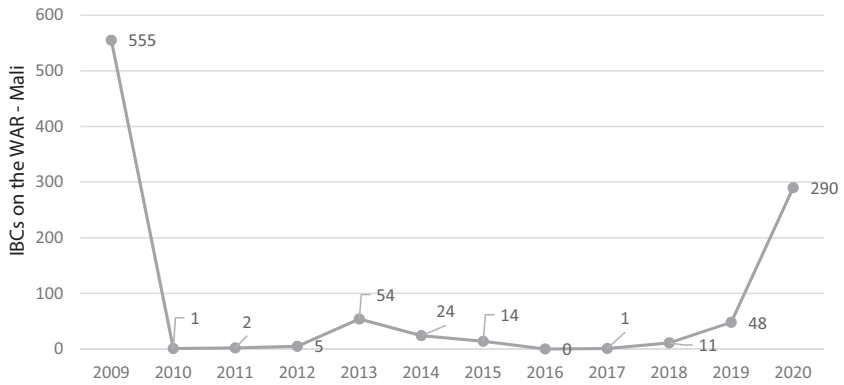
third behind those from Guinea and Burkina Faso in land crossings. In zooming in on the monthly data, IBC detections of Malians rise significantly starting from the month of May until October when they reach 1,841, and begin to taper off in November and December. By contrast, while in December 2018 there were 993 detections, January 2019 registers only 9. Meanwhile, October 2018 registers the most land detections.



**Figure 6.3:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

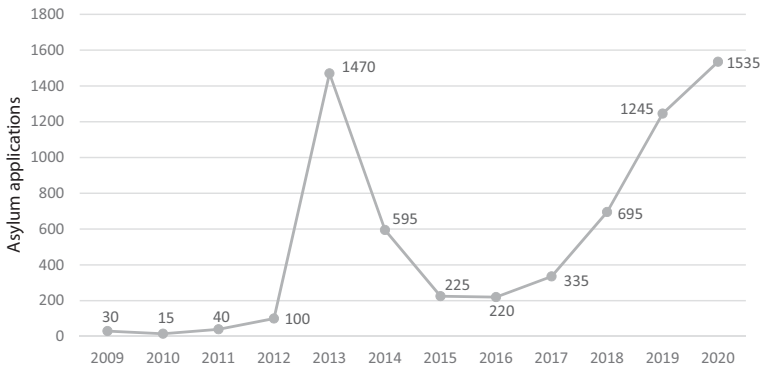
The increased numbers of Malians on the WMR in 2018, and later on the WAR throughout 2019 and 2020, as illustrated in the figure below, seem to suggest a diversion of the flow from the CMR. In terms of the WAR, three trends emerge over the selected time frame. As the figure displays, the most significant year for monthly detections of Malians on the WAR was in 2009 (with over 500 detections), with another slight rise in 2013. At the same time, detections also significantly rise from 2018–20.



**Figure 6.4:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009–2020

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

More specifically, in 2009, Malian nationalities make up the greatest number of detections on the route, and 25 per cent of overall WAR detections. Numbers then remain relatively low until 2013, when Malians make up 19 per cent of all detections along the WAR route, the second most prominent group after Moroccan nationals. These detections are in the months of January through March and then June through August, with the highest number in February. After bottoming out in the following years, in 2018 and 2019 detections begin to rise again, reaching a significant amount in 2020. The number of detections in 2020, 290 (practically all in the month of May), is much greater than the average annual detections for Mali. In looking at Mali over the selected time frame, the year 2020 is second only to the 555 detections of Malians in 2009, but due to the overall surge of WAR detections in 2020, Malian nationals only make up 1.26 per cent as compared with total route detections, ranking third and far behind in absolute numbers (again, 290) after a substantial amount of Moroccan nationals (11,759) and an 'unknown' category of nationals (10,620).



**Figure 6.5:** Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Spain, 2009–2020

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on 'Asylum and first time asylum applicants' (Eurostat 2021).

Looking at the figures illustrating asylum applications to Spain from Malian nationals, from 2009 to 2011 there were relatively few applications, but they almost doubled from one year to the next in 2012, and then tripled to reach the second highest number of applications in the ten-year period in 2013 at 1,470 (with the exception of detections at their height in 2020). In terms of the male to female ratio of Malian asylum applications, looking at the entirety of applications to the EU over the ten-year period is perhaps more illustrative, given that Eurostat data indicate applications to Spain make up only an average of 8 per cent of those to the EU overall in this timeframe, and the Spanish figures may be unrepresentative (see below). Given this, from 2009–20, Malian asylum applications to the EU reflect a male majority, with 82 per cent of applications from males and 18 per cent from females over the ten-year time frame. While this overall average reflects the general breakdown from 2011–20, the years 2009 and 2010 saw a more balanced breakdown, with 58 per cent male and 42 per cent female, and 47 per cent male and 53 per cent female, respectively.

After 2013, applications almost halve in 2014 and diminish further in 2015, remaining relatively stable through to 2018 where they begin to rise again, reaching the third highest number in the period in 2019, and again, the highest over the course of the period in 2020. Despite a steady increase in the number of asylum petitions of Malians since 2016, the statistics do not reflect the real number of nationals reaching Spain to seek asylum, due to the bureaucratic difficulties that prevent them from successfully requesting international protection.

### **6.3 Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends**

Two broader aspects about emigration from Mali in the last decade seem to emerge. First, asylum seekers and refugees have become a more relevant – but not dominant – feature of migration towards the EU. Second, while the incidence of forced displacement on Europe-bound routes seems to suggest a correlation with the deepening instability in the country, the role of insecurity in Mali as the key driver of emigration has to be balanced against the declining trend of irregular arrivals in 2018–20 and its decoupling from asylum requests in Spain. The impact of other factors along the routes needs to be assessed in order to better understand these diverging trends.

#### **6.3.1 A complex security-migration nexus in Mali: Challenging the conventional wisdom**

Established regional differences in migratory attitudes within Mali matter, as the majority of Malians engaging in international migration seem to depart from the region of Kayes, bordering Senegal and Mauritania. An estimate in 2007 found that 80 per cent of Malians in France originated from that region, which has long been considered one of the most peaceful in Mali. Moreover, surveys undertaken in the region signal a deeply rooted social culture that generates long-running expectations for the young to leave. Insecurity does not appear prominently among the factors fuelling such expectations, which are rather based upon a view of migration as ‘the norm’ and ‘the only way out of poverty’, but also on the lack of work at home and the youth’s perceived social responsibility towards their family (REACH 2020).

Social practices and family pressures could also be conceived as structural drivers predating our period of analysis when it comes to the importance of gender roles and expectations. While Malian asylum-seekers reaching Europe in 2009–20 have been predominantly male, the social construction around gendered mobility at the regional level contributes to influencing the context within which migratory choices are made in Mali. On the one hand, migration of young males is part of family economics and is used to strengthen their family status (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013: 175), as it is one of the few options in rural settings to acquire the material and symbolic resources to get married. On the other hand, other studies suggest that migration is increasingly considered as an inevitable part of life for many adolescent girls in Mali and that the migratory experience has significant impacts on women’s social position, as ‘it allows girls to [...] avoid early marriage’ (Engebretsen et al. 2020). Migration experiences can also expose girls to social practices, especially marriage-related, incongruent

with cultural expectations at home, indirectly influencing marital relationships (*ibid.*).

Moving back to our analysis aimed at problematising the view of Malians' emigration as predominantly conflict-related, another element mediating migratory choices in Mali is constituted by shrinking access to natural resources, which is an important driver of rural mobility. While the nexus between the consequences of climate change in the Sahel (such as desertification) and international migration is gathering increasing attention from the literature and the international community, it should be noted that there is still no consensus on the concrete ways in which environmental dynamics are operating in the region. However, although international migration from Mali usually originates in urban contexts, as illustrated by recent interviews with migrants in the country (Mixed Migration Centre 2021a), most of these trajectories still constitute secondary movements after the failure of initial migration projects from rural contexts to major urban centres like Bamako. Rural-urban movements remain both a major pattern of internal migration and often a prelude to international mobility: therefore, the role of competition over natural resources in rural areas cannot be ignored as another wide-ranging driver.

Nonetheless, political instability and armed conflict have certainly played a central role in Mali over the last decade, affecting the socio-political context and economic livelihoods, and acting as a driver of displacement. First of all, it is important to draw attention to the conflict enacted in 2012 in northern Mali, which reflects the combined dynamics of an allegedly weak state, separatist groups or armed rebellion, and jockeying, extremist Islamist groups, in addition to other inter-community disputes. Extremist attacks, including by forces affiliated with the Islamic State, became so targeted, frequent and deadly throughout 2017 and 2018, that the UN Peacekeeping Mission MINUSMA reclassified its listing of civilian threats in 2017, so as to separate out 'terrorist' groups from other 'non-state armed groups' (Di Razza 2018: 21). Moreover, the peace process initiated in 2015 under the Bamako Agreement has been scrutinised as to its effects years later, as findings highlight how it did not address terrorist groups and the UN presence attracted further threats and violence, it left fighters idle and thus predisposed to armed banditry, and it increased divides among clans as they attempted to consolidate power or reorganise and reposition (Boutellis and Zahar 2017; Di Razza 2018: 21).

The trends of emigration towards Europe could be related to some extent to this insecurity cycle, as the numbers of asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons have been at historically high levels (Migration Data Portal 2021). However, a more careful analysis of the situation on the CMR in 2017–20

seems to nuance this assumption: despite persisting insecurity in the country after 2017, the number of Malians reaching Italy (and Spain after 2018) significantly declined. Furthermore, economic determinants have been singled out as having a much bigger role in shaping migratory aspirations in West African countries, including Mali, than political factors (Schöfberger et al. 2020). Coupled with the declining post-2017 pattern, this seems to suggest that, while the conflict might have partially driven emigration, there is not a straightforward connection between lasting conditions of insecurity in Mali and irregular arrivals of Malians in Europe, at least since 2017. Other elements should be factored into the analysis, such as the disrupting effects on the CMR of an intensifying Libyan conflict, as well as the impact of EU-sponsored policies in countries of transit and the shift towards the WMR, which not coincidentally experienced an increase in arrivals in 2018.

Apparently, a clearer connection with conditions of political instability could be drawn concerning the high 2009 WAR figure (or alternatively the 2010 decrease). A certain consensus has emerged on the fact that Mali saw relatively low levels of violence until around late 2011; however, a previous Taureg uprising in northern Mali, spurred by low economic development and secessionist demands, which lasted from 2006 to 2009, was particularly more violent towards the end of that period, thus possibly explaining the high 2009 numbers and the subsequent drop (Hoogeveen et al. 2018). The long-term consequences of the rebellion could also have a role in the sudden – albeit rather limited – increase in irregular arrivals in Italy in 2011, even if also other national groups, such as Nigerians, experienced a similar surge that year.

Looking to the most recent developments, instability in the country has also been fuelled by the deterioration of the crisis in the Liptako-Gourma region, spread across south-east central Mali (as well as Niger and Burkina Faso), where tensions between pastoral farming Dogon and nomadic Fulanis came to a head in 2018 over land and water access points, leading to clashes with the armed forces, attacks on civilians and militia formations (ACAPS 2018). Moreover, the Malian presidential elections took place in the summer of 2018. One survey estimated that almost half of Malians feared becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during the campaign (Haïdara and Isbell 2018). Indeed, there was an uptick in extremist attacks in the months leading up to the election, which ventured down from the north to central Mali and the capital city of Bamako. The UN Secretary-General noted that the three-month period in which the July elections fell represented the deadliest for civilians since 2013 (Gilmour 2019; UN Secretary-General 2018). Still, as previously detailed, it would be simplistic to connect drivers and migration decisions solely to the international intervention,



armed conflict, peace-building and development nexus. As already noted, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation affecting food security, among other dimensions, as well as the (often gendered) cultural and societal understanding of mobility, should also be borne in mind when examining these trends (Hegazi et al. 2021; Bolay 2021).

The intensifying armed conflict engulfing the country has nonetheless influenced internal transit routes operating in the most-affected areas, especially the city of Gao, which is located in the Liptako-Gourma region and has been a key transit point along the WMR: the route may have thus served as a logical choice for those consequently displaced in 2018. At the same time, Gao has also traditionally acted as one of the most important crossroads for journeys using public and private transport from central Mali towards Niger and Algeria. Together with enhanced law enforcement and (limited) controls implemented by Malian authorities, especially in 2018, the insecurity in the area has had a disruptive effect on established smuggling networks and has made Gao a less attractive transit point for migrants departing from Bamako. Since 2018, instability in the region has also prompted migrants from Mali to try other routes towards Burkina Faso and Niger and, at a later time, towards the city of Timbuktu, which consolidated its position as a new smuggling hub towards Algeria in early 2020. This shift from Gao to Timbuktu has also affected the costs of smuggling services to enter Algeria, which are estimated to having increased from 76–122 euro to 229–305 euro in 2020, before the impact of border closures due to the pandemic (Micallef et al. 2021). Interviews with migrants transiting through the country also indicate that the use of smugglers and facilitators is less frequent in Mali (58 per cent) than in Niger (84 per cent), and that the relationship between facilitators and people on the move is much more complex than what transpires from the rigid dichotomy between ‘victims’ and ‘criminals’ that seems to underpin several policy interventions in Mali. The most common services provided in Mali by these actors are not only the crossing of borders, but also accommodation and the facilitation of money transfers (Mixed Migration Centre 2021b). As these changes in Mali occurred concurrently with a decline in irregular arrivals in Italy through the CMR, as well as with the post-2018 drop in Spain, it appears that the role of conflict in driving and mediating migration flows in origin and transit areas is not a given fact, but can produce contrasting effects.

Despite this complex assessment, the security-migration nexus attracted several foreign interventions. The multi-layered Malian crisis has entailed various missions and policy initiatives from the United Nations, the European Union and some European member states (Ioannides 2020). For instance, Italy’s deepening diplomatic foothold in Mali is mainly related to the relevance gained

by immigration from the Sahel in Italian policy-making during the refugee crisis. Mali is also one of the top beneficiaries of the EU Emergency for African Trust Fund, which allocated over 220 million euros to the country (European Commission 2021). Overall, Mali is one of the key African countries where externalisation policies have been applied.

### **6.3.2 The durability of trans-Saharan corridors and the (disputed) impact of the Libyan conflict**

Different legs of the route converging in Libya from Mali have been affected along their trajectories by local developments, which persisted and went through modifications multiple times over the course of a few years. As also made clear by the internal shift from Gao to Timbuktu, the routes followed by migrants departing from Mali have shown a certain degree of adaptability in light of insecurity at home. In particular, the trans-Saharan traits of the CMR have shown a pronounced durability, especially when compared to the dramatic decrease in irregular arrivals experienced at their concluding end in Italy from 2017 onwards. Such misalignment could be partially explained by the large presence of Malians still stranded in Libya's bottleneck, which amounted to 32,840 at the end of 2019 (IOM DTM 2020). This lowest point in terms of irregular arrivals in Italy could also be partially explained by possible diversion of flows towards the WMR in 2018, or changing mobility patterns along the route. In its Displacement Tracking Matrix, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) identifies three major corridors to Libya used by migrants departing from Mali: through Niger, through Algeria, or through Burkina Faso and then Niger. In 2016,<sup>1</sup> IOM reported that 34 per cent of those migrants in Libya had reached the country using the Burkina Faso–Niger corridor, while 30 per cent had passed through Algeria (IOM DTM 2016). Over the years, while the Europe-bound flow was dwindling, the volume of movements along these trans-Saharan pathways continued to shift: in 2018–19 Algeria became the preferred country of transit for migrants from Mali on the CMR,<sup>2</sup> being used by slightly over 40 per cent of those stranded in Libya. Those years also marked the EU-sponsored crackdown against human smuggling in Niger, especially in the key transit point of Agadez, and the enacting of the Nigerien Anti-Trafficking Law. As analysed in the chapter on Nigeria, the effects of this significant modification to the policy framework

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<sup>1</sup> The first time these figures have been made available.

<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, the use of the WMR, away from the CMR and Algeria, was also increasing. Please refer to the case study on Morocco.

in Niger intervened upon a grey area of informality often enabling smuggling and other services linked to mobility, sometimes with the tolerance or even the active participation of local authorities (Raineri 2018).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as already recalled, insecurity in northern and central Mali undermined smuggling networks especially in Gao, a traditional departure point to Niger. The direct involvement of non-state armed groups in human smuggling in northern Mali also remained low as the activity proved to be less lucrative than other illicit trades (Micallef et al. 2019).

The focus thus moves to Algeria, a country which has traditionally emphasised its sovereignty in managing its borders and has remained uncooperative with the EU on migration management. After having introduced a law in 2008 criminalising irregular entry into its territory, Algeria responded to the crises in its neighbourhood in the first half of the decade, including the conflict in Mali, by increasingly linking immigration to terrorist threats and by securing its own frontiers, notwithstanding the persistence of traditional mobility patterns across its borders, especially among the Tuaregs (Teevan 2020). A new and revamped securitised policy adopted by Algerian national authorities has made the tentative shift in 2018–19 from the Nigerien leg of the CMR to the Algerian one short lived: Algeria had already militarised the control of its frontiers, but in 2018 it went even further by conducting several raids and abandoning Malian nationals in the desert across the border (Zardo and Loschi 2022). These interventions ended up anticipating the decrease of Malians transiting through Algeria already in 2019 (41 per cent, slightly down from 42 per cent the year before) and, in a more pronounced fashion, in 2020, when the share dropped to 27 per cent (IOM DTM 2021a).

The partial disruption of flows crossing Niger<sup>4</sup> and policy developments in Algeria have therefore affected the trajectories of Malians, as also underlined by the diversion of their movements towards Chad in 2017–18 (Tubiana et al. 2018). However, despite the recrudescence of Algeria's policies, Malians remain amongst the primary nationalities represented in the immigrant population there (Teevan 2020), as the country has traditionally served as a destination for Sub-Saharan migrants, especially from West Africa (Lahlou 2018), applying an ambivalent approach to their contribution to the local economy.

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<sup>3</sup> For further analysis on the role of Niger as country of transit please refer to the case study dedicated to Nigeria in this book.

<sup>4</sup> Over 35 per cent of Libya-bound migrants from Mali kept on choosing this route even in the years of relative decline of this corridor, namely 2018 and 2019.

The country of ‘alternative destination’ where the scenario for Malians has changed more dramatically over the last decade has been Libya. The inception of a decade-long conflict in 2011 after the toppling of the Qaddhafi regime may have facilitated the first wave of departures of Malians in 2011 and, most significantly, the decisive increase of their numbers during the ‘migration crisis’ in 2014–17, concurrently to the intensification of the civil conflict in Libya.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Libya had long been a key destination country for Malian workers before 2011. While the inflow of economic migrants has not completely faded during the last decade, the deterioration of the economy has impacted the immigrant population. The profile of Sub-Saharan workers in Libya has changed as well, being composed predominantly of single males with a lower level of education. Malians employed in Libya reflect this profile and are mainly hired in agriculture (El Kamouni-Janseem et al. 2019). The reduced attractiveness of the Libyan labour market could be a factor at play when considering the increasing number of migrants attempting to reach Italy in 2011 and then in 2014–17, due to the reduced opportunities of employment available there. At the same time, secondary drivers of emigration from Libya have been mainly connected to forced migration, not only as a consequence of enduring violence, but also of widespread discrimination and exploitation (Crawley et al. 2016), especially after 2014, when the security situation further worsened. While this applies generally to all Sub-Saharan migrants transiting and/or residing in the country, it rings true especially for Malians, because of their vulnerability to trafficking in Libya. Moreover, rising emigration from Mali has also been indirectly affected by the influence of the Libyan crisis: significant numbers of Tuaregs were for instance engaged in security forces in Libya under Qaddhafi and many of them returned in Mali after 2011, fuelling the ensuing instability in the north (Cartier 2013). The influx of Libyan arms in the Sahel, and particularly in Mali, is also estimated to have played a role in nourishing regional and national instability. In turn, it partially drove the increase in Europe-bound flows culminating in 2016 on the CMR and in the following increase in arrivals on the WMR in 2018.

### **6.3.3 The effects of securitised European border policies and Covid-19**

As drivers – especially linked to conflict – interacted in such contrasting ways in shaping Malians’ mobility in contexts of origin and transit, it is also important to

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the broader role of Libya as a country of transit please refer to the case study on Nigeria in this report.

assess the impact of European policies, especially at the concluding ends of the CMR and WMR. The sudden rise of asylum applications of Malians in Spain in 2013 could have been already related to the role of European policies, with particular reference to the dynamic of French and Spanish bilateral agreements with Mali within the EU's cooperation framework on migration control and development. At that time, relations deteriorated between France and Mali with regard to readmission agreements and overall cooperation, while a strengthening of ties with Spain in migration control and police cooperation was taking place (Trauner and Diemel 2013: 25).

More recently, as already noted, the detections of Malians on the CMR have followed the general pattern of decreasing arrivals inaugurated in mid-2017, after a number of significant policy developments in Libya and in the Mediterranean, among them the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Tripoli's government in February 2017. Italy has heavily invested in the policies promoted in the same year by Italian Minister of Interior Marco Minniti, including his strategy of "mending", sewing and repairing' (Liga 2018: 12) relations with different local actors in Libya, such as militias, tribes and mayoral authorities both on the coast and in the south, with the explicit goal of reducing the number of irregular arrivals by dismantling and de-potentiating smuggling operations. Other measures, such as the delegation of Search and Rescue responsibilities to Libyan authorities and the training of the Libyan Coastal Guard, went in the same direction. Restrictions on NGOs operating rescue ships in the Mediterranean were also put in place by the Gentiloni government, followed in 2018 by a decree introduced by the government led by Giuseppe Conte that weakened asylum and international protection in Italy. Further restrictive migration policies were introduced under the new Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini (Vecsey 2019). These measures have significantly distanced the Italian approach from the humanitarian stance of the naval mission *Mare Nostrum* launched in 2013. A more restrictive framework – especially when it comes to the shift to the *Sophia* and *Irini* EU sea operations – has been implemented, which has also been meant as an instrument of deterrence to disincentivise departures from Libya and beyond (Mali included). These measures affected the CMR, and thus would go towards explaining the rise in WMR and WAR detections in 2018.

Finally, the rise in Malian detections in 2020 on the WAR might be attributed to shifts and volume of overall migration routes caused by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, IOM has reported a 39 per cent decrease in the weekly flow at key crossing points in West and Central Africa between January and May 2020 (Horwood et al. 2020). Migrants from Mali – among others – have reported increasing difficulty in crossing national frontiers on traditional

corridors along the CMR in Niger (67 per cent) and Mali (56 per cent) due to the pandemic, but also in moving freely within the same country. People crossing Niger have also stated a decrease in the access to smugglers (26 per cent), much more than in Mali (Mixed Migration Centre 2020). In the Sahel, mobility has then recovered.

Apart from these mobility repercussions like border closures causing – apparently temporary – route shifts, forced displacement, insecurity and conflict continue unabated in countries along the CMR, WMR and WAR, and secondary movements have become significant as the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic affect countries of origin, transit and destination, thus influencing the volume of the flows (IOM DTM 2021b). For instance, mobility had recovered in the Sahel already over the course of 2020 (Mixed Migration Centre 2020), as also signalled by the increasing number of arrivals in Italy.

It is also worth noting that access to political asylum in the Canary Islands presents many challenges because the region has not been sufficiently strengthened with specific capacities and the needed infrastructure. There is a shortage of economic and logistical resources to accommodate the entrances of asylum seekers, which mainly affects those arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa, e.g., due to a lack of interpreters and counsellors (Martín 2021). These considerations can be taken into account alongside the impacts of Covid-19 described earlier.

## 6.4 Conclusions

The challenge posed by drivers of migratory movements originating in Mali is twofold. First, in comparison to other countries of origin examined in this book, Mali acts as an origin for significant movements of irregular migrants reaching both Italy and Spain along different EU-bound migratory routes (CMR, WMR and WAR). As migratory trends on these corridors have been so diverse over 2009–20, the question concerning a deterministic relation between drivers (framed as ‘causes of migration’) in a single country of origin and wavering patterns of arrivals in multiple destinations appears even more complex to untangle. For instance, the evolution of the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions in Mali, especially the Liptako-Gourma area, has presented different effects on displacement, as trends in irregular arrivals have not automatically reflected or corresponded with the intensification of violence in Mali. Instability has also influenced smuggling and mobility facilitation networks in the country, which have been disrupted – and sometimes diverted – by the spreading of conflict around the city of Gao.

Second, these shifting trends question the role of secondary drivers and policies in different countries of transit – especially Niger, Algeria, Libya and Morocco – and introduce the issue of the diversion of the flow of Malian nationals from one route to others, in particular when it comes to the reduced irregular arrivals on the CMR after 2017 and the ensuing increases on the WMR in 2018 and on the WAR in 2020. In this chapter, we have highlighted several factors in contexts of transit that may have played a role in shaping such migratory dynamics, starting with the durable and ever-shifting nature of migratory corridors from Mali to key countries of transit as Niger, Algeria and Morocco. In particular, we have investigated the consequences of restrictive policy evolutions in these countries, and how these interventions have interacted with the free circulation regime of ECOWAS, which is key to understanding the first steps of migrants leaving Mali and moving through these migratory complexes. Nevertheless, our analysis cautions against drawing a straightforward connection among these dynamics. The movement of people in countries of transit has usually been co-influenced by multiple factors at the same time, and the transition in the use of one route over another does not follow clear-cut patterns. This rings particularly true when looking at the role of European policies at the common external frontier in the Central Mediterranean Sea, hailed as a success in stemming irregular arrivals through the CMR, but whose impact has potentially diverted (part of) the flow towards Spain, and has been in turn heavily shaped by the different phases of Libyan conflict.

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Luca Barana

## Chapter 7 Nigeria: The impact of economic struggles and conflict on fragmented migratory routes

**Abstract:** Nigeria is a key West African country, being both a context of origin and a country of destination for regional migratory patterns. In terms of EU-bound movements, Nigerian nationals constituted the second largest group on the Central Mediterranean Route between 2009 and 2020. In particular, trends in arrivals experienced a sharp intensification in 2015–16 at the peak of the ‘migration crisis’ and a sudden decline afterwards. This chapter argues that conflict and instability have certainly played an important role as migratory drivers, but Nigerians’ emigration has been mainly driven by economic motivations, in light of the ‘jobless growth’ affecting the country even before the 2016 recession and looking at the potential consequences of the socio-economic impact of Covid-19. Factors in contexts of transit assessed by the chapter include the shifting socio-political conditions at the local and regional level and the development of smuggling/mobility facilitation activities in key countries such as Niger and Libya, while also considering the evolution and impact of the EU’s border policies in the Mediterranean Sea. Lastly, the multifaceted effects of the conflict in Libya on irregular movements and smuggling networks are also analysed.

**Keywords:** Nigerian refugees | Boko Haram | jobless growth | smuggling in Niger | Libyan conflict

Emigration from Nigeria is a durable feature of mobility spaces connecting West and North Africa, and of migratory corridors converging towards the Central Mediterranean Sea. The presence of Nigerian nationals among ‘irregular border crossings’ on the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) and those who have applied for asylum in Italy has strengthened over 2009–20. Nigeria has been the second most relevant country of origin in terms of irregular migrants reaching Italy through the CMR during that time. As highlighted in this chapter, trends in arrivals have shown some key turning points during this period: a seemingly isolated first increase in 2011; the gradual rise of 2013–14 becoming much sharper in 2015–16; and the sudden decline starting from 2017. In terms of asylum applications, the trend has been similar, but statistics suggest that Nigerians tend to apply for asylum more often than they have been recorded at the CMR

(Melachrinos et al. 2020), as in different years during the period of our analysis the number of applicants (see Section 7.2) has been higher than that of irregular entries. This chapter will look at the main political, social and economic drivers contributing to shaping these trends.

## 7.1 Migration profile

Nigeria is the most populous country in the African continent (190.1 million inhabitants in 2017) and a political heavyweight in the region of West Africa. Its federal structure mirrors significant differences among the states composing its territory: conventionally, the most important divide on political, cultural, religious and environmental grounds has been considered the one between the north and the south. This divergence is also based on economic imbalances, due to the presence of extended oil reserves and the commercial hub of Lagos in the south (EASO 2017). Despite being the biggest economy on the continent, the country faces widespread poverty and unemployment, especially among the youth, whose incidence in the Nigerian population is high, as 35 per cent are aged between fifteen and thirty and 44 per cent are under age fifteen (Adepoju 2017: 119). Over 40 per cent (83 million people) of the national population live below the poverty line (World Bank 2021). Both extreme poverty and unemployment put Nigerian society under severe pressure, as economic growth does not keep pace with demographic trends. Even before a recession began in 2016, the sustained economic performances of the previous fifteen years were described as ‘jobless growth’ (Adepoju 2017: 121). Large swathes of Nigerians also suffer from food insecurity and a lack of basic services, especially among internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The country has been characterised by a history of political instability, despite the introduction of democracy in 1999. Beyond the internationally recognised threat posed by Boko Haram in the north-east, communal violence in the Middle Belt between agricultural and pastoralist populations, as well as separatist claims in the southern states, constitute other key security challenges (Adibe 2017).

Informed by this complex social, economic and security context as well as the sheer size of the country, migration has been a constant feature in Nigeria’s history, both as a territory of origin and as a country of destination. As in other areas of West Africa, mobility has long constituted an established social feature since precolonial times (Afolayan et al. 2008; Ikwuyatum 2016). The colonial rule enhanced internal and rural-urban movements of labour towards administrative centres and areas hosting vital export infrastructure like harbours (Gopalkrishna and Oloruntoba 2012). The British domination also encouraged

regional flows providing workers in mines and plantations outside Nigeria. In a similar fashion, Nigeria received different waves of labour immigration from French West Africa (Mberu and Pongou 2010).

Internal labour mobility towards major cities and economic hubs continued in the newly independent Nigeria (Ikuteyijo 2020), which became even more of a key destination for migrants from other West Africa States: the country experienced an oil boom in the 1970s and early 1980s, attracting many labour migrants. The ratification in 1980 of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Protocol relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment has been widely considered another key factor facilitating the entry of labourers from neighbouring countries (Afolayan et al. 2008). However, the economic downturn during the following years was also blamed on foreigners: in 1983 such sentiment drove the mass expulsion of ECOWAS citizens, especially Ghanaians, who had overstayed their residence permits (Arhin-Sam 2019). In the 1980s and 1990s Nigeria also hosted many refugees from the region, especially from Liberia and Sierra Leone. Their presence has declined in recent years, as conflict in their home-countries has subsided (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016). In 2013, more than 950,000 foreign nationals were still estimated to be present in Nigeria, most of them from West Africa, attracted by its large market, the porosity of its borders and the implementation of the ECOWAS provisions on visa-free entry.

Outbound migration and mobility from Nigeria have also remained predominantly intra-regional, especially within ECOWAS. Nigerian migrants also moved towards other African destinations, especially South Africa, which historically has attracted immigrants from other countries on the continent due to its economic dynamism. Nigerian forced migrants have instead started to seek refuge in Cameroon and South Africa in the 1990s. Overall, it is estimated that over 3 million Nigerians live abroad in Africa (Adepoju 2017: 123).

A more recent feature of migration and mobility concerns emigration outside Africa, which has gained steam after independence in 1960. Emigration, especially towards the United Kingdom and then the United States, has been mostly motivated by education and economic reasons, even if political instability also played a role. There are over 15 million Nigerians abroad (27 per cent in the US and in the UK). Many Nigerians left their country to seek higher education and most of them never returned. Nigeria has experienced outflows of high-skilled workers and professionals to the point that 'a well-developed culture of professional migration emerged' (Mberu and Pongou 2010). This has proven especially true for health-care professionals. With the sector being hit hard by the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s, scores of nurses and doctors

left not only towards Europe and the US, but also to the Gulf (Adepoju 2017: 126). The Nigerian diaspora is thus one of the best educated immigrant populations in several destination countries (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016).

A vast and well-educated diaspora marks some key implications for national development policies and migration governance. Nigeria is the top recipient of remittances in Sub-Saharan Africa: they amounted to over 24 billion US dollars in 2018 (McAuliffe et al. 2019). Together with Egypt, Nigeria receives 50 per cent of all remittances in Africa (Isaacs and Natali 2020). At the same time, the departure of many high-skilled citizens has raised concerns about brain drain, especially in health-care. The role of diaspora is equally important for migration governance and trends: established and broad social networks within the Nigerian community abroad constitute a prominent component of the social discourse on migration in the country and contribute to shaping personal and collective preferences on mobility (Arhin-Sam 2019). Remittances not only play a key role in national development strategies – and hence, are strongly incentivised by public authorities – but they also contribute to local livelihoods, making the choice to depart also part of family strategies facilitating emigration, especially of youth (Ayuba 2018).

Emigration has also acquired a gendered dimension: official figures in 2010 indicate that 51 per cent of Nigerians emigrants were female and only 38.7 per cent of returnees were women, suggesting that female emigration is more often a long-term choice (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016). Irregular emigration of female workers has also been described as a ‘survival strategy’ in search of employment opportunities so as to escape deepening poverty in the country (Ayuba 2018).

Irregular flows of economic migrants towards Europe have increased only more recently: for instance, migration towards Italy reached notable levels for the first time in the 1980s. The highly educated professionals initially arriving in Europe have been followed by lower skilled workers looking for employment opportunities mostly through irregular channels, as the domestic conditions were worsening during the 1990s (Adepoju 2017: 126). In the meantime, forced migration had become another key factor: the number of Nigerian refugees started to climb during the 1990s, particularly in the UK and Ireland.

At the same time, profound concern has been raised by human trafficking, which is run by ‘highly organized criminal webs’ usually involved in international trafficking networks exploiting their victims both in areas of transit, such as Niger and Libya, and countries of destination in Europe and the Gulf (US Department of State 2020: 382). In Libya, vulnerable Nigerians are exploited in construction, agriculture and commercial sex, and are usually lured by the



promise of reaching Europe. Sex trafficking in Europe since the 1990s has been directed especially towards Italy. Spain and the Netherlands have emerged as other key destinations. Criminal networks have developed 'a self-reproducing organization' (Carling 2005) based on the role of local actors in Nigeria, who usually sponsor the journey, trapping their victims in debt.

Human trafficking and trends in irregular migration both highlight the regional peculiarities within Nigeria: for instance, a significant share of Nigerian women trafficked in Europe have historically come from Edo state. Explanations for such geographical concentration range from the particularly disadvantaged conditions of women in the area, due to cultural and historical factors, to the presence of self-reinforcing mechanisms that involve local actors once migratory patterns have been consolidated, in turn shaping networks, infrastructure and expectations (Carling 2005). When it comes to irregular departures, the state's capital, Benin City, has been labelled the 'Agadez of Nigeria' as prospective migrants from different parts of the country pass through the city and organise their onward journey (Arhin-Sam 2019). Moreover, the fact that certain states are subjected to higher volumes of outbound migration and human trafficking contributes to shaping different institutional attitudes towards prevention, protection and prosecution between the states and the central government, and among various Nigerian states.

Notwithstanding these internal asymmetries, Nigeria has been updating its migration governance regime at the federal level. A National Migration Policy was adopted in 2015, establishing a Migration Governance Framework that aims to enhance coordination both among different ministries involved in migration policy and between different levels of government. The National Migration Policy acts as a framework for thematic laws, like the 2014 National Labour Migration Policy and the regulations on diaspora engagement. Another key normative tool is the Trafficking in Persons Law Enforcement and Administration Act – amended in 2015 to include stricter sentencing guidelines – which criminalises sex and labour trafficking. In the field of anti-trafficking, Nigeria established an ad hoc agency in 2003, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons.

## 7.2 Recent trends in EU-bound migration: 2009–2020

According to Frontex statistics on 'detections of illegal border-crossings', Nigerian nationals constituted the second largest group on the CMR between 2009 and 2020. In cumulative terms, 99,056 Nigerian migrants reached Italy and (to a lesser extent) Malta irregularly, constituting 11.82 per cent of the total irregular

arrivals recorded by Frontex in this period. On this route, arrivals from Nigeria were only surpassed by those of Eritreans (119,128 detections, 14.21 per cent), while far fewer irregular crossings have been detected when it comes to nationals of other African countries, like Mali and Gambia. Nigeria is thus the most significant Western Africa country in terms of recorded irregular border crossings on the CMR. In all but two of the years we have analysed, Nigeria appeared among the top-ten nationalities on the CMR, while it should also be noted that overall detections on this route dramatically decreased from 2018 onwards. The notable exception was 2020, when the number of irregular arrivals from Nigeria decreased significantly, despite the overall surge in total detections from 2019 (14,003) to 2020 (35,673).

The mixed flow of Nigerian migrants reached the highest point in terms of irregular arrivals in 2016 (also the peak year for the general pattern of the CMR), when 37,553 detections from Nigeria were recorded. This constituted the highest record of arrivals by Nigerians both in absolute terms and as their share of total detections: more than one in five detections in 2016 originated from Nigeria (20.71 per cent). Overall, the presence of Nigerians on the CMR, after having gradually increased in previous years, intensified particularly in the period between 2015 and 2017, during the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in Italy – and the EU. In those years, Nigeria repeatedly figured among the top nationalities, being second highest in 2015 (21,914 arrivals, 14.23 per cent of total detections), and the most numerous in both 2016 (37,554 arrivals, 20.71 per cent) and 2017 (18,163 arrivals, 15.27 per cent). The number of irregular arrivals of Nigerians on the CMR spiralled down in the following years, decreasing to 1,262 in 2018 (5.37 per cent of total arrivals) and constantly declining afterwards.

The year 2017 was clearly a turning point. A focus on the monthly trends further shows that a steep and sudden decline in the number of arrivals occurred in the summer of 2017: detections dropped from 4,834 in June, one of the highest ever monthly records, to 2,199 in July and just 305 in August. This trend mirrors the general dynamics along the route, which saw a decisive reduction of irregular arrivals in that same period.

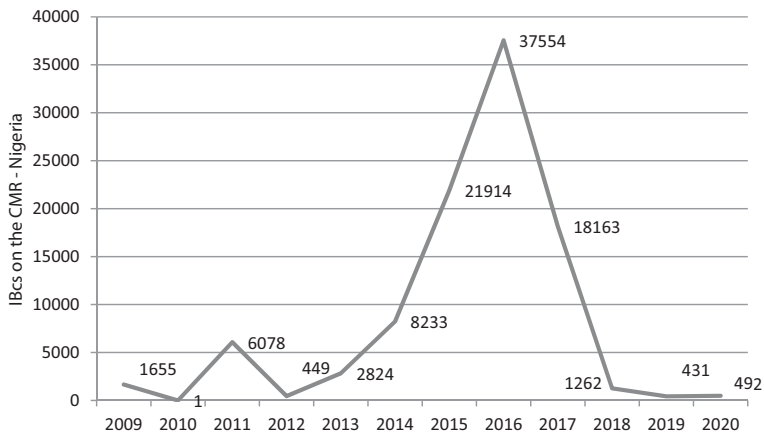
**Table 7.1:** Detections of Nigerian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Year	Detections of Nigerian nationals	Total detections	As % of total detections
2009	1,655	11,043	14.99
2010	1	4,450	0.02
2011	6,078	64,261	9.46
2012	449	15,151	2.96

**Table 7.1:** Continued

Year	Detections of Nigerian nationals	Total detections	As % of total detections
2013	2,824	45,298	6.23
2014	8,233	170,664	4.82
2015	21,914	153,946	14.23
2016	37,554	181,376	20.71
2017	18,163	118,962	15.27
2018	1,262	23,485	5.37
2019	431	14,003	3.08
2020	492	35,673	1.38
<b>Total</b>	<b>99,056</b>	<b>838,312</b>	<b>11.82</b>

Source: Author's elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

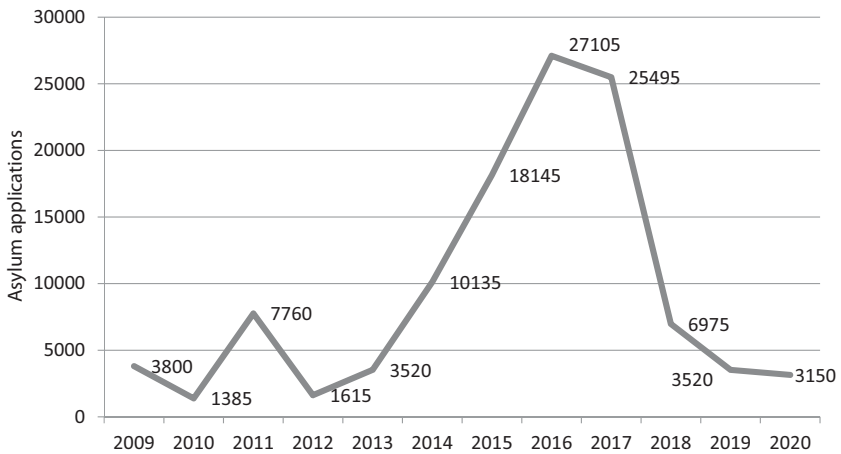


**Figure 7.1:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Nigerian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Source: Author's elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

Eurostat data on asylum applications depict a parallel pattern. 2017 was the last year in which Italy was the top recipient of asylum applications from Nigeria in the EU-27, with 25,945 Nigerian asylum seekers filing their request in the country. Italy had been the top destination for Nigerian asylum seekers

in the EU since 2009. Looking at other European countries – including those Schengen members outside the EU – only Switzerland received slightly more asylum seekers in a couple of years at the beginning of the decade. Then a change occurred. In 2018 Germany became the favourite destination for Nigerians seeking refuge, even if with lower numbers than those recorded in Italy at the peak of the ‘crisis’: Germany received 11,010 requests in 2018. France has also surpassed Italy among the preferred destinations of asylum seekers from Nigeria. This shift towards Germany and France has consolidated in 2019 and 2020.



**Figure 7.2:** Asylum applications of Nigerian nationals in Italy, 2009–2020

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on ‘Asylum and first time asylum applicants’ (Eurostat 2021).

Despite this recent trend, within the EU-27 Italy remains by far the top destination where asylum claims were submitted by Nigerian nationals during the timeframe of our analysis. In total, more than 112,000 applications were filed in Italy, double the number of those in Germany (over 61,000) and with France as a distant third (over 27,500). It is also worth highlighting that the UK, historically a country where the Nigerian diaspora has been particularly strong, recorded far fewer asylum applications in the period between 2009 and 2020 (almost 16,000).

**Table 7.2:** Ranking based on total asylum applications of Nigerian citizens in Europe, 2009–2020

Italy	112,605
Germany	61,560
France	27,655
United Kingdom	15,955
Switzerland	14,965

*Source:* Author's elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on 'Asylum and first time asylum applicants' (Eurostat 2021).

In comparison to established data about gendered emigration from Nigeria (see Section 7.1), Nigerian applicants in Italy in 2009–20 have been mainly male. In 2014, 82.44 per cent of asylum seekers filing their application in Italy were male, the highest share recorded during the timeframe under consideration, while the most robust presence of females among those seeking refuge in Italy was reached in 2010 (49.82 per cent). Overall, the yearly percentage of male asylum seekers in Italy has remained over 60 per cent for most of the last decade, including when the flows of Nigerians intensified in 2015–17. On average, 32.27 per cent of asylum applicants in Italy in 2009–20 have been female.

### 7.3 Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

Irregular arrivals of Nigerian citizens on the CMR in the years between 2009 and 2020 occurred against a background of deteriorating security conditions in Nigeria, and the consequent forced displacement of population both within the country and towards other states in Africa and beyond. In this sense, the country has been labelled as a hotspot of (internal) displacement in West Africa (Dick and Schraven 2018). Accordingly, the number of refugees and asylum seekers from Nigeria has significantly grown in the last decade: overall, Nigerian asylum seekers numbered 73,100 in 2020 (down from the peak of 109,000 in 2019), while refugees from the country reached the record number of 353,000 in 2020 (Migration Data Portal 2021). Also, internal displacement remained at a high level during the decade, with 2.7 million IDPs recorded in 2020 (IDMC 2020).

#### 7.2.1 Insecurity as a driver of emigration: Looking beyond Boko Haram

Founded in 2002, Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group, launched a major insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria in 2009 and since then it has been carrying out

assassinations and large-scale acts of violence in that region, but also in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. It has associated itself with the Islamic State (ISIS), assuming in 2015 the new denomination of Islamic State West Africa Province. The depth of ISIS involvement is not fully clear though (Venturi and Barana 2021). The violence enacted by Boko Haram has caused more than 30,000 victims over the last decade, while the kidnappings of schoolgirls and other attacks against the civilian population have attracted international condemnation. The international response to the growing menace has mainly relied on the launch of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), under a mandate of the African Union Peace and Security Council: its track record reveals some successes in stymieing Boko Haram activities in 2015–16, but the insurgency regained ground in 2018–19.

However, the threat of Boko Haram is not the only instability-related driver of displacement in Nigeria: according to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Nigerians are seeking protection from multiple sources of insecurity due to the actions of militant groups in the Delta, separatist movements, clashes between herders and farmers, the role of students' cults, the impact of trafficking and kidnapping networks, but also human rights violations committed by the state and affiliated groups (EASO 2021). More recently, kidnappings have also escalated at the national level, with abductions and forced disappearances doubling in 2020 compared to the previous year (Ayandele and Goos 2021). Boko Haram is not the only actor involved in these crimes, which are predominantly carried out by unidentified armed groups. Further complicating the picture, it has been argued that many layers of conflict – and thus displacement – are a product of increasing climate-induced risks, for instance referring to the crisis in the Lake Chad region and inter-communal clashes between agricultural and pastoralist populations (Bendandi 2020).

However, the deterministic link between these multiple drivers of forced displacement and the trends of mixed migration flows towards Europe is disputed. While the intensification of both irregular arrivals on the CMR and asylum requests in Italy, first in 2011 – just two years after the insurgency led by Boko Haram flared up – then in 2013–17, seems to confirm to some extent the deepening role of those drivers in shaping emigration from the country, conflict and political violence can hardly explain by themselves the non-linear dynamic followed by movements towards Europe, which have displayed different volumes while conditions of insecurity in Nigeria persisted and evolved. For instance, the post-2017 drop in arrivals in Italy occurred while attacks perpetuated by Boko Haram were intensifying again after the initial gains of the MNJTF, and the relative calm in 2018–20 materialised while the kidnapping crisis was worsening in Nigeria.

### 7.2.2 An emigration mainly driven by socio-economic factors

Emigration from Nigeria is still mainly driven by economic factors and by the search for better job opportunities (Benattia et al. 2015). An OECD study highlighted in 2018 how economic motivations are by far the main reasons declared by those in Nigeria willing to leave the country,<sup>1</sup> also towards Europe. Moreover, the regions more prone to insecurity, like the north-east, are actually those where migratory aspirations are lower, also due to the extreme marginalisation of local populations (Kirwin and Anderson 2018). Nigeria has also been listed among the ‘relatively prosperous African countries’ where urban coastal zones are emerging as sources of extra-continental emigration (Flahaux and De Haas 2016). Widespread conditions of poverty and the ‘jobless growth’ experienced by the country during the commodities boom in 2000–14 have informed international migration patterns. Such findings suggest that the recession inaugurated in April–June 2016 (BBC 2016) should have kickstarted a significant increase in movements along the CMR: not coincidentally, arrivals in Italy between July 2016 and June 2017 were at their peak (more than 39,000 detections over twelve months). However, since mid-2017 the Italy-bound flow has significantly declined, while a feeble economic recovery was occurring in the country in 2017–18.<sup>2</sup>

The relevance of economic motivations and the complex interaction among different drivers in shaping migratory choices made by individuals is also confirmed by interviews with Western Africa migrants moving towards other African regions and Europe – with Nigerians being a significant proportion of those interviewed. Overall, almost 80 per cent of respondents declare economic reasons as one of the key factors in their decision to leave (Mixed Migration Centre 2021a). This observation is reiterated by migrants’ voices collected by the same survey in Western and Northern Africa. However, when specifically looking at the responses of those who have reached Europe, violence, insecurity and conflict becomes a more prominent driver (43 per cent), followed by personal and family reasons and economic motivations (*ibid.*). Available data on drivers of female emigration from countries in West Africa<sup>3</sup> point to a similar direction, as 42 per cent of women interviewed describe economic reasons as

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Better jobs and pay’ was the main factor indicated by 51 per cent of respondents, and ‘send money home’ was referred to by 23 per cent of them.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that data on irregular arrivals in Italy do not capture by far the whole picture of emigration from the country should also be taken into account when assessing the impact of the recession.

<sup>3</sup> Nigerian women comprise a large share of the sample for such surveys.

the most pressing (IOD PARC 2018). It is also interesting to note how Western African women on the move possess an advanced educational degree more frequently than those from other African regions. In terms of social attitudes on female mobility, nuclear and extended families also play a key role in encouraging the decision to migrate (*ibid.*).

Another element concerns the evolution of public attitudes about migratory practices: social discourse on irregular migration significantly changed in Nigeria in 2017 due to the publication of a damning CNN report on the abuses suffered by Nigerian migrants in Libyan detention centres, pushing Abuja's government to change its policy approach and organise the return of thousands of nationals stranded there (Arhin-Sam 2020). Finally, the issue of social and economic pressures on the environment and shrinking access to natural resources in Nigeria should also be taken into account, even if the nexus between conflict, migration – especially EU-bound – and the effects of climate change is not fully clear (Raineri 2019). However, regions like the Lake Chad area in northern Nigeria appear vulnerable to enhanced environmental challenges and the increasing competition for access to natural resources around the lake.<sup>4</sup>

### 7.2.3 A fragmented journey from Nigeria to Europe: Crossing Niger

The contrasting dynamics illustrated so far challenge the conventional wisdom assuming a clear and deterministic 'push effect' of insecurity and economic crisis, and call for further reflection on the fragmented nature of EU-bound migratory patterns. Our assumption of the multi-leg trajectory of migratory routes from Nigeria to Europe along the CMR is also validated by qualitative surveys intercepting the voices of Nigerian migrants; overall, they clearly indicate that their journey is characterised by different stops, usually in certain urban centres along the way, such as Kano (Nigeria), Agadez (Niger), Sabha (Libya) and Tripoli (Libya). Migratory corridors between these cities and other transit points have shifted in different moments in time, but the multi-leg nature of migration remains a common trait, mostly due to logistical reasons, such as waiting for transport for the next phase of travel. The chance of being stopped for detention increases in Libya, but it is an almost non-existent threat along previous legs of the journey (Mixed Migration Centre 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> Please refer to similar reflections in the chapter on Mali for further observations on the complex nexus between environmental dynamics, rural-urban migration in West Africa and EU-bound emigration.



Migrants from Nigeria have predominantly transited through Niger in order to reach Libya. For instance, at the height of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy during 2016, 83 per cent of individuals travelling from Nigeria to the North African state took the Nigerien leg of the CMR (IOM DTM 2016). Geographical reasons are evidently an element to consider in order to understand this preference, as Niger shares a long border with Nigeria to the south and with Algeria and Libya to the north. Another factor enabling the development of this corridor has been the entrenched culture of mobility, trade and transhumance of nomadic populations living in northern Niger, that facilitate the north-bound movement of Nigerians who have freely entered the country thanks to the free circulation regime established among ECOWAS member states.

However, the implementation of this agreement is uneven: free circulation out of Nigeria is still often subject to the payment of bribes at border posts and not all citizens possess the required travel documents. Both circumstances create new incentives for activities of facilitators and smugglers also within ECOWAS (Benattia et al. 2015): 26 per cent of Nigerian migrants interviewed between 2017 and 2018 in Niger declared having started their journey with the help of a smuggler (Golovko 2019). Other surveys have collected similar opinions some years later, at a time when EU-bound movements were dwindling: 79 per cent of those interviewed between 2019 and 2021 in Niger declared having already made use of a smuggler at that stage of their journey (Mixed Migration Centre 2021c).<sup>5</sup> The use of these facilitation services is reportedly higher among migrants from Nigeria’s south-west (99 per cent) than in other areas of the country (67 per cent among migrants from the north-west), highlighting the regional differences between north and south (Mixed Migration Centre 2021b).

In this framework, human smuggling has long been legitimised in certain areas of Niger as a business deeply rooted in the local political economy, with local and state authorities choosing to adapt to it, rather than fight it (Raineri 2018). It has also emerged as a significant source of income for populations in border areas or transit hubs like Agadez. Here, the local economy has been relying on these practices especially before 2016: ‘connection men’, guides and drivers of vehicles equipped for the desert have become key actors in Agadez for the facilitation of mobility through the Sahara of ECOWAS citizens heading towards the border with Libya, where the ‘true’ irregular part of their journey begins (Crawley et al. 2016). Sometimes such networks constitute the only alternative available in the

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<sup>5</sup> The percentage increases even further for those interviewed in Italy (88 per cent) and Libya (100 per cent).

absence of legal channels of entry. These developments in the smuggling infrastructure had consolidated before 2015 and, interacting with shifting conditions in Nigeria and the evolution of the Libyan conflict down the route, could have led in part to the surging number of irregular arrivals of Nigerians in Italy between 2014 and 2016.

### **7.2.4 The EU intervenes: The effects of anti-smuggling policies**

Burgeoning smuggling activities and irregular migratory trails crossing Niger have attracted the attention of policy-makers in Europe, even though the proliferation of human smuggling has also been analysed as an unintended consequence of EU's increasingly high barriers to entry put in place over the years (Reitano 2015). Once the flow on the CMR surged in 2014–16, the EU responded by relaunching the same securitised approach. The Nigerien government became one of the most important partners for the renewed European drive to externalise migration policies: it has been one of the top beneficiaries of the EU Emergency for Africa Trust Fund, receiving 279.5 million euros since 2015, with the majority of those resources being allocated to improved governance, conflict prevention and improved migration management (European Commission 2021).

Pushed by its international partners, the national government also introduced in 2015 the Law No. 36–2015 criminalising human smuggling through the penalisation of irregular entry or exit for both migrants and smugglers. The implementation of the Law in the following years has had significant consequences on the route crossing Niger: the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported a 62 per cent reduction in migratory movements through the country in 2017 (Yuen 2020: 79). The political price borne by Nigerien authorities for this policy sponsored by external partners, which has been described as a 'revolution' for Nigerien society (Pellerin 2018), has however been heavy, especially in terms of loss of legitimacy with local populations (Tubiana et al. 2018).

It has been reported that the decline in human smuggling has been particularly stark in Agadez, where smugglers decreased from a few hundred to a few dozen, mainly active through underground operations, a factor that has raised the costs for migrants up to five times the previously required expense for the same part of the journey (Micallef et al. 2021). The number of migrants transiting through the town, presumably including those from Nigeria, dropped as well from 350 a day in 2016 to between 60 and 120 per week in 2018 (Malakooti and Fall 2020). This crackdown on human smuggling has affected the flow of Nigerians towards Libya since 2017, contributing to shaping the decrease in their arrivals in Italy in

the second half of that year. Despite these visible effects, which have been hailed as a momentous success by EU's policy-makers, north-bound routes have been displaced, not curbed (Raineri 2018). Increased enforcement and controls have fragmented established routes, but have not eliminated them. Even if in diminished number, over 95 per cent of migrants departing from Nigeria and heading to Libya in the next three years have continued to use the corridor through Niger (IOM DTM 2019, 2020, 2021).

Moreover, the rigid dichotomy between migrants and smugglers has to be mitigated. Nigerian migrants themselves express a more nuanced opinion on the role of smugglers and facilitators, more frequently describing them as service providers and business persons (83 per cent). Women tend to indicate them as criminals more frequently than men (15 per cent vs. 10 per cent). In any case, perceptions on the role of these actors change along the route: 56 per cent of Nigerian migrants interviewed in Italy declare that smugglers have intentionally misled them about their journey (61 per cent among women), whereas only 9 per cent respond in the same way when contacted in Niger (Mixed Migration Centre 2021c).

These observations on the complex role of smugglers and facilitators could also help to better understand the decision of Niamey's authorities, between 2019 and 2020, to tone down the law enforcement efforts of previous years, in order to respond to the economic grievances in the north. However, the initial and partial reprise in smuggling activities, which emerged after this new policy turn, has been mitigated by the long-term blow suffered by the smuggling infrastructure during the crackdown and, soon afterwards, further suffocated by the impact of the pandemic (Micallef et al. 2021). So it is hard to assess whether any clear effects have emerged down the route: the number of Nigerians arriving in Italy has remained stable and at a low level in 2019 and 2020.

### **7.2.5 Libya: The contrasted impact of a conflict**

Beyond the situation in Niger, the evolving and conflict-riven conditions of Libya – the African country where the different legs of the CMR converge – can similarly go towards clarifying the choices of Nigerian nationals arriving in Italy. First of all, the toppling of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 proved to be a turning point for Nigerian immigrants earning a living in Libya, as the country had long been an established destination for migrant workers from many Sub-Saharan countries, who found themselves suddenly deprived of income opportunities due to the conflict and the ensuing economic disruption. Another element worsening the conditions of foreign residents in Libya was the proliferation of

episodes of discrimination concurrently with the explosion of political violence. Nonetheless, tracing a causal link between the Libyan upheaval and the first wave of irregular arrivals of Nigerians in Italy in 2011 would risk falling into ‘the trap of oversimplification’ (Rothe and Salehi 2016: 80), as African migrants residing in the country adopted several adaptive strategies in the new context, from internal movements within Libya in search of more stable areas, to the attempt to return to their home countries once opportunities in Libya plummeted. This shows that ‘going to Europe was often not the migrants’ primary choice’ among those living in Libya (*ibid.*: 90). At the same time, while it is safe to assume that the crisis made Libya a less attractive ‘alternative destination’ for Sub-Saharan migrants, the entry of immigrant workers has not completely faded during the ten years of political violence and conflict, as the upheaval has also provided new opportunities for them to enhance their economic agency, due to the dependence of the Libyan economy on their contribution (El Kamouni-Janssen et al. 2019).

Women’s labour migration to Libya over the last years seems to confirm the complex interactions between developments in the country and immigration from West Africa.<sup>6</sup> Finding a job has remained the main aspiration for the majority of Western Africa women – including Nigerians – heading to Libya, despite the recrudescence of the conflict. However, economic reasons are also intertwined with protection factors. Interviews in 2017 show that Libya has maintained, at least partially, its role as a destination for labour migration, but women have become more vulnerable to the risks of being trapped in debt or blackmailed due to their irregular status in the country (4Mi 2017). Despite the risks, women from West Africa increasingly travel alone while looking for employment in the North African state. Several women refer of having been attracted in Libya by exploitative middle-men with the promise of stable jobs in Europe. Others see Libya as a country of transit, but declare being forced to work there to pay the passage across the Mediterranean Sea. Some of them seem also to have found a more stable employment in Libya in the meantime. In any case, 40 per cent of those who arrived in Italy in 2017 reported having left Libya because they could not find a job (*ibid.*).

Although Libya has remained a relatively suitable destination for foreign workers, the conflict developing in the country over the last decade has surely reshaped its migratory environment. Irregular migratory movements from Libya

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<sup>6</sup> As already specified for other surveys based on migrants’ interviews, Nigerians feature prominently among the women included in these qualitative surveys on migration patterns on the CMR.

across the Mediterranean Sea were already common practice under the previous regime, but after 2011 the country established itself even more as the 'launching pad' towards Europe. The share of arrivals in Italy departing from Libya, especially from the western portion of the coast, increased from 38 per cent in 2012 to 83 per cent in 2014 (Malakooti 2015). Trafficking of Nigerian women by boat to Italy seems also to have been facilitated by the 'opening' of the Libyan corridor: their number is reported to have grown by 300 per cent in 2014 in comparison to the previous year (Benattia et al. 2015). While these dynamics were unfolding in Libya, the number of irregular arrivals of Nigerians on the CMR gradually increased as well.

Following this already rising trend, a new turning point proved to be 2014. A key element that changed in Libya at that time was the sudden arrival of thousands of Syrians refugees trying to reach Europe through Italy. Syrian migrants were usually wealthier than those from Sub-Saharan Africa: the presence of a significant population of 'new' migrants with more resources at their disposal demanding for smuggling services out of Libya led these activities to mature. Stakeholders engaged in smuggling soon developed their business responding to Syrians' demand. At that point, also potential migrants from Nigeria and other African countries found a smuggling infrastructure readier to accommodate their needs (Tinti and Westcott 2016). While Syrians did not remain long among the top nationalities of those leaving Libya, smugglers reoriented their business towards the vast population of Sub-Saharan Africans arriving in the country or already residing in Libya. Such interplay between different migratory flows crossing Libya contributed to the surge in irregular border crossings on the CMR – and of Nigerians in particular – in 2014–16. The irregular departures of Nigerian migrants also interacted with the various evolutions of the Libyan conflict: for instance, the increasing violence and economic disruption provoked by the civil war of 2014 could have influenced the decision to leave made by the migrants who until then had lived in Libya.

However, the conflict may have also had a disrupting effect on migratory flows, creating the conditions for the drop in irregular border crossings of the Mediterranean Sea occurring since 2017. The inter-communal clashes in the Fezzan, especially among the Tuaregs and the Tebus in 2014–15, anticipated the disruption of the Nigerian leg of the CMR in 2016. The involvement of the Tebus at the border with Niger has also drawn the attention of Italy, which in early 2017, through the Minister of Interior Marco Minniti, tried to engage these groups and their networks in enhanced migration controls (International Crisis Group 2017). These evolutions in southern Libya have particularly affected the flow of Nigerians due to their preference for the Niger–Libya corridor.

At the same time, the disrupting effects of the Libyan conflict have contributed to displace and/or reshape the business model of local smugglers who, after 2017, switched ‘from monetizing the movement of migrants to monetizing their extortion and ransoming’ (El Kamouni-Janssen et al. 2019: 15). Moreover, the attempted conquest of the capital, Tripoli, during the advance of General Khalifa Haftar’s forces in 2019, and the mobilisation of armed groups that followed, moved the conflict nearer Libya’s western coast, where unauthorised departures towards Italy had previously concentrated. Such developments were met by a sudden decrease in departures in April 2019 (Micallef et al. 2021). Despite a moderate reprise of activities in the following months, irregular entries of Nigerians in Italy remained low that year. This could be also explained by the fact the since 2018 coastal militias have retreated from the protection of smuggling activities, due to the international pressures that made them ‘toxic’ (Micallef et al. 2021).

Thus, the significant decrease in irregular border crossings of Nigerian nationals recorded in Italy since 2017 could be attributed to the cascading effects of different factors in transit countries, such as the relative decline of the portion of the CMR crossing Niger and the obstacles posed by the Libyan conflict. The European political pressure on smuggling operations on the Libyan coast deserves also attention. Italian policies in the Mediterranean and at home<sup>7</sup> could have had a particularly profound impact on Nigerian migrants due to the fact that they appear, among the national groups arriving in Italy, more willing to elect the country as their preferred destination in Europe (Crawley et al. 2016). This is proved also by their preponderant presence among the detections on the CMR and the significant number of asylum applications filed by Nigerian individuals in Italy. It is also worth noting that over 50,000 Nigerians were still stranded in Libya in 2019 (IOM DTM 2020), when the flow to Italy was at its lowest. This figure declined to around 37,000 presences in 2020, after border closures due to the pandemic were introduced (IOM DTM 2021).

The impact of different policies on the traits of the route linking Nigeria to Libya could give some hints on the reasons why the flow of Nigerian migrants did not pick up according to the general trend of the CMR in 2020: such misalignment could be partially explained by the border closures in the Sahel and the general disruption that smuggling networks and irregular routes between Nigeria and Libya have met due to the pandemic, especially in the first half of the year. It could be assumed that many departures from Libya in 2020 involve

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<sup>7</sup> Please refer to case studies on Mali and Morocco for a broader analysis of such policies.

migrants already residing for a period of time in the country, who finally took the decision to leave due to Covid-related economic hardships.

## 7.4 Conclusions

The discussion about the drivers contributing to shaping EU-bound irregular migration from Nigeria shows how drawing deterministic interrelations between so-called ‘causes of migration’ and shifting trends in arrivals on the CMR is – at best – simplistic. Moreover, the multi-leg, non-linear trajectories of migration from Nigeria towards Europe clearly highlight the ways in which individuals actually adapt their migratory behaviours to diverse conditions in origin and transit countries. These considerations bear even more weight when taking into account how several EU policy interventions have been informed by vaguely defined assumptions on the role of ‘root causes of migration’, inspiring an externalisation agenda mainly aimed at enhancing border controls in West Africa, the Sahel and North Africa. In fact, the concrete results of these policies are challenging to assess, as delineated by the post-2017 shifting trends in irregular arrivals in Italy unfolding in the presence of a stable – and restrictive – policy framework in Niger and at the EU’s external frontier in the Mediterranean Sea.

We have also investigated how policies interact with multiple factors in Nigeria when influencing migratory movements. In a country sitting at the centre of deeply engraved regional mobility patterns and arrangements, drivers that stand out are, foremost, the economic motivations of Nigerian migrants. In light of the ‘jobless growth’ affecting Nigeria, the effects of conflict and instability in certain regions of the country, especially in the north-east, need also to be carefully balanced when considering the mixed nature of migratory flows.

Our analysis also corroborates the key role of secondary drivers and modifications in the economic, social and political conditions in countries of transit like Niger and Libya. Migratory corridors through Niger – as well as smuggling and facilitation activities operating in the country – have proven durable and adaptable to policy evolutions at the national level, and to EU actions negotiated with Niamey. At the same time, the conflict in Libya has either facilitated irregular movements through the country, partially reduced its economic attractiveness for foreign workers (many of them Nigerians), or hindered the activities of smuggling networks at different moments in time. These multifaceted consequences of variable mobility patterns and conflict dynamics highlight one last time how deriving cause-effect relationships among restrictive

policies at the EU's external frontier, evolving conditions of instability and trends in irregular arrivals risks becoming a challenging exercise.

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## **Chapter 8 Understanding migration from Tunisia: Domestic marginalisation, regional instability and the EU's over-securitisation approach**

**Abstract:** Tunisia is a strategically located country, between Africa and Europe, and as such it plays a fundamental role in migration dynamics along the Central Mediterranean Route. Over the decades, Tunisia has seen a large share of its young population leaving irregularly for Europe, some of whom have been returned forcibly or on their own initiative. Since 2011, Tunisia's poor economic performance, persisting unemployment and inequalities, and political crisis and uncertainty have been fuelling feelings of disenchantment and frustration about the change that the revolution was expected to bring, especially among Tunisian youth. Many Tunisian migrants who leave for Europe via the sea come from some of the poorest governorates in Tunisia, illustrating a potential link between Tunisian migration outflows and the poor economic performance of Tunisia's countryside and southern regions. Furthermore, Tunisia has risen in importance for the EU in migration terms since the collapse of Ben Ali's regime and the outbreak of the civil war in neighbouring Libya. Recent migration trends – with spikes in arrivals in 2011 and particularly in 2017 – have been responsible for the over-securitisation process undergone by EU–Tunisia relations at large in recent years.

**Keywords:** marginalisation | failed revolution | unemployment | youth | Libya | over-securitisation | externalisation

Tunisia is a tiny but strategically located country, between Africa and Europe, and as such it plays a fundamental role in migration dynamics along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR). Over the decades, Tunisia's mainly youthful population has left in great numbers for Europe. Tunisia's recent socio-economic and political situation is largely seen as directly or indirectly responsible for such migration patterns. In particular, comparatively high levels of educational attainment in primary and secondary grades and the presence of extended social networks in Europe represent important factors shaping Tunisians' tendency to migrate in greatest numbers compared to other nationalities (REACH and Mercy Corps 2018: 8).

The regional context in which Tunisia finds itself, the existing historical connections to the other North African countries and in particular its exposure to security developments in Libya all represent important factors to be accounted for in assessing Tunisia's recent migration trends, Tunisia-EU relations in this domain and the changing attitudes of Tunisian civil society *via-à-vis* migration. Finally, the migration situation has been aggravated by the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This chapter investigates Tunisia's position as an important migration player along the CMR. It argues that its role can be explained by looking at domestic factors – in particular linked to marginalisation patterns – as well as at regional drivers, thereby entangling Tunisia into broader dynamics of insecurity in North Africa and the Sahel.

## **8.1 Historical patterns and the making of the 'marginalisation' problem**

Historically, Tunisians' migration destinations also included other North African countries and the countries in the Gulf in addition to Europe. In particular, in the late 1960s Libya became one of the major destinations for Tunisia migrant workers due to geographical proximity and in connection to the development of the Libyan oil industry. As documented by De Bel-Air,

Legal as well as irregular migration channels, sustained by cross-border tribal connections, brought increasing numbers of Tunisians to Libya (up to 85,000 in the mid-1980s), mostly from the border areas and from the poor, steppe regions in west-central Tunisia (Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Kairouan). (De Bel-Air 2016: 1)

These regions have by and large remained the main departure bases of Tunisian migrants till today. Tunisian migration flows to Libya were characterised by a high turnover due to difficult diplomatic relations between Libya and its neighbours. For example, between 1969 and 2012 Tunisian migrants were repeatedly expelled from Libya, thus creating the conditions for the prevailing informality characterising Tunisian migration to Libya (De Bel-Air 2016: 2; see also Camilli and Paynter 2020). In the 1980s, European countries – in particular France and Italy – became the main destinations of Tunisian workers. Italy started to become very attractive 'due to its geographical proximity to [the Tunisian coast] and to new opportunities in the country's informal economy' (De Bel-Air 2016: 1), particularly in the agricultural sector (Boubakri 2013b; Natter 2015). After Europe restricted its visa regime and strengthened external border controls in the early 1990s – in parallel with the gradual abolition of internal border controls and the

expansion of Schengen membership during the same years – Tunisian labour migration in Europe manifested the following structural features: ‘permanent settlement, irregular entry, and overstaying’ (De Bel-Air 2016: 1). Concurrently, new patterns opened up for Tunisian migrants in the Gulf countries, thanks to a diversification strategy pursued by the Tunisian authorities leading to the signing of technical cooperation agreements between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Awad and Selim 2015).

In light of the substantial number of Tunisians living abroad, Tunisian authorities have always been very aware of the need to remain engaged with the diaspora, predominantly in the European countries. Both under Habib Bourguiba and his successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ousted by the popular upheaval in January 2011, Tunisia’s migration patterns were linked to two factors shaping state-society relations: first, workers were encouraged to emigrate for economic reasons and, second, Tunisian diasporas abroad were closely monitored by the home authorities and by the rest of the expatriate community (De Bel-Air 2016: 1). Tunisian governments came to realise that the country’s economy was facing enormous difficulties in absorbing ‘all the available labour force, and that remittances from abroad were an indispensable source of foreign currencies’ (*ibid.*: 1) for the cash-strapped economy, hence the attempts to closely monitor the Tunisian population living abroad.

Until 2011, the migration phenomenon has been mainly framed along these lines. In this context, the main goal was to foster the integration of Tunisians living abroad into the host societies and to manage the transfer of their remittances so as to harness their economic and social potential (Colombo and Gozzini 2021). In the Tunisian case, this role was performed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Solidarity and Tunisians Abroad and the Office for Tunisians Abroad as its executive body (Weinar 2017).

The 2000s was a period of rising socio-economic difficulties and political tensions, which contributed to opening the door to the unrest and the revolution of 2011. Two structural factors or dynamics of marginalisation need to be taken into account in this respect. The first dynamic of marginalisation concerns the generational gap between the youth (male and female) and the rest of the population. The younger Tunisian population was able to benefit from the availability of higher education for all the population, with UNESCO data for 2009–10 indicating that ‘as many as 40 per cent of 18–23 year olds were enrolled in higher education in Tunisia’ (De Bel-Air 2016: 1). This is confirmed by the fact that Tunisian migrants arriving in Europe both regularly and irregularly are mostly skilled and highly skilled (Schäfer et al. 2015). However, when structural adjustment policies, launched in cooperation with international financial institutions,

such as the International Monetary Fund, and other socio-economic reforms promoting a neo-liberal economic model, which had been implemented in the country since the late 1980s, started to produce their effects, employment opportunities drastically decreased (especially in the government sector, a traditional employer of university graduates). It has been calculated that in 2010, 23 per cent of graduates were out of the labour market, as compared to an overall unemployment rate of 13 per cent for the total population (De Bel-Air 2016; see also Szakal 2017). More specifically, Honwana and Mnasri estimate that 31 per cent of the youth with an engineering degree, 50 per cent with a technical degree and 68 per cent with a master's degree in legal studies were unemployed at the beginning of the revolution (Mnasri 2011; Honwana 2013: 26; see also Sofi 2019).

The second dynamic of marginalisation regards the stark inequalities between the centre and the peripheries that have traditionally been key factors in explaining Tunisia's socio-economic development patterns (or the lack thereof) and state policies. Since Tunisia gained independence in 1956, most investments in tourism and infrastructures have gone to the coastal areas (such as Tunis, Monastir, Mahdia and Sousse) while the internal regions (such as Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Medinine and Gafsa) have continued to experience marginalisation, creating an explosive gap between the centre and the peripheries of the country (Colombo 2021: 4). The marginalisation of central-southern regions continued to worsen under the regime of Ben Ali who, over two decades, undertook deliberate political decisions that have progressively reduced Tunisia's interior regions to 'reservoirs of cheap labour, agrarian products and raw materials for the more developed industries and service sectors operating in the coastal regions' (Colombo and Meddeb 2018: 36). Clientelist resource distribution systems based on tribal and family affiliations helped to maintain apparent stability over two decades in the Tunisian interior regions while fuelling frustration and anger among those parts of society that were excluded from patronage networks (Hamid 2015). As documented elsewhere, on the eve of the fall of Ben Ali, poverty was estimated at 42 per cent in the centre-west and 36 per cent in the north-west, whereas it was at the much lower rate of 11 per cent in the capital and the centre-east of the country (Colombo and Meddeb 2018: 36–37; Colombo 2021: 4–5).

On top of all this, the 2007–08 global financial and economic crisis dealt a huge blow to the tourism sector, which had represented around 10 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, thus further reducing job prospects domestically as well as opportunities for legal migration abroad for Tunisian youth (De Bel-Air 2016). The combination of rising youth unemployment, the proliferation of low-paid jobs in the informal sector, increasing economic inequality and



regional disparities largely explain the outburst of the revolution in Tunisia at the end of 2010 (Achy 2011; see also Cavatorta and Haugbølle 2012).

## 8.2 Why is migration important in the case of Tunisia?

When talking about migration patterns in the case of Tunisia, which is classified as a country of departure (of origin and transit), both inbound and outbound migration trends need to be taken into account. The start of the Arab uprisings represented a watershed for Tunisia's migration trends, with important changes happening both on the inbound routes and the outbound ones. With regard to the former,<sup>1</sup> the growing instability in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa pushed numerous Algerians, Syrians and Libyans to leave for Tunisia to escape instability and civil wars, particularly in and shortly after 2011. Their number, although difficult to pin down with certainty due to the fact that many are not registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), reached around 1 million people in 2011 (UNHCR 2011; Mixed Migration Hub 2018). The reason for these low registered numbers of refugees is that – compared to those arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa – migrants from Libya and Syria have a relatively easier time supporting themselves in Tunisia and have more connections and resources, and therefore are less motivated to apply for refugee status (*ibid.*).

Tunisia is rightly described as a destination country, but it is also a transit country to Europe as many Sub-Saharan migrants depart from the Tunisian northern coast towards Italy and other European destinations. Others come to settle in Tunisia and survive in clandestine, low-skilled and low-pay economic activities. An increasing number of Sub-Saharan Africans are trafficked to Tunisia: many boys and young men are attracted into Tunisia by the promise of careers in sport and other highly paid jobs but are then exploited. Some experience sexual harassment and are forced into domestic labour and other forms of hard work in agriculture, construction or in services (*ibid.*; see also Mazzoleni 2016).

From the legal point of view, Tunisia is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Although the constitution voted in 2014 (now replaced by the one engineered by President Kaïs Saïed and approved in a referendum in late July 2022) guaranteed the right to seek political asylum (Article

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<sup>1</sup> The main recent trends in outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe are described and analysed in the following two sections.

26), the country has yet to adopt national asylum and protection legislation due to both technical and political reasons. Meanwhile, the UNHCR remains responsible for refugee status determination. Nevertheless, Tunisia has taken major steps forward in terms of combatting human trafficking. On 3 March 2016, the Law No. 61/2016 was adopted by the Assembly of the Representatives of the People improving the country's anti-trafficking regulation, in particular with regard to child trafficking and exploitation (Veron 2020). An ad hoc National Authority for the fight against human trafficking (*Instance nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes*) was set up in February 2017 and formally inaugurated in January 2018 (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 88). These improvements notwithstanding, generally speaking, Tunisian governments have approached migration from Sub-Saharan Africa as a security issue, under pressure from the EU and from the need to respond to the latter's concerns for the control of migration at its borders.

The first step towards cooperating with the EU on migration and mobility was taken by the Tunisian authorities in 2003 when they joined the informal consultative platform Dialogue on Mediterranean Transit Migration (*ibid*: 87).<sup>2</sup> Until that moment, EU-Tunisia relations on migration had been discontinuous and piecemeal (Fargues 2004). On the Tunisian side, despite the early signing of a bilateral readmission agreement with Italy in 1998, irregular migration from the Tunisian coast into Europe was not regarded as a key priority by the Tunisian governments, which – as already argued – have tended to frame migration and mobility as a domestic security and economic issue only (Paciello et al. 2016). On the EU's side, the increased relevance of Tunisia as a departure and transit country started to catalyse attention in Brussels, particularly when confronted with humanitarian disasters at sea such as the sinking of a boat 60 kilometres off the Tunisian Kerkennah Islands, causing the death of forty-six migrants trying to reach Italy on 8 October 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> The Dialogue on Mediterranean Transit Migration is an interregional intergovernmental consultative forum of migration officials in countries of origin, transit and destination along the migration routes in Africa, Europe and the Middle East with a focus on irregular and mixed migration, as well as on migration and development in the Mediterranean region and beyond, aiming to build common understandings and to jointly develop evidence-based comprehensive and sustainable migration management systems. For more information, see the European Commission website: *Dialogue on Mediterranean Transit Migration*, <https://europa.eu/!WFFd44>.

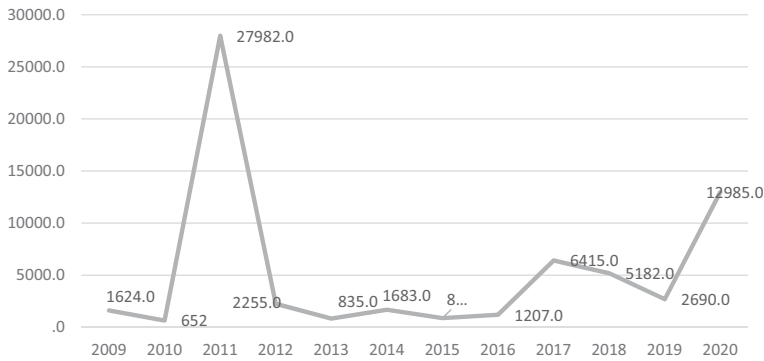
### 8.3 Recent trends in Tunisia's EU-bound migration: 2009–2020

Talking about outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe, the last decade has seen important developments along the CMR involving Tunisia. According to Frontex statistics on 'detections of illegal border-crossings', during this timeframe (2009–20), two major peaks were registered: first, an immediate and major upsurge in migration from Tunisia through irregular channels in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, when almost 28,000 Tunisians left the country profiting from the relaxation (or outright absence) of border controls to cross into Europe (Frontex 2021). The second increase within the 2009–20 time-frame started in the second half of 2017 – with detections of 6,415 Tunisian migrants – and has continued in the following years with an increase to 12,985 arrivals in 2020.

**Table 8.1:** Detections of Tunisian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

<b>Year</b>	<b>Detections of Tunisian nationals</b>	<b>Total detections</b>	<b>As % of total detections</b>
<b>2009</b>	1,624	11,043	14.71
<b>2010</b>	652	4,450	14.65
<b>2011</b>	27,982	64,261	43.54
<b>2012</b>	2,255	15,151	14.88
<b>2013</b>	835	45,298	1.84
<b>2014</b>	1,683	170,664	0.99
<b>2015</b>	880	153,946	0.57
<b>2016</b>	1,207	181,376	0.67
<b>2017</b>	6,415	118,962	5.39
<b>2018</b>	5,182	23,485	22.07
<b>2019</b>	2,690	14,003	19.21
<b>2020</b>	12,985	35,673	36.40
<b>Total</b>	<b>64,390</b>	<b>838,312</b>	<b>7.68</b>

*Source:* Author's elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).



**Figure 8.1:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Tunisian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

In 2011, Tunisians represented the relative majority of arrivals (43.54 per cent of detections), followed by Nigerians (representing not even 10 per cent of total arrivals). Their number then shrank in the following years (2012–16) and remained low until starting to grow again from 2017 onwards. This trend in 2012–16 contrasts with general patterns unfolding on the CMR, whose flow intensified prominently in those years. In 2017, the fourfold increase of departures from the Tunisian coasts compared to 2016 drew the attention of the EU’s institutions and many member states. Since then, Tunisians have represented again the largest cohort of arrivals (Frontex 2021). However, as argued by Zardo and Abderrahim, ‘concerns are less related to the number of people reaching the European shores than to the fact that sea-crossings involve mostly young Tunisian citizens fleeing unemployment and lack of prospects’ (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 85). In 2018, Tunisian migrants along the CMR were reported to represent over 22 per cent of total CMR detections and in 2020 their share increased to over 36 per cent of total detections (almost 13,000 migrants in absolute terms). The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic did not halt Tunisian departures in significant ways; on the contrary, 2020 has ranked second among the years with the highest number of detections of Tunisian migrants in the 2009–20 period.

Eurostat data on asylum applications paint a similar picture. Most Tunisian asylum-seekers (more than 11,000 asylum applications in the period 2009–20 according to Eurostat data) reached Italy, followed by Switzerland (9,175) and Germany (6,765) as the other two key destinations. The number of Tunisians

reaching Italy peaked in 2011 with over 5,000 asylum applications, and again in 2018 and 2020, with 1,025 and 1,020 applications, respectively. While during the first peak of 2011, following the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisians travelled by sea to Lampedusa in Italy to pursue employment opportunities or reunite with their families (those who had connections) as a direct response to what was happening in their own country, seen both as an opportunity and a threat, the 2017–20 increase was linked to several factors related to both domestic and regional contexts, as well as general developments along the CMR route (Gallien and Herbert 2017).

Tunisian asylum applicants in Italy in 2009–20 have been disproportionately male. Overall, the yearly percentage of male asylum seekers in Italy has stood in the range of 84–97 per cent of the total, a remarkably high proportion. In 2011, 97.02 per cent of asylum seekers filing their application in Italy were male, the highest share recorded during the time frame under consideration, while the most robust presence of females among those seeking refuge in Italy was in 2020 (15.69 per cent).

Tunisian people's motivation to migrate was particularly strong in low-income neighbourhoods in the country, thus eventually fuelling a vicious cycle of displacement and underdevelopment. Boats leaving Tunisia for Europe typically depart from the Tunisian northern coast (for example, Bizerte, Cap Bon) and eastern coast (most prominently, Sfax, Thyna and the Kerkennah Islands) and try to reach Lampedusa and Sicily in Italy (Mixed Migration Hub 2018). Despite the relatively short passage, taking these routes entails significant risks for migrants including drowning and the possibility of being intercepted by the coastguards, who are in charge of implementing the highly securitised and externalised European approach to migration along the CMR also with regard to Tunisia.

#### **8.4 Understanding recent migration trends from Tunisia**

Several intertwined factors account for the general trend in outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe between 2009 and 2020. Since 2011, Tunisia's poor economic performance, persisting unemployment and inequalities, political crisis and uncertainty related to the country's democratic transition and consolidation process, in addition to the impact of the Libyan conflict across the border, have been fuelling feelings of frustration and disillusionment with regard to the expected changes brought about by the 2011 revolution, especially among the Tunisian youth (REACH and Mercy Corps 2018) and those living in marginalised areas of the country.

Returning to the two dynamics of marginalisation mentioned above (i.e., generational and geographical marginalisation), they can be identified as powerful factors shaping the context for recent outbound migration trends from Tunisia. Concerning generational marginalisation, young Tunisians' unmet expectations and lack of prospects for a decent life in their own country, entailing finding a job, accessing housing and eventually having the possibility to marry, feature high on the list of motivations commonly contributing to their decision to leave (Schäfer 2015). The lack of trust in the government's ability to successfully address persisting economic difficulties has heightened the feeling of alienation felt by young people vis-à-vis political and economic participation and fulfilment (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018). Expectations for a better socio-economic future have plummeted: in 2019, only one third of Tunisians still believed that the situation in their country could improve in the near future compared to 78 per cent in 2011 (Arab Barometer 2019; see also Narbone 2020: 8). This means that frustration has run very high. This has created a sense of non-belonging to the communities at the individual level, pushing many to consider leaving the country (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 97). In addition to that, the perception of migration itself and the social frames associated with this phenomenon have 'undergone a critical change by shifting from an individual to a family choice as some families now encourage and help their sons to leave the country' (*ibid.*). Finally, young people tend to, on the one hand, have more connections to Tunisians living abroad and, on the other hand, fall more easily into the dirty hands of traffickers as they are often approached by them over the Internet and through social media.<sup>3</sup>

In 2012, the Tunisian government launched the National Strategy for Employment 2013–2017. However, its results seem to indicate that it has not been successful. In recent years poor employment opportunities, mainly in the informal sector, have remained the only avenues for young Tunisian graduates. In 2017, 54 per cent of young people could only find a job in the informal economy (DirectInfo and TAP 2017). Some of them have also become involved in the cross-border smuggling trade and trafficking with nearby countries such as war-torn Libya and Algeria (Marzo 2016: 9), thus challenging even more Tunisia's capacity to control its peripheries where terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State have exploited porous borders to traffic weapons and jihadists (Gallien 2018). Indeed, young Tunisians have represented the largest group of foreign fighters who have joined ISIS to

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<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with a Tunisian youth activist, phone interview, June 2021.

be trained and fight in Syria and Iraq or elsewhere, and then returned to their country (Marzo 2016: 11; Cristiani 2014). Some reports put this number at a staggering total of three thousand (Zelin 2015).

The generational marginalisation of large swathes of the population makes internal and international migration more rewarding in terms of employment and social security. This set of socio-economic opportunities and constraints within Tunisian society applies both to rural-urban migratory movements inside Tunisia – reflecting the geographical marginalisation of certain Tunisian regions analysed below – and even international migration. Both internal and outbound migration show a gendered dimension as well, with repercussions on the role and social position of women both at home and within the migrants' community. On the one side, migrant women experience higher employment opportunities and labour market participation than non-migrants. As such, Tunisia has been experiencing a process of deepening 'feminisation' of migration (Zuccotti et al. 2018). This mainly applies to rural-urban movements on seasonal basis, but, after 2011, increasingly to international migration as well, thus becoming a key factor mediating aspirations and attitudes towards gendered EU-bound migratory patterns. The process of feminisation is also linked with the emergence of a higher number of highly educated migrant women. 2011 seems to have been a turning point also in the sense that Tunisian women on the move have increasingly declared that the reasons for their departure were related to study, while the incidence of marriage-related reasons has been decreasing, especially when compared with the situation before 2010. On the other side, migration from Tunisia is still predominantly male and households with migrants are more feminised, i.e., with a higher share of women who are more likely to be active compared with women in non-migrant households (*ibid.*: 42).

Moving on to geographical marginalisation, many Tunisian migrants who have left for Europe via the sea, particularly since 2017, have come from some of the poorest and most marginalised governorates in Tunisia, thus uncovering a potential link between outbound migration and the poor economic performance of Tunisia's countryside and southern regions (Boubakri 2013a). Indeed, these regions have been shaken by significant incidents of popular mobilisation from 2016 onwards, which have reinforced the idea of a two-speed Tunisia in development terms. They have been mainly motivated by the pressing issues of (youth) unemployment and underdevelopment. In January 2016, a series of popular demonstrations began in Kasserine in response to the death of a young man who had contested the results of a hiring procedure. The wave of unrest quickly spread through sixteen other governorates (Szakal 2016). In September of the same year, the mining region of Gafsa and the Jendouba governorate adjacent to

the Algerian border saw protests and unrest against economic marginalisation and local corruption (Yahia 2016). In March 2017, strikes and demonstrations in Tataouine completely blocked all economic activity in the region. Protesters proclaimed their right to employment and the development of their marginalised region, where many oil companies operate without accepting any social or environmental responsibility for the development of the area (Colombo and Meddeb 2018: 42; Cherif 2017). New protests broke out in January 2018 around the passing of the new economic and financial law and following the announcement of new rounds of austerity measures (International Crisis Group 2018). A national strike to demand pay increases for public employees in January 2019 brought the country to a halt (Reuters 2019). Strings of protests continued the following year despite Covid-19-related restrictions and have most recently intertwined with popular mobilisation against President Kais Saïed's power grab (Abouzouhour 2021).

In light of the insecurity nexus connecting Tunisia to Libya, some of these locally driven protests have had a strong connection to developments in Libya when it comes to migration ramifications. The increase in departures from Tunisia since 2017 is indeed partially linked to the relative closure of the Libyan route.<sup>4</sup> Traffickers' proven capacity to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances has meant that a growing percentage of those making the trip to Europe has been represented by people from Sub-Saharan countries, although Tunisians have continued to represent the greatest majority. According to some accounts, 'in the past migrants from sub-Saharan Africa comprised between nine and 11 per cent of those departing from Tunisia', while in 2019 this percentage increased substantially 'because of the deteriorating situation in Libya and the bombing of Libyan detention centres' (Camilli and Paynter 2020). It could be argued that Tunisia is increasingly assuming the role of a transit country, to the extent that many refugees and migrants moving from neighbouring Libya are spending a longer time in Tunisia than expected (Horwood et al. 2020).

## 8.5 EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration and beyond

It is clear that the increase in departures from Tunisia to Europe analysed above has placed a huge strain on the former's relationship to the EU. It is not by surprise that – in a vicious circle – since 2015 EU-Tunisia relations have undergone

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<sup>4</sup> Please refer to the case studies on Mali and Nigeria for more details on the disrupting effects on migratory flows of certain phases of the Libyan conflict and of the EU's border policies.



a process of over-securitisation that has reinforced the EU's inborn dynamic towards the externalisation of border control (Cherif and Kausch 2018). This process of over-securitisation has mainly been framed along the strong emphasis placed on radicalisation and migration as two contiguous challenges in the EU's discourse (Badalič 2019). Contrary to the past, Tunisia has become a priority for the EU in migration terms since the collapse of Ben Ali's regime and the outbreak of civil war in neighbouring Libya. The need for more intense bilateral cooperation with the Tunisian authorities on this matter became particularly evident after the upsurge of migration from Tunisia to Europe that took place in early 2011. In that context, Tunisia concluded a number of readmission agreements with the main destination countries for irregular migrants, namely Italy and Switzerland but also France (De Bel-Air 2016: 3). Not only were these agreements geared towards strengthening cooperation on border management, i.e., preventing unwanted migration to Europe, but they also included clauses related to the readmission to Tunisia of Tunisian migrants, as well as, in some cases, of third-country nationals (TCNs). This latter point in particular contributed to poisoning the relations between Tunisia and the EU on migration issues (Meddeb 2017).

In November 2012, the European Union and Tunisia signed an Action Plan for 2013–17 in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, granting Tunisia a 'Privileged Partnership' status and 'strengthening financial support, trade openings and improved mobility' (De Bel-Air 2016: 3; see also Lixi 2018). In this context, the transitional Tunisian government has tried to negotiate new cooperation patterns with the EU with regard to the movement of people, the management of legal migration, and the fight against irregular migration and readmission (Cassarino 2014). However, the negotiation of Chapter 6 of the 2013–17 EU-Tunisia Action Plan dealing specifically with 'migration, mobility, and security' proved not to be an easy task.<sup>5</sup> After a lengthy negotiation process, the Tunisia-EU Mobility Partnership was eventually signed on 3 March 2014 (Rouland 2021). Since that moment, EU funding to Tunisia in the realm of migration and mobility has substantially increased (Cassarino 2014). For example, the Development Cooperation Instrument has supported the development of the Tunisian National Migration Strategy trying to foster a more comprehensive approach to migration management. Furthermore, an important share of the 23 million euro planned for the Security Sector Reform programme

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<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with a Tunisian civil society representative working on the migration dossier, phone interview, July 2021.

has been devoted to border management and 11.5 million euro under the Emergency for Africa Trust Fund has been committed to: (i) operationalise the National Migration Strategy; (ii) involve the diaspora in local development; (iii) support reintegration; and (iv) link migration and local development (European Commission 2015). The EU and Tunisia started negotiations on a readmission agreement and a visa facilitation agreement in October 2016.

However, EU-Tunisian cooperation on migration has also faced a number of stumbling blocks that persist till today. The EU's insistence on the signing of a readmission agreement with Tunis, as with the other North African countries, has encountered the opposition of Tunisian authorities (Limam 2020). For them, readmission is a very sensitive topic – in relations with the EU and domestically. Tunisian authorities and civil society organisations alike have heavily criticised the procedures for readmission, both of Tunisian citizens and TCNs, included in the first draft agreement discussed in October 2016 (then temporarily withdrawn). Among the factors quoted to justify the opposition to these procedures, the weaknesses of the Tunisian institutional and legal framework to deal with readmitted TCNs, such as the lack of an official regularisation policy or of voluntary return programmes, stand out as the most important ones (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 94–95). Moreover, these practices are regarded as dangerous as they would expose the fragile Tunisian socio-economic and political context to people's reactions to having to host an increasing number of migrants. This is why Tunisia has declined forcefully the EU's request to set up migration hot-spots on its territory (*ibid.*).

Many discussions have also been undertaken on migration between Tunisia and some of the European member states that have been more concerned by the general trend in outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe in the period 2009–20. The case of Italy is paramount in this regard. In light of the spike in arrivals from Tunisia experienced in summer 2020, Italian authorities and officials have asked their Tunisian counterparts to step up their commitment to control and stem migration flows. These requests were laid out in a series of visits paid to Tunis by several Italian political figures over the same months, and that have continued into 2021 as well. These meetings have provided the opportunity to discuss migration relations in the framework of broader cooperation initiatives, leading – among other things – to increased bilateral economic support to Tunisia in return for tougher efforts to stop migrants coming into Europe and the announcement in May 2021 of a 'hotline' for better exchange of information about irregular departures from Tunisia (AfricaNews 2021).

Overall, several critiques have been voiced to the approach and concrete initiatives for EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration as well as to bilateral

Tunisia–member states migration deals particularly by the very active Tunisian civil society organisations that have been flourishing since 2011. Firstly, this approach has failed to provide Tunisian citizens with concrete, legal opportunities to enter and live in the EU countries, and to address the existing bureaucratic burdens encountered by Tunisian citizens when submitting visa applications, the relatively high financial cost of these procedures and the often-reported opacity of the motivations for visa rejection (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 96). Secondly, mobility opportunities continue to target high-skilled Tunisians only, and do not represent an alternative to the undocumented journeys that are mainly undertaken by young unemployed Tunisians, who long for opportunities abroad that are barred from them. Thirdly, mobility opportunities for Tunisian students and researchers offered by the EU through a series of programmes (Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ or Creative Europe) are steps that go in the right direction. However, these programmes do not represent – either qualitatively or quantitatively – the change that the Tunisian authorities and CSOs have been demanding. In particular, they still cannot compensate for what is perceived by Tunisia as an emergency-driven, short-term approach by the EU (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 95). A partial improvement in this respect is on the radar thanks to the newly launched Talent Partnerships. Inaugurated in June 2021 in the framework of the ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’, the Talent Partnerships aim to provide opportunities for vocational education and training for people in their countries of origin, followed by the possibility to live and work legally in the EU countries once the training period is completed.<sup>6</sup> Going back to the criticalities of the EU–Tunisia migration cooperation, it remains to be noted that the draft visa facilitation agreement with Tunisia – contrary to other similar agreements signed by the EU and ‘wider Europe’ countries – does not mention a visa-free regime as a (very) long-term goal, thus complicating the prospects for opening safe and legal pathways from Tunisia to Europe.

All this has contributed to not only poisoning EU-Tunisia bilateral relations in general but most importantly to continuing to push mainly young Tunisians to attempt dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean to reach Europe. On the first aspect, it is important to be aware of the fact that Tunisia’s domestic democratic policy-making process is very sensitive to the public opinion’s views on this matter voiced by Tunisian CSOs. Moving away from ‘migration management’, perceived as a synonym for migration deterrence, civil society has been calling for ‘a human-rights-based immigration policy’ both domestically

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, see European Commission (2021).

and externally (Natter 2015). Regarding the second aspect, one can conclude by saying that the 2011 Tunisian uprising has ‘revolutionized’ the ‘space of mobility’ in Tunisia and raised people’s expectations of freedom in unprecedented and highly visible ways, and as such these expectations need to be accounted for and acted upon before they turn into deadly decisions (Garelli and Tazzioli 2017).

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Colleen Boland and Daniel Morente

## Chapter 9 Morocco's influence on WMR and WAR transit: Key relationships with Africa and Europe and growing geopolitical weight

**Abstract:** Given historical ties and shared sea and land borders with Spain and Europe, Morocco serves as a linchpin in migration routes from North and Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe (through Spain), and is increasingly a key actor in both European border externalisation and broader geopolitics. Initially invited labour migration from Morocco to Spain shifted to mixed migration flows, gaining visibility from the European public and policy perspective at the turn of the century. EU and Spanish securitisation and monitoring measures, in tandem with Moroccan state cooperation, began to specifically address Sub-Saharan transit migration. Such policies and practices continue to focus on irregular arrivals by sea to Spain's Canary Islands, or irregular crossing to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Despite political signals of reform, at the domestic and international levels, Moroccan state migration policies and practices continue to face critique, and largely deter transit migration with dispersal or clandestine and discretionary state practices. These transit migrants can face gendered and racialised outgroup prejudice and rhetoric both in Morocco and in Europe. While Moroccan nationals themselves have accessed Europe through the Central Mediterranean via Italy, recent shifting or increasing trends of movement on the Western Mediterranean and Western African routes promise to continue. Domestic conflicts like the Rif crisis, and restrictions in Italian migration policies may be contributing factors, alongside Covid-19 border disruptions and the socioeconomic impacts of the crisis affecting livelihoods.

**Keywords:** EU border externalisation | transit migration | discretionary migration governance | intersectional vulnerabilities | multi-level securitisation

The Kingdom of Morocco is a lower middle income, parliamentary constitutional monarchy with a population of roughly 36.5 million (when including the Western Sahara), located in North Africa and bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Algeria and Mauritania (World Bank 2021). At the same time an origin, transit and sometimes destination country, it is pivotal in the landscape of migration between Africa and Europe, and has assumed an increasing leadership role in both regional and global migration management (Benjelloun 2021; Messari 2018). Morocco serves as the departure point for Europe on the traditional Western Mediterranean route (WMR), as migrants

access Spain either via the sea routes crossing the strait of Gibraltar (from Tangier to Tarifa), or traverse land routes in North Africa into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Moroccan territory.

This chapter offers an overview of the historical trajectory of Moroccan emigration and immigration, before observing recent trends in EU-bound migration, and identifying key patterns in Morocco's shifting and expanding role as a transit country in mixed migration flows between Africa and Europe. It notes how the country's domestic migration governance is intertwined with its diplomatic or geopolitical positioning and significant relationships with Spain and the EU, all of which has continued securitisation-related consequences for the WMR and WAR (Western Africa) routes, particularly exacerbating intersectional vulnerabilities of Sub-Saharan and North African migrants.

## **9.1 Morocco's historical migration profile and the shift to a transit context**

While throughout the twentieth century Morocco largely was a country of emigration, the 1990s saw a shift to irregular and transit migration. This decade was preceded by Spain's recent accession to the EU and marked by Spain's economic success; while Spain experienced seasonal labour demand, increasingly restrictive political and legal measures in EU migration requirements meant any corresponding and growing migration flows became irregular. Moreover, the 1990s involved political and economic developments within Africa that transformed Morocco into a significant transit country, with migratory movements primarily from Sub-Saharan countries. This was linked to the 1985 institution of the Schengen zone and free movement regime in the EU, with a multiple-entry Schengen visa afforded to Moroccan citizens, as well as Ceuta and Melilla forming part of the Schengen area. Civil unrest and economic crises in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast led to refugee migration during this time, and Libyan restrictions on labour migration in 2000 also encouraged economic migration. Later, post-2000 mixed flows to, through and out of Morocco were not exclusively economically motivated but also drew from a variety of factors including war, natural disaster, climate change and rapid population growth, among others (Benamar and Ihadiyan 2016).

In particular, the literature emphasises post-2000 Sub-Saharan flows through Morocco to Europe, with a spike of Sub-Saharan migrants arriving in Morocco in 2006 (Berriane M. et al. 2015; Mghari 2007). With respect to post-2000 Sub-Saharan transit migration, a 2007 demographic study of Sub-Saharan Africans transiting in Morocco found that the most prominent nationalities included

Nigerians, Malians, Senegalese, Ivorians, Guineans and Cameroonians (Mghari 2007). After a highly sensationalised 2006 surge in Sub-Saharan arrivals on Spain's Canary Islands catalysed securitisation and monitoring measures at the EU and Spanish levels in tandem with Moroccan state cooperation, WMR flows through Morocco have especially come into focus (Schapendonk 2012). While the later analysis will point to significant and pivotal Sub-Saharan transit migration, it could be argued that Morocco is not a significant country of destination (Lahlou 2018a). It is difficult to account for irregular Sub-Saharan migrants residing in the country: a 2014 estimate puts the number with irregular status between 25,000 and 40,000, another records 50,000 Sub-Saharans working and living legally in the country, and yet another totals 70,000 Sub-Saharan migrants of any legal status in a country of negative net migration (Benamar and Ihadiyan 2016; El Ghazouani 2019). The aforementioned 2007 demographic survey found that a negligible number of Sub-Saharan migrants intended to stay in Morocco, rather than continue on to another destination country or return home to the country of origin (Mghari 2007).

In terms of Morocco's emigration history, after gaining independence from France in 1956, contemporary Morocco has been a major sending country, with initial emigration to France, Belgium and the Netherlands as European countries actively recruited low-skilled labour. In the 1980s, in tandem with more restrictive immigration policies in Europe since the early 1970s, migration flows increased to Spain and Italy, given their high demand for low-skilled labour. At first, this migration to Southern Europe was circular in character, in that Moroccans travelled back and forth; however, when Italy and Spain joined the Schengen Area in the early 1990s, entailing visa requirements, flows became more irregular, despite both European states' periodic regularisation of unauthorised migrants. From the turn of the century forward, Morocco's implementation of varying migration policy reflected its new role as a transit country (Berriane M. et al. 2015: 504; Berriane M. 2018). At the same time, it has also remained an origin country, with emigration and corresponding remittances still continuing to bolster the Moroccan economy (Khachani 2006).

## **9.2 Morocco as a geopolitical force with significant regional influence**

Morocco's migration profile is linked to the state as an influential geopolitical and regional actor. A founding member of the Organisation of African Unity (1963), historically Morocco's African foreign policy under Kings Mohamed V and Hassan II boasted strong ties with Senegal, Gabon, Guinea and the former

Zaire. Cultural and social ties were also established via Moroccan universities hosting students from African states since the mid-1980s, and the country has long served as a religious influence in Western African Islam, via its religious leadership in the Tijani branch of Sufi Islam (Berriane J. 2014; Berriane M. 2018).

In terms of interregional cooperation within North Africa, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania signed the constitutive treaty of the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989 in order to achieve economic integration with the intent of eventual political unification that could better position the Maghreb within the international economic system (Zoubir 2000). However, discord regarding the Western Sahara conflict meant a stalemate, and instead, Morocco has established bilateral agreements with African countries to the south. In essence, North African regional cooperation or integration on migration issues remains unfulfilled; for example, the opposing foreign policy interests and tensions between Algeria and Morocco have repercussions for the entire Maghreb and Sahel regions, which in turn affect migration management and patterns. Since the 1990s, economic development and trade has often been conducted via primary economic partners as the EU and or/its member states, the United States and China, rather than fellow Maghreb countries, leading to vertical rather than horizontal integration of economic policy in addition to migration policy (Kireyev et al. 2019; Zoubir 2000: 57).

After the turn of the century, Morocco's migration patterns attracted heightened academic and political interest, particularly in light of transit migration from Sub-Saharan Africa, and the state began to impose restrictive immigration policies in 2003. The next significant shift in migration policies took place with Morocco's 2013 immigration reform, the National Immigration and Asylum Strategy (SNIA), followed by a 2015–16 surge in asylum seekers headed to Europe, leading to a deepening engagement with the EU on migration management (Benjelloun 2021; Natter 2021). At this point, it is also worth highlighting how after leaving in 1984 (due to recognition of the Western Sahara), in January of 2017 Morocco re-joined the African Union, with a speech from the King implying that Maghreb integration was being replaced with an African one; this marked a strategic shift in both Moroccan and African regional foreign and development policy (Messari 2018).

### **9.3 Scrutinised domestic migration governance and signals of reform**

Meanwhile, Moroccan state migration policies, or practices, continue to face critique, with observations as to migrant rights violations in border areas, and

academic consensus that migration policy remains inconsistent, or incomplete (Natter 2021; Jiménez-Alvarez et al. 2021). Despite regularisation processes as a result of the 2013 law, many Sub-Saharan migrants do not meet the definition of asylum seeker or refugee, and thus enjoy limited protections, and can become victims of trafficking either domestically, towards Europe or towards Libya (Ennaji and Bignami 2019; Lahlou 2018a). Moreover, many may continue to aspire to keep travelling towards Europe, as recorded in 2021 national and smaller qualitative surveys, detailed further below (HCP 2021).

Indeed, while the 2013 reform emphasised fighting trafficking, presumably in part due to pressure from international organisations, reality on the ground reflects ongoing phenomena, both in accessing Europe, in moving into Libya or in transiting through Morocco. Firstly, trafficking can often take place in attempts to access Libya, with Moroccan actors operating independently, or Moroccans, Nigerians or migrants from Côte d'Ivoire running criminal organisations (Lahlou 2018a). Sub-Saharan women, meanwhile, can be exploited for prostitution along the journey through Africa (including Morocco) by those from their community of origin. Within Morocco, research indicates that young Moroccan women can disappear in the migration process as well, with girls between eight and fifteen years (termed '*petites bonnes*') from urban or impoverished areas compelled or deceived into domestic work for wealthier families in largely urban areas, work that can entail labour and sexual abuse (Melgar et al. 2021). Finally, drug traffickers often use irregular migrants of Moroccan origin to transport drugs to Spain as payment for their trip (Lahlou 2018a). In addition to this, other forms of trafficking may continue upon arrival in Europe; a 2017 report in Spain found that the general profile of sex-trafficked workers included Nigerian women between eighteen and twenty-two years old, living irregularly (Melgar et al. 2021).

At the same time, the literature has also pointed to how Sub-Saharan migrant activists or community leaders are active agents in the Moroccan migration landscape, where they help facilitate border crossings or are key players in networks, information and support to either stay in Morocco or continue to Europe (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021). Morocco can serve not only as a transit country, but as a destination of particularly prolonged transit for Sub-Saharan migrants, who may aspire to migrate to Europe but, in the meantime, navigate legal and societal barriers during their extended stay in Morocco by making a livelihood in the informal sector (Pickerill 2011). Finally, while Sub-Saharan flows are predominantly composed of male migrants, the literature and activists have increasingly provided visibility into migrant women in Morocco, attempting to move

beyond issues of trafficking and sexual violence to illustrate how gender affects mobility as a structural factor (Tyszler 2019).

#### **9.4 Moroccan emigration and diaspora networks**

Meanwhile, with roughly 10 per cent of its nationals living abroad (with 3,262,222 nationals living outside of Morocco as of 2020 out of a population of roughly 36.9 million), Morocco has actively and continuously pursued regional and international cooperation in designing policies for successful Moroccan emigration, has established and promoted ties with Moroccan diaspora, and has managed remittances and returns (Berriane M. 2018; UN Population Division 2020; World Bank 2021). In Europe, in addition to colonial ties with states like Spain and France, bilateral worker recruitment agreements in West Germany (1963), Belgium (1964) and the Netherlands (1969) resulted in the establishment of networks that became more rooted thanks to family reunifications throughout the 1970s oil crisis and the political instability (including two coups in 1971 and 1972) in Morocco (Gabrielli 2015). It follows that as of 2019, the largest groups of Moroccan nationals in Europe are found in France (1,020,162), Spain (711,792), Italy (450,557), Belgium (226,216), the Netherlands (180,879) and Germany (105,928) (UN Population Division 2020).

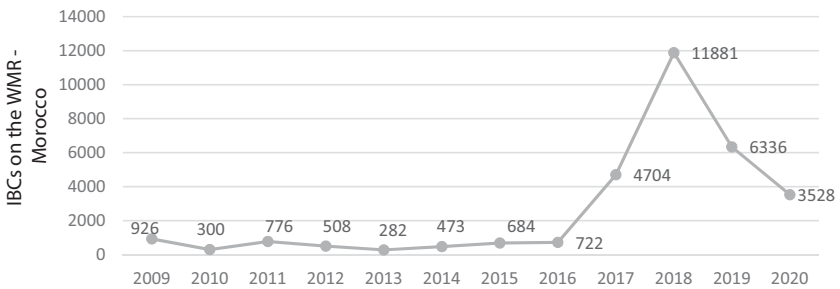
Some strategies and initiatives for the socio-economic, cultural and political integration of Moroccan expatriates include the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Living Abroad (1990), the Ministry for the Moroccan Community Residing Abroad (2000), the Council for the Moroccan Community Abroad (2007) and the ‘Strategy of Mobilisation of the Competences of Moroccans Residing Abroad’ (2009). Apart from these Moroccan communities in Europe, somewhat feminized highly skilled workers have formed Moroccan communities residing in North America (Canada and the United States) and the Gulf states (Berriane M. 2018; Berriane J. 2019). Finally, remittances remain a continued and key support for the Moroccan economy (Lahlou 2018b).

#### **9.5 Recent trends in EU-bound migration from Morocco: 2009–2020**

In turning towards an analysis of recent trends in EU-bound migration, for every year between 2009 and 2020, Morocco has been among the top five countries in terms of detections of ‘illegal border-crossings’ (IBCs) by Frontex on the WMR, with the exception of 2016, when the country fell to the sixth place. In 2017, Morocco became the country with the greatest number of arrivals on the route to

Spain, and from the following year onwards it remained with the second greatest number.

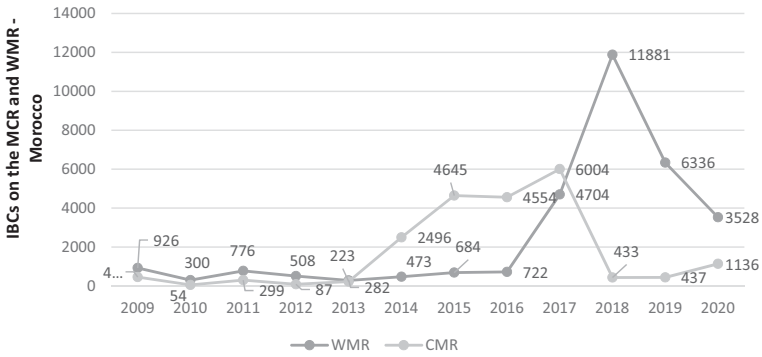
Over the last decade, Moroccans have constituted the second national group on the WMR with 31,120 detections, 17.63 per cent of the total sum. The only demographic group with more crossings included Algerians, with 38,275 crossings or 21.69 per cent. On the other hand, Guineans represented the third nationality, but remained far behind Moroccans in terms of numbers, with 21,479 detections between 2009 and 2020, or 12.17 per cent.



**Figure 9.1:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

In comparative terms, the evolution of detections of Moroccans followed the same pattern as WMR flows overall, with the slight difference that, while arrivals through the WMR began to augment in 2014, and then rise significantly from 2016 to 2017, the number of detections of Moroccan nationals remained steadily low until the end of 2016, before the rise. By the end of 2017, Morocco had become the top reported nationality on the WMR, constituting 20.4 per cent of total detections.



**Figure 9.2:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the CMR and WMR, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

Again, when looking at the entirety of the WMR, in 2018 Morocco emerged as the main point of departure in reaching the EU, with nationals from several countries of Sub-Saharan Africa using it as a territory of transit. Despite the heterogeneity of nationalities using the WMR, 2018 saw Moroccans rise to the second most reported nationality on the route, a trend that continued through 2020. Given this, it is useful to further consider the monthly detections; in zooming in on monthly statistics on the sea route (there is a general absence of land route detections) and understanding what time of year flows are significant, Moroccan detections seem to rise in the second half of the year, largely summer and early fall. The detections peak in the month of October 2018 (the most significant over the ten-year period at 2680 detections, again solely via the sea route), with other noteworthy peaks (in order of volume) in the months of July 2018 (1,631), June 2019 (1,046), September 2019 (943) and August 2017 (894). Such summer-month crossings are perhaps more feasible in terms of weather conditions, as opposed to the rest of the year.

In terms of moving from the ten-year average to a yearly contextualisation of percentage of Moroccan nationals on the route, while between 2010 and 2016 Moroccans made up less than 10 per cent of total detections, they began to rise above 20 per cent from 2016 onwards. The year 2019 saw the highest total of arrivals at 26.43 per cent, with 2020 at 20.48 per cent, returning to the 2017 levels. This 2018 increase might be linked to Moroccans shifting from the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) to the WMR in that same year. Although



between 2009 and 2013 there was no significant difference in use of the two routes, in 2014 the number of Moroccans opting for the route to Italy increased. Between 2014 and 2017, 17,699 Moroccans were detected on the CMR, with more than 4,500 reported annually in 2015, 2016 and 2017. However, during the first months of 2018 the situation reversed, and the number of Moroccans using the WMR more than doubled the number in 2017, which had already increased as compared to the previous year. Concurrently, in 2018 detections of Moroccans on the CMR plummeted to 433.

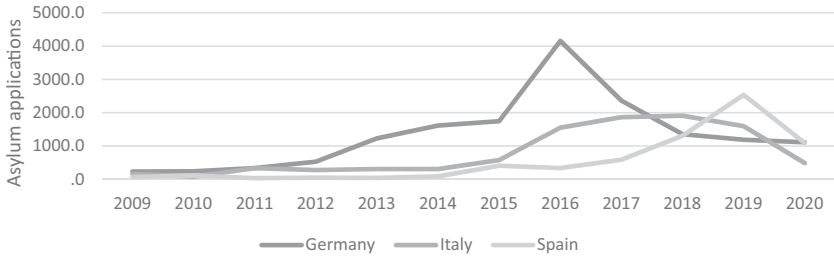
**Table 9.1:** Detections of Moroccan nationals on the WMR (sea and land), 2009–2020

Year	Detections of Moroccan nationals	Total detections	As % of total detections
2009	926	6,642	13.94
2010	300	5,003	6.00
2011	776	8,448	9.19
2012	508	6,397	7.94
2013	282	6,838	4.12
2014	473	5,654	8.37
2015	684	7,004	9.77
2016	722	999	7.23
2017	4,704	23,063	20.40
2018	11,881	56,245	21.12
2019	6,336	23,969	26.43
2020	3,528	17,228	20.48
<b>Total</b>	<b>31,120</b>	<b>176,481</b>	<b>17.63</b>

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on 'Detections of illegal border-crossings' (Frontex 2021).

Turning to Europe, in spite of Spain's close proximity, for the last ten years Germany has constituted the top destination in international protection requests by Moroccan nationals. From 2009 to 2020, the country received 16,115 applications from Morocco, followed by Italy with 9,475, and then Spain with 6,680. Moreover, it is noteworthy that over the ten-year period, Switzerland and the Netherlands do not fall far behind Spain in terms of absolute numbers, receiving 6,320 and 5,830 asylum requests respectively. Over the past decade, Germany has remained one of the top three countries receiving Moroccan asylum requests, constituting the first recipient of these requests in 2009 and 2010, and between 2013 and 2017. Between 2015 and 2020, Germany received more than 1.9 million asylum requests overall. In examining the data on Moroccan asylum

applications to Germany, it is important to note how the percentage of women has always remained below 20 per cent, with the figure not even reaching 10 per cent between 2012 and 2014.



**Figure 9.3:** Asylum applications of Moroccan nationals in Germany, Italy and Spain, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on ‘Asylum and first time asylum applicants’ (Eurostat 2021).

In absolute numbers, Germany has initially been the most requested destination by Moroccan asylum seekers in Europe. However, since 2016, the number of requests started to decrease, while those in Spain began to grow. The number of petitions in the two countries was roughly the same in 2018, with 1,355 applications to Germany and 1,310 to Spain. Spanish applications rose to 2,535 the following year, making it the first intended destination country among Moroccan asylum seekers, and also remained significant in 2020 at 1,090 applications.

Over the ten-year period, asylum applications to Spain by Moroccan nationals average out to 8 per cent of all such applications to EU countries. However, in 2019, applications to Spain reached up to 25 per cent of total applications and reached up to 15 per cent of the total in 2018 and 2020. The gender breakdown of Moroccan asylum applications to Spain is similar to the percentage for Germany, in that they are predominantly male. In the ten-year period, there were an average of 18 per cent applications from women and 82 per cent from men; this is generally the breakdown each year. However, the gap does close significantly in 2015, when women constitute up to 37 per cent of Moroccan asylum applications to Spain, as compared to 62 per cent men.

Finally, with respect to the West African Route (WAR) to Spain’s Canary Islands, it should be noted that IBCs of Moroccans registered by Frontex are

significantly lower than on the WMR. At the same time, this deserves mention as Morocco is one of the WAR points of departure, and Moroccans rank within the top five nationalities each year of the ten-year period under examination, except for 2009 and 2015 (where they rank sixth). The detections remain few until 2018 and 2019, when they at least triple to almost 1,000 each year, followed by an almost twelve-fold increase in 2020 to 11,759 Moroccan IBCs (Frontex 2021). This should be considered in conjunction with the fact that, again, Frontex reports Moroccans as the second greatest number of nationals detected on the WMR as well from 2018 to 2020, practically entirely sea route detections.

### **9.6 Mixed migration flows from Morocco: Understanding key drivers of EU-bound migration on the WMR and WAR**

The observations in the previous sections highlight several patterns in mixed migration flows of Moroccans along the WMR and WAR, the route shifts pivotal in Morocco's alleged transit country role, and trends in Moroccans seeking asylum in Europe over the 2009–20 period. Among those, it is worth recalling an increasing trend of detections of Moroccans on the WMR from 2013 to 2018; a greater number of Moroccan arrivals *en route* to Spain via the WMR starting in late 2016, with Morocco becoming a top nationality on the WMR from 2017 onwards; a shift in volume between the WMR and CMR in 2018 significant for Morocco as a transit country; changing percentages of asylum applications to Germany and Italy versus Spain; and increased detections of Moroccans on the WAR route from 2018 onwards. In contextualising these trends, it is helpful to go into further detail regarding developments in Moroccan domestic migration management and corresponding international cooperation, as well as Morocco's evolving economic development and ongoing management of the Rif crisis. These potentially inform not only outflows, but also shifts in movement and transit patterns or alternative destinations.

Also, new policy developments played an increasing role. As mentioned in the Morocco profile, the first restrictive immigration law since independence in 1956 was enacted in 2003, initiating a series of more restrictive policy interventions throughout the decade (Natter 2014). These included increased patrols of the Spanish borders and the reinforcement (on both sides) of the fence between Morocco and the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla (the subject of an ongoing sovereignty dispute between the two countries), a point of entry into Europe from the Moroccan mainland. In efforts to pursue further economic cooperation and knowledge sharing with Europe, Morocco may increasingly leverage its role in security and migration from Africa to Europe (Baida 2020).

### **9.6.1 Migration control and increasing international visibility: Securitisation and economic interests versus migrant rights discourses**

The deaths of migrants on the Moroccan-Spanish borders of Ceuta and Melilla in 2005 in particular catalysed both domestic and international media attention regarding flows to Europe, and prompted the dispatch of a European Commission delegation in October that same year (European Commission 2005; Natter 2014). While Morocco's Ministry of the Interior remained responsible for migration control, new international actors including the International Organisation for Migration and the United Nations High Commissariat for Refugees came on the scene, in addition to local civil society efforts (Natter 2014). On the one hand, the literature observes an increasing trend of intolerance towards Sub-Saharan migrants in media and societal discourses, including considering them a social and security threat (Gazzotti 2021). On the other hand, the 2005 migrant deaths brought about the creation of the Council of Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco and local initiatives like the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) to support migrants in the face of Moroccan and European policies, and later the Anti-Racist Defence and Support Group of Foreigners and Migrants, with the acronym GADEM (GADEM 2018; Natter 2014).

It is argued that in order to polish Morocco's international image, the monarchy increasingly has taken on a progressive role or positioning when it comes to immigration policy, while the administrative state maintains the prioritisation of state interests over migrant rights (Natter 2021). For example, the aforementioned December 2014 SNIA was purportedly propelled forward by the King, likely in response to the pressures of scrutiny from a September 2013 BBC documentary broadcast accusing Morocco of human rights violations against migrants, as well as an AMDH report on the same subject (Lahlou 2015; Natter 2021). SNIA measures targeted migrant regularisation and integration, legal reform and further migration diplomacy, marking a clear shift to transit migration policies (Benjelloun 2021). Such reforms signalled Morocco's commitment to international human rights, and also represent the monarchy's attempt to respond to domestic pressure for reform, to gain legitimacy as part of the overall state apparatus, and to encourage cooperation rather than dissent on the part of humanitarian civil society actors (Natter 2021). As previously mentioned, these reforms may also have been an attempt at improving relations with the EU and Sub-Saharan countries. However, later analysis indicates that the 2013 reform and SNIA have not necessarily improved the situation for migrants. While two regularisation campaigns took place, the Moroccan state security

force crackdowns following these regularisations have swung the pendulum of migrant rights protections in the other direction (GADEM 2018; Gazzotti 2021). Moreover, those migrants who have been able to obtain authorisation can still find socioeconomic integration very difficult, with lack of employment opportunities and challenges in accessing basic services including healthcare (Baida 2020). They may still remain willing to migrate onwards to Europe, or even Canada or the United States, despite having obtained authorisation and the right to work in Morocco (Lahlou 2015).

As a result of the 2015–16 surge in asylum seekers in Europe, unfolding at that time through other routes, further key European-level agreements and interventions involving Morocco included the commitments made during the 2015 Valetta Summit on Migration between European and African partners, leading to the country receiving funds from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) ‘for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa’ (European Commission 2021; EU and Morocco 2019). In terms of cooperation with neighbouring countries, the EU holds its second largest migration cooperation portfolio with Morocco, at a total of 346 million euro as of May 2021, with 238 million euro of this drawing directly from the EUTF (European Commission 2021). However, while these funds are meant to essentially manage irregular migration and support Morocco’s SNIA, Morocco and Spain have intermittently cooperated in border surveillance on the European end, and this, in combination with Moroccan state practices directed towards security rather than targeting migrant protections, could explain continued WMR flows (Carrera et al. 2016; Kostas 2017). Meanwhile, the fact that in July and December 2019 the EU increased EUTF funding, largely for migration control rather than protections, could also partially explain the drop in WMR crossings occurring that year (European Commission 2018). Finally, while Spain holds a privileged bilateral migration relationship with Morocco (complemented by EU funding), after at least twenty years of negotiation the EU itself has not been able to achieve a readmission agreement with Morocco via its EU-Morocco Mobility Partnership established in 2013 and reaffirmed in 2019 (EU and Morocco 2019). This is likely due to Morocco’s attempt to maintain good relations and take on a leadership role with Sub-Saharan states both economically and geopolitically, among other factors (Carrera et al. 2016).

In this sense, the transactional migration governance relationship between Morocco and the EU, an amalgamation of economic interests and migration or securitisation agendas, should be emphasised, especially with regard to the socioeconomic situation informing Moroccan emigration or transit migration. Morocco has a fairly stable, market-oriented economy with continuous growth

over the past decades (with the Covid-19 years being anomalous), although it is still affected by high levels of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, especially in rural areas. In relation to this, the country has experienced climate cycle changes over the past decades in terms of precipitation rates, temperatures, drought periods and extreme events, all of which affect rural livelihoods in Morocco (Van Praag 2021). Apart from the migration funds described above, the EU is Morocco's most important economic partner, and as of 2017 represented 59.4 per cent of its trade and 64.6 per cent of its exports. The Moroccan diaspora in the EU makes up the majority of remittances among the global Moroccan diaspora, as well (Teevan 2019).

### **9.6.2 Domestic dispersal policies and conflicts: Corresponding to route shifts?**

Given this context, in understanding origin contexts and migration management, it is important to further understand the migration control of transiting Sub-Saharan migrants since 2013's SNIA. In implementing the SNIA's new migration policy, authorities began relocating migrants from northern (specifically Tangier, Tetouan and Nador) to southern cities, and the literature points to cooperation between Spain and Morocco between July and August of 2018 that manifested as detention and dispersal efforts throughout the majority of Moroccan cities, relocating Sub-Saharan migrants from their chosen urban areas to smaller towns or cities (Gazzotti and Hagan 2021). These dispersal policies targeting transiting migrants might explain increasing detections on the WMR route starting from 2013. For example, studies note increasing immobility and insecurity that Sub-Saharan migrants encounter in Morocco, which not only results from crackdown and dispersal approaches at the hands of Moroccan state security forces, but is also interconnected with security contractors and informal networks that facilitate irregular border crossings to Spain (Iranzo 2021). Transit migrants report feeling trapped or stranded in Morocco, subject to surveillance and persecution, forced to remain in hiding to avoid arrest, or exposed to other insecurities like labour exploitation, destitution or begging (*ibid.*).

Alternatively, Moroccan government migration control in terms of these dispersal policies may have contributed to the 2018 increase in the percentage of Moroccans overall on the WMR route, as compared with other nationalities; that is, the relocation of Sub-Saharan migrants may have acted as a deterrent in continuing to their final destination. These potentially contrasting consequences of a dispersal policy demonstrate the complex and multiple effects of any given migration policy on migratory trends, and the difficulty of reading such a

policy's effects, especially as they relate to irregular flows and clandestine or discretionary state practices.

Moreover, as the region has been subject to various conquests since ancient times, Morocco is culturally and ethnically diverse, and competing historical narratives and historic tensions can affect migration flows. Tamazight is one of its official languages, spoken by the indigenous Amazigh population, with Classical Arabic then serving as the other official language; the latter forms part of the pan-Arab project in the wake of independence from France, shaping the narrative of Morocco as an Arab-Islamic state (French and Moroccan dialect Arabic are also widely in use) (Jay 2016). The more recent presence of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa has also increased religious diversity (Berriane M. et al. 2015). In light of this context, particularly relevant for the period under study is the Tamazight-speaking ethnic population of the Rif region in northern Morocco.

More specifically, in October 2016, widespread protests erupted in Alhucemas in response to the death of Mohssine Fikri, reflecting ongoing social unrest due to widespread political corruption, low levels of development and the Moroccan government's neglect of economic development in this northern part of the country (Zaireg 2018). At that point in time, the Hirak Rif Movement quickly formed, with Nasser Zefzafi as one of its prominent leaders. After months of social protests and heavy repression by state security forces, in May 2017 Zefzafi and other leading activists from the movement were detained and charged with serious accusations, including crimes against the internal security of the state. The cycle of social upheaval and violence at the hands of the police may have factored into many Moroccans' decisions to leave the country. This deteriorating situation in the northern region of Rif can go towards explaining how the number of detections of Moroccan nationals remained steadily low until the end of 2016, when they suddenly escalated, with Morocco becoming the top reported nationality on the WMR by 2017 at 20.4 per cent of total detections.

### **9.6.3 Policies in the European context: Shifts on the CMR and a continuously evolving relationship between Morocco and Spain**

It is also useful to look at policies in the European context when proceeding on to further understand the shifts in 2018 and especially in comparing the WMR and CMR routes. Again, a notable shift takes place in 2018, with a decrease in CMR and increase in WMR detections. During the first months of 2018, the number of Moroccans using the WMR more than doubled the number in 2017, which had already increased as compared to the previous year. There may be a twofold explanation for the shift between the two routes. Firstly, the routes were

likely affected by the sea border shutdown implemented in Italy. Specifically, in 2017, the Italian government issued a code of conduct for NGOs running migrant rescue ships in the Mediterranean, which banned vessels from entering Libyan territorial waters, and imposed closer cooperation with the police, among other measures, threatening to bar NGO ships from Italian ports if non-compliant (Vecsey 2020). Then, restrictive migration policies beginning in the summer of 2018 were spearheaded by the country's then Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. Such policies went from discouraging Mediterranean search and rescue missions by NGOs to encompassing all actors, including Frontex and the Italian Coast Guard (Dennison and Geddes 2021). Moreover, they also restricted migrant rights upon arrival, which could perhaps have encouraged Moroccans to choose Spain as a viable alternative route, and may explain the October 2018 peak in detections of Moroccans crossing into Spain. A comparable pattern has been also spotted among Sub-Saharan migrants privileging Morocco as a transit country over Niger or Algeria in 2018–19. For instance, migrants interviewed around that time in Timbuktu, Mali, indicated they were intending to travel to Morocco (39 per cent) and Spain (21 per cent) – most of them coming from Guinea and Mali. This is a clear shift from a couple of years before, when migrants transiting in the Malian city predominantly stated Algeria (78 per cent) as the next destination of choice in their journey (Horwood et al. 2019).

Secondly, it is argued that Moroccan authorities could have used migration practices as a leveraging instrument in their negotiations with the EU to obtain funding for migration control, with 2018 measures perhaps having directly contributed to an increase in 2018 WMR flows (Harris et al. 2018). Alternatively, it is also possible that these security and military crackdowns may not so much serve as a leveraging instrument, as much as maintaining security interests of the Moroccan state despite commitments to migrant rights. While 2018 Italian government measures allegedly redirected migrant flows to the WMR, the earlier described dispersal operations by Moroccan state authorities could also have contributed to the 2018 increases in WMR arrivals. Reports signalled that Moroccan state authorities were destroying migrant camps along the northern coast, as well as expelling migrants from the territory, outside of official declarations or legal procedures. Specifically, 6,500 individuals were allegedly either arrested or displaced between July and September of 2018 by Moroccan security or military forces (GADEM 2018).

By the end of 2019, while the presence of Moroccans on the WMR versus the CMR was still greater, the number of detections on the former had dropped from the historic record of the previous year. In this respect, Spain continuously dialogues with Morocco in a fluctuating political and diplomatic relationship



with oftentimes diverging priorities, as the two states work off of a readmission agreement dating back to 1992, which even allows for the return of third-country nationals. However, Spain and Morocco cooperation on readmission has increasingly translated into a series of informal arrangements (Lixi 2017). Moreover, while Morocco may accept returns of its adult nationals who entered Spain irregularly, it can be more reluctant to accept third-country nationals in practice. Notably, it is argued that observation of the Spanish and Moroccan readmission agreement can breach the principle of non-refoulement, through the use of illegal pushbacks. Returns of migrants without adequately conducting asylum procedures (especially with regard to minors) has been constantly documented and reported in recent years at the borders of Ceuta, Melilla and in the Canaries, thus perhaps explaining decreases on the WMR (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Martínez Escamilla and Sánchez Tomás 2019). Still, the 1992 agreement allows for legal returns as well, which, when (sporadically) implemented, could also have deterrent effects and help explain a decrease in WMR detections from 2018 onwards.

Similarly, when looking at fluctuations in Moroccan asylum applications to Europe, European policies might also inform such changes. Again, while asylum applications to Germany remained significant, requests from Moroccans began to decrease in 2016, with increasing requests to Spain from that year, alongside decreasing requests to Italy from 2018 onward. Two factors might explain this. On the one hand, while Morocco did not enter the top ten nationalities with the greatest number of petitions, Moroccans likely attempted to obtain international protection there as a result of Germany's migration policy under Merkel, along with Germany's labour market opportunities. Indeed, from 2009 until 2015, applications increased steadily, spiking in 2016. This 2016 spike can perhaps be partially attributed to public declarations of openness to asylum seekers, as in August 2015 Chancellor Angela Merkel stressed the capability of Germany to cope with asylum seeker arrivals (Oltermann 2020). The perception that Germany offered better possibilities of labour market access and societal integration could have served as a pull factor.

However, applications to Germany from Morocco sharply declining in 2017 and continuing to decrease going forward could parallel a shift in German discourse on migration policies. In particular, in early 2016 and again in 2018, several political parties in Germany, including Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, began to advocate for Morocco to be declared as a 'safe country' alongside Algeria (Bölinger and Conrad 2016; CEAR 2019). In other words, public and political discourse characterised Moroccan asylum seekers as not requiring international protection. Moreover, anti-immigrant populist parties obtained

seats in the German Parliament in 2016, citing events such as the attack in a Berlin Christmas market as a reason for more restrictive asylum policies (Oltermann 2020).

Secondly, as previously referenced apropos of Italy, an initial increase in the number of Moroccan asylum applications had begun in 2014, with a decrease from mid-2018 onwards. In understanding this, it should be noted how the Gentiloni government policies, promoted by Interior Minister Marco Minniti, asking that NGOs stop save-and-rescue operations at sea, as well as engaging in cooperation with Libya, perhaps contributed to the drop in sea arrivals in Italy between 2016 and 2018 (Dennison and Geddes 2021). However, such policies may not have had as great an impact on Moroccan nationals as those of the Conte government with Matteo Salvini as the country's Minister of the Interior. Again, policies under his government could go towards explaining a decrease in Moroccan asylum seekers from mid-2018 onwards. In particular, the September 2018 'Salvini Decree' approved by the Council of Ministers abolished migrant protections, facilitated deportation and suspended refugee application processes of those deemed 'socially dangerous' or with a past criminal conviction (Cervi et al. 2020). These policies may have discouraged Moroccan nationals from seeking asylum in Italy and illustrate the drop in applications from mid-2018 onward.

Still, European policies aside, Spain's historical ties and geographical proximity to Morocco are undoubtedly linked to Moroccan migrants' decisions to seek asylum there, with the majority having chosen the WMR and WAR routes to arrive. Furthermore, domestic conflicts like the Rif crisis and crackdown against social activists in the north of Morocco beginning in the second half of 2016 might have served as an impetus for the rise in asylum requests in Spain, geographically most proximate to the Rif region through the border cities of Ceuta and Melilla; not only did the total detections on the WMR significantly increase in the following year of 2017, but Moroccan nationals formed a higher percentage than usual of total detections, at over 20 per cent.

Finally, these considerations affecting movements from 2018–20 with reference to the WMR might also inform the growing popularity of the WAR from 2018 onwards. In addition, increasing use of the WAR could be due to long-held migrant perceptions that the journey is relatively short, with information sharing about this increasingly facilitated by social networks (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021). Moreover, the 2020 exponential increase along the WAR could also be explained by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, further analysed in the section on future developments. The most obvious rationale includes the disruptions that Covid-19 state measures caused to mobility, including border

closures, along with the socioeconomic impacts of the Covid-19 crisis affecting livelihoods in Morocco. In addition to this, interviews with migrants indicate that misinformation was circulating that deaths from the pandemic had increased labour demand in Europe (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Monreal Gainza and Paredes 2021).

## **9.7 Concluding observations: Multilevel migration control with compounded effects on migrant vulnerabilities**

Morocco has become an increasingly crucial player over the past few decades in relation to mixed migration flows between Africa and Europe, and even more so in recent years. The findings here indicate that the factors involved go beyond geographical positioning. Not only does Morocco receive significant funds from the EU (the second largest recipient among EU neighbours), it also exercises its weight with Sub-Saharan African neighbours and in contesting the Western Sahara with Algeria. Any geopolitical jockeying by the Moroccan state is mutually affected and informed by the interests and corresponding actions of North African and Sub-Saharan states and regions, as well as those of the EU and Spain, all with significant impacts for transit migration. Finally, patterns observed in this chapter impact gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities of Moroccan nationals *en route* to Europe, as well as those Sub-Saharan migrants transiting through Morocco.

In looking at multilevel migration governance in the Moroccan case, Europe and Spain continue to outsource border management to Morocco, as between 2019 and 2020 Spain provided 30 million euros to Morocco from the General State Budget to improve and upgrade vehicle fleets for border enforcement, directed at stemming irregular migratory flows towards Europe (Barbero and López Sala 2021). The Spanish and Moroccan relationship is multifaceted, including technology sharing, joint patrolling and temporary work permits for Moroccans (Lixi 2017). However, as their relationship has developed, while based in the 1992 readmission agreement, Spain and Morocco often work via informal cooperation in terms of readmission (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012).

It is worthwhile to note the symbolism and relevance of how the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was adopted at an Intergovernmental Conference in Marrakech, Morocco by the majority of UN member states in December of 2018 (and endorsed by the UN General Assembly a few days later). Since its signing, there has been criticism of not only signatories' lack of implementation (Spain and Morocco are signatories), but also the fact that states may use it to legitimise practices that are not in keeping with

its objectives, and that it does not provide adequate protections to migrants in the first instance (Bloom 2019; Guild 2020). The Compact makes only vague references to key human rights on which migrants may be particularly dependent, including the right to liberty, protection of private and family life, and protection against expulsion. For example, migrants are often detained in arbitrary ways, outside of the normal function of the criminal justice or public health systems (*ibid.*). No substantive political reform has taken place in terms of migrant rights, and the current 'transit' migrant treatment, inaptly named as migrants become immobilised in Morocco, looks as if it will continue.

In this sense, a dichotomy has emerged between the allegedly progressive and rights-oriented migration policy reform in 2013, positioned as spearheaded by the monarchy, versus actual practices of Moroccan authorities and in particular security forces in the form of dispersal policies and detention. These can cause immobilisation that deters further journeys, or alternatively can encourage departure from Morocco at any cost (Iranzo 2021; Natter 2021). In combination, there is a lack of true opportunity for socioeconomic integration in the face of these unfulfilled or non-implemented migration commitments and policies (as well as the current Moroccan economic context) (Baida 2020). Added to this is the amplified public and societal othering of Sub-Saharan migrants which can lead to their experience of further vulnerabilities and violence, a public attitudes trend that has been increasing over the past decade (Gazzotti 2021).

In zooming in on Moroccan policy itself (as influenced by multilevel actors), gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities underly the shifting migration dynamics this chapter has overviewed. Moroccan migration policy has been criticised as abandonment by the state, in that while migrants may not face deportation or incarceration, they are immobilised in a way that similarly breaches rights, while saving state resources (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020: 900). One illustration includes a repeatedly noted gendered phenomenon: given how many West and Central African women in Morocco have children, they may be more limited in their mobility than males. They are not only possibly indebted to smugglers or other migrants, but also are restricted by childcare responsibilities that may limit aspirations to move on to Europe. Such limitations and responsibilities may even go so far as to restrict their movement within Moroccan cities (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020: 890; Stock 2012).

Indeed, it is illustrative to take into account the gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities interrelated with inconsistent or 'alegal' migration governance and how this relates to real or perceived constraint and opportunity structures regarding asylum processes, in family strategies of Moroccan nationals moving towards Europe. For example, it seems possible that whether or not a pregnancy

was deliberate (i.e., often possibly a result of rape), either the mother herself or a smuggler or partner might consider this a strategy to avoid deportation and obtain family reunification rights upon arrival in Spain (Dubow and Kuschminder 2021; Tyszler 2019). It is also theorised that children can be a part of these gendered family mobility strategies: for example, Moroccan families may send their sons on an attempt to clear the fences of Ceuta and Melilla with the hopes of avoiding pushbacks as minors are entitled to international protection (Queirolo Palmas 2019). Finally, the discourse and rhetoric surrounding black bodies and Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco, as well as migration from the African continent to Europe, maintains securitised and racialised tones that appear to be fomenting anti-immigrant attitudes and even violence (Buehler and Han 2021; Landau 2021). This can lead to facilitating securitisation policies rather than working towards long-term or substantive improvement in migration governance policy. Gendered outgroup prejudice often applies to Sub-Saharan men, particularly in the case of being made visible by blackness (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020: 888).

In this vein, Morocco will clearly remain pivotal in mixed migration flows between Africa and Europe, and the dynamics of migration control are characterised by multi-level securitisation policies that can be challenged with migrant rights discourses or diplomatic overtures, but ultimately influence exacerbated intersectional vulnerabilities and societal consequences for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers across both continents. In light of the lack of sustainability of certain discretionary practices and securitisation measures, this entails continued migration and asylum mobilities and shifting dynamics in the future in terms of Morocco-to-EU flows.

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Daniel Morente

## Chapter 10 The legacies of the armed conflict, regional dynamics and Spain's immigration and asylum policies in the shaping of migration from Colombia

**Abstract:** Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and until the late 1990s, Colombia was predominantly a country of emigration. Shifting progressively into a territory of immigration from this point forward, a considerable influx of Venezuelans began to enter from the mid-2010s onwards, to now represent the largest group of migrants and asylum seekers in Colombia. Concurrently, strong patterns of internal displacement began in the 1980s in Colombia, fueled by the protracted violence resulting from the armed conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the state. By September 2016, when peace agreements were signed between the guerrilla group and the national government, internally displaced persons totalled more than seven million, or approximately 15 per cent of the country's population. Despite the peace accords, criminal violence in certain peripheral areas of the country remains rampant and is particularly directed towards community leaders and activists. This has led a considerable number of Colombian nationals to emigrate, predominantly to Venezuela, the United States and Spain. Sharing a language with the latter, in combination with more promising economic opportunities and better societal integration prospects, makes the Southern European country particularly attractive to Colombians.

**Keywords:** internal conflict | internally displaced persons | peace agreement | rural violence | restrictive asylum policies | migration in Andean states

Bordering Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, Panama and Ecuador in north-west South America, Colombia has traditionally been a country of emigration (World Bank 2021; Silva and Massey 2014). From a historical perspective, three waves of emigration from Colombia can be identified throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Firstly, in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, an initial group of Colombians emigrated to the United States in pursuit of more promising labour opportunities, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the US Immigration Act of 1965. Secondly, in the late 1970s and during the 1980s, whilst thousands of Colombians kept moving to the US, a considerable number of citizens turned also to Venezuela, in a moment when that country

was expanding its oil industry while Colombia was experiencing an economic slowdown and a rise in unemployment. Thirdly, starting in the 1990s, due to a combined national political and economic crisis and the deterioration of internal security conditions, many Colombians used former social networks developed by their ancestors to emigrate to an array of destinations that included both the aforementioned countries and some new ones, most prominently in Europe. Spain in particular, as well as certain countries of Latin America, for instance Chile (Palma 2015: 11–12; OECD 2009), were among them. Towards the end of the century, this decades-long tendency had consolidated Colombia as a country of emigration.

In the 1990s, however, the migratory tendency in Colombia slowly began to shift, and the gap between the departure of emigrants and the arrival of immigrants slowly narrowed. On the one hand, immigration to Colombia steadily decreased from 1980 to 1990, to then recover to its 1980 levels by 2000 and keep slightly increasing until 2010. On the other hand, emigration has consistently fallen since 1990 (Palma 2015: 14). For the last few years, Colombia has constituted a country of transit for mixed migration emanating from Latin America, but also from specific regions of Africa and Asia. The citizens of these regions fly to countries with relatively lax visa policies, for instance Ecuador, to then travel by land in the direction of the US and Canada, using the only country separating South from Central America – Colombia (Carvajal 2017). Simultaneously, throughout the last five years, an important influx of Venezuelans has arrived in Colombia. As a result, Venezuela now represents the country with the largest number of national emigres and asylum seekers in Colombia; by September 2021, more than 1.7 million Venezuelans were residing in its neighbouring country (GIFMM 2021). As of 2021, Colombia is the largest receptor of Venezuelans, accumulating 32.9 per cent of the country's immigration (UN Population Division 2020) with a vocation of permanence, and also the territory from where 90 per cent of that population has departed to third countries, despite the continuous and prolonged border closures and the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Since 1985, the violence resulting from the conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) and the Colombian state has displaced more than 8.2 million citizens (HRW 2021a). In 1965, after the turbulent undeclared civil war period known as *La Violencia*, spanning between 1948 and 1958, during a moment of high tension between the conservative and the liberal political elites, large groups of Colombian peasants across the country armed and organised themselves to protect their land. It was in that year that the first combat between the newly funded rebel group and the national army took place, with the former officially assuming

the name FARC shortly afterwards, in 1964 (Linde 2017). One of the main triggers for the eruption of the violence that would extend over the following five decades was the discontent in the rural areas of the country, due to territorial and political marginalisation, high levels of corruption and political abandonment, and the uneven distribution of land property rights between large versus small landowners (IDMC 2022). Initially localised in certain rural areas, as years went by the conflict progressively permeated the entire national territory.

By the time of the signing of the peace agreements between the FARC and the national government in Havana, in September 2016, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia was 7,246,000 (*ibid.*), more than 15 per cent of the total population. This figure had escalated to 7.7 million by mid-2018, thus rendering Colombia the country with the greatest number of IDPs in the entire world (Alsema 2018). As one of the cornerstones of the 2016 accords, a comprehensive rural reform was agreed upon, in order to solve the contentious subject of the distribution of land ownership. Despite the fact that tackling this issue was one of the main reasons why an agreement between the FARC and the Juan Manuel Santos government had been reached, as of 2021 this part of the accords has not been fully respected and implemented. In fact, in 2018 the concentration of land ownership reached its highest point in the history of the country, with 1 per cent of elite landowners holding more than 80 per cent of the total national land (Guereña 2017: 13). The lack of advancement in this area has prevented a shift in the internal migration patterns and a return process from the urbanised areas to the rural periphery.

Community leaders and social activists in rural areas have been publicly denouncing this reality, seeking to raise visibility as to the situation of exploitation that Colombian peasants still endure at the hands of paramilitary groups and criminal gangs formed by post-2016 FARC dissidents. As a consequence, such activists and human rights defenders have been systematically persecuted by those and other non-state violent actors, with more than 1,200 of them having been assassinated in the country between the signing of the accords and May 2020 (Camprubí and Pineda 2021). The rapid proliferation of competing criminal organisations occupying the power vacuum left by the FARC and conducting illegal activities in the country's rural periphery, like drug trafficking or unauthorised mining (UNHCR 2017), together with the inability or unwillingness of former president Iván Duque's government to offer meaningful economic solutions to these regions, has led to the re-emergence of violence (IDMC 2022). Criminal groups created or strengthened by FARC dissidents that did not comply with the 2016 agreement currently pose a serious threat to the further advancement of the peace process.

In the mid-1950s, large-scale emigration from Colombia to Venezuela began as a response to the absence of economic opportunities and the aggravation of the armed conflict (Carvajal 2017; Álvarez de Flores 2004). For the last few decades, emigration from Colombia has increased steadily, with 1 million Colombian nationals having left the country by 1990, 1.4 by 2000, 2.6 by 2010 and three million by 2020. As of 2020, the top three countries of destination for Colombian emigrants were Venezuela, the US and Spain; ranking as the first destination country, by that time Venezuela had received 917,753 Colombians, i.e., 30.3 per cent of the total share of emigrants. The US follows with 817,604 Colombians (27 per cent) and Spain ranks third with 450,377 (15 per cent). In terms of gender, female emigration, with 1,647,831 women, i.e., 54.48 per cent of the total number of emigrants, has been higher than that of men, which totals 1,376,442 or 45.51 per cent of the total emigration (UN Population Division 2020). Contrarily to what could have been initially expected, the signing of the peace agreements did not slow down the departure of Colombians to third countries.

Since the upsurge of Venezuela's cycle of political unrest, humanitarian crisis and economic turmoil around 2015, many of the almost one million Colombians who had moved there throughout the previous four decades started to return. In regard to the US, the Immigration Act of 1965 overturned the quotas based on national origin that benefited European immigrants, a change which allowed more than 150,000 Colombians to enter the country at the beginning of the 1970s. Finally, the increasing economic opportunities in Spain and other European countries in the early 2000s, alongside the shared language and more favourable prospects of successfully integrating within the host society, likely attracted many Colombians to Spain at the end of the twentieth century and during the following years (Carvajal 2017). However, the 2008 financial crisis and resulting economic collapse led to the number of people arriving from Colombia and other Latin American countries to progressively decrease.

To enter Venezuela and, on a smaller scale, Ecuador, Colombian migrants usually choose border areas with easy access, sometimes after already having undergone internal displacement. Despite the geographical proximity between these states, travelling abroad requires a certain amount of economic expenditure, which sometimes acts as a critical barrier to cross-border movements in these territories (IDMC 2019). Irregular Colombian immigrants also use smuggling networks to pass between countries. In many instances, these criminal enterprises are responsible for facilitating transit of Colombians who own falsified visas or travel documents to the US or Canada, or who simply desire to access other countries of South America. These not only include Venezuela and Ecuador, but also Chile and Peru. Nonetheless, fear connected to the risk of



inadmissibility often plays an important role when pondering the most suitable destination (Carvajal 2017).

Regarding emigration to the US, by 2015 approximately 998,000 Colombians and their children, including first and second generation, were living in that country. In terms of first generation, in 2012 around 601,000 Colombian immigrants were residing in the US, making Colombians the country's largest South American demographic group and the fourteenth largest group of foreign nationals overall. Regarding second generation, in that same year around 397,000 US-born individuals had at least one Colombian-born progenitor (Migration Policy Institute 2015: 1–3). As a result, the US has consolidated itself as a destination country receiving a steady flow of Colombian individuals annually.

Finally, the European route. At the beginning of the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, there was a considerable increase in Colombians emigrating to Europe and most notably Spain, which became one of the preferred destination countries. According to Eurostat data, in 2019 there were more than a half million people born in Colombia residing in Europe. By 2018, Spain hosted 386,141 of those individuals, followed by Italy (40,023), the United Kingdom (38,000), France (30,921), the Netherlands (15,127), Switzerland (13,671), Sweden (12,315), Germany (9,000), Belgium (6,733) and Norway (6,000) (Bermúdez Torres 2021: 21). In worldwide terms, by 2020 Spain constituted the third country of destination for Colombian emigrants, with Italy and France following as the eighth and ninth, respectively, and constituting the only other two European states within the top-ten list of countries where Colombians had decided to move. Since 2015, the number of Colombian arrivals in Spain has increased yearly, beginning at 9,367, augmenting to 34,106 in 2017 and then to 76,816 in 2019. As the second preferred European country of destination for Colombians, Italy has a considerably lower volume of arrivals, given that 1,609 Colombians arrived in 2019.

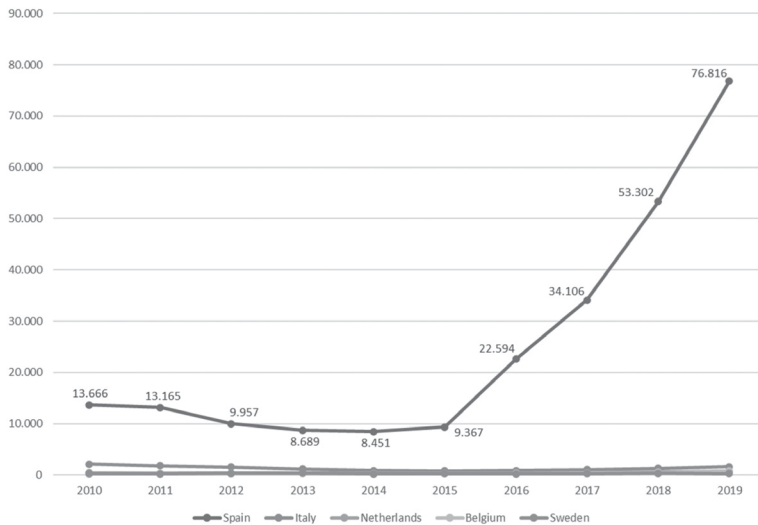
In terms of asylum, since 2017 Colombia has been within the first three nationalities of asylum seekers in Spain and the second nationality from 2018 to 2020. When the peace agreements between the FARC and the Colombian government were signed in 2016, the asylum petitions of Colombians in Spain totalled only 615, but from that year onwards applications escalated. A similar trend was evidenced in Ecuador, albeit receiving little attention due to the massive displacements of Venezuelans occurring at the time. According to official data shared by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, in 2019, 29,285 individuals from Colombia sought asylum in Spain, but only 5,226 files were resolved between January and December of that year. Among those resolved files, there were many accumulated applications from previous years. Finally, from this total

of 5,226, only forty-eight were finalised favourably, which means that just 0.91 per cent of applicants received international protection (CEAR 2020). These low numbers have repeatedly located Spain in the lower tier of European countries in terms of its share of accepted international protection requests.

Regarding transcontinental migration, as international transport has become more accessible in terms of reduced costs and the multiplicity of available routes, there has been an increase in international movements of migrants from Colombia to Europe, most notably to Spain (Palma 2015: 16). To reach the Mediterranean country, practically all Colombian immigrants use the air route – although a few do travel by sea – via a valid passport or a travel or short stay visa. Also referred to as tourist visas, these allow for a maximum stay of three months. Nonetheless, migrants may use them to enter Spain regularly and then extend their stay longer than the maximum allowed time, thus falling into an irregular situation (Gil Araujo and González-Fernández 2014). Under this legal condition, individuals often attempt to seek unregulated employment and inevitably expose themselves to exploitative working conditions.

### **10.1 Recent trends in Colombia's EU-bound migration: 2009–2020**

When examining data on migration from Colombia to the European Union, Spain stands out as the state receiving the largest number of Colombian migrants. Throughout the decade spanning from 2010 to 2019, a total of 250,113 Colombians travelled to the Mediterranean country, with the figures dramatically increasing from 2015 onwards; in 2015, 9,367 Colombians arrived in Spain, whereas two years later, in 2017, 34,106 did so, and, finally, 76,816 in 2019. Italy comes far behind in second position, with a total of 13,035 Colombians landing in the 2010–19 timespan, and never surpassing the annual influx of 2,132 people of 2010. In the third, fourth and fifth position were the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden, respectively, with 4,177, 3,391 and 2,682 migrating between 2010 and 2019 (see Figure 10.1). As such, in analysing the immigration trends of Colombia from the last ten years, the focus shifts onto Spain. In terms of the gender division, in Spain there was a larger share of arrivals of Colombian women throughout the entire decade, with the annual percentages moving between 55.45 and 57.46 per cent women and 42.5 to 44.55 per cent men.



**Figure 10.1:** Migration from Colombia to the top EU country destinations, 2010–2019

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021b).

For the last ten years, Colombia has been within the top seven countries with the largest number of foreign nationals in Spain, ranking as the fifth demographic group uninterrupted between 2009 and 2013, as the sixth between 2017 and 2019, and finally jumping to the third in 2020, with 273,050 individuals. Despite the fact that in 2016 the number of Colombians living in Spain began to increase significantly, in 2011 the records were already similar to the figures that would be later reached in 2020. This is due to the fact that from 2009 to 2016 the number of Colombians living in Spain steadily declined as a consequence of the global financial crisis, and then began to recover from 2016 onwards. Moreover, throughout the last decade, the only Latin American country with more nationals in Spain than Colombia has been Ecuador; this occurred from 2017 forward. Nonetheless, when analysing these data, it is necessary to take into account that nationalisation processes might have reduced the recorded number of Colombians residing in the country. Within two years' time, most third country nationals from Colombia residing in Spain will be nationalised and will become Spanish citizens, thus disappearing from statistics on Colombian residents in the country. In terms of the division between male and female foreign residents, there has been a larger annual share of 54.91–55.65 per cent of Colombian women living in Spain from 2009 to 2020.

When analysing asylum applications, Spain largely remains the country of preference for Colombians between 2010 and 2020, with 70,425 applications out of a total of 79,700 processed in the entire European Union. Regarding percentages, asylum applications to Spain throughout the last decade account for 88.36 per cent of the overall claims made by Colombians within the EU. In Spain, figures began to rise notably beginning with a spike in 2015, when the percentage in relation to the total applications in the European Union went from 20–30 per cent during the period between 2010 and 2014, to 45.61 per cent, to then increase progressively to 82.45 per cent in 2017 and reaching a noteworthy 93.33 per cent in 2020 (see Table 10.1). Spain was, behind France, the second country where Colombians preferred to apply for asylum until 2014, when it became the first uninterruptedly until 2020.

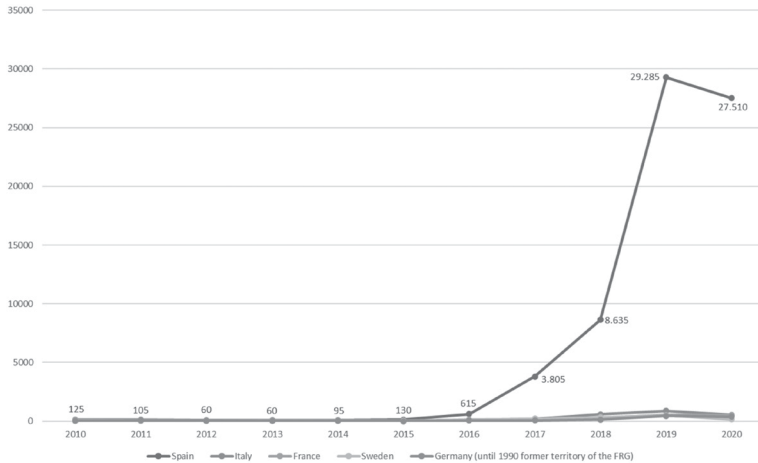
**Table 10.1:** Asylum applications of Colombians in Spain, 2010–2020

Year	Asylum applications in Spain	Total asylum applications in the EU	As % of applications in the EU
2010	125	415	30.12
2011	105	375	28.00
2012	60	290	20.69
2013	60	300	20.00
2014	95	325	29.23
2015	130	285	45.61
2016	615	1,070	57.48
2017	3,805	4,615	82.45
2018	8,635	10,245	84.29
2019	29,285	32,305	90.65
2020	27,510	29,475	93.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>70,425</b>	<b>79,700</b>	<b>88.36</b>

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

In this regard, Spain is followed by Italy, France, Sweden and Germany, with 2,610, 2,220, 1,445 and 1,245 asylum applications, respectively. Similarly to what occurs with immigration data, these numbers are strikingly low in comparison to those of Spain. As already mentioned, in 2015 there was an increase in the number of EU applications overall, with the latter four countries also experiencing a rising number of Colombians seeking international protection. However, Spain was the only country where numbers rose at such dramatic level,

jumping from 130 applications in 2015 to 3,805 in 2017, and then to the historical record of 29,285 in 2019. By the following year, in 2020, and likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic and border restrictions worldwide, the numbers slightly decreased to a still significant 27,510; as Figure 10.2 shows.



**Figure 10.2:** Asylum applications of Colombians in EU member states, 2010–2020

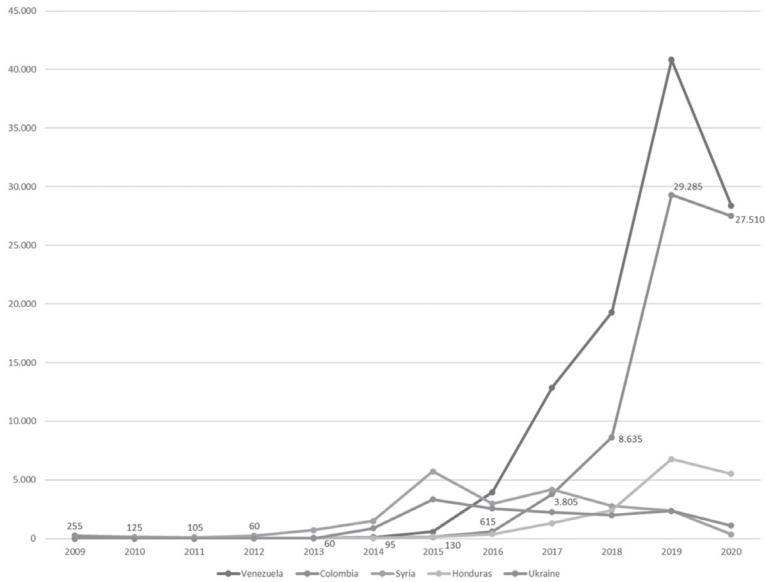
Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

As for the gender division of EU asylum applications by Colombians, it is interesting to note that the annual share can be clearly divided into two phases. In the first, ranging from 2010 to 2015, there was a clear predominance of males, with the yearly percentages moving between 61.33 and 68.42 per cent men versus 38.67 to 31.58 per cent women, respectively. Nonetheless, in the second phase, between the years 2016 and 2020, the numbers became more balanced and the gender difference progressively decreased from a 56.54 per cent majority of men in 2016, to an almost equal 50.70 per cent to 49.30 per cent ratio in 2020. When scrutinising the aforementioned top-five countries of Colombian asylum applications, clear differences also appear. Following the same pattern in the EU on the whole, from 2016 onwards figures became relatively balanced, with a persistent male majority that closed to an almost 50–50 balance by 2020, with 50.55 per cent men and 49.45 per cent women.

From 2010 to 2015, however, the numbers diverge, with Italy and Spain presenting striking differences in most years. In the case of the former, the

percentages ranged from 87,50 per cent men versus 12,50 per cent women in 2012 and 2015 – the years with the most significant gap – to a still considerable gap of 81,82 per cent versus 18,18 per cent in 2013, when the difference was least. Regarding Spain, from 2010 to 2012 the gender gap remained at 58.33 per cent men versus 41.67 per cent women, but in 2013 it jumped to a 75 per cent versus 25 per cent difference, marking the greatest gap. It then became 69.23 per cent men versus 30.77 per cent women in 2015. These numbers seem to indicate that until 2015, when the overall arrivals of Colombian asylum seekers started to increase rapidly, there was a significant male majority, but that from 2016 onwards, and especially in Spain, where most Colombian asylum seekers arrived, the gender gap progressively narrowed.

Finally, Colombians constituted the second-largest demographic group of asylum seekers in Spain between 2009 and 2020, with 70,680 claims, only surpassed by those of Venezuelans, who requested 106,215 instances of international protection. After Colombia, Syria, Honduras and Ukraine appear as the third, fourth and fifth countries, respectively, with 21,020 applications from nationals of the first, 16,795 from the second and 14,625 from the third. It should be noted how asylum applications start to increase in 2015, with a jump from 8,635 requests in 2018 to 29,285 in 2019, with numbers more than tripling and reaching historic highs in the latter year. In 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic spread transnationally, there was a slight drop in applications, but still a considerably larger amount were administered than before. From 2010 to 2015, the general numbers moved relatively steadily, shifting more in the case of immigration, but not at any point reaching the records from the spike that would begin between 2015 and 2016. Until 2017, the sum of asylum applications from Colombians in Spain moved within the range of protection claims processed by other third-country nationals, such as Syrians or Ukrainians. However, from that year onwards, the stark difference between asylum applications from Colombian citizens and from all other nationalities was only nuanced by an even higher surge in the quantity of requests from Venezuelans, following a similar chronological pattern to that of its neighbour country, as Figure 10.3 shows.



**Figure 10.3:** Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009–2020

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

Alongside Colombia, there was also an increase in the number of asylum claims by Venezuelans starting in 2015, with an even more marked growth and progressively higher numbers until 2020. As with the case of Colombia, the figures of Venezuelan claims also decreased between 2019 and 2020, most likely due to the aforementioned Covid-19 situation. The third Latin American country with the most nationals seeking international protection after Venezuela and Colombia was Honduras. Between 2009 and 2015, Colombia shifted from being the third country of origin with the largest number of asylum seekers in Spain to falling behind neighbouring Venezuela, Honduras and El Salvador. In 2016, however, Colombia returned to the third position behind Venezuela and Syria, and from the following year onwards became the country with the second most claims for international protection in Spain, behind only Venezuela (see Figure 10.3).

## 10.2 The drivers informing recent migration trends from Colombia

The data on migration as well as asylum applications in the European Union for the last decade show a significant increase beginning in 2015, both in the number of arrivals and in terms of international protection claims from Colombia. That year marked the start of a linear growth in the influx of Colombian nationals arriving in the Mediterranean countries, that reached its highest point in 2019. This trend is particularly important for the Spanish case, where Colombians have become a more predominant demographic group. To analyse these trends it is useful to explore Colombia's domestic situation in relation to the protracted armed conflict with guerrilla and paramilitary groups, the signing of the September 2016 peace agreements and the uneven distribution and dispossession of land in rural areas of the territory; but also elements that are more broad, mainly the increasing demand for care services and construction labour in Spain, the lack of strict visa requirements for entry into the country during a determined period in time, or the cultural patterns (language, religion, common historical background) shared between the two countries.

The coincidence between the moment when the peace accords between the FARC and the national government of President Santos were brokered in Havana and the surge in asylum applications from 2016 to 2017 (from 615 to 3,805 in Spain) seems to show a possible correlation between the two factors. However, the signing of the agreements needs to be considered as one potential driver within a wide set of factors that might have fuelled such an increase in international protection requests. The arrival of Duque in the presidency replacing Santos in August 2018 represented a policy shift in regard to the fulfilment of the agreements, particularly in relation to one of its cornerstones, a comprehensive rural reform that was supposed to distribute land ownership rights more fairly between large and small landowners. The administration change in the presidency concurred with the increase in asylum applications in Spain in 2019 (29,285 in total). The influence of these factors, along with other elements concerning internal migration policy and international agreements, needs to be analysed to shed some light on the development of migration movements from Colombia to its neighbour countries and to Spain. At the same time, it should be once again emphasised that these are approximated, possible factors which may or may not affect decision-making by individuals.



### 10.2.1 Brief historical background of the armed conflict and internal displacement over the past six decades

The armed conflict between the FARC and the Colombian state spanned fifty-two years, from the inception of the guerrilla group in 1964 until the signing of the peace agreements in 2016. The civil war has played a crucial role in the displacement of millions of Colombians, having had direct repercussions on the demographic structure of the country and the political relations between its urban centres and the rural periphery. From the end of the 1950s until 2012, the moment when President Santos announced an approach to set up peace dialogues, armed violence had resulted in the death of 218,094 people, 81 per cent of whom were civilians and 19 per cent combatants (CNMH 2012). According to the Victims Unit of the National Information Network (*Red Nacional de Información*, RNI), the mid-1980s marked the beginning of a significant increase in the expulsion of people from their households, with figures having tripled in 1994, before dramatically increasing the following year (RNI 2021).

By 2002, a historic record of 772,255 annually displaced people was reached. Nonetheless, from that moment onwards and after a period of stabilisation spanning from 2003 to 2008, internal displacements slowly decreased until the signing of the peace agreements (Bonilla Castaño 2020: 142). These large numbers were the consequence of a wide array of types of violence, such as gender-based which accumulated 1,714 victims between 1985 and 2012 (CNMH 2012), with women being targeted in some instances as a way to drive populations out of their homes; or the proliferation of right-wing paramilitary groups with links to the state security forces in the 1980s that emerged as a response to the violence at the hands of the guerrillas and that fed from displacing and extorting small peasants to harvest coca crops (Klobucista and Renwick 2017). In this regard, the demographic groups that still today tend to be more at risk of being forcibly displaced are indigenous communities and African-Colombians, whose lands are in rural areas rich in resources that can be highly lucrative for criminal organisations.

During those years – which coincided with the creation of the United Self-Defences of Colombia (AUC), a far-right and drug trafficking group unifying paramilitary organisations that were very much active in the conflict by engaging against the FARC – the levels of inequality in the Andean country were strikingly high. In 1990, the gross national income per capita was 8,013 US dollars, which slowly improved until reaching 14,257 by 2019 (UNDP 2020). However, this upgrade did not translate into poverty vanishing from the country; quite the opposite, the presence of inequalities was still perpetuated across all regions of the territory, but most notably in rural areas. In 2018, the urban-rural divide

was distinctly acute, with 36 per cent of the rural population living below the national poverty line, in comparison with the much lower 15.7 per cent among people residing in urban regions (IDMC 2019: 10). Particularly affected by poverty in the rural periphery are the indigenous communities; between January and November 2018, forty-three children under the age of five – the majority of whom belong to Wayuu communities – died in the region of La Guajira, as the result of a lack of access to clear water or malnutrition (HRW 2019).

Drawing attention to the management of the internal conflict in the decade of the 2010s, in 2011 the national government enacted the Victims and Land Restitution Law, to restore millions of hectares of workable land that had been abandoned or taken from Colombians driven out of their homes and internally displaced during the previous decades (HRW 2011). By that moment, the Santos government understood the need to offer an institutional tool to the thousands of Colombians that had been forcibly displaced through threats, gender-based violence and assassinations. This reality was underscored by the fact that displaced populations asking for restitution of their property had been systematically targeted by criminal groups and subjected to threats and intimidation. At the beginning of the 2010s, forced migration in Colombia mainly generated internal movement to the metropolitan areas and the urban centres (Ruiz 2011: 142), leading to a progressive increase of IDPs that went from 5.2 million in 2010 to a record 7.2 million in 2016 (IDMC 2022). A considerable segment of forced displacement in Colombia is intra-urban, with people shifting between neighbourhoods within a city to try to get away from violence.

### **10.2.2 Political relationship with neighbouring countries, the 2016 peace accords in Havana and a subsequent spike in violence in rural areas**

Despite the growth in internal mobility, during the first half of the 2010s immigration arrivals and asylum applications to the European Union and to Spain remained relatively stable, with immigration numbers progressively decreasing and the sum of international protection requests moving between sixty and a maximum of 130 in 2015, as an effect of the global financial crisis. In this context, Colombians remained either within their own territory or moved across the region, using neighbouring countries like Venezuela or Ecuador, and at a lower scale Brazil and Peru, as their destination. Moreover, all these states saw themselves affected by a conflict spillover in the form of an increasing presence of FARC combatants within their own borders or the arrival of Colombian asylum seekers, fleeing from regions like Nariño, Cauca, Chocó and Valle. Collectively

these four regions accumulated 40 per cent of the overall forced displacements in 2015 (El Espectador 2016); and the first two, alongside Antioquia, comprised the three regions where almost half of the total sum of victims from the armed conflict were located.

Political interactions with neighbouring countries had been seriously impacted during the previous decade. On the one hand, diplomatic relations with Venezuela deteriorated since 2004, when the Colombian executive of President Álvaro Uribe internationally denounced the sheltering of FARC combatants in the Bolivarian country, leading to tensions that did not de-escalate until the arrival of Santos in the presidency, but that re-emerged with the beginning of the administration of President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela in April 2013. On the other hand, relations worsened with Ecuador when President Rafael Correa declared a stance of neutrality in the Colombian fight against the FARC shortly after the beginning of his tenure, refusing to declare the guerrillas as a terrorist or warmongering organisation, a situation that was exacerbated by multiple Colombian military incursions into Ecuadorian sovereign territory to persecute members of the FARC, for instance *Operación Fénix* of March 2008 (Moreira et al. 2015).

The signing of the peace accords in September 2016 was supposed to bring peace to Colombia, with the five-decade-long conflict officially concluding and the FARC reconvertng itself in August of the following year into a political party, now called Commons (*Comunes*), after having changed its name in January 2021 from the original Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (*Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*, FARC). Since that moment, the party and the Colombian government have maintained a line of dialogue through the National Reincorporation Council, designed to monitor the process of integration of former FARC combatants to civilian life. Nonetheless, critical elements of the peace accords have not been yet implemented, mainly the comprehensive rural reform agreed upon by the two parties, an indispensable element and likely the most contentious subject of the agreements. In regard to land property rights, the peace accords had a dual goal: first, to develop a land fund with about three million hectares for the peasantry; and second, to formalise seven million further hectares of farms to be owned by families that did not hold any land titles, with some of them having been driven out of their regions years earlier (Guereña 2017). As a response to the infringement of the agreements, social and human rights activists, as well as community leaders in rural areas, have denounced the corruption and failure of the government, arguing, among other things, that the lack of meaningful economic alternatives to vulnerable collectives, such as small farmers growing coca, keeps exacerbating both the conflict and forced

displacement, for which they have been heavily targeted by organised crime (IDMC 2022).

The killing of hundreds of activists after 2016 represents a potential driver of displacement in Colombia, and not only at the internal level, but also in the form of asylum seekers leaving the country and attempting to find international protection abroad. According to the Ombudsman of Colombia, 753 social leaders were assassinated between 2016 and 2020 (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021), many of whom were attacked in the aforementioned departments of Nariño, Cauca and Antioquia, but also in Córdoba and Norte de Santander. All of these are mountainous and jungle areas that attract criminal organisations like the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*), a cluster of FARC dissidents that abandoned the guerrilla group after the peace agreements, or groups like the *Clan del Golfo*, whose leader Dairo Antonio Úsuga David, known as Otoniel, was arrested in El Cerro del Yoki, in the West Andes, by the Colombian state security forces in October 2021; or Los Pelusos, all of whom are waging a war for the control of undivided territories (Reuters 2019).

The limited presence of the government in these regions of the country has been used by non-state violent actors to expand their territorial grasp. Their rapid proliferation to occupy the power vacuum left by the FARC to conduct illicit activities like drug trafficking or unauthorised mining (UNHCR 2017), together with the inability or unwillingness by the national government to offer meaningful economic solutions to these regions, has led to the re-emergence of violence, constituting in 2020 the main driver behind the 106,000 conflict displacements recorded in the country (IDMC 2022). To those who remember the targeted assassination of more than 3,000 militants of the left-wing Patriotic Union, together with that of two presidential candidates, between 1985 and 1990 at the hands of far-right paramilitary groups, the current assassination campaign of human rights activists and community leaders makes them fear that such a terrible episode might end up repeating itself.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), among the social activists killed between 2016 and 2019, thirty-six of them were women and six belonged to the LGBTQI+ community (OHCHR 2020). A great deal of effort was put into providing a gender approach to the 2016 peace agreements, but as of August 2019, 42 per cent of the commitments with a gender perspective had not yet been initiated (Kroc Institute 2019: 11). Furthermore, between 2011 and 2013, at least 219 assassinations of LGBTQI+ people were registered across the country, with a rise in the latter year in the number of murder complaints of this collective in comparison to those of 2012 (CIDH 2015: 93). In 2019, the year when asylum

applications in Spain rose significantly, the OHCHR documented the killing of 108 social leaders, an increase of almost 50 per cent compared to the previous year (OHCHR 2020: 4), and a figure that would jump to an even higher 297 assassinations in 2020 (IDMC 2022).

Particularly worrying has been the situation for the local population of northern Cauca since the end of 2018 and having worsened during 2019, when FARC dissidents declared that they would regain control of the region. This area is highly desired by criminal actors linked to the drug trafficking business due to having large tracts of cultivable land. One of the main problems accompanying this violence is that the Colombian government does not recognise it as a systemic phenomenon, to which the communities that are suffering respond by demanding an increased state presence in the form of public investment and initiatives defending the respect of fundamental rights (Duarte and Vargas 2020). In February 2021, however, Human Rights Watch denounced that the administration of President Duque had left security and protection policies for rural communities at a standstill, whilst also stating that the government had reacted slowly and poorly in the implementation of policies to prevent targeted assassinations and persecution of men, women and children (HRW 2021b).

### **10.2.3 The inherent risks of the ‘Darién Gap’ to reach North America and the arrival of Venezuelans since the mid-2010s**

The geographical location of Colombia in the north-west extreme of South America turns it into a territory of transit for immigrants and asylum seekers from countries like Haiti, Cuba, Chile, Senegal, Ghana or India, who usually cross several borders within the continent with the final aim of reaching the United States or Canada (Ramírez et al. 2010). To access Central America by land, tens of thousands of migrants annually use the ‘Darién Gap’, a 266 km long jungle corridor stretching between Colombia and Panama. This is one of the most dangerous irregular migratory routes in the region due to the high temperatures, long jungle sweeps and large presence of criminal armed groups located there. According to data provided by the United Nations, around 24,000 people of more than fifty different nationalities, including India, Somalia, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Bangladesh, whose citizens often reach Latin America by flying to Brazil, crossed the long route in 2019, with 16 per cent of them being children and teenagers, half of whom were under six years old. Moreover, according to the Panamanian government, around 49,000 people crossed the dangerous route throughout 2021 (El Espectador 2021). When arriving in Panama, migrants of those nationalities, and also Colombians

abandoning their country, are received at the Migrant Reception Station, a shelter in La Peñita in the Darién province, one of the regions with the lowest levels of development in the country (UNICEF 2020). This centre in La Peñita has effectively been used by the Panamanian government as a detention facility, which has led the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to establish some principles on measures that the country should implement in regard to the respect of the fundamental rights of migrants in transit detained there.

Some people crossing the Darién Gap enter Colombia from neighbouring countries like Brazil, Peru or Ecuador, in addition to other people doing so from the states of origin mentioned above. Depending on the place, human smugglers and other criminal organisations, like the paramilitary group Clan del Golfo, may charge between 2,000 and 3,000 US dollars to traverse the route, extorting people who usually travel with heavy luggage and children (Pardo 2021). In July 2021, there were about 10,000 migrants, most of whom were Haitians, stranded in the Colombian municipality of Necoclí, of only 21,000 inhabitants and located near the Gulf of Urabá, on the Atlantic coast (Torrado 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic situation and the closing of the Panamanian border exacerbated the gridlock of those people in the small Colombian village, with local authorities calling for alternative solutions and asking for help from the central government. In 2016, Panama had already hardened its border control policy to deter potential migrants from attempting to cross the country to the United States (Ocampo-González and Arboleda-Cardona 2016: 96), a commitment that has only seen itself reinforced with the conjuncture of the pandemic.

Some of the routes that migrants use to reach Colombia are located along its borders with Venezuela, Ecuador and, to a lesser extent, Brazil. When crossing from Ecuador, migrants enter the country through Ipiales, to then move to Pasto, Cali, Medellín and Urabá; or instead they use an alternative itinerary along the Pacific Ocean. Concurrently, the routes exiting Venezuela are located on the Atlantic coast, reaching Arboletes and Montería (*ibid.*: 102). In regard to the entrance of immigrants from third countries, Colombia, together with Ecuador and Brazil albeit to a lesser extent, is the recipient of a great deal of Venezuelan migrants, with at least one million people having moved from Venezuela to the Andean state between March 2017 and June 2018, and around two million people putting together the three mentioned countries of destination (Marston 2019: 11; HRW 2019).

As explained before, until 1990 Colombia was a country of expulsion, starting to receive immigrants progressively and at a low pace only from that year onwards. Nonetheless, in 1999 the war between the FARC and the AUC of Catatumbo, bordering Venezuela, acted as a driver for the forced displacement

of more than three million people to the Venezuelan border. This was one of the first instances wherein the real scope of the refugee situation in Colombia was appreciated in its neighbouring state (Álvarez de Flores 2004: 198). In terms of immigration, Colombia has recently started to receive third-country nationals, acting as a transit country for migrants from neighbouring countries in the region, for instance Ecuador, which suffered from a severe economic and political crisis in the beginning of the 2000s. It was not until the start and worsening of the socio-political turmoil in Venezuela in 2015 that Colombia started to experience an important number of entrances into its territory.

Political disorder, rampant crime and economic instability in Venezuela since the mid-2010s has reversed migratory trends, and now Colombia represents the main country of destination for Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers. In July 2017, in the face of thousands of arrivals, President Santos's government approved a special permit to allow Venezuelans who had accessed the country regularly but had overstayed their visas to regularise their residence status and thus try to acquire a work permit and have access to public services (HRW 2019). After a rapid surge in the number of Venezuelan nationals residing in Colombia after 2015, when in the span of two years the records increased from 48,714 citizens to 550,000 in 2017, the government implemented the Special Permit of Permanence explained above, but also an Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia one year later, in 2018, to design a comprehensive national public policy of humanitarian care for arriving Venezuelans. Despite these initiatives, in the following years the number of Venezuelan citizens residing in Colombia kept augmenting, to 1,408,055 in 2019 and to 1,742,927 in 2021 (GIFMM 2021). Simultaneously, however, a process of securitisation and the strengthening of borders also took place, in the form of the deployment of more security operatives and a militarisation of the key entry points (Gissi Barbieri et al. 2020).

#### **10.2.4 Immigration, (restrictive) asylum policies in Spain and the impact of Covid-19**

Besides analysing the main drivers of displacement shaping migration in Colombia, together with the role that the country plays as a territory both of origin, transit and destination for migrants and asylum seekers, it is also necessary to evaluate the impact that migration policies implemented in Europe and in Spain have had on the shaping of migratory movements originating in the country. The considerable increase in asylum applications and immigration numbers in Spain that began in 2015 coincided with the suppression of short

stay visas for Colombians to travel to most countries of the European Union, announced in December of that year (Fernández-Huertas Moraga 2021: 23). On 2 December, the European Union signed an agreement with Colombia on an exemption for this type of visa, in a ceremony conducted in Brussels with the presence of President Santos. This new visa regime allowed EU citizens visiting Colombia, and Colombian nationals visiting the Union, to travel without the need to request a visa for a stay of ninety days over a period of 180 days. This decision arguably led to an increase in the arrival of Colombian migrants who accessed Spain regularly, through the airports of Barajas in Madrid or Josep Tarradellas in Barcelona-El Prat, with the intention of overextending their stay and looking for employment.

According to a recent report, by 2020 there were around 100,000 Colombians residing in Spain in a situation of irregularity, with their presence, along that of Venezuelans and Hondurans, amounting to around 60 per cent of the total sum of third-country nationals irregularly staying in the country (Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta 2020). Accompanying the aforementioned exodus of tens of thousands of Colombians to Venezuela in 1999 due to the worsening of the conflict with the FARC, but also as a result of the 25 January massive earthquake that heavily affected the city of Armenia, in the Quindío department, thousands of Colombians travelled to Spain looking for new opportunities. From that moment, arrivals moved steadily until the economic crash of 2008, when many of them lost their job and decided to return to their country of origin. The heavy crackdown of the Uribe government against the FARC and other guerrilla groups encouraged plenty of Colombians to go back, perceiving the situation as more secure than a few years earlier. In 2005, the Spanish government of President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero initiated a process of regularisation of irregular immigrants, which led to the accession of thousands to the Spanish labour market. However, the current administration of President Pedro Sánchez does not contemplate developing a similar process, as stated in mid-2018, a decision that has not likely changed considering the economic downturn since the beginning of the pandemic (Europa Press 2018).

Regarding the processing of asylum applications in Spain, in recent years many people have fled Colombia due to suffering from death threats, extortion and exploitation at the hands of armed criminals permeating rural areas of the country. Nonetheless, what most asylum seekers encounter when reaching Spain is rejection by the Spanish authorities who argue that there is no longer an armed conflict in Colombia. In this logic, they do not deem the persecution suffered at the hands of criminal actors as political, but instead as common crime. Even though the government of President Duque usually talked about a post-conflict



situation, violence in the country is still rampant, with a widespread lack of availability of public services, especially among the indigenous communities; high levels of poverty; human rights violations at the hands of the paramilitary and the state security forces; and an elevated criminality index.

As mentioned earlier, despite the fact that since 2017 Colombia has been within the first three nationalities of asylum seekers in Spain, out of the total of 5,266 requests that were resolved in 2019, with some of them being from earlier years, just forty-eight were granted a favourable outcome. This means that only 0.91 per cent of Colombian applicants received asylum rights (CEAR 2020). Moreover, it also indicates that the change in the Spanish presidency in June 2018, from the conservative Popular Party (*Partido Popular*) to the more left-leaning Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*), did not translate into an immediate policy variation in terms of asylum. And with the current socio-political and immediate post-Covid conjuncture, this seems highly unlikely on a short-term basis.

Simultaneously, it is important to point out that the low acceptance numbers of asylum seekers have not deterred Colombians from attempting to ask for international protection in Spain. In Latin America, while the numbers of recognition have not been lowering as much as in the Mediterranean country, many Colombians have easily accessed a regular status due to permanent avenues for residence under regional migratory agreements. Despite the low numbers, plenty of Colombians could have also been attracted to Spain due to factors like their inclusion in the municipal census, which offers the possibility to access public services including health, education or economic aid, despite a situation of irregularity; the small allowance provided to those who have requested international protection and are awaiting resolution; or the above-mentioned possibility of nationalisation after two years of residence, or access to nationality by ancestry of historical memory.

Finally, the drop in both asylum applications and immigration numbers in 2020 might be attributed to the restrictive measures applied worldwide in the form of limited mobility and border shutdowns as a response to the transnational spreading of Covid-19. On 27 July 2021, due to the high incidence of the virus in most regions of Spain, a temporary restriction was implemented on the entrance of travellers from a number of countries, including Colombia. There were people exempted from those restrictions, mainly third-country nationals with residence permits, but they were still expected to comply with the health measures and security controls deployed to contain the spreading of the disease (Spanish Ministry of the Interior 2021). The lack of proper infrastructure and strengthened capacities to follow proper medical guidelines led to the

overcrowding of migrants and asylum seekers, who found themselves in a situation of vulnerability where their physical integrity was put at risk of exposure to potential contagion from the virus.

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Colleen Boland and Elena Sánchez-Montijano

## Chapter 11 Increasingly exacerbated crises in Honduras

**Abstract:** From being a country of immigration during the first half of the twentieth century, by the 1990s Honduras had transitioned to one of emigration, with negative net migration. Systemic socioeconomic inequality fomented by land concentration and dispossession, combined with poverty and gang-related violence, are cited as key factors informing the departure of Honduran nationals. More specifically, political and economic instability, together with fragile institutions, corruption and insecurity represent destabilising mechanisms that contribute to both internal displacement and emigration. Weak social protections make the effects of climate disaster more acute. Violence at the hands of international criminal organisations renders Honduras one of the most violent countries in the world; its homicide rate, while recently slightly in decline, remains comparatively high, and systemic gendered violence is on the rise. While Hondurans on the move mainly choose the United States or Mexico, they also elect irregular migration pathways and submit asylum requests to Europe, mainly Spain. Nonetheless, despite persistent or inevitable threat to life, when Hondurans apply for asylum, they usually encounter difficulties in meeting the requirements for international protection, indicating further precarity and marginalisation in the future as flows continue.

**Keywords:** asylum recognition | weak state protection | international organised crime | gendered violence | climate disaster

A country of 9.9 million, with a population including combined Spanish and indigenous descent, Honduras is an interesting case in studying the Atlantic Route, as it became a country of significant emigration from the 1990s forward. It currently has a negative net migration, although it also experiences significant and sometimes forced return migration (UN Population Division 2020). Poverty, inequality and violence are cited as influencing this emigratory turn, in combination with fragile institutions, political instability and corruption (Gutiérrez Rivera 2018). Its nationals' main countries of destination include the United States, Spain, Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Canada, although it can also serve as a transit country given its geographical location *en route* to North America (UN Population Division 2020).

This chapter explores the historical context of current Honduran migration and asylum flows to Europe and other international destinations, including

historical developments and international interventions and extractive projects that contribute to present reliance on micro and macro levels of remittances as well as NGO and international cooperation. It provides a further overview of internal displacement and interregional movement in light of recent history and current political, social and economic crisis, lack of social protection, increasing gender violence and climate disaster. This is followed by a close examination of migration flows to the EU and asylum applications to Spain and other EU member states, as well as patterns of Honduran settlement within Spain. These specific trends are then further fleshed out in a series of observations and concluding insights.

### **11.1 From immigration to emigration, internal displacement and movement to urban centres**

In parallel with overall historical trends in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, Honduras was initially a country of immigration in the first half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, immigration policies encouraged foreign investors or professionals to engage with industries like the banana industry (López Recinos 2020). On the other hand, further immigration to Honduras also occurred in the 1970s with Salvadorians in search of land and work, and various nationalities from the Central American region fleeing conflict in the 1980s (Léon Araya and Salazar Araya 2016). At the same time, the trade and migratory ties between the United States and Honduras account for some small-scale migration of Hondurans to the North American country, up until the more voluminous migratory movements in recent history (*ibid.*). For example, the Afro-indigenous Garífuna population began to establish diaspora communities well before recent migration (Agudelo 2019).

Indeed, throughout the century, until the 1990s, migratory movements of Hondurans largely remained within the country. The Honduran population was mainly distributed in rural areas (and a large portion remains in these areas today) with the majority involved in agriculture. A combination of factors meant that most disenfranchised land renters or agricultural workers had to rely on mobility, although the distribution and manipulation of land use by an elite few exercised and continues to yield great influence (Jolly and Torrey 1993). Boom and bust cycles of export commodities, in combination with decisions on land use made by these elite economic interests, translated to impoverished or unemployed rural populations that had to engage in cyclical or permanent migration to urban areas, or depend on family remittances (*ibid.*).



In addition to the hierarchical land ownership complicating the rural economy, development in the country was further affected by a shift in economic policies at the end of the Cold War in particular, heralding international emigration. Here, the Common Central American Market agreement, initiated in the 1960s and of which Honduras was a member, has allowed for some positive changes in the Central American region, and despite interruptions by crises in the 1980s, proceeded from the 1990s forward to coordinate interregional economic integration and free trade policies (Cordero 2017). Neoliberal restructuring of the Honduran economy can in particular be traced to early 1990s legislation under President Rafael Leonardo Callejas, as the Honduran state became decentralised and shifted towards market-friendly neoliberal policy (Hernández Rodríguez 2020: 86). It is also argued that United States involvement under the former President Reagan, in restructuring the Honduran economy to deregulate and arguably destabilise the coffee trade, had repercussions for traditional forms of agriculture (Nevins 2016).

The deterioration of living conditions in the past several decades in Honduras includes a lack of government prioritisation for social protections like housing, health, education and aid for populations like the elderly and disabled. With a vacuum in social services for Hondurans, international NGOs began (and continue) to take on the responsibility for providing social services and addressing a destabilised social welfare. Increasing 1990s Honduran emigration is particularly cited as economic and development related, and linked to a search for social and economic security. Emigration outside of the country became an increasingly frequent option for agricultural workers, and remittances a key resource for those who remained. In fact, between 1990 and 2005, it is notable that remittances had become the single largest source of foreign exchange in the Honduran economy (Reichman 2011). Social protections continue to reflect short-term, partisan policies that lack universal coverage or institutional coordination, financing, implementation, and evaluation, thus having little impact for vulnerable populations (Martínez Franzoni 2013).

Finally, it seems important to point out the relevance of the Central American integration process, which was the first of those processes in the LAC region, with support from the regional bloc Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and at the initiative of the Costa Rican, Salvadorian, Guatemalan, Honduran and Nicaraguan governments (Cordero 2017). Although in the second half of the twentieth century political will for integration in Central America has been variously expressed, Costa Rica has remained resistant, with an effect on control of migration flows and migration policies, which are not particularly streamlined (Solano Muñoz 2017).

## 11.2 International migration trends and asylum flows: Lack of state and social protection

This historical overview prefaces this century's recent Honduran international migration, which can be attributed to intertwined factors of socioeconomic and political instability, violence and climate change or disaster, as the largely rural makeup of Honduras is particularly susceptible to environmental changes. Concurrently, on the one hand, while rural-to-urban migration represented a significant phenomenon pre-1990s, this internal migration is still prevalent today (Lamiño Jaramillo et al. 2019). On the other hand, there is substantial and frequently forced return migration to Honduras (IOM DTM 2021). Finally, Honduras sometimes serves as a transit country, in what seems to be an increasingly permanent trend, primarily for Haitians as well as Cubans and some African nationalities (IFRC 2016; IOM DTM 2021).

In a further examination of the origin context in Honduras, after having provided a brief sketch of the development situation in the country, we go on to detail how the socioeconomic situation is inextricably linked with political instability and corruption, with the weak state consequently leaving violence and crime largely unchecked. Political conflict has been rife in particular since the coup d'état of 2009. Since then, the conservative National Party has remained in power amidst allegations of corruption, with contested presidential elections taking place in 2013 and 2017 (Greene 2020). President Juan Orlando Hernández, presiding since 2014, is under US investigation for links to drug trafficking organisations, and his government has been most recently accused of graft in hurricane relief (Angelo 2021). Compounding this political corruption, in the last few years the economic policies enacted under President Orlando Hernández have been argued to worsen the economic situation. Government neglect, incapacity or corruption in the face of other crises, including humanitarian disaster and climate-related forced displacement, thus can often partially serve as a driving factor in Hondurans' decisions to move (Wrathall et al. 2014). Recent general elections were held in November 2021 and the election of the new left-wing President, Xiomara Castro, brought an end to the twelve-year rule of the right-wing National Party, inheriting a country in exacerbated crisis. As a result, according to Varieties of Democracy reports that the last election has "consolidated the country's democratic progress" (Papada et al. 2023: 28).

Meanwhile, in addition to the intertwined political unrest, the extreme levels of violence in Honduras can drive both international migration, as well as cause forced displacement internally (Nelson-Pollard 2017). Violence is often (although not exclusively) perpetrated by the *maras*, criminal groups that originated from

the west coast of the United States in the 1980s and have currently expanded to form extensive organisations in Central America, which operate via local groups. In Honduras some of these groups include the Salvatrucha or Barrio 18, and primary activities include extortion, kidnapping, murder and drugs, weapons, and human trafficking (Obinna 2021: 808). These organisations exercise powerful social control, and state authorities have little control over them, and may even collaborate with them. Apart from organised crime triggering emigration, prevalent criminal deportation of Hondurans from the United States and Canada adds to instability (Burt et al. 2016).

Honduras' aforementioned political, social and economic crises, alongside weak social protections, can be exacerbated by climate disasters, with highly visible examples including Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 (Beltrán 2021; Wrathall et al. 2014). Approximately 45 per cent of Honduras's nine million inhabitants live in rural areas, and the majority of households in these areas are dependent upon small-scale subsistence agriculture for food security (Dodd et al. 2020). These climate disasters destroy homes and schools, cripple health care networks and roads, entail loss in crops and mean a transfer of workers from the formal to the informal economy (Quijada and Sierra 2019). Repeated droughts also cause crop losses and increased food insecurity (Bermeo and Leblang 2021). Essentially, climate change scenarios and natural disaster can radically alter or destabilise rural livelihood systems in Honduras (Wrathall et al. 2014).

### **11.3 Current migration profiles and trajectories, alongside difficulties in obtaining international protection**

In light of this origin profile, while it is difficult to document and likely underestimated, Honduran emigration is often classified as irregular (Hernández Rodríguez 2020: 89). In 2010, the World Trade Organisation estimated that 330,000 Hondurans resided in the United States without authorisation, while other studies indicate that roughly a third of Hondurans in Canada reside there without authorisation (Burt et al. 2016; Hernández Rodríguez 2020: 89). International protection may not be sought due to administrative barriers: either migrants may understand that few receive international protection for reasons like gang violence, or it is easier to report seeking economic opportunity or family reunification when undergoing administrative or deportation procedures (Nelson-Pollard 2017). At the same time, Hondurans also engage in regular migration pathways, primarily in applying for asylum or family reunification, but also via work permits and other avenues (Reichman 2011). As later described

in more detail, how receiving countries or regions define international protection as relates to Honduras, including the EU and its member states, particularly impacts the nature of Honduran migration.

Before turning to Honduran migrants' destinations and the European context, two populations within the more general Honduran migration and asylum profile are important considerations. Notably, emigration from Honduras has become increasingly feminised, especially emigration to Europe (Hierro 2016). Gendered violence is cited as causing Honduran women's migration, and while factors like organised crime can form part of this, domestic violence factors in as one of the leading causes of child migration (Obinna 2021; Portillo Villeda and Torres Zelaya 2014). Moreover, it is important to note the aforementioned ethnic Garífuna minority, an Afro-indigenous population historically linked to migration in its founding, dispersal and fragmentation. From the eighteenth century onward, the Garífuna have migrated back and forth in cyclical labour migration (Agudelo 2019). They continue to remain mobile within the region as diasporas in Belize, Nicaragua and Guatemala, and in the past decade their primary international destination outside of other countries in Central America has especially been the United States, where diaspora networks were established in the first half of the twentieth century (*ibid.*; Obinna 2021: 819; Wrathall et al. 2014).

To some extent, Hondurans' destination countries can be explained by historical ties. In modern history, the United States is an important actor to consider when detailing Hondurans' migration and asylum profile. US military presence and involvement is argued to be historically and currently related to the roots of Honduran emigration. As a destination country, the United States hosts more than 773,045 nationals as of 2020, making up 78.5 per cent of Honduran immigration (UN Population Division 2020). At the same time, notably, by 2010 it had deported more Hondurans than any other group from Central America since 1980 (Blanchard et al. 2011). The United States has been present in the country since the late 1800s, when American companies (banana-based) arrived, and US interests gained significant ownership of Honduran land (Nevins 2016). Further heavy US involvement occurred when the Reagan administration oversaw substantial intervention, including military presence and overall militarisation and restructuring of the Honduran economy (*ibid.*).

In essence, commercial ties throughout the twentieth century and the first trickle of migration to the United States aided in establishing Honduran diasporas, which increased with family reunification and the emigration uptick at the end of the century (Gonzalez 1988). Continual demand for low-paid labour in the US over the past decades coincides with a lack of regularisation policies, contributing to the irregularity of migration, including for those

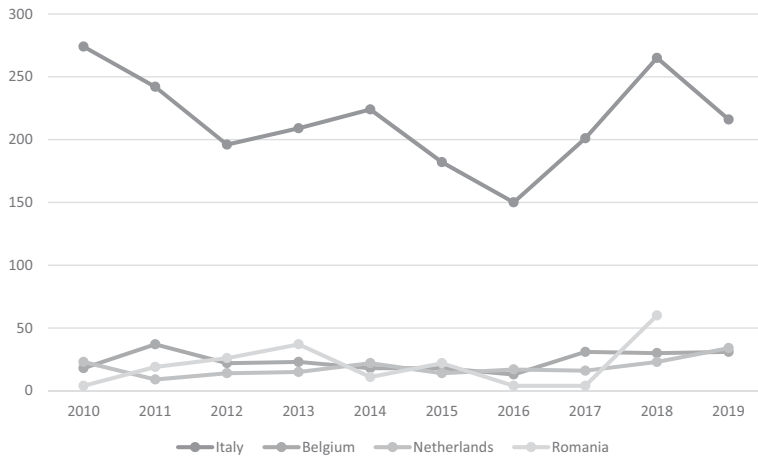
motivated by family reunification which could potentially take place via regular routes (Musalo et al. 2015).

Migrant caravans from Central America have been a recent pattern, moving via land route to Hondurans' primary destination country of the United States. Honduran migrants may select to travel in a caravan in order to make visible the root causes of their migratory decisions, to gain more protection via safety in numbers and to receive assistance from governmental and nongovernmental organisations (Astles 2021). Migrants in these caravans may lack required mobility documents, and their movement may thus be characterised as irregular as they encounter entry, transit or residence regulations along their journey. Still, whether in a caravan or opting for solo travel, Hondurans face dangerous conditions in transit to the US–Mexico border, which often take between two and six weeks (Obinna 2021; Quijada and Sierra 2019). The danger and violence, including risks of kidnapping, rape, disappearance, assault, trafficking and murder, is present not only throughout the journey in Central America but also when transiting through Mexico (Astles 2021). The risk of detention and deportation there can mean choosing alternative and more dangerous routes in order to avoid migration checkpoints (Sánchez-Montijano 2022). This is illustrated by a high-profile case of the kidnapping of 102 Honduran migrants in Tamaulipas state on the northeast Mexican-US border in 2013 (Reichman 2011). Irregular migration is often facilitated via a smuggler, or coyote, which costs thousands of dollars, although costs can be mitigated if travelling in a caravan (Astles 2021; Quijada and Sierra 2019).

#### **11.4 Recent trends in Honduran migration to the EU, and primarily Spain**

When analysing the data on immigration from Honduras to the European Union over roughly a decade (from either 2010 to 2019 or 2010 to 2020 depending on the data source), Spain clearly stands out as the country where a considerable number of Hondurans decided to move. During this decade, a total of 115,608 individuals with Honduran citizenship arrived in Spain (Eurostat 2021b). As illustrated in Figure 11.1 below, Italy represents the only other significant country of destination with a much lower figure of 2,159 arrivals in that same timespan. Belgium, the Netherlands and Romania were respectively the third, fourth and fifth country of destination, with 241 entrances for the former and 187 for the latter two. Considering these data, it is thus necessary to focus almost exclusively on Spain when examining Honduran immigration to Europe during the decade of the 2010s. Starting in 2013, there was a positive trend of arrivals

from Honduras, that grew linearly from 4,342 in that year to 29,080 in 2019. However, prior to that moment the figures were already considerably high, with 6,265 Hondurans reaching Spain in 2011, but started to decline from that year until a tendency shift in 2013. Regarding the gender division of immigration from Honduras, in Spain there was an overwhelming predominance of women, with a share moving between 66.40 per cent in 2019 – the only year when the percentage was less than 70 per cent – and 77.25 per cent in 2011.



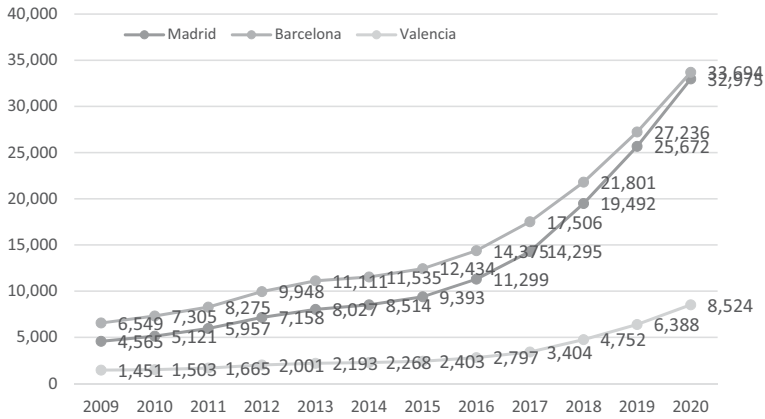
**Figure 11.1:** Immigration to top EU country destinations by individuals with Honduran citizenship, 2010–2019

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

Turning from Eurostat data to United Nations Population Division data, for the last decade Hondurans only appeared within the top-ten list of foreign nationalities living in Spain in 2020, when they assumed tenth place. In 2009, they comprised the thirty-third demographic group of residents from a third country, a position that progressively and interruptedly escalated until reaching the tenth position in 2020. Throughout those years, there was a much larger presence of other Latin American nationals in Spain, for instance Ecuadorians, Colombians or Bolivians (to mention those who appear within the first ten largest groups each year), but also Argentinians, Brazilians, Dominicans, Venezuelans or Peruvians. Until 2017, the increase in the presence of Hondurans residing in Spain was quite linear, before significantly augmenting in 2018 in relation to the

previous year. Afterwards, the tendency again grew in a linear fashion until 2020; the current population as of 2020 totals 99,418 Hondurans (UN Population Division 2020). In terms of the difference between male and female residents from Honduras, there was a regular difference similar to the one corresponding to immigration, with an annual share of women that moved between 67.47 per cent and 73.69 per cent over the 2010–20 time frame.

To better capture the Honduran population in Spain, the authors analysed data from the Spanish municipal registry (*censo municipal*) as well. This is the Spanish state's official statistics on all residents (including foreign) collected on a yearly basis and compiled at the national level. Figure 11.2 illustrates the populations of Honduran nationals in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, the three largest cities in Spain and also those that, among others, have a historical relevance in regard to migration movements. The pattern of rising Honduran residents roughly corresponds to the Eurostat data patterns of immigration of individuals with Honduran citizenship to Spain. From 2009 to 2020, there was a constant rise in the number of Honduran nationals living in the three metropolises, with the largest number being found in Barcelona. This fact contrasts with the usually higher presence of other Latin American nationals, for example Venezuelans or Colombians, in Madrid, Spain's capital. For the previous decade, Barcelona hosted 28.18 per cent of the absolute number of Hondurans residing in Spain, with the greatest share peaking at 29.74 per cent in 2017. Madrid counted an average of 23.64 per cent of Honduran nationals residing in Spain between 2009 and 2020, with the highest share in 2020 at 27.04 per cent. In fourth position overall and third among the three selected cities, Valencia hosted 6.10 per cent of Hondurans residing in Spain in that same timespan, also experiencing its highest share of Honduran residents in 2020, with 6.99 per cent.



**Figure 11.2:** Honduran nationals residing in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on INE (2021).

Within the three cities, the presence of Hondurans in the ranking of foreign populations also parallels residence overall in Spain. Starting with Barcelona, Hondurans only represented one of the top-ten nationalities from 2017 onwards, having risen from being the thirtieth demographic group in 2009. Hondurans reached the sixth ranking of foreign national communities in Spain in 2019, the only year that Hondurans topped the list of Latin American nationalities in Spain. Subsequently, in Madrid, Hondurans only appeared as the tenth and ninth position within the rank of foreign populations in 2019 and 2020, respectively, having previously constituted the twenty-eighth in 2009, to then rise from 2012 onwards. Honduran nationals were the fifth largest foreign national population in Madrid in 2020, behind Colombians, Venezuelans, Peruvians and Ecuadorians. Finally, Valencia demonstrates similar trends in Honduran national residents, with the slight difference that there was a decrease in 2010 in respect to their presence in 2009, when Hondurans descended from thirty-third place to thirty-fourth, to then become thirty-first in 2011 before climbing steadily to reach their highest location in 2020, as the eleventh foreign nationality, and never entering the list of the first ten communities. Nonetheless, in that year Hondurans comprised the third Latin American nationality in Valencia, behind only Colombians and Venezuelans.



## 11.5 Honduran asylum flows to the EU and Spain: 2010 to 2020

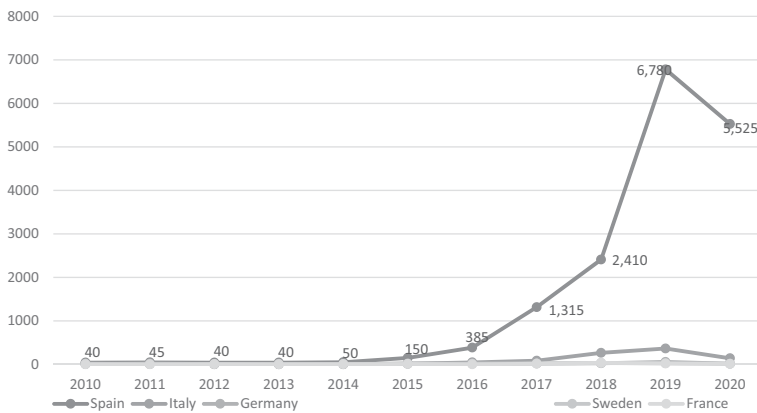
Regarding asylum applications, Spain was also clearly the preferred choice for Hondurans from 2010 to 2020, with a sum of 16,780 applications out of the total number of 18,360 administered in the whole European Union (Table 11.1). Considerably fewer applications were lodged in Italy, Germany, Sweden and France, with 930, 190, 155 and 100 asylum claims, respectively. As with the data on immigration, the difference between Spain and the other four countries was notable. Overall, asylum applications in Spain processed between 2010 and 2020 accounted for 91.39 per cent of all the claims made by Hondurans in the European Union. Until 2015, the share of applications moved between 47.06 per cent and 66.67 per cent, only surpassing these figures in 2013, with 72.73 per cent. Nevertheless, in 2016 Spain accumulated 81.05 per cent of applications, a number that rose to 92.88 per cent in 2019 and to an even more overwhelming 96.51 per cent in 2020. At all times between 2010 and 2020, Spain comprised the first country of preference for Hondurans to request asylum, with the other four countries shifting their positions regularly, but with Italy becoming the second most solicited asylum destination from 2016 onwards.

**Table 11.1:** Honduran asylum applications to Spain and the EU, 2010–2020

Year	Asylum applications in Spain	Total asylum applications in the EU	As % of total applications in the EU
2010	40	85	47.06
2011	45	80	56.25
2012	40	60	66.67
2013	40	55	72.73
2014	50	80	62.50
2015	150	225	66.67
2016	385	475	81.05
2017	1,315	1,490	88.26
2018	2,410	2,785	86.54
2019	6,780	7,300	92.88
2020	5,525	5,725	96.51
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,780</b>	<b>18,360</b>	<b>91.39</b>

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021b).

From 2010 to 2013, asylum applications from Hondurans in Spain ranged between 40 and 45 per year, but in 2014 they started to increase, slightly augmenting to 385 by 2016, after which there was a considerable jump to 1,315 in 2017. Subsequently, there was a significant rise in 2019 in relation to the numbers of 2018. In the year prior to the transnational spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the application of political measures restricting international and intranational movements of people worldwide, protection claims for Hondurans in Spain reached their highest point, with 6,780 applications, to then descend to 5,525 in 2020, figures that still surpass by far those of 2018 (see Figure 11.3).



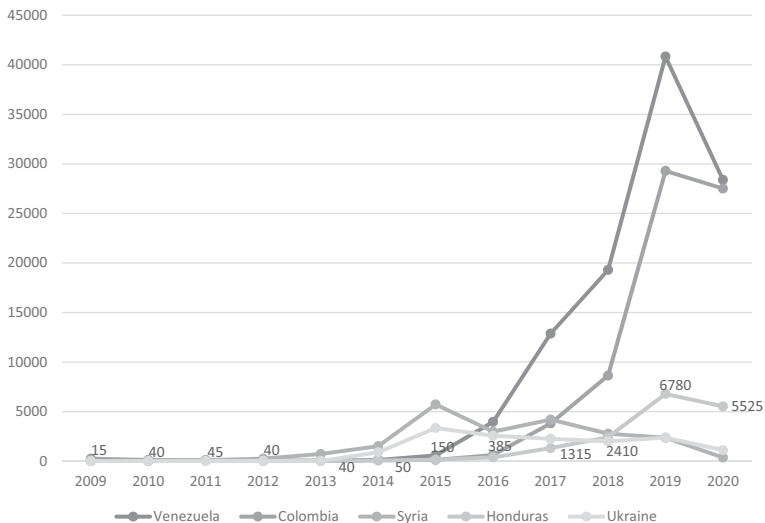
**Figure 11.3:** Honduran asylum applications to EU member states, 2010–2020

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021b).

In terms of the gender division of Honduran asylum applications to Spain and to the other top-five European Union countries, from 2010 to 2020 there was a generally balanced situation between women and men, except in those instances where the number of asylum applications was especially low (the result of which was that the percentages diverged significantly). Nonetheless, in the case of a minimum amount of claims, the general share remained close to a 50–50 division. In the case of Spain, the annual percentage of women moved between 44.44 and 60 per cent, reaching the latter higher amount in 2014. Concurrently, the data corresponding to applications processed by men moved between 40 per cent in 2014 to 55.56 per cent in both 2010 and 2011, never reaching 60 per cent of overall applications. Apart from the year 2014, there was only one other year

when there was a larger share of women than men, in 2015, with a breakdown of 46.67 per cent men and 53.33 per cent women. In sum, the years when the gender gap was least acute were 2010 and 2011, with a difference of 55.56 per cent men and 44.44 per cent women in both instances. In other member states, there were more marked differences between the share of Honduran women and men soliciting asylum, although this again often took place when asylum claims were few. In that sense, in several years there could be a 100–0 division, due to a country only processing five asylum applications by Hondurans overall (all of which could be either male or female, for example).

To conclude, Honduras was the country with the fourth largest number of asylum applications processed in Spain between 2009 and 2020, with 16,795 claims (Figure 11.4), after Venezuela, Colombia and Syria with 106,215, 70,680 and 21,020 applications respectively. Closely behind Honduras, Ukraine followed with 14,625 applications for international protection.



**Figure 11.4:** Asylum applications to Spain by nationality, 2009–2020

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021b).

As illustrated in Figure 11.4, Honduran international protection claims in Spain experienced a decrease in petitions in 2020, possibly as the result of the aforementioned restrictions applied across the globe to contain the Covid-19

pandemic. However, petitions still surpassed the number of applications from two years earlier. Finally, in 2009 Honduras comprised the forty-third country of origin in the list of asylum applications processed in Spain. In the following year, however, Honduran national applications reached the seventeenth position, to then descend slightly to twentieth in 2012. From that point onwards, the country continued to rise in the ranking, reaching the top-ten list in 2016 in seventh place. In 2018, Honduras became the fourth country on the list, and third in both 2019 and 2020, behind Venezuela and Colombia.

## 11.6 Understanding Spain as destination country

When analysing Europe as a Honduran destination, the history between Spain and Honduras can account for the prevalence of migration to Spain in comparison to the rest of the EU member states, in a similar manner to several other LAC states. An object of Spanish conquest since the sixteenth century, Honduras gained independence from Spain in 1821, and Spanish continues to remain the primary language today, alongside Roman Catholicism serving as the main religion. Spaniards made up some of the investors and migrants to Honduras in the early twentieth century, and a Spanish diaspora currently exists in Honduras (UN Population Division 2020). The two countries engage in a close diplomatic relationship, and an agreement that allows for double nationality was also signed in 1966 (Spain Government 1967). Spain and Honduras also signed an agreement of 'Social Cooperation' that allowed for reciprocal right to work in the two countries, which has since been followed by several agreements and frameworks, as a result of a 2019 visit by the Honduran president (Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1979; El Mundo 2021).

In this sense, Honduran migration may be regular at the start of the journey. However, given that Hondurans are permitted to enter Spain via a visitor's visa of up to three months, an irregular path includes arriving by air route to Spain and remaining after this visa expires (Gil Araujo and González-Fernández 2014: 8). Hondurans also request asylum in Spain, although the Spanish state generally does not recognise the situation in Honduras as meriting international protection, as further explained in the section on drivers. In recent decades, the literature notes the highly feminised patterns of migration from Honduras to Spain (Gil Araujo and Pedone 2014; Gil Araujo and González-Fernández 2014: 6).

## 11.7 Honduran migration and asylum flows to Spain in light of the socio-political context

In light of the previous section, important trends in Honduran migration to Spain include a significant increase in Eurostat-recorded immigration starting from 2018 (and consistent increase over the ten-year period when looking at municipal registration), asylum applications rising from 2016 onward until slightly dropping in 2020, feminised immigration, and the significant presence of Hondurans in Barcelona versus the more populated Spanish capital, Madrid. To begin, in exploring these trends, further explanation of the Honduran socio-political context, along with the closely related economic and security situation, can offer insight.

A key event was the 2009 coup, where the National Congress, Supreme Court, Public Ministry and Armed Forces forcefully removed elected President José Manuel Zelaya, given his socialist agenda and attempts to enact a new Constitution (Mendes Loureiro 2018). Following this, among other factors leading to further destabilisation, criminal groups usurped state power in several strategic locales, and could be even described as providing more semblance of public services than the state (Altamirano Rayo 2021). Following the coup, it is alleged that there has been pervasive repression and misuse of government funds, along with loss of working rights, real wages and civil guarantees (Portillo Villeda and Torres Zelaya 2014).

Subsequently in 2012, the National Congress stacked the country's Supreme Court to support the ruling conservative National Party, and in early 2013 it revised the Constitution to authorise a military police force (Jokela-Pansini 2020). In light of these political machinations, snowballing government corruption and neglect, and a tumultuous election year in 2013, it should be noted that the Eurostat figures on immigration begin their yearly increase starting in 2013. President Juan Orlando Hernandez took power in 2014 under this same party, which allegedly controls Honduran politics and squashes any dissent (*ibid.*).

In 2015, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court ruled in favour of unlimited presidential re-election. A series of protests led by self-titled *indignados* ('the indignant') called for accountability after it came to light that top government aides had embezzled hundreds of millions from the Honduran social security institution, and that the President had used some of this money in his 2013 presidential campaign (Beltrán 2021). This can perhaps go towards elucidating both the continued rise in immigration, as well as the significant increase in asylum applications to Spain beginning from 2016 onwards. Moreover, a contested election took place in 2017 wherein Orlando Hernandez was re-elected amid allegations of electoral fraud, with the General Organisation of American States calling for a re-election. This led to popular protest and

clashes with military and police forces, as citizens viewed these procedures as illegitimate (Beltrán 2021).

Indeed, Honduras' ruling political party has been repeatedly and consistently linked to corruption, including membership in or collusion with organised crime, both generally and with regard to certain instances. For example, over the time frame studied, many environmental activists were killed protesting corruption in government mining and dam contracts (Beltrán 2021). More specifically, President Orlando Hernandez's brother had been cited as a co-conspirator in drug trafficking and money laundering, and his brother faced these charges and was in fact convicted in 2019 in the United States (Oxford Analytica 2021). Demonstrations and strikes peaking in April of 2019 in protest of the President's alleged corruption, as well as in response to proposed health and education regulations, resulted in forceful crackdowns between March and July of 2019 (HRW 2020). This possibly sheds light on the 2019 spike in asylum applications to Spain (as well as a less significant but noticeable increase in those to Italy).

### **11.8 Increasing insecurity, lack of social protections and systemic gendered violence**

In combination with the political corruption and weak state is the continued erosion of the public sector, brought about in part by the neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s. Among other sectors, the healthcare system is extremely lacking, and the education system similarly poor (Portillo Villeda and Torres Zelaya 2014). As such, various protests form part of a wider trend of demand for democratic participation and representation in recent years from all sectors of society, including indigenous, Black and women's groups (Loperena 2016; Obinna 2021). In tandem with the political turmoil, drug harvesting and trafficking results in land transfers or 'grabs' that are in turn shared with corporate interests or corrupt state actors, all of which significantly affects the dispossession of these underprivileged, indigenous or Afro-descendent populations (McSweeney et al. 2018). Essentially, both legally and physically, these groups are coerced to cede resources. Furthermore, mining industry exploitation in recent decades has affected these groups, and the greater Honduran population, in similar ways (Bebbington et al. 2019).

In addition, Honduras, like its neighbouring Central American countries, is classified as one of the most violent countries in the world, with the most recent data from 2016 indicating a murder rate of 59 out of every 100,000 people (Obinna 2021). Some data suggest that violence decreased after 2011, thus perhaps serving as a factor in the slight decrease in Eurostat immigration numbers

from 2011 (Landa-Blanco et al. 2020). However, while over the ten-year period under study the homicide rate may have been declining, Honduras still ranks highly for overall violence and crime, and includes some of the world's most violent cities (Bermeo and Leblang 2021). This can go towards partially explaining the continual rise in immigration to and municipal registration in Spain, as such violence perhaps precludes internal (rather than international) migration due to additional factors like climate or environmental shocks.

The way violence affects certain groups in Honduras is important to examine. Gendered violence in Honduras, observed frequently by both human rights organisations and scientific studies, provides further understanding of feminised migration beyond the more typical explanation of Spanish demand for domestic care work (Hierro 2016). In particular, this issue could pertain to the greater percentage of women asylum applications over the ten-year period. Apart from the Autonomous University of Honduras's Observatory on Violence reporting 224 femicides in 2020, literature and advocacy groups note that gender-based violence is normalised and structurally endemic, with increasing gang violence and militarisation (especially during 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic) (Amnesty International 2021; Jokela-Pansini 2020; Menjivar and Walsh 2017). Enforced disappearances during and after the 2009 coup are accompanied by overall rape, kidnapping and systemic domestic violence during the period under study (Obinna 2021).

These considerations as to political, social, economic and security factors help to explain the consistently increasing trend in municipal registrations in the selected most populated cities in Spain over the ten-year period. In referencing this data, it bears mentioning that the notable Honduran presence in Barcelona versus Madrid and Valencia could be explained by the ties established by Catalan businessmen in the nineteenth century, as part of the Spanish immigration to Honduras described earlier; Catalanian immigrants in Honduras still exist to this day (Delgado Ribas 1982). This diaspora can also be compared to the transnational Palestinian community present in Central America; Palestinians first arrived in Honduras in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after over a century of immigration of merchants and entrepreneurs the community has established itself as an economic and political elite (Gutiérrez Rivera 2014). However, it is also likely that the trend relates to the more inclusive immigration and integration policies in the Catalanian region (Casademont Falguera and Serra Serra 2021).

Finally, two further groups need mention here. While the data examined do not speak to LGBTQI+ individuals, and although they are not officially recognised in Honduran statistics, it is important to emphasise that these individuals have

been reported by various rights organisations as particularly subject to abuse and violence (Amnesty International 2021; Portillo Villeda 2020). The second group is Honduran children. The migration of minors, especially along the corridor to the United States, is characterised by various interventions, including efforts by UNICEF and temporary measures by the Honduran governance; for example, a programme was enacted in response to the Zika virus of 2011 (Hernández Rodríguez 2020). However, again, continued migration to Europe may reflect how there is no prolonged strategy to assist Honduran children suffering from endemic structural problems in the country (*ibid.*).

### **11.9 The United States as a destination country**

Given this general outline of the situation in Honduras itself, the most significant consideration in terms of transit influences is the US President Donald Trump's administration from 2017 until 2021, as well as his declarations as President Elect in 2016. Trump's immigration positions and policies markedly denounced or placed stricter control on Central American caravans arriving through Mexico, and as early as 2016 Honduran migrants were recorded as having turned to Spain as an alternative option to the US (Ojea 2018). Again, as migration to the US is estimated to make up almost 80 per cent of total Honduran immigration, the highly visible Trump administration rhetoric (and later actions) regarding Central American and Mexican immigration could play into the significant number of asylum applications to Spain in 2017, 2018 and 2019 (Eurostat 2021a).

As touched on earlier, the US can engage in a lack of immigrant regularisation or enforcing regular migration and asylum programmes. Both the US and Mexico engage in restrictive migration policies with preventive or punitive measures, and sometimes discretionary practices. While the land route through Central America and Mexico to the US is one of the most dangerous for irregular migration, it is chosen more frequently than paths to Europe by Honduran and Central American migrants. The land route is more accessible for those with less resources: lack of visas and passports, limited financial resources and lack of knowledge of regular migratory processes, among other factors. Exclusion from regular migratory programmes has resulted in irregular channels, where strategies utilised include reliance on smuggling and trafficking networks that can allow for delayed or non-monetary payment, information sharing via word of mouth and family ties in the destination country.



### 11.10 Difficulties in regular migration pathways and receiving international protection in Spain

In turning to the destination context and considering factors that may have impacted Hondurans choosing Europe, and primarily Spain, it should be noted that these asylum measures or lack thereof may affect both number of asylum applications and irregular migration. Despite the structural and democratic decay of the Honduran state, high political and economic instability and systemic violence of organised crime, and compounded ramifications of climate shocks, it is difficult for Hondurans to meet the requirements for international protection in Spain and Europe. For example, while Honduran nationals may be clearly targeted by organised crime and certain to risk their lives if they stay, the Spanish state does not normally classify this as a type of violence based on the grounds of race, religious affiliation, nationality, belonging to a specific social group or holding a particular political opinion, which would allow them refugee status under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (CEAR 2018).

For instance, in 2019, out of the 6,780 asylum applications to Spain that year, only 226 Hondurans received favourable resolutions (Eurostat 2021a). At the same time, the Spanish National Court did rule in November of 2017 (in its sentence from Audiencia Nacional 2017) that Honduran victims of the *maras*, or international organised crime groups, should be granted international protection in that the Honduran state security forces were unwilling or unable to protect their citizens, and given how such groups are intricately implicated in all levels of the Honduran societal fabric and political system. This could also contribute to the significant increase in asylum applications beginning from the year 2017.

In concluding this overview of drivers, we should reemphasise the qualification that while the data reflect a slight decrease from 2011 to 2013 in immigration, the municipal registrations in Spain consistently rise. Again, this is significant as even those Honduran nationals residing in Spain for two consecutive years can be eligible to apply for Spanish citizenship and may no longer factor into these rising numbers. And of course, the lack of data available on irregular migration means the volume and characteristics of migration may not be completely accurate, and are no doubt underestimated. Moreover, despite the stark evidence of the relatively consistent levels of poverty as well as economic and political uncertainty, Honduran migration decisions must be understood beyond the structural, to also reflect individual-level drivers.

### 11.11 Ultimately, continued non-linear trajectories of asylum and migration flows

To conclude, considerations on Honduran migration are complex, and can be characterised as comprising agricultural workers, internal and international migrants, and asylum seekers, in the context of systemic poverty, inequality, land concentration or dispossession (from seizing land for drug trafficking, mining or extractive industries), climate vulnerability, varied forms of violence, lack of social protections in combination with neoliberal policies and US presence or intervention and its effects. Migration is notably non-linear in that there is often forcible displacement within Honduras before moving on to a third country. The combination of factors outlined that often prevent regular migration pathways result in varied strategies. Significant Honduran emigration at the turn of the century and its continued volume now translates into a transgenerational migratory project as well, already taking place in Honduran migration to the United States, but also becoming distinctive in Europe.

In the origin context, normalised violence drivers, humanitarian crises, lack of social protection and systemic gendered violence are consistently met with state inaction or lack of protection. It remains to be seen whether EU member states and Spain in particular will take into account the increasing vulnerability and lack of recourse of those Honduran individuals seeking international protection. Moreover, while it was noted that some bilateral frameworks between Honduras and Spain may offer pathways to regular migration, they remain few, while other opportunities like informal demand for feminised labour continue. Given the trends observed here, transgenerational migratory projects and increased Honduran national residence in Spain promise to continue, regardless of precarity and support in the form of regularised pathways and recognition of asylum claims.

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## Chapter 12 The continued Venezuelan exodus

**Abstract:** Venezuela is distinctively marked by its current humanitarian crisis, as political, economic and social complications have resulted in the state's deteriorating democratic institutions and crippled economic and productive capacities, leading to six million displaced. Historically receiving immigration from Europe and Spain, Venezuela transitioned to a country of emigration in the 1980s in light of declining oil prices and financial crisis. The rise of the Chávez government in 1999 triggered further outmigration. At this point, significant Venezuelan migration to Europe and Spain began, largely regular and facilitated by economic, professional and cultural capital, until another 2013 oil crisis shifted this profile. Migration demographics became increasingly heterogeneous in 2015 and 2016 under the contested Maduro government and with snowballing humanitarian crisis. Most Venezuelan migration is regional, with Colombia and Brazil serving as choices due to geographical proximity as well as cross-border ties, along with Peru, Ecuador and Chile. However, in the case of emigration to Europe, family reunification or asylum claims can be a means to regular migration, and Spain has offered some targeted humanitarian protection regimes. At the same time, the persisting humanitarian crisis has invited more restrictive policies in neighbouring countries, and often leads to irregular migration both within the Latin American region and further abroad.

**Keywords:** humanitarian crisis | political instability | Europe historical ties | humanitarian protection corridors | non-linear trajectories

Migration to, within and from Venezuela, a federal presidential republic with a population of almost 28.5 million as of 2020 (UN Population Division 2020), is primarily understood in light of an ongoing humanitarian crisis and political repression, precipitated by overall predisposing factors including deteriorating economic, political and security conditions. Beginning with the 1998 election of President Hugo Chávez, academic, political and human rights spheres have noted massive emigration trends, with even further exacerbation in the ongoing exodus identified as starting in 2015 and 2016, under the contested government of President Nicolás Maduro (Edson Louidor 2018). Venezuela's current political, economic, and social crisis has garnered international attention, and the country is cited as one of the global leaders in terms of refugees and displaced (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020).

For the most part, in these most recent migratory movements, Venezuelans move to neighbouring countries or the general Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, with the largest concentration specifically residing in Colombia, followed by the countries of Ecuador, Peru and Chile, and key extra-regional destinations include the United States and Spain (Chaves-González and Echeverría-Estrada 2020). The Platform for Interregional Coordination of Migrants and Refugees estimates that currently there are 5.9 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees globally (R4V 2021), with 4.8 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela remaining in Latin America and the Caribbean. Colombia hosts 1.7 million, Peru 1.3 million, Ecuador 482,900, Chile 448,100 and Brazil 261,400. At the international level, countries that experience significant Venezuelan migration include the United States with 465,200 nationals, Spain with 415,000 and Italy with 59,400. Experts cite the state's political and economic failure, alongside added Covid-19 economic hardship including food, medicine and medical supply shortages, when claiming that the current Venezuelan emigration represents an unprecedented migration crisis in the region, particularly given the relatively short period of time in which it has taken place, and the significant inter- and intra-regional displacements.

Within this framework, this chapter explores, firstly, the history of the immigration and emigration phenomenon in the country, focusing on the economic, political and social context. Secondly, it provides an overview of the main trends in migration and asylum flows to the European Union in the last ten years, with a special emphasis on the situation regarding beneficiaries of international protection. Finally, the chapter presents an outline of the overall origin context experienced by Venezuelan migrants informing their decisions to leave, before offering brief concluding thoughts.

## **12.1 Historical context of Venezuela's immigration and emigration**

Throughout the twentieth century, Venezuela has served as a significant country of immigration from Europe, primarily for Spanish migrants, as well as receiving immigration from neighbouring countries in the region. Post-war immigration from Europe to Venezuela was prevalent, not only due to Spanish colonial ties, but also given a refugee programme that encouraged migrants from other Southern European countries, including Portugal and Italy (Huhn 2020). In this framework, the Venezuelan government sent three post-1945 missions to France, Italy and Germany, in order to recruit specific migrant profiles, including agricultural and domestic workers (*ibid.*). Furthermore, oil reserves discovered in the

1920s led to Venezuela's economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with accompanying immigration continuing from Europe. Exceptionally high economic growth rates due to the international price of oil are cited as driving this immigration, which also drew from the greater LAC region (Sassen-Koob 1979).

However, a decline in oil prices in the 1980s and ensuing financial crisis after Black Friday, among other factors, caused economic and political instability in the country. This occurred in parallel with wider social, political and economic contextual crises in LAC. At this point, Venezuela began transforming into a country of emigration, with Spain as the most relevant European receiving country. It is argued that initial Venezuelan emigration in the 1990s was motivated by a desire to avoid the loss of economic, political and social status. Chávez's socialist government established from 1999 onwards coincided with further emigration, and was characterised by a leftist ideology, nationalisation and a resistance to United States hegemony until 2013. While the literature and data reflect a majority of women as compared to men among Venezuelan migrants to Europe, it is notable that these patterns were and continue to be comparatively less feminised than those drawing from other countries in the LAC region (Dekocker 2018).

Emigration has been rising over the past two decades. In particular, since 2016, it has been identified as both asylum-related, given the claims relating to political upheaval, as well as economically motivated, with many leaving in search of basic rights (access to health, food, work) given the state's collapse. Initially, a great number of migrants were considered highly educated and skilled, drawing from the upper and middle class, with their absence further contributing to the country's economic troubles (Garcia Zea 2020). However, the snowballing humanitarian crisis has been contributing to a shift in this profile (García Arias and Restrepo Pineda 2019). Whether Venezuelans are afforded refugee status largely often depends on the migration policies and practices of each receiving country.

As mentioned, the majority of Venezuelans emigrate to neighbouring countries, with Colombia and Brazil serving as choices due to geographical proximity as well as cross-border ties, and Peru, Ecuador and Chile serving as further regional destinations (UN Population Division 2020). Peru, in particular, was considered accommodating in its refugee policies at the start of the Venezuelan crisis, and continues to be perceived as offering the best employment opportunities in the region (Morales and Pierola 2020; Doocy et al. 2019). It is accessible by foot through transit via Colombia, as is Ecuador, which serves as both a transit and destination country for Venezuelan migrants. In any case, the Peruvian government recently announced it would reopen a dialogue between Peru and

Venezuela, possibly signalling border closure, tightening immigration policies or an increase in deportations.

While the surrounding region (i.e., LAC states) has a history of openness to humanitarian protection and migration, most countries in the region are unequipped to meet Venezuela's asylum needs (Staedicke 2018). Although when the crisis began these countries offered a more or less 'open door' approach to Venezuelan migrants, and several countries established reception programmes, policies are becoming more restrictive (Wallace and Mortley 2021). According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of December 2020, 851,119 Venezuelans are subject to pending asylum applications, and only 171,127 refugees have received recognition (UNHCR 2021b). Up until 2021, the majority of Venezuelan refugees have been recognised in Spain (75,640), Brazil (46,675), the United States (17,292), Mexico (13,014) and Canada (3,524) (UNHCR 2022). Regional states such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile account for about 58 per cent of applications, but the process of status recognition is slow (R4V 2021). Lack of resources and infrastructure in humanitarian response is punctuated by bureaucratic roadblocks and disjointed regional coordination on migration governance, in addition to insufficient response from the Venezuelan government itself (Camilleri and Hampson 2018).

In light of involuntary migration patterns, those Venezuelans who cross into bordering LAC states can be subjected to human and sex trafficking (John 2019). Indeed, individuals participating in the most recent migration from Venezuela often do not have a valid passport, and thus could not initiate visa processes even if these were less restrictive (*ibid.*). At the same time, the current humanitarian crisis and new visa restrictions often lead to irregular migration both within the LAC region and further abroad.

Apart from LAC, the United States is historically and increasingly a main destination as well. While studies estimate that the Venezuelan population in the United States is not fully accounted for, as of 2018 they were the fifth largest immigrant group from South America, with a median age of 38 and higher levels of education as compared with foreign and US-born adults (García Arias and Restrepo Pineda 2019; Gallardo and Batalova 2020).

Focusing on Europe, and particularly Spain, Venezuelan migration substantially began during the period from Chávez taking power in 1998 until roughly 2013; the Venezuelan migrant profile largely reflected regular status. Given that Venezuelan migrants often could claim Spanish descentance thanks to colonial ties or due to post-World War II Spanish emigration to Venezuela, those with Spanish parents or grandparents benefitted from an allowance for dual nationality (Spanish and EU); this policy lasted until 2013. This, along with the

economic, professional and cultural capital, facilitated regular migration and integration. Moreover, Venezuelans migrating to Spain also consisted of young professionals seeking to complete graduate degrees and enter the labour market, usually individually, with an increase in student visa applications and renewals from 2012 to 2015 (Dekocker 2018).

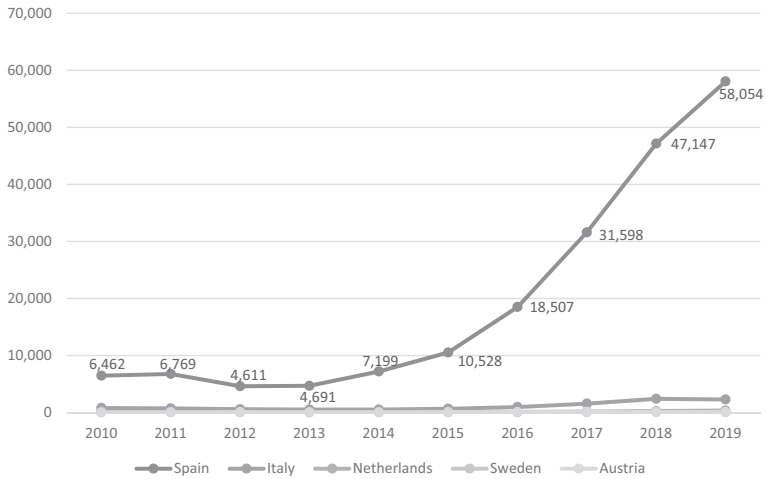
Indeed, it should be emphasised that the Venezuela-to-Europe migration profile is distinct from the profile migrating to the LAC region. On the one hand, second- or third-generation migrants and binational families have been able to nationalise in European countries like Spain, Portugal and Italy. On the other hand, there is an important number of Venezuelan migrants who arrive in the EU in the framework of a family reunification process. Finally, the costs and regulations involved in transatlantic journeys from Venezuela have meant that migrants with valid passports and with mid-high to high socioeconomic and educational profiles tend to enter as tourists, and then request international protection from an EU member state once they are settled.

However, the profile of regular migration to Europe has slightly altered, particularly in parallel with another decline in oil prices between 2013 and 2016 that contributed to a Venezuelan economic crisis operating in tandem with political instability and corruption (Van Praag 2019). For the ten years under study here (2009–20), Eurostat data on asylum applications in conjunction with Spanish municipal registration help to flesh out recent trends in Venezuelan migration to Europe. These data sources in particular are chosen because the majority of Venezuelan migration to Europe is to and through Spain, via air route to the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid, where Venezuelans arrive after often having departed from a transit country, such as Colombia.

## **12.2 Recent trends in EU-bound migration from Venezuela: 2010–2019**

In examining trends at the EU level over the course of the years 2010 to 2019, Eurostat data on Venezuelan migration indicate that this population most frequently chose Spain as a destination country (Figure 12.1). While migration numbers dip in the years 2012 and 2013, they rise from 2014 forward and significantly increase beginning in 2017. In particular, in the year 2017, 31,598 Venezuelans migrated to Spain, followed by 47,147 in 2018 and 58,054 in 2019; the latter figure reflects nine times the amount of migrants as compared to 2010. Venezuelan migration clearly becomes a more significant portion of overall immigration when it peaks in 2019, as Venezuelan migration to Spain makes up 4 per cent of all immigration from the Community of Latin American and

Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2010, 9 per cent in 2015 and 52 per cent in 2019. In the years 2010 to 2019, for the Spanish case, the average male versus female gender makeup of recorded migration is 42.81 per cent versus 57.18 per cent. This general division remains similar to the average over the years, without any significant variation.



**Figure 12.1:** Immigration to top EU country destinations by individuals with Venezuelan citizenship, 2010–2019

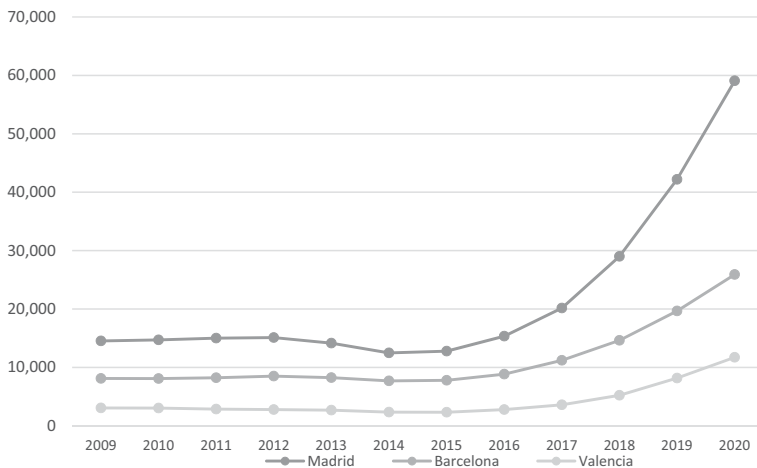
Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021b).

However, Spain is not the only destination country. Other EU members received Venezuelan migration over the ten-year period, notably Italy, followed far behind by the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria. While not receiving nearly as many Venezuelan nationals as Spain, Italy receives significantly more Venezuelans as compared with the other three countries. It also reflects the same dip in numbers in 2012 and 2013, as well as a substantial increase beginning from 2017 onwards. The percentage of women versus men also remains consistent in Italy over this period, with an average of 37.04 per cent males and 62.96 per cent females over the selected period. The greatest discrepancy occurs in 2021, with a difference of 32.70 per cent males versus 67.29 per cent females.

To illustrate the significance of the Venezuelan population in Spain, the authors analysed data from the Spanish municipal registry (*censo municipal*). This census is collected annually and compiled at the national level, and

represents official state statistics on all residents, including foreign nationals. In general terms, the Spanish census data on Venezuelan nationals residing in Spain roughly corresponds to the Eurostat data patterns for immigration of individuals with Venezuelan citizenship to Spain. The breakdown ranges between a 57.08 per cent and a 58.97 per cent majority of Venezuelan women, depending on the year in the ten-year period. At the same time, the Spanish census data record slightly higher numbers in terms of Venezuelans present in Spain. This is likely because this dataset reflects a yearly count of registered residents in a given city, regardless of legal status. As an example of what is taking place in the Spanish case, Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia were selected for analysis based on their historical migrant populations and size as the largest three municipalities in Spain. Displayed in Figure 12.2 are Venezuelans registered in the communities of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia from 2009 to 2020.

As demonstrated in Figure 12.2, while the population remains fairly steady until 2012, there is a slight decrease in the numbers between 2012 and 2014. This reflects a similar trend captured in Eurostat data on immigration. Apart from this one dip over the course of the three-year period, the population steadily increases. Most notably, however, the figure shows how Venezuelan registrations begin to increase starting from 2015 onwards. By 2020, the population has quadrupled in Madrid and tripled in Barcelona.

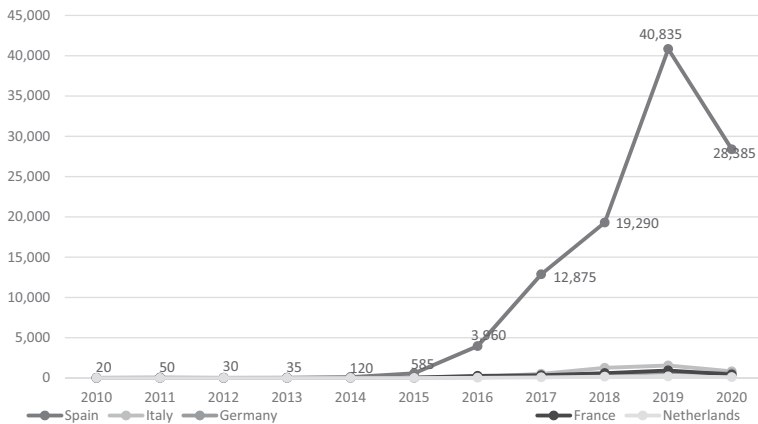


**Figure 12.2:** Venezuelan nationals residing in Spanish cities, 2009–2020

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on INE (2021).

Within these three cities, Venezuelans do not rank highly in the total of resident nationalities until the year 2018. In Madrid, for example, they rank between sixteenth and eighteenth in the number of foreign residents from 2009 to 2015, then rise steadily until climbing to sixth place in 2018, and remaining the fifth greatest nationality (second greatest of the CELAC countries, after Colombia) in 2019 and 2020. In Barcelona, they remain outside of the top twenty foreign national residents until 2018, where they rank fourteenth, followed by twelfth in 2019 and finally placing in the top ten behind Colombia and Honduras in 2020. They similarly remain a less significant proportion out of the overall foreign population residing in Valencia over the ten-year period, albeit finally reaching the top ten in 2019 and 2020, with Colombia as the only other CELAC country ranking above them over these years. Again, these resident registration numbers are useful in validating Eurostat information on immigration statistics.

In turning back to Eurostat data for asylum data, first-time asylum applications are again illustrative of Spain as a primary destination. In an examination of first-time asylum applications, the bulk are submitted to Spain, followed by Italy, France and Germany, with requests to Spain totalling 106,215 over the ten-year period (Figure 12.3).



**Figure 12.3:** Asylum applications from Venezuela to the EU, 2010–2020

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

In observing asylum trends, there is a notable application spike at the beginning of 2016, which then rises going forward. In terms of the height of requests



over the ten-year period, the year 2019 marks the greatest number of asylum applications from Venezuelans to Europe, again to Spain, Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands. These drop slightly in 2020. As can be viewed below (Table 12.1), Venezuelan asylum requests to Spain make up the majority of all Venezuelan asylum requests to the EU from 2015 onward, making up 92 per cent of Venezuelan applications to the EU in 2020. In 2020, Venezuelan applications make up 6.5 per cent of asylum requests from all nationalities to the EU.

**Table 12.1:** Venezuelan asylum applications to Spain and the EU, 2010–2020

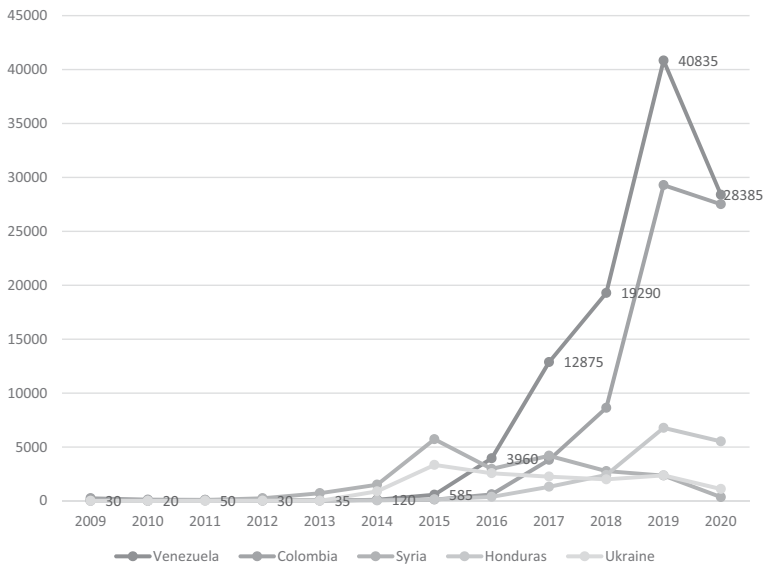
Year	Asylum applications to Spain	Total asylum applications to the EU	As % of total applications to the EU
2010	20	70	28.57
2011	50	90	55.56
2012	30	75	40.00
2013	35	95	36.84
2014	120	285	42.11
2015	585	780	75.00
2016	3,960	4,670	84.80
2017	12,875	14,480	88.92
2018	19,290	22,440	85.96
2019	40,835	45,405	89.94
2020	28,385	30,805	92.14
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,185</b>	<b>119,195</b>	<b>89.09</b>

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

However, as briefly noted in the description of the Atlantic route, given the current situation and mass exodus from Venezuela, these applications are likely unrepresentative of a greater number of nationals that could qualify for international protection, including under human rights treaties beyond the 1951 Convention, and anti-trafficking protocols. As currently Venezuelans are exempted from a visa when travelling to Spain for a short stay (after having arrived in Spain via air through the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid), they may remain in the country and thus eventually take on irregular status.

As Figure 12.4 shows, while applications remained fairly low from 2010–15 in Spain, they begin to rise in 2015 and start to increase from 2016–19. As can be noted here, beginning in 2016, asylum applications from Venezuela surpassed all other nationalities, whereas until then they had remained equal to or less

than those from Colombia and Syria. The 2019 peak in asylum applications from Venezuela is significant, with 2020 reflecting a drop in applications, but still totalling the second greatest number in any year in the period. While asylum applications to Spain remain balanced between male and female on average over the period, 2011 is notable in that it is the year with the greatest percentage of male applicants (60 per cent), and while the gender breakdown of applications remains balanced or with a male majority from 2011–16, from 2017 onwards female applications make up a slight majority.



**Figure 12.4:** Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

The asylum applications from other countries apart from Venezuela demonstrate that some of these asylum trends may be specific to Venezuelan asylum-seekers and are not reflective of asylum demand overall. For example, in 2018, as applications continue to increase dramatically in the context of the period under study, they also increase from other LAC countries like Colombia and Honduras, but Syrian and Ukrainian applications slightly decrease in the same year (Figure 12.4).

### 12.3 The Venezuela context in understanding the rise in asylum applications

After presenting specific migration trends in the previous section, we next focus on a general outline of the overall origin context that Venezuelans have experienced in the past years 2009–20, which largely relates to alleged political instability and accompanying economic and humanitarian crises. A starting point lies with the Chávez government, as outlined in the earlier migration and asylum profile, which already oversaw a population facing serious hardship. After former President Chávez died of cancer, his successor Nicolás Maduro took office in March of 2013 in a narrow and contested election. Since then, political unrest as well as claims of corruption, political oppression and Maduro's illegitimacy have persisted.

While immigration to Europe slows and even slightly decreases between 2012 and 2014, the rise again in 2014 forward could be attributed to yet another fall in oil prices, further economic crisis and stringent repression of significant civil protests that took place in 2014, as the people voiced their concern over the country's situation (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018). Continued political events undoubtedly shaped migratory movements. In particular, in December of 2015, the opposition party won control of the legislature, in the first parliamentary election to take place since Chávez's death, and the first time that the ruling party lost since 1999. However, Venezuela's Supreme Court, stacked with Maduro government loyalists, stripped the legislature of its powers and declared the opposition win fraudulent, denying efforts throughout 2016 to hold a referendum to recall Maduro's government. In July 2017, the Supreme Court ordered the takeover of three leading opposition parties, appointing Maduro government supporters to the National Electoral Council. In the same year, Maduro government supporters won two-thirds of the National Assembly seats, in an election boycotted by the majority of opposition and all institutions, except for the legislative branch. After another contested re-election of Maduro in May 2018, Juan Guaidó, National Assembly president, declared himself interim President of Venezuela in January 2019, bringing the country to a political impasse (Singer 2020). Once again, in July of 2020, ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for December, the Supreme Court ordered the 'restructuring' of three leading political opposition parties (those opposing Maduro) (Moleiro 2020). Several neighbouring regional and wider international governments declared the elections were neither free nor fair. International support is divided, and Maduro continues to attend CELAC summits, including the Sixth CELAC Summit of the Heads of State and Government in September 2021 in Mexico.

In looking at the dramatic increase in immigration from 2017 forward, as well as the asylum spike from 2016 on, these political events help to contextualise the political instability faced by Venezuelans. In addition to the 2014 protests, denial of the 2016 presidential recall referendum, and the convocation of the National Assembly in 2017, unrest fomented to lead to further protests in 2017 that resulted in 165 deaths (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018). As protests continue, it is worth noting how a recent 2021 UNHCR report indicates that security operations and suppression of protests particularly resulted in the deaths of young men and boys from marginalised neighbourhoods (UNHCR 2021a).

Related to political instability is the overall insecurity generated by compounded crises, and what is considered the political and economic failure of the Venezuelan state. As of 2020, the Venezuelan Observatory for Violence estimated that Venezuela remained the most violent country in the region and one of the most violent in the world, with 11,891 violent deaths at a rate of 45.6 for every 100,000 inhabitants (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia 2020). Criminal groups and drug traffickers also destabilise any state security authority and contribute to the general insecurity as well as the vulnerability of the overall Venezuelan population (Edson Louidor 2018). There is argued to be an increasing complicity between these criminal groups and the National Guard, as well (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018).

In fact, the human rights situation in terms of political oppression may serve as a driver for the more privileged of Venezuela's population, including those who are able to migrate to Europe. There have been reports of ongoing political oppression, confirmed by human rights watchdogs (HRW 2021). The number of political prisoners has allegedly skyrocketed, with many jailed without access to due process (Biderbost and Nuñez 2019). Furthermore, media censorship also takes place alongside the widespread corruption (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018).

As of 2019, Venezuela was the OPEC member with the largest proven crude oil reserves (OPEC 2020). However, its economy has been described as in collapse. Since the 2014 oil crisis, the government has defaulted on foreign debt, the productive sector has been crippled by exchange and price control policies, the oil industry is collapsing and hyperinflation has eliminated Venezuelans' purchasing power (García Durán and Cuevas 2018). An illustrative example of the dire situation includes how in 2017, the average Venezuelan lost 10 kg due to lack of food (*ibid.*). According to the National Survey on Living Conditions in 2021, 94.5 per cent of Venezuelans are in a situation of poverty, and of these 76.6 per cent are in extreme poverty (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello 2021). The data also indicate that only 5.8 per cent are not experiencing food insecurity (*ibid.*). Minimum wage increase decrees by the government also affected the economic

situation, with the last increase of 300 per cent made official in January of 2019 (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020: 168).

In relation to the pandemic, most recently, the economic overview produced by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in 2020 ranked the drop in Venezuela's GDP as the greatest in the region, three times greater than the next countries on the list including Peru, Panama and Argentina (ECLAC 2020). In addition to the economic duress, even before the Covid-19 pandemic the health system could be described as collapsed, with an increase in maternal and child mortality, diphtheria and malaria outbreaks, those with chronic diseases unable to access treatment, deterioration in health infrastructure and shortage of medicine, medical supplies and surgical equipment, as well as a large number of medical personnel having migrated in search of improved conditions (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020: 168).

Within this context, the volume of asylum applications in 2019 is perhaps due to the deepening crisis, and the subsequent drop in 2020 likely due to the Covid-19-induced national border closures in Spain as well as restrictions on entry affecting the entire EU, and thus shutdown of the principal point of entry for the Atlantic air route. In fact, the 2020 numbers remain high in light of the period of time the Spanish and EU borders remained closed in 2020.

Apart from the situation at home, currently policies within the region and among other LAC states might also influence Venezuelans' decisions to ultimately choose Europe. Again, it is argued that interregional agreements including Mercosur (the Southern Common Market) boast some of the most human-rights-compatible migration policies globally, and many countries in the region interpret the definition of refugee broadly, comparatively speaking (Lavenex 2019). Despite the humanitarian openness of its neighbours, however, in practice applications for international protection are not largely or consistently granted, with the exception of Mexico (Gandini et al. 2020). Moreover, it should be noted that while some countries like Argentina and Uruguay grant easier access to residency due to the Mercosur agreement, other states listed earlier (Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and Peru) serve as main destination countries in the region (*ibid.*). For this reason, both the intraregional migration dynamics and any relation to migration to Europe must be considered in light of factors including family ties, lack of resources, socio-economic conditions and circumstances of extreme vulnerability as well.

Moreover, the extended nature of the Venezuelan crisis is a challenge. For example, neighbouring Ecuador expanded its policy temporarily between 2009 and 2010 to absorb Colombian asylum-seekers in a regularisation of 30,000 Colombian nationals. However, these policies have not been extended to the

ongoing applications of Venezuelans (Gandini et al. 2020). Another example includes how in 2019, 10,479 Venezuelans sought asylum in bordering Colombia, with only 145 of these accepted as of 2020 (Ruiz del Río and Hoyos Bula 2020). At this same time, a regularisation process has been announced in September of 2021 that could regularise 450,000 Venezuelans (UNHCR 2021a).

As mentioned, Colombia is the main destination country and it also serves as a key transit country, as it shares a difficult-to-control border of approximately 2,219 kilometres with Venezuela, receiving around 30 per cent of Venezuelan migration, as well as serving as a transit country for 90 per cent of the Venezuelan population that migrate to another country (Ramos et al. 2019). This is despite ruptures in diplomatic relations and periodic border closures between the two countries, which often influence the choice of irregular passages across the border (*ibid.*). Moreover, Venezuelans may repeatedly cross the border in seeking access to food or medical supplies. The border areas can be insecure, and spaces where criminal organisations operate and control irregular routes, in the absence of institutional stability, with populations made invisible and revictimised at these borders (*ibid.*). Upon leaving Colombia, another precarious route that Venezuelans (along with other nationalities) can embark on towards the United States and Canada goes through the Darien jungle area of Panama, where Colombian National Police and Interpol estimate the migrant trafficking business earns one million US dollars weekly (El Espectador 2021).

As such, a demographic profile at the border is useful in observing self-described drivers for Venezuelans. A study conducted in 2018 surveying almost 15,000 Venezuelans arriving in Colombia explains that motivations to emigrate include insecurity, finding a better livelihood or employment and supporting their family via remittances; it argues that the profile of those emigrating represents a significant loss of economically active populations in Venezuela (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020: 176). At the same time, as referenced earlier, it should be emphasised that the uptick in migration from Venezuela particularly beginning in 2016 has meant a diversification of the migratory profiles. There are families with children, unaccompanied minors and elderly people with chronic diseases, among other vulnerable populations, all forming part of the mass migration (Ramos et al. 2019).

## **12.4 European (Spanish) migration policies and a shift in migration profiles**

Given these considerations to contextualise the latest Venezuelan emigration from the perspective of origin, including the rise in asylum applications

beginning in 2015 and increasing from 2016 onwards, policies in Europe and specifically Spain help to illustrate recent patterns as well. Firstly, again, Spain allows for regularisation based on descentance, which may serve as a draw, and Portugal and Italy have similar policies (Dekocker 2018). However, with the deepening crisis in Venezuela, young migrants who did not meet the requirements for double nationality also began to arrive (*ibid.*). From 2013 onwards, it became more difficult to arrive to Spain with a student visa, and as previously noted, the 2016 surge in humanitarian applications changed the migration and asylum profile up until that point (*ibid.*).

In Spain, while the majority of Venezuelans request asylum after arriving, some already request it at the border at the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid (Dekocker 2018). Once again, in this sense, the exceptional nature and magnitude of the Venezuelan crisis begets varying and perhaps reactionary asylum policies. For example, in 2018, a Spanish Commission on Refugees (*Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado*, CEAR) report explained that only 65 per cent of all asylum petitions for international protection were granted in the year 2017, below the EU average and also below the year before in Spain (CEAR 2020: 68–69). Of those, 99 per cent of Venezuelans were rejected. The Spanish Ministry of the Interior, overwhelmed with asylum applications, announced in February 2019 that it would issue temporary residence to Venezuelans based on ‘humanitarian reasons.’ As a result, in the year 2019, out of the 40,906 Venezuelans applying for asylum, 39,667 were issued these temporary permits and only 48 received official refugee status (*ibid.*). The 2019 increase in asylum applications over the previous observed trends could be partially accounted for by this 2019 policy.

Given the irregular nature of current mobility patterns and the very recent high volume, which still remain to be exhaustively analysed and understood, several qualitative studies conducted with Venezuelan migrants also help to shed light on the drivers of migration to Europe. Historical migration from Venezuela and even up through the decade under study may have encompassed students and skilled labour, including migrants with economic, professional and cultural capital as mentioned earlier. However, the profile has become more heterogeneous with the mass exodus, with populations accessing Spain and Europe via asylum seeking and immigration regimes as well as irregular channels.

This changing profile could explain gender variation in recent trends, and shifting dynamics in women’s and family migration. Until recently, migration from Venezuela had not reflected the same degree of feminisation as in other LAC countries; this could be attributed to the fact that rather than migrating as part of global care chains, Venezuelan migration included elite flight and

skilled workers with a more balanced gender profile. However, the most recent years (from 2016 onwards) have demonstrated a slight female majority in migration and asylum applicants. This may be a result of the ‘*en masse*’, collective nature of current flight: a study using International Organisation for Migration data presents a regional profile of Venezuelan migrants and refugees traveling through and to a selection of American and Caribbean countries during 2019, and reports that the vast majority travelled with family members. This family migration perhaps explains the trend whereby both Venezuelan immigration to Spain and asylum seekers in Spain reflect higher percentages of females in the second half of the period under study, versus the first half (Chaves-González and Echeverría-Estrada 2020).

Moreover, while the literature notes that Venezuelan migration is not exclusive to those with Spanish heritage, this still factors into the current Venezuelan migration to Spain and Europe. Thus, those Venezuelans who reach Europe in the current prolonged crisis may diverge from the more vulnerable migrant profiles that remain in the surrounding region or nations bordering Venezuela, for example (Gandini et al. 2020). By way of example, a recent 2019 study notes how second- and third-generation Spanish women (born in Venezuela) are ‘returning’ for work. The majority did not have children in Spain and had family or friend networks in Spain already, which allowed for their integration, but it was not always easy to find work (even with Spanish nationality) (Rodicio-García and Sarceda-Gorgoso 2019: 13).

## 12.5 Concluding observations

In summary, decades of political, economic and social complications have resulted in a compromise of Venezuela’s democratic system and deterioration of the country’s institutional, economic and productive capacities. Gathering official information related to these considerations has been difficult, as the Venezuelan government stopped producing official reports and data around the year 2013. Ultimately it is clear that a humanitarian crisis has remained ongoing, with general food and medicine shortages, the collapse of basic services and lack of access to electricity, drinking water, the internet, transport, education and health services (PROVEA 2021). This heavily influences trends in the period under study. However, Venezuelan migration to Europe reflects a complex and interconnected history and trajectory.

Indeed, until recently, Venezuelan flows to Europe were composed of more elite populations and reflected a very particular historical context and relationship with Spanish society (Dekocker 2018). However, in light of the ongoing crisis,



the migration profile has become more heterogeneous, and notably non-linear; Venezuelans may transit through and stay for long periods of time in countries within the LAC region before moving on to Spain. These transit migrants mainly seek economic resources and stability (obtaining savings) before continuing their journey. Although the majority of displaced Venezuelans remain within the surrounding region, reduced travel costs and a greater variety of available routes, as well as increasingly established personal networks in Spain, can facilitate the journey to Europe (Palma 2015).

Moreover, Spain has recently demonstrated openness to facilitating regular migration pathways or upholding humanitarian protection corridors in the case of Venezuela specifically, in that it issued special 'humanitarian protection' visas in 2020 to around 40,000 Venezuelans. However, LAC states have tended to become more restrictive in policies towards displaced Venezuelans, particularly as survival-driven and forced migration promises to continue. In fact, this new context has forced many Venezuelan migrants to return to their country of origin given the economic and social adversities, mainly provoked by pandemic crisis, and the impossibility of starting an accommodation process in the host country (Sánchez-Montijano 2022). It remains to be seen whether national, regional, intergovernmental and trans-governmental policies will achieve consistency in upholding human rights guarantees and international protection commitments. In particular, EU member states' asylum and humanitarian protection recognition rates will be key in determining Venezuelans' regular pathways to Europe and Spain, as flows remain likely to continue.

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## Chapter 13 Conclusions

**Abstract:** The conclusions provide comparative reflections with a particular focus on regional patterns regarding diverse origin contexts, as well as what happens *en route* or during consecutive, multiple journeys. Thus, it looks into how changing conditions in transit or alternative destination contexts inform migration processes and patterns as well as the timing and directions of movement, including from a gender and sexuality perspective. EU policies are assessed in relation to all these stages. Finally, the conclusions also discuss the initial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and future prospects regarding all routes.

**Keywords:** regional patterns | diverse trajectories | multidimensional drivers | gender | European policies

A comprehensive look at the operation of drivers and shifting opportunity-constraint structures informing cross-border mobility dynamics across interlinking origin, transit, destination and host contexts in various spaces of mobility connecting the EU with South-Central and Western Asia, the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel, and Latin America and the Caribbean respectively, offer insights into comparative patterns when considering overall mixed migration patterns towards the EU in the past decade. These concluding observations highlight (changes in) key migration processes and trends emerging along the various identified routes, call for greater attention to the complex interplay between drivers operating across different contexts in which population movements unfold, and underline the ways in which EU policies and their ripple effects in relevant non-EU contexts as well as gender and sexuality dynamics play out along non-linear journeys. Given the time frame of analysis, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic necessarily enters this discussion, and contextualises some final thoughts on future prospects of mobility along each route.

### 13.1 Eastern Mediterranean Route

While of interest to the EU already since the late 1990s, mixed migration flows along the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) originating in several regions of Asia have become a major policy concern in the last decade, particularly following the so-called ‘migration crisis’. Building on the policy repertoire that

was already in the making, the EU responded to the intensification of irregular crossings mainly of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis by reinforcing the approach oriented at preventing spontaneous arrivals at its external borders. Besides hardening its own borders, externalising the management of cross-border mobility in origin and transit contexts has constituted one of the main policy lines. Partially delegating protection responsibilities has formed another increasingly important element targeting non-EU countries immediately subjected to large-scale displacement and sitting along the transit mobility trails towards Europe. With a view to stemming irregular flows arriving in the EU by minimising departures at the point of origin, addressing the drivers of migration and enforcing returns of those with no right to legal residence in the EU have become the main policy objectives vis-à-vis source countries.

The questions of who has the right to legal residence in the EU despite having arrived without authorisation (i.e., who is entitled to international protection), and who lacks such right and hence should be returned are inextricably linked to that of how drivers in origin contexts translate into individual motivations kicking off migration journeys. In relation to all these questions, a key assumption on which policies and policy categories are increasingly based relates to the distinction between 'legitimate' refugees versus 'economic migrants'. The assumption is that what motivates migration should be neatly categorisable into either politically or economically motivated factors. A series of classification and hierarchisation exercises derive from this: countries that can be considered as 'refugee-producing' and nationalities that fit the legitimate refugee definition (increasingly equated with being directly targeted in situations of all-out war and active conflict), as well as gender-based and other social differences that include some and exclude others from qualifying as a person in need of protection (e.g., the case of single Afghan men in Turkey and the EU). This tendency has become increasingly visible in public and policy debates in Europe (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), while becoming more widespread also globally, with significant implications for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

The operation of drivers in the three EMR origin countries examined in this volume suggests a different account and calls for a nuanced approach. Conflict and violence, often heavily informed by foreign interventions and geopolitical rivalries, and their direct effects on physical safety play clear roles in informing migration within and from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, in the latter two cases for more than a decade. However, it is also those effects of war and frustrated peace-building processes on livelihoods, infrastructure and access to basic services that inform the decisions of many who might not be directly affected by physical violence. As the conflict becomes protracted as in Afghanistan and Syria, or acquires



a cyclical nature as in Iraq, political and economic governance structures as well as rule of law erode and struggle to recover. This implies an almost permanent experience of insecurity for the populations in terms of livelihoods, fundamental rights or access to education, health and justice, affecting not only their daily lives, but also their ability to imagine and build a future. All three cases therefore confirm the point made by Crawley and Skleparis (2018: 53): to ‘fully appreciate the drivers of migration’ one needs to ‘examine the ways in which political and economic factors come together to shape the experiences of those living in times of war’, and ‘[t]he longer the conflict continues, the more complicated – and difficult to unpack – this relationship becomes’. This also underlines the importance of individual assessment of protection claims, and the flawed nature of making short-cuts between ‘legitimate’ claims and particular nationalities and/or gender groups.

While the case studies illustrate the need for nuancing the understanding of drivers so as to better account for the intertwinement between political, social and economic factors, they also call for a refinement of the still largely dominant idea that it is principally the conditions in countries of origin that drive mixed migration (somewhat directly) to the EU. The importance of secondary drivers in informing migration decisions and outcomes clearly emerges from these cases. Fragmented journeys or ‘serial migration of consecutive movements, separated by periods spent in one or more different locations’ (Crawley et al. 2016: 28) characterise Afghan mixed migration towards the EU in the last decade (in particular secondary movement from Iran). Conditions and experiences in Lebanon or Turkey, which were initially intended as destinations, also seem to have played a considerable role in Syrian refugees’ secondary movement towards Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, while onward movement from countries like Iran, Pakistan, Turkey or Lebanon has been directed towards Europe, these countries have also continued to act as major destinations for both new arrivals from origin countries and secondary movement taking place within the region (e.g., movement of Afghans from Iran to Turkey). Secondary movement towards the EU, while requiring further attention, does not therefore imply that all or most migrants and refugees in these contexts leave their countries of origin intending to eventually move to Europe. In fact, according to a 2018 International Organisation for Migration

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted however, that migration from Iraq during the 2015–16 peak seems to suggest a slightly different picture, with shorter and more direct journeys briefly transiting through Turkey possibly accounting for a larger share.

(IOM) Flow Monitoring survey, of the 3,173 migrants and refugees interviewed in Turkey between December 2017 and February 2018, 86 per cent of Syrians, 68 per cent of Iraqis and 64 per cent of Afghans indicated Turkey as their intended destination at the time of departure (IOM 2018).

However, as underlined by the notions of secondary drivers and fragmented journeys, decisions are readjusted as a response to altering conditions (e.g., the effects of the 2018 economic crisis in Iran on growing movement of Afghans towards Turkey) and to policy-informed constraints that migrants and refugees increasingly face in these contexts. As for the latter, the cases demonstrate that factors like legal uncertainty, persistent temporariness, irregularisation and risk of deportation have significant implications for access to formal employment, education or healthcare, reproducing insecure livelihoods and largely depriving people of future prospects. When considering such a restrictive turn, one should however also take into account that these countries – most of which already face mounting economic challenges – have been shouldering a disproportionately high share of protection responsibilities.

EU policies pay increasing attention to supporting refugee-hosting countries along major migration routes mainly through financial assistance. Such support typically finds its expression in the channelling of aid to these countries, where the objective is to build refugee and host community resilience through a shift from a humanitarian to a developmental approach. On the one hand, this policy can be seen as forming part of responsibility-sharing and following a global trend that attaches greater importance to investing in durable solutions for refugees and their host communities beyond emergency responses. On the other, the channelling of aid and the mainstreaming of migration into these countries' development policies as part of this approach aim to address secondary drivers (particularly those that are related to livelihoods), so as to limit onward movement from these countries to the EU. Therefore, as the case studies showed (particularly in relation to the Syrian displacement), this policy approach is closely – if not mainly – linked to the objective of delegating protection responsibilities to third countries and minimising future arrivals in the EU through containing refugees and asylum seekers outside.

This approach therefore shifts responsibility to third countries, rather than sharing it more equitably – especially when one considers that EU financial assistance remains limited relative to the challenge faced by these countries and more importantly, that the EU largely lacks quantitatively and qualitatively meaningful resettlement and humanitarian admission schemes, i.e., responsibility-sharing mechanisms beyond financial assistance. Besides catalysing transactional approaches to protection and falling short of effectively remedying the precarity

faced by refugees in non-EU countries, this policy approach reproducing dynamics based on disproportionate distribution of responsibility becomes particularly questionable in terms of its sustainability. Considering that economic and socio-political capacities have already been increasingly overstretched in most refugee-hosting contexts, there is a necessity for the EU to move from the idea of 'prevention through containment' to 'sustainable responsibility-sharing', and from 'developing others' to a 'multilevel partnership'.

In terms of (particular countries in) Europe as destination, the cases show that the main expectations informing this choice include being able to access physical safety, livelihoods, a secure legal status and basic services, in particular education. At the same time, whether one can reach the intended destination depends on how one can navigate opportunity-constraint structures encountered during the journey. The analyses suggest that changes in these structures particularly during and after the large-scale movement in 2015–16 played important roles in facilitating, impeding, affecting the timing or altering the pathways of cross-border mobility throughout the trails culminating at the south-eastern borders of the EU. In particular, the temporary opening up of a transit mobility corridor in 2015 enabling movement through to preferred destinations in Europe, which was arguably significantly informed by the sheer intensity of the Syrian refugee movement, seems to have shifted the opportunity-constraint structure, influencing decision-making (on whether/when to depart and where to move) by those considering embarking on the journey or moving onward.

The EU's (gender-blind) policy response that, from early 2016 onwards, came in the form of enhanced mobility control at its borders and beyond; augmented political and financial investments in preventing departures from origin countries (most notably Afghanistan) and host and transit contexts (most notably Turkey); and intra-EU measures increasingly shrinking the protection space, has contributed to elevating the constraints. While varying in their timing, a shift from more open to restrictive policy frameworks aiming to limit new arrivals and encourage returns has been visible in all destination/host countries in the region, narrowing down and changing available destination alternatives. Increasing convergence towards restrictive policy frameworks in this broad space of mobility has implied growing insecurity and vulnerability for people on the move.

Cutting across origin, transit and host contexts is the role played by gender and sexuality: the case studies show that it is important to see the complex decision-making processes that women and individuals of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) go through at different phases of their journeys from an intersectional perspective. Whilst both women and LGBTQI+ individuals decide to leave in a context of discrimination, one needs to take into account

how this discrimination intersects with the outbreak of conflict, economic rights and needs of the self/family, considerations on security during the journey, as well as (beliefs about) the opportunity-constraint structures in origin, host, transit and destination countries. The interlinkages between these factors are complex. For example, once conflict erupted or intensified, discrimination has accelerated for both women and LGBTQI+ individuals in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. At the same time, the revolution in Syria has also empowered women in their agency, while the opportunity-constraint structures also changed once they became sole breadwinners of the family. Once *en route*, women and mothers are at heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in host, transit and destination contexts (i.e., also in Europe), while gender-blind migration and asylum policies in all these contexts exacerbate such risks. Furthermore, the case study on Iraq also highlights how Western-defined categories such as LGBTQI+/SOGI and the necessity to perform them visibly in order to be granted asylum can be highly problematic.

While research suggests that '[v]ictims of trafficking constitute a particularly gendered group, which increasingly includes minor girls' (Boland and Tschaler 2021: 14), existing data and analyses on trafficking along the EMR and in Europe are unfortunately insufficient to reach sound conclusions on the representation of women/men/boys/girls among victims of trafficking. However, as the case studies demonstrate, migrant women/girls from the three countries face greater risks and are particularly subjected to SGBV and other forms of violence and exploitation during the journeys. Yet the case studies also suggest that unequal power relations between undocumented (and hence unprotected) people moving under precarious conditions and the smugglers, authorities, bandits or militias they relate to while *en route*, subject all – women, men, boys and girls – to experience some form of violence and abuse.

Finally, the analyses show that the Covid-19 pandemic had significant implications for both migration drivers and the opportunity-constraint structures shaping cross-border mobility along the EMR. The socioeconomic fallout deriving from the pandemic has deepened existing fragilities in origin contexts, for example in Afghanistan, by leading to rising urban poverty, inflation and food insecurity and further straining already limited capacities to absorb the pandemic-induced returns. In host countries, the pandemic, intersecting with other crises (e.g., economic downturn in Jordan/Turkey, multiple crises in Lebanon) has further impacted precarious livelihoods of refugees and migrants. The pandemic has also augmented the constraints for cross-border mobility and access to asylum through generalised border closures and mobility restrictions, as well as particular policy choices partially justified by public health concerns

such as Greece's temporary suspension of its asylum system in early 2020 and the increasing use and normalisation of pushbacks at the Greek borders in the post-pandemic context (Grandi 2022).

### 13.2 Central Mediterranean Route

The 'migration crisis' of 2014–17 has been a game-changer for European policy-making targeting the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR). A securitised approach aimed at deterring irregular migration from Africa and mainly based on externalisation and border controls has been established, without relevant modifications materialising in the following period despite shifting trends in irregular arrivals. As the analysis of the case studies in this volume has shown, such measures are often based on biased assumptions about the drivers of irregular migration from countries of origin and transit in Africa and beyond, and on a simplistic perspective on the functioning of the route, often framed as a linear trajectory from sending countries to Europe.

In fact, the assumption that migration trajectories along the CMR are easily conceived as linear journeys is challenged by the difficulties of defining the CMR itself as a 'route'. The CMR is better understood as a fragmented ensemble of mobility and migratory trails originating in different regions in Africa – and even outside the continent – and converging on the Mediterranean coasts of Libya and Tunisia, before heading to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.

Such complexity is also reflected in the divergence of drivers at play in the regions where movements on the CMR originate, namely the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and West Africa. These areas have presented stark differences in terms of political arrangements, economic trends and conflict dynamics during the last decade. Key institutional elements stand out, starting from the different circulation arrangements characterising these regions. Migrants from Mali and Nigeria are able to reach the borders of Libya and Algeria exploiting the opportunities posed by the free circulation regime of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and, concurrently, by consolidated regional mobility patterns and infrastructures, not limited to smuggling operations. Tellingly, not all movements from these countries have turned into irregular migration to Europe, even when conflict erupted in north-eastern Nigeria in 2009 and in northern Mali in 2012. The picture changes in the Horn of Africa, where the absence of a free circulation regime affects migratory attitudes in a completely different way, concurrently with the role played by the authoritarian political system in Eritrea. While the porosity of borders should always be taken into account as an important factor, it has been underlined how in Eastern Africa

migration poses mortal risks due to the dangerous crossing of borders, especially the militarised frontier of Eritrea. Such obstacles enhance also the appeal of smugglers operating on the first trails of travel out of the country (McMahon and Sigona 2016).

These different institutional environments faced by potential migrants in Eritrea, Mali and Nigeria also shed some light on the difficulty of drawing a deterministic link between the emergence of conflict, waves of political violence or economic downturns and irregular arrivals in Italy, bearing in mind that, with some fluctuations, the flows from these countries have all mainly followed the general pattern of the route, peaking in 2016. In this sense, the peculiarity of the Eritrean case as a country of origin emerges due to the persistence of structural political drivers that have not changed during the last decade, despite major geopolitical developments in the region.

Looking instead at other countries of origin on the CMR, changing conflict dynamics and evolving political drivers alone are not sufficient to determine the trends of unauthorised border crossings along the Mediterranean Sea. While political conditions in Eritrea are structural, key modifications have occurred both in Mali and Nigeria in different moments of the period under analysis. However, such evolutions did not unmistakably translate into shifts of the migratory flow at the concluding end of the CMR.

In fact, despite the divergence of political, economic and social drivers in countries of origin as diverse as Eritrea, Mali or Nigeria, movements from these countries have shown a comparable outcome in terms of irregular arrivals in Italy: they peaked in 2015–16 and, broadly speaking, during the migration crisis of 2014–17. These trends suggest that, in order to gain a better grasp of the drivers on the CMR, the analysis should look more carefully at conditions in countries of transit and how these areas have acted as amplifiers or bottlenecks for irregular migration at different moments in time. The case of emigration from Tunisia constitutes a partial exception among our case studies because of the country's peculiar geographic proximity with Italy, which diminishes the significance of other contexts of transit, and the different pattern followed by irregular arrivals of Tunisians in comparison to the other nationalities included in this volume. However, it has been highlighted how the first wave of Tunisian migration in 2011 might have been also precipitated by the 'simple' opportunity posed by the momentary absence of border controls due the confusion and disorganisation of the police forces during the upheaval (Fargues 2017).

To move to the role of drivers and policies in countries of transit, elements such as the arrival of Syrian migrants in Libya in 2014 and the development of an operational smuggling infrastructure there and in the Sahel, especially in Niger,

have interacted with the growing instability in Mali and Nigeria, the downturn of the Nigerian economy in 2016 and the persistence of political repression in Eritrea in shaping the increase of irregular arrivals in Italy culminating in 2016. Also, the decreasing trend spotted in unauthorised border crossings in 2017–20 seems to have been largely affected by shifting conditions in areas of transit, such as the implementation of the EU-sponsored Anti-Trafficking Law in Niger and the multifaceted disrupting effects of the various phases of the Libyan conflict on smuggling business and irregular migration. Overall, it could be safely assumed that the flow of Sub-Saharan migrants on the CMR has been profoundly influenced by the changes occurring in the ‘alternative destination’<sup>2</sup> of Libya since 2011: while these evolutions have not been unidirectional in incentivizing departures from the country, they have profoundly affected the context in which migratory decisions of potential migrants have been taken, one way or the other. For instance, the violence engulfing the western coast of Libya in the more recent years of the conflict has posed new obstacles to the activities of smugglers and has potentially enhanced neighbouring Tunisia’s role as an area of transit, as the increase in departures from the country since 2017 seems to suggest. However, this increasing trend in departures from Tunisia is not only connected to the crossing of Libya becoming even more dangerous, time consuming and expensive over the years, due to the conflict and the lack of rule of law in the country, but it has been also facilitated by the change of EU policies in terms of externalisation and securitisation of borders.

As a reaction to the ‘migration crisis,’ regions of origin for the CMR – the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and West Africa – have been the explicit targets of actions funded under the European Union Emergency for Africa Trust Fund since 2015. The EU intervened at all levels of the route – in countries of origin (Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria and Tunisia), of transit (Mali, Niger and Libya) and at the European border on the Mediterranean, deepening its collaboration on migration management with governmental authorities, for instance in Niger, and local actors in Libya. Member states like Italy have also been active in securing their borders since 2017.

It is complex to assess how these European and Italian policy actions aimed at enhancing cooperation on border management with countries like Niger and Libya have impacted on irregular movements, also depending on the benchmarks assumed to measure policy success (the reduction of irregular arrivals or

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<sup>2</sup> The role of Libya as an ‘alternative destination’ is a rather Eurocentric concept, but it is useful in explaining the attraction that the country has produced for foreign workers.

rather the humanitarian costs and level of protection guaranteed to migrants). Nonetheless, even if only in a partial fashion, the disruption of smugglers' business model in Niger, accompanied by a deeper cooperation between the EU, Italy and Libyan authorities inaugurated in 2016–17, was followed by a dramatic decrease in the arrivals recorded by Frontex in Italy from July 2017. While conditions were shifting along the route, European policies seemed to be working, at least temporarily. However, without any significant change in the framework of European actions, 2020 saw the start of a new increase in the number of irregular arrivals on the CMR, while governments of countries on the route were seemingly adopting a more relaxed stance, for instance in Niger.

A final point about the importance of incorporating into the analysis the role of secondary drivers unfolding in countries of transit pertains to the wide-ranging consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in the different geographical contexts crossed by the CMR, which predisposed EU-bound flows in unexpected ways in 2020. For instance, free circulation within ECOWAS and more broadly in the Sahel slowed during the first half of that year, due to border closures and containment measures put in place by several governments. Not only was circulation hindered, but thousands of people remained stranded at borders during those months, a new reason for them to stop in an already fragmented migratory trajectory. The pandemic highlights also a gendered dimension at play on the CMR. For instance, women – mostly of Sub-Saharan origin – transiting through Tunisia in 2020–21 have been more frequently affected than men by the socio-economic consequences of Covid-19: women more often experience a loss of income, reduced access to basic goods and services or increased racism and xenophobia, while migrant women with children have experienced an even more pronounced level of Covid-induced stress and anxiety than those traveling alone (Mixed Migration Centre 2021).

### **13.3 The Western Mediterranean Route and the Western African Route**

In considering the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and Western African Route (WAR) case studies from a broader standpoint, it indeed seems evident that emerging, merging and shifting regional migration patterns on the route through Morocco or West Africa to Spain reflect the conflation of different factors, which may produce aggregate effects in acting concurrently across various stages and contexts of migrant journeys and decision-making. What follows includes the most relevant findings informing the past decade's trajectories, with particular emphasis on the potential but not exclusive influence of: livelihood



strategies in origin contexts as affected by local and global drivers; informal networks as recourse vis-à-vis inconsistent national, intergovernmental and trans-governmental migration and asylum policy regimes (or lack of implementation and streamlining of these); both Mali and Morocco's increasing role as transit (in addition to origin) countries as pertains to a wider geopolitical negotiation; and prioritisation of EU and member state securitisation interests over a more holistic, long-term view of migration governance and integrity of asylum systems, particularly resulting in gendered effects on flows along these routes.

To begin, structural drivers at the point of origin appear increasingly global in nature, from international security and development interventions to climate effects. In the case of Mali, for example, it may be that intensifying violent conflict throughout the country (and particularly in the north) could partially result from destabilising effects of international peacekeeping interventions over the past decade. This forms part of a greater international security and development nexus that could engender further violence and forced displacement, not exclusive to the Malian case, but also impacting Sub-Saharan African flows and transit through Mali overall (Boutellis and Zahar 2017; Di Razza 2018). Moreover, global climate change and its implications for food security, socioeconomic stability and overall livelihoods has increasingly emerged as a significant factor at play in Mali and the wider Sub-Saharan context, and climate cycle changes have affected migration patterns in Morocco as well (Hegazi et al. 2021; Van Praag 2021). Even the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for origin country economies and resulting societal well-being could be understood as part of the global effect on the local. This is not to dismiss local factors like the Tuareg uprising through 2009, the social and political response to Mali's 2018 election, various increasing conflicts over access to land and resources in Mali, or Morocco's 2016 Rif struggle (ACAPS 2018; Haïdara and Isbell 2018; Zaireg 2018). Nor should observations on globalisation's effects detract from migrant agency as to livelihood strategies, as exemplified by the Malian history and culture of gendered mobility, or long-established Moroccan diaspora networks (Bolay 2021; Berriane 2018).

In turning towards those drivers mediating migration and mobility in contexts of transit, the degree of capacity or willingness of state and regional actors to craft and implement migration governance, or the disparity between purported potential for authorised mobility versus the reality on the ground, should be considered in combination with disjointed legal avenues and administrative processes between states and regions. The Free Movement Protocols of ECOWAS allow for a national to move from one Member State to another for up to ninety days with valid documentation, thus facilitating regular migration flows within the region. Upon leaving the ECOWAS region and proceeding on

to North Africa and entering Morocco, movements may become irregular, as the ECOWAS free movement measures no longer apply, and migrants find limited options for regular pathways with even further limitations when opting for crossing from Morocco or West Africa into Spain and the EU.

Such fragmented migration regimes in turn relate to smuggling or informal networks that exercise significant influence on the manner and direction of migratory movements. Given the absence of recourse to the state or legal systems, it is argued that in the majority of cases, individuals who form part of the mixed migration flows from Africa along the WMR and WAR routes choose smuggling entities in order to facilitate their travel (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2020). The informal and precarious nature of these networks can then expose migrants not only to more dangerous and clandestine journeys, but also to trafficking and abuse with heavily gendered dimensions.

Forming part of these previous considerations about transit is the greater geopolitical context, consisting of competing interests, diverging diplomatic overtures versus discretionary practices, and corresponding inconsistent implementation of migration strategies, all of which have important repercussions for migrants. In particular, Morocco has become an increasingly crucial player over the past few decades and even more so in recent years, beyond its geographical location positioning at the crux of the WMR. Not only does it receive significant funds from the EU (the second largest recipient among EU neighbours), it also exercises its weight with Sub-Saharan African neighbours and in contesting the Western Sahara with Algeria. In combination, there is a lack of true opportunity for socioeconomic integration in the face of these unfulfilled or non-implemented migration commitments and policies (as well as the current Moroccan economic context) (Baida 2020).

Finally, in arriving at the destination stage within the overall route context, it is again evident that the observation and implementation of migration and asylum policies both in transit countries and in the reception and handling of asylum requests at the European border work in a mutually constitutive nature with migrants' initiative or response in light of this management, affecting flows.

In this context, frequently documented discretionary and at times illegal procedures take place at the Spanish southern border of Ceuta and Melilla. These are visible in the news and civil society advocacy throughout the timespan under study, an example including the pushbacks and returns of unaccompanied minors in August of 2021 (De Vega 2021). As with similar critiques on the WMR, in terms of the WAR, advocacy organisations have condemned migration management policies in the Canaries as intentionally dissuasive mechanisms, isolating migrants and ultimately seeking their deportation, including via pushbacks.

Finally, reception conditions have been criticised as particularly lacking during 2020 with Covid-19 consequences and heightened arrivals (Monreal Gainza and Paredes 2021).

As a final consideration, when taking into account the gendered effects of inconsistent or irregular migration governance and how this relates to real or perceived constraint and opportunity structures regarding asylum processes, research to date on family strategies in accessing Spain via Morocco is notable. For example, it seems possible that whether or not a pregnancy was deliberate (i.e., often possibly a result of rape), both the mother herself or a smuggler or partner might consider this a strategy to avoid deportation and obtain family reunification rights upon arrival in Spain (Dubow and Kuschminder 2021; Tyszler 2019). It is also theorised that children can be a part of these gendered family mobility strategies: for example, Moroccan families may send their sons in an attempt to clear the fences of Ceuta and Melilla with the hopes of avoiding pushbacks as minors are entitled to international protection (Queirolo Palmas 2019).

Finally, regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the intermittent Spanish border closures related to the pandemic and crisis, arrivals continue on the WMR and WAR, with flows even shifting from other routes, given the pandemic's effects on movement restrictions and migration decision-making. As a result, despite and due to Covid-19 mobility complications, arrivals on the WMR and WAR continue, and in some cases are overwhelming reception systems. The socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic for origin and transit countries along the WMR and WAR also point to future migration trends. The impact of the pandemic has slowed efforts towards development goals among African countries, and there has been an estimated 3 per cent contraction of Sub-Saharan Africa's economy in 2020 (Nwuke 2021).

### **13.4 Atlantic Route**

Recent trends on the Atlantic Route illustrate how the volume, direction, gender composition and forms of migration are shaped by varying combinations of macro- and meso-level factors that produce aggregate effects on non-linear migration and asylum trajectories. The Atlantic Route demonstrates many context-specific characteristics, but in particular manifests the ways in which configurations of drivers in the transit context are inextricably linked and operate in parallel with the contexts of origin and destination.

In light of this, what follows are the most relevant observations as to key drivers, trajectories and policies informing the Atlantic Route in the period under study, namely: (1) local to global precipitating and predisposing drivers,

including deteriorating social protections and humanitarian crisis within the region, in combination with US interventions and policies, all of which inform both origin and transit contexts and trajectories; (2) the air route as a former limitation on mobility and as a socioeconomic constraint on demographic profiles, as contrasted with a shift in demographic profiles in light of cheaper air travel combined with volumes of human movement; (3) the ancestral and historical ties between Spain and LAC states affecting both the nature of migration patterns and interrelated policies; (4) in both the LAC and EU contexts, diverging and evolving definitions and policies as to who and what merits international protection directly affecting the way migration and asylum systems accommodate human mobility; relatedly, a lack of consistency in asylum system procedures or real practices at member state and EU levels that has important ramifications for irregular migration; and finally, (5) gendered dimensions of LAC nationals' migration not only reflected in global care chains, but also in the increasingly endemic structural violence against women in the origin and transit contexts, linked to historic or current interventions and policies in destination countries.

To begin, in looking at the case studies, a very general and simplistic understanding could point to proximate drivers of persistent and gradually deteriorating economic, political, security and environmental conditions, with predisposing factors including political instability as well as lack of security in the context of weak states and government corruption, alongside deepening inequalities brought about by interconnected economic instability.

In combination with this and as referenced in the case studies, social protections can be limited or entirely lacking in several LAC states. What social protections are put in place can often be short-term, partisan policies without universal coverage and long-term impacts, especially for vulnerable populations. As a result, migration dynamics reflect more transit and unstable migration, as traditional labour migration has been replaced with survival migration and forced migration, or in the case of Europe, migration for social reproduction. This migration is non-linear as the case of Europe illustrates; for example, Venezuelans may transit through and stay for long periods of time in countries within the LAC region before moving on to Spain.

However, closer inspection reveals that conditions in the origin countries cannot simply be considered outside of the migration, security and development nexus, particularly in light of US intervention, and later restrictive and fluctuating migration policies. To begin, the advent of neoliberal globalisation from the 1980s forward, led by the US among other actors, was based in implementing structural adjustment programmes in regions including that of the LAC states, arguably leading to unequal development, deteriorating regional conditions and

forced migration (Delgado-Wise 2014). At the same time, migration policies in receiving countries like the US have not always accommodated consequent, or even initially invited, migration. Moreover, significant US foreign policy intervention is witnessed in the case studies. A first instance is US involvement in the Honduran economy in the 1980s, alongside US military presence and support for allegedly corrupt political leaders through to the present (Nevins 2016). Meanwhile, Venezuela's so-called failed state and collapsed economy can be attributed to multiple factors, although US trade sanctions undoubtedly play a role, and could be contributing to exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and displacement (Weisbrot and Sachs 2019). Colombia similarly has received controversial US military and securitisation aid from the 1980s forward articulated in terms of a drug war, marked by a shift in this framing and bilateral cooperation in a post-9/11 context (Crandall 2002).

Meanwhile, regional migration is characterised by complex, diverse and non-linear migration, rather than by the transborder patterns that characterised the region in the past. Both regionally and within states, in addition to the vacuum in protections outlined, infrastructure projects resulting from interventions described above, as well as environmental crisis, contribute to internal displacement. Any destabilisation in the region, and how it affects mixed migratory movements in particular, has been influenced by transit and destination countries that implement a discretionary use of any refugee protection norms (i.e., those included in the 1950 Convention or Cartagena Declaration instruments). In addition, there have been policies increasing penalisation for border crossings, border removals and deportation under the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations (Chishti et al. 2017). In the period under study, Obama and Trump inherited the comparatively most robust migration enforcement regime both legally and in terms of resources (*ibid.*). Most recently, however, migration policies under the Trump administration—both restrictive, preventative and punitive—in combination with strong anti-immigration rhetoric towards Central American migrant caravans, inform an increase in Central American migration to Spain and Europe as diverted from the US from 2016 onwards (Ojea 2018).

Secondly, all of this has implications for migration to Europe, both in influencing origin contexts as well as in possibly presenting Europe as an alternative destination to the US. Here, it is important to highlight potential mitigating effects of air travel, more or less necessary in accessing Europe. For example, before the ten-year period under study and in the previous century, migration patterns were either less voluminous as in the case of Colombia or Honduras, or composed of more elite populations as in the case of Venezuela (Dekocker 2018).

However, increasingly reduced costs and a greater variety of available routes in recent decades could go towards explaining the past decade's increased migration from LAC countries to Europe (Palma 2015). This may also have gendered effects in terms of family migration patterns, as instead of prioritising women migrants reaching Europe as a livelihood strategy, families may perceive it as possible to bring additional family members, thus affecting the feminisation of migration to Europe.

Thirdly, this in turn relates to the historical and ongoing relationship between Spain and LAC countries that demonstrates how configurations of drivers, at the route and international level, can alternate back and forth between origin, transit and destination. By way of illustration, it seems to be the case that Spain proves a preferred destination country among the member states, much of which could be traced to historical context, but no doubt primarily to Spanish emigration in the twentieth century and current ancestral ties with the LAC region. Integration of LAC-origin migrants may be improved thanks to family ties and diaspora networks, common language, greater acceptance of certain migrant ethnicities by Spanish society, and accepted international care regimes, among other factors (Hierro 2016). Apart from labour market and migrant integration policies and programmes, part of this relationship is also built into Spanish nationalisation policies. In addition, the Spanish provision for expedited nationality by residence after two years (versus ten) for those from Ibero-American countries may allow for the regularisation of irregular migrants, depending on the ease and duration of the process, and if migrants perceive that this is a viable option. In this sense, despite whatever historical groundwork lies behind them, it is the current and developing EU and Spanish migration policies that apply to migrants from the LAC region that undoubtedly shape decision-making.

Fourthly, a primary issue in considering asylum-seeker and mixed migration from LAC regions to Europe and Spain is the context in which LAC nationals seek international protection, and their ultimately limited protection in this sense. Precarious social protection systems in the LAC region have been put under further stress with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Vera Espinoza et al. 2021). Most notably, life-threatening security and crime conditions in their origin countries, which their respective governments are unable to protect them from, may not be considered sufficient for individuals to meet international protection requirements in Spain and in Europe. For example, in the case of migration from Honduras to Spain, even as the Spanish justice system ruled in 2017 that victims of the *maras* could meet requirements for international protection, in 2019 only 226 of 6,780 Honduran asylum applications to Spain received favourable outcomes (CEAR 2020). The Colombian case is also striking, as in

2019 only 0.91 per cent of those Colombian nationals whose cases were resolved received a favourable determination in receiving international protection (*ibid.*). These low acceptance rates may influence whether those LAC nationals who entered via a tourist visa weigh the opportunity cost of attempting the asylum process at all, versus remaining in an unauthorised capacity. Moreover, asylum procedures consist of long wait times. By way of example, even in order to register for applying for asylum, 2019 appointment waiting times in Spain could reach up to a year, with an average of six months' wait time (AIDA 2020). The length and consistency of asylum procedures can thus serve as a deterrent in practice, even if not consciously written into policy.

These limitations in administrative procedures or real practices are not exclusive to the Spanish and EU context, again demonstrating how consideration of these patterns requires a non-linear understanding of the connections between origin, transit and destination. International human rights frameworks and intergovernmental or transgovernmental agreements still do not sufficiently fulfil legal obligations. In terms of interregional cooperation, the LAC region has some notable mechanisms in place, including the migrant rights provided under Mercosur (Lavenex 2019). At the same time, the Venezuelan example can demonstrate how nationals simply do not have access to documentation that they are legally entitled to, thus leading to their mobility taking on an irregular nature in crossing any international border, regional or not (John 2019). Moreover, met with overwhelming demand resulting from humanitarian crisis, some countries within the region have tightened their reception and regularisation provisions for Venezuelans, with originally human rights-oriented asylum regimes implementing more restrictive policies (Wallace and Mortley 2021). In this sense, and in light of recent policy changes in several countries, progressive legislation and regional agreements largely are not applicable to these new patterns of increasing migration, which are managed with presidential decrees and ad hoc policies like temporary permits that relegate migrants to a secondary juridical status (Acosta and Brumat 2020). This demonstrates the variable and sometimes conflicting effects of migration and asylum policies, as restrictions within the region can either: affect whether arrivals to Europe become irregular (due to policies in transit countries); lead to consideration of Europe as an asylum destination if it had not been before; or preclude ever reaching Europe.

Fifthly, the systemic nature of human trafficking growing within the region has amplified migrant vulnerability. In that sense, in considering a wholistic view of these patterns, it is important to stress the gendered characteristics of Atlantic Route migration and how this speaks to the overall arch of globalised processes, transactions and mobilities that configure such mobility. Again, this of course

relates to the gendered nature of movement in terms of feminised global care chains and family livelihood strategies characterising LAC country migration to Europe. The Global North, including the EU, benefits from this transnational labour system, which can often take place outside of formal arrangements and can subject labourers to compounded vulnerabilities, including involvement in smuggling and trafficking networks (Sassen 1998). Such phenomena are inter-related with the case study observations of increasing structural violence against women in origin and transit contexts. In particular, in the Central American case, violence against women and other minority groups is observed to be worsening, as those committing the violence operate with impunity, continuing these practices alongside the state's inaction or lack of protection (Menjívar and Walsh 2017).

Given the transnational nature of these processes and human mobilities, this amplified violence against women and other minority groups in the LAC region should not be decoupled from the policies and interventions of destination countries that may have played a role in shaping this systemic violence. This is a trend that can be witnessed throughout any observations made as to shifts and patterns in the direction, composition and volume of migration along the Atlantic Route in the ten-year period under examination. In particular, the irregular nature of mobilities seems to be inextricably linked to fragmented or inconsistent migration and asylum governance, with not only the US implicated in the origin and transit contexts, but the integrity of systems in Spain and the EU factoring significantly into shaping migration to Europe. Ultimately, of course, all of these observations as to the Atlantic Route must be understood within a more nuanced picture of complex migrant decision-making processes couched within fluctuating real and perceived constraint and opportunity structures.

Finally, the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic surface as one of the most obvious ongoing developments. Of course, the pandemic has had profound public and population health as well as socioeconomic impacts. The LAC region accounts for a disproportionately high number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 and deaths worldwide, representing over 30 per cent of deaths globally, although it only makes up 8.4 per cent of the world's population (ECLAC and PAHO 2021). There continue to be significant gaps in health access and vaccine coverage. This evidently augments earlier described inequalities in the region. Indeed, the continued repercussions in the LAC region, including economic impacts, certainly precipitate future migration. LAC experienced the worst economic performance of all developing regions, with its most serious economic contraction in 120 years in the year 2020, and it is not expected to bounce back to 2019 figures in 2021. It is estimated that 22 million more people fell into poverty in 2020



(*ibid.*). Vulnerable populations were hit hardest, which can include women, children, indigenous people, persons of African descent, LGBTQI+ persons, rural populations, persons with disabilities, and crucially, migrants, who can intersect with several of these categories.

In that respect, migrants likely faced further loss or breach of human rights. The pandemic witnessed authoritarian regimes become emboldened or further bolstered in the region, with human rights violations multiplied or manifested in new ways (Voces del Sur 2021). Migrants' human rights were further compromised in that those already in precarious situations were subject to further exposure, with authorities in transit and destination countries relegating migrants to situations of overcrowding and not acting in compliance with Covid-19 protocols. Critically, many migrant groups have been left stranded by border closures (Manetto 2021). This underlines the continued prioritisation of securitisation and the reluctance to craft long-term, sustainable migration policy, both within the region and further abroad.

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# Abbreviations

AIDA	Asylum Information Database
AMDH	Association Marocaine des Droits Humains
AR	Atlantic Route
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEAR	Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CMR	Central Mediterranean Route
CNN	Cable News Network
CSO	Civil society organisation
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ECOWAS	Economic Community of Western African States
EEAS	European External Action Service
EMR	Eastern Mediterranean Route
EU	European Union
EUTF	European Union Emergency Trust Fund
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
FARC	Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común
GADEM	Groupe Antiraciste de Défense et d'accompagnement des Etrangers et Migrants
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Gross domestic product
HCP	Haut Commissariat au Plan
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IBCs	Irregular border-crossings
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística
IOD PARC	International Organisation Development Ltd.

IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JWF	Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues between Afghanistan and the EU
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
Oxfam	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
PoR	Proof of Registration
PROVEA	Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos
PRS	Palestine refugees from Syria
R4V	Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela
RNI	Red Nacional de Información
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SNIA	Stratégies Nationales d'Immigration et d'Asile
SOGI	Sexual orientation and gender identity
TCN	Third-country national
UASC	Unaccompanied and separated children
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
US	United States
WAR	Western Africa Route
WMR	Western Mediterranean Route



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