POLICY BRIEF

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

MIGRATION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:

Commonalities and differences among Egypt, Lebanon, Greece and Cyprus

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The two sides of the Mediterranean share significant similarities, particularly insofar as how they are responding to the challenges emerging from the socio-economic, climate and security challenges in the region and beyond

The EU plays a particular role, with its external dimension not only seeking to support countries in the region but also "asking" them to function as gatekeepers, whether frontline member states like Cyprus and Greece, or countries in the immediate neighbourhood, like Egypt and Lebanon.

Across both sides of the Mediterranean, there is increased dissatisfaction with continuing to host and/or receive forced migrants. This spills over to policies that emphasise deterrence and/or return, with little investment in reception and integration capacity.

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Contents

1

INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, the Eastern Mediterranean migration route has served as an important entry point for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants crossing to Europe from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The Eastern Mediterranean route refers to the migratory route to Greece, Cyprus (and Bulgaria to a lesser extent), primarily transiting from Türkiye but also from Lebanon and Libya. Due to the broader instability in the region, it has remained consistently in focus for European Union (EU) policymakers, but even more so since 2015 amidst the Syrian refugee exodus. While movement slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic due to strict border closures worldwide, the past five years have seen a gradual rise in arrivals to Greece. Similarly, Cyprus has experienced a significant increase in irregular migration compared to previous years. Both countries are on the receiving end of a mixed migratory movement that originates and/or transits from Türkiye, but increasingly also from Lebanon and Egypt.

In October 2023, the European Commission presented an EU Action Plan for the Eastern Mediterranean with targeted operational measures to address migration management along this route. The foreign policy of migration is a priority at the EU level, but it is also a priority for frontline countries like Greece and Cyprus, which are exposed by virtue of their geography to irregular flows and at the same time constrained in their ability to pursue a foreign policy of migration with all the countries in the region. The Action Plan highlights prevention of irregular departures, combatting migrant smuggling and offering legal migration pathways, reinforcing border management, returns and improvement of asylum procedures. It focuses on member states, as well as third countries in the Southern neighbourhood and countries in Africa and Asia. None of the thematic areas are new, although the situation in the immediate neighbourhood and also in the countries of origin of migratory movements has changed significantly in the past few years and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Taliban have returned in Afghanistan; Syrians remain one of the largest displaced groups, while the situation in Syria remains a fundamental obstacle to return due to the absence of security for returnees; Africa has experienced seven coups since August 2020; the clampdown on Kurds in Türkiye remains and the prospects for positive change diminished drastically following the recent re-election of President Erdogan; Israel's military operation in Lebanon has further destabilised a collapsing state while the war in Gaza has once again displaced thousands of Palestinians; Egypt's worsening economic conditions and limited legal pathways are pushing more people to migrate; Climate change is affecting the livelihoods of people, resulting in displacement as well as migration.

The present report is based on the individual country reports of Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon and Egypt.[1] It seeks to bring together both transit and receiving destinations for mixed migratory movement and to offer a snapshot of the recent evolution and current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean migratory corridor and, specifically, of movement across Lebanon, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus. All four have evolved in recent years, functioning as sites of transit, but also of destination, for migrants and asylum seekers.

We suggest that despite the very different national contexts and challenges, the two sides of the Mediterranean share significant similarities, particularly insofar as how they are responding to the challenges emerging from the socio-economic, climate and security challenges in the region and beyond. In this, the EU plays a particular role, with its external dimension not only seeking to support countries in the region but also "asking" them to function as gatekeepers, whether frontline member states like Cyprus and Greece, or countries in the immediate neighbourhood, like Egypt and Lebanon.

The foreign policy dimension of EU policy in the Mediterranean

Migration movement unfolds within a specific context and is heavily influenced by the foreign policy of migration at the EU level, commonly known as the external dimension.

1 The analysis draws primarily from the individual country papers. For Lebanon see Baroud, M. (2024, December). Country Report: Lebanon. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs; For Egypt see Fahmy, A. (2024, December). Country Report: Egypt. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.; For Greece see Dimitriadi, A. (2024, December). Country report: Greece. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs; for Cyprus see Messa, A. (2024, December). Country report: Cyprus. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. https://mena.fes.de/topics/regional-peace-and-security-project.html (FriSi)

The latter is not a new element in the EU's toolbox. For the last 20 years migration[2] has been a critical challenge for both the EU and the broader neighbourhood, particularly in the absence of effective ways to reduce and prevent the factors that produce humanitarian crises and displacement. Since the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (2011), the EU has sought to establish an overarching framework for its external migration policy grounded in reducing irregular migration, combatting smuggling, addressing root causes and facilitating legal mobility.

Several attempts were made in this direction, with the "refugee crisis" of 2015 kick-starting a process whereby the external dimension acquired priority amidst the inability of the EU to respond internally and in a cohesive manner to the arrival of Syrian refugees. The EU sought for years to reform the Common European Asylum System, culminating in the 2020 reform of the Pact on Migration and Asylum (henceforth the Pact), finally voted into EU law in May 2024.[3]

In the external dimension, the Pact proposed tailor-made partnerships, presented as a "restart" in the relationship with priority countries. A similar framework had already been attempted in 2015 through the multi-billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa that sought to address irregular migration, with particular emphasis on the Sahel and Lake Chad Region, North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Within the Migration Partnership Framework introduced in 2016, the EU negotiated bilateral compacts with Niger, Senegal, Ethiopia and Nigeria, to name a few. In 2016, the EU also undertook the first of what would be many informal deals with third countries. The EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 was a game-changer, initiating a period (ongoing) of informalisation whereby the EU offered financial assistance in exchange for border management in countries of origin and/or transit. The EU has since developed "a new paradigm based on comprehensive partnerships"[4] with many of the countries of origin and transit to the EU, including initiatives with Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt and, most recently, Lebanon. Under the current approach, migration is embedded in a broader cooperation, i.e., in areas such as economy and trade, investments in green energy, security, and capacity building projects. In exchange, countries are expected to ensure that irregular departures are reduced and to accept returnees. Of particular interest for the Eastern Mediterranean route are Egypt and Lebanon, since both are functioning as countries of origin and transit for recent migratory movement to the EU.

EU and Egypt

Egypt[5] has been a strategic partner for the EU in the MENA region, particularly since 2013.[6] Then, in 2024, Egypt and the EU elevated their relationship to a strategic and comprehensive partnership. This partnership outlines a comprehensive migration governance approach aimed at providing financial support to Egypt for migration-related programs, addressing the root causes of irregular migration, and facilitating legal migration pathways. This support encompasses efforts to combat smuggling and human trafficking and to improve border management, while also ensuring return and reintegration for migrants.[7] Beyond migration management, the partnership proposes a 7.4 billion euro financial and investment support package, providing 600 million euros in grants including 200 million euros for migration management.[8] The Egyptian State Information Service (SIS) has described the partnership as a testament to Egypt's crucial role in regional stability and security. It is promoted as a unique arrangement, with Egypt being the "only country" selected by the EU for enhanced relations.[9] On the Egyptian end, the priority is on the legal migration channels that are included in the partnership. This is largely due to the contribution of migration in economic development (through remittances). The importance Egypt attributes to legal mobility is also evident in the different bilateral agreements it has signed regarding labour migration.[10]

There is a mutual interest in curbing irregular migration and Egypt accepts that the return of migrants is a strategic priority for the EU. The relationship has acquired renewed urgency over the past two years. The Egypt-Libya-Crete corridor, coupled with increased concerns over Egypt's collapsing economy and its potential triggering of migratory movement, have led both the European Commission as well as countries like Greece to take an active role in reaffirming the partnership. For Greece, the arrival of Egyptians that are con-

2 We use the term 'migration' as an umbrella term to refer to mixed migratory movement including forced migrants, refugees and economic mobility.

3 For analysis of the Pact see Refugee Support Aegean (2024, July). New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Impermissible regression of standards for asylum seekers. https://rsaegean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/RSA_NewPact_Comments_EN.pdf

4 Wallis. E. (2024, May). The new EU Asylum and Migration Pact -- questions answers. InfoMigrants. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/57358/the-new-eu-asylum-and-migration-pact---questions-answered

5 Fahmy, A. (2024, December). Country Report: Egypt. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs https://mena.fes.de/topics/regional-peace-and-security-project.html (FriSi)

6 Awad, I. (2024). The political economy of Egyptian migration to Europe in the 2020s. In R. Zapata-Barrero & I. Awad (Eds.), Migrations in the Mediterranean ((pp. 347-363). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42264-5_20

7 Fahmy, A. (2024, December).

8 Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. (2024, March 17). Joint declaration on the strategic and comprehensive partnership between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-declaration-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-between-arab-republic-egypt-and-european-2024-03-17_en

9 State Information Service. (2024, March 17). Miṣr wa al-Ittiṣād al-Ūrūbbī... Sharāka Istrātījiyya Shāmila [Egypt and the European Union: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership]. https://sis.gov.eg/Story/272051/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%89..-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9?lang=ar

10 Fahmy, A. (2024, December).

sidered "economic migrants"[11] has been of key concern, especially since this is a fairly recent development.

The EU-Egypt deal is not grounded solely on migration, which is nevertheless a critical component, and particularly the commitment from the Egyptian side to curb irregular departures. While large-scale onward movement is not a likely scenario, movements out of Egypt could increase if the economic and/or political situation for migrants in Egypt deteriorates, with Greece and Italy functioning as the main countries of arrival to the EU. Thus, the country remains a priority for the Eastern Mediterranean corridor.

EU and Lebanon

Similarly to Egypt, Lebanon[12] is not a new partner to the EU's external dimension. In 2002, the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (Article 68) was signed; this pact also addresses return and readmission, stipulating that the two parties "agree to cooperate in order to prevent and control illegal migration," including readmitting nationals illegally present on each partner's territory.[13] Lebanon is not signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention), nor to its 1967 Additional Protocol. The country does not have a legal definition for refugees or any specific legislation dealing with the issue of refugee status. Still, the country continues to host one of the highest number of refugees per capita globally.[14]

Lebanon has received more than 3.5 billion euros in aid from the EU since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011. The EU directly supports refugee communities in Lebanon by providing direct aid to Syrian refugees through its EU Regional Trust Fund, and to Palestinian refugees through UNRWA and other non-governmental organizations, among other initiatives.[15]

Both Cyprus and Greece are engaged with Lebanon. Cyprus has sought to strengthen relations with Lebanon through a bilateral agreement focusing on the management of migration. The agreement signed between Cyprus and Lebanon in 2020 stipulates that migrants trying to reach the island will be "intercepted" and sent back.[16] However, due to the escalation in aggression on the Lebanese-Israeli border starting on October 8, 2023, Beirut authorities have been less focused on stemming the flow of irregular migrants, resulting in boats carrying primarily Syrians to the Cypriot coast.

In May 2024, the President of the Commission, Von der Leyen, announced a 1.03 billion euro deal for Lebanon. Most of the funding is meant to support basic services such as education, social protection and healthcare, and to help the government of Lebanon implement reforms to address the ongoing financial and economic crisis. About a quarter of the funding is allocated to supporting Lebanon's security forces for defense of the country's borders, which would help to reduce migration attempts to the EU.[17] The EU also funds projects directly to support Lebanon in securing its borders. One example is the Frontex-implemented, EU-commission-funded project called the EU4BorderSecurity project, which aims "to contribute to enhancing border security in the Southern Neighborhood, through bilateral and regional cooperation."[18] Another such project was implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development and aimed to "enhance capabilities of the Integrated Border Management (IBM) and related fields of operation in Lebanon."[19]

The May 2024 deal was met with significant backlash from political parties and other actors in Lebanon, with some considering it "European bribery" to keep Syrian refugees in the country. Similarly to previous deals with the EU, it was announced despite the increase in anti-refugee rhetoric and diminishing rights for refugees in the country.[20] Of concern, the deal also points to "a European willingness to explore new 'interpretations' of key protection norms in an effort to stave new arrivals to Europe from Lebanon," namely around declaring parts of Syria safe for return—something both Lebanese politicians and representatives from EU states have been calling for, including the Cypriot president.[21]

A common theme emerges, whereby the EU now funds border management as well as development/humanitarian projects aimed to enhance resilience in the region and to support countries that continue to shelter populations seeking refuge. In that sense, an unequal "burden-sharing" arrangement emerges, which seems to replicate what is playing out in the internal dimension - financial assistance in exchange for frontline countries acting as gatekeepers.

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11 Baroud, M. (2024, December). Country Report: Lebanon. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. https://mena.fes.de/topics/regional-peace-and-security-project.html (FriSi)

12 Ibid.

13 EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (2006). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/euro_mediterranean_agreement_en.pdf

14 UNHCR (2024). UNHCR Lebanon at a glance. https://www.unhcr.org/lb/at-a-glance

15 European Commission (2024). European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) - Lebanon. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/lebanon_en

16 Messa, A. (2024, December). Country report: Cyprus. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. https://mena.fes.de/topics/regional-peace-and-security-project.html (FriSi) ; Stamouli, N. (2024, October). Cyprus to migrants: 'The route is no longer open'. eKathimerini. https://www.ekathimerini.com/in-depth/analysis/1251478/cyprus-to-migrants-the-route-is-no-longer-open/

17 Schaer, K. (2024). Could the EU-Lebanon aid deal backfire on Syrian refugees? DW. https://www.dw.com/en/could-the-eu-lebanon-aid-deal-backfire-on-syrian-refugees/a-69018942

18 Frontex (2024). Beyond EU borders. https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/beyond-eu-borders/our-international-projects/

19 European External Action Service – EU Delegation to Lebanon (2020). Enhanced capability for integrated border management in Lebanon. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/enhanced-capability-integrated-border-management-lebanon_en?s=203

20 Schaer, K. (2024, May 7).

21 Janmyr, M., & Baroud, M. (2024). Lebanon's refugee return agenda: Negotiating global protection norms and responsibility sharing. Beirut: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, p.8.

2

MOBILITY PATTERNS

Irregular movement in the region

The Mediterranean is characterised by mixed irregular migratory movement, consisting of forced migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees and economically motivated migrants. The absence of legal pathways pushes these groups to undertake irregular journeys, via both maritime and land borders. Although this has been a consistent feature of the Eastern Mediterranean route since the early 2000s, in recent years noticeable shifts have taken place not only regarding nationalities, but also in how countries of destination and/or origin take on different roles (transit, destination, origin) for different groups on the move.

Egypt is one such example. According to the IOM (International Organisation for Migration), Egypt hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrians, while according to UNHCR 1.2 million Sudanese have fled to Egypt since the start of the conflict in April 2023.[22] This makes Egypt the top country receiving individuals forced to flee the current conflict in Sudan while remaining a key host country for Syrians. The latter, for years, found Egypt to be an accessible refuge with greater community acceptance than other nearby countries and less restrictive requirements to stay long term. Other relevant countries of origin include Libya, Yemen, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Iraq. However, boat departures from Egypt are rare and generally the country has functioned more as a country of destination rather than of transit and origin. This has been changing in the last two years.

More Syrians are leaving Egypt (see factors below), joined now by Egyptians. Egyptian migration to Europe has surged recently, with departures increasingly routed through Libya due to heightened Egyptian coastal border controls. In 2022, nearly 20,000 Egyptians reached Italy from Libya—nearly triple the previous year's count. In 2023, Egyptians were among the top nationalities arriving in the EU, recording a total of 8,895 arrivals. Many are utilising a new route; for example, Egyptians are now departing from Tobruk in Libya and crossing to Greece, despite severe security and human rights concerns in Libya.

Overall, in the EU there was a reduction in irregular movement in the first ten months of 2024.[23] This is largely due to the Central Mediterranean route and Western Balkans (mainly secondary movement from Greece). In contrast, the Eastern Mediterranean saw an increase in comparison to 2023.

Greece has been the most affected, recording 52,052 arrivals across land and sea borders by October 2024. The majority have entered through the sea border with noticeable shifts emerging as regards entry points; the Dodecanese are witnessing an increase in arrivals, alongside the more "traditional" disembarkation points of Lesvos, Chios and Leros. Additionally, a new corridor is now open from the Libyan coast to the island of Gavdos.

Cyprus has seen a reduction in numbers; this is largely attributable to its enhanced border controls, cooperation with Frontex, and suspension of asylum processing for Syrians, who constituted the main nationality in the boat arrivals. Located just 170 kilometres from Lebanon, Cyprus has been a preferred choice for Syrians fleeing the country. Though the majority of those aboard intercepted boats were Syrian refugees, there were also Lebanese and Palestinian refugees. From January 1, 2024, to June 20, 2024, there were a reported 61 verified actual or attempted movements by sea from Lebanon to Cyprus,[24] compared to 65 verified actual or attempted movements in all of 2023.[25] The majority of people onboard these boats were Syrian refugees. Of these move-

22 IOM (2022, August). IOM Egypt estimates the current number of international migrants living in Egypt to 9 million people originating from 133 countries. https://egypt.iom.int/news/iom-egypt-estimates-current-number-international-migrants-living-egypt-9-million-people-originating-133-countries; UNHCR (2024, October). UNHCR Egypt: Sudan Emergency Response Update, 2 October 2024. https://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/unhcr-egypt-sudan-emergency-response-update-2-october-2024

23 Frontex (2024, August). EU external borders: irregular border crossings drop 43% in first 10 months of 2024. https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-irregular-border-crossings-drop-43-in-first-10-months-of-2024-PnbwBc

24 UN-Security Council (2024a). Implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) during the period from 21 February to 20 June 2024 - Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/548). https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/implementation-security-council-resolution-1701-2006-during-period-21-february-20-june-2024-report-secretary-general-s2024548-enarruzh

25 UN-Security Council (2024b). Implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) during the period from 21 October 2023 to 20 February 2024. https://unifil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/n2405583.pdf

ments, 34 reached Cyprus in 2023, while 51 reached the island in 2024.[26] There has been a growing concern around both governments' policies, especially regarding land and sea pushbacks, which include returns to Lebanon, and possibly deportations to Syria, according to Human Rights Watch.[27]

Syrians and Afghans are the common nationalities in the apprehension data for both Greece and Cyprus. Divergence, however, is noticeable with regard to Egyptians, Turkish citizens and Palestinians, with Greece receiving a higher percentage than Cyprus. Turkish citizens are crossing through the land and sea borders. Palestinians who arrived were those who had managed to flee the early stages of the war to Egypt (or were already in Egypt). Most traveled from Gaza to Egypt by bus. From Cairo, they flew to Istanbul on tourist visas and, once there, utilized the maritime and land border crossings to Greece. Egyptian migration to Europe has surged recently, with departures increasingly routed through Libya due to heightened Egyptian coastal border controls. In 2023, Egyptians were among the top nationalities applying for asylum, marking a sharp increase in comparison to previous years: from 6,616 in 2021 to 26,512 in 2023.[28] Greece is one of the main countries of arrival.

Although fewer Lebanese appear in the asylum data, they do appear in the apprehension statistics for the Eastern Mediterranean corridor. The percentage of Lebanese attempting irregular migration has increased year on year since 2019, including to Cyprus and Greece.[29] According to UNHCR numbers from 2022, irregular migrants departing from Lebanon were mainly Syrians, with a smaller percentage of Palestinians and 28 percent Lebanese,[30] and this trend is expected to remain stable as the situation in Lebanon continues to deteriorate (see factors below), also driving onward and/or return movement of refugees from Lebanon to countries of origin and/or neighbouring countries.

Finally, it is important to mention Palestinians fleeing the region and heading towards the EU. The war in Gaza, as well as recent expansion of Israeli military operations in Lebanon, are believed to be driving forward a large-scale refugee movement of Palestinians to the EU and particularly Greece and Cyprus. Palestinian asylum applications had been increasing prior to the war. However, they have since gradually declined, largely due to the border closures and the difficulty of fleeing Gaza.[31]

Factors for migration in the Eastern Mediterranean corridor

The region continues to face the aftermath of the global economic downturn and the Arab Spring protests and uprisings, while the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen and the ongoing war in Gaza are still active and volatile situations. The war in Gaza is now in its most deadly phase, which has resulted in the displacement of millions of .Palestinians and the death of thousands,[32] while also leading to wider regional tensions.[33] Suppression of rights and freedoms, high unemployment, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the effects of climate change such as water scarcity[34] and extreme weather conditions[35] have also contributed to the growing insecurity and tensions in the region. Lastly, the involvement of external powers continues to influence and shift the dynamics in the region.

Many Egyptians are driven by economic hardship, as rising poverty impacted over 32 million people in 2018.[36] The subsequent eight years of economic reforms in coordination with the IMF have failed to deliver macroeconomic stability and growth. Farmers are facing rising costs for agricultural inputs that have quadrupled since subsidies were lifted in 2014, with regions like the Nile Delta and the rural town of Tatoun seeing a significant portion of working-age residents migrating to European countries like Italy and Greece.[37] They are joined in the journey by Syrians, who are also departing partly due to the deteriorating economic situation but also changes in status. In August 2023, the Egyptian government announced new measures requiring foreign nationals to obtain a formal residency status. An original deadline was subsequently extended, with enforcement beginning in July 2024. With many Syrians not registered with UNHCR and operating either on a tourist visa or entirely unregistered, the current changes are motivating some to undertake the journey to the EU.

The situation has also drastically changed for the Syrians in Lebanon. Increasing raids and crackdowns on Syrian refugees with irregular status, and forced deportations have contribut-

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26 Messa, A. (2024, December).

27 Human Rights Watch (2024). "I Can't Go Home, Stay Here, or Leave." Pushbacks and Pullbacks of Syrian Refugees from Cyprus and Lebanon. HRW. https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/09/04/i-cant-go-home-stay-here-or-leave/pushbacks-and-pullbacks-syrian-refugees-cyprus

28 European Union Agency for Asylum (2023). Asylum Report 2023. EUAA. https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2023

29 Diab, J.L. (2024). Selective and Strategic indifference: Lebanon's migration and refugee landscapes in the absence of inclusive legal frameworks. https://mixedmigration.org/lebanon-migration-and-refugee-landscapes/

30 Ibid.

31 Aza, H.A. & Hierro, L. (2024, March). The war in Gaza cuts short the flight of Palestinian refugees towards the EU. El Pais. https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-03-12/the-war-in-gaza-cuts-short-the-flight-of-palestinian-refugees-towards-the-eu.html

32 Human Rights Watch (2024). World Report: Israel and Palestine: Events of 2023. HRW, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/israel-and-palestine

33 By the time of publication of this report, Israel had launched offensive operations against Lebanon and Iran.

34 Hall, N. (2024, March). Surviving Scarcity: Water and the Future of the Middle East. CSIS. https://features.csis.org/surviving-scarcity-water-and-the-future-of-the-middle-east/#:~:text=Decades%20of%20poor%20water%20management,sapped%20its%20limited%20water%20supplies.

35 Wehrey, F. Dargin, J., Mehdi, Z., et al. (2023, July). Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East. Carnegie Endowment. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/07/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-the-middle-east?lang=en

36 Armanious, D. M. (2021, January 31). Accelerating global actions for a world without poverty: Egypt experiences. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/02/Final-World-without-poverty-Egypt_31-january-2021.pdf

37 Fahry, A. (2024, December).

ed to a very hostile environment for Syrian refugees (see section on Policies). While the passage to Cyprus remains a possible exit strategy for some and has been used in the past three years, we are also witnessing both Lebanese and Syrians forced to flee to Syria through official border crossings due to recent escalations. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) reported that, between September 24 and October 22, about 440,000 people, 71 percent Syrians and 29 percent Lebanese, fled Lebanon to Syria through official border crossings,[38] with Human Rights Watch warning of arbitrary arrests and human rights violations in Syria for returnees. Lebanese flight in this context is a response to the indiscriminate attacks by Israel across the country, increasing in frequency since September 23, 2024, and causing one of the country's largest internal displacement crises in recent history.[39]

At the same time, the desire to emigrate, whether through regular or irregular pathways, remains significant among the Lebanese population. For example, 36% of Lebanese participants in the eighth wave of the Arab Barometer (2024) expressed a desire to emigrate, listing Canada, Germany, France, Australia, and the United States of America (USA) as their top preferred destinations, while 17% reported a willingness to migrate irregularly.[40]

Legal migration

Although legal migration is one of the key pillars of the EU's migration policy, it is also the least developed one. With member states retaining competence, and highly dependent on economic growth and domestic priorities, it is perhaps not surprising that legal pathways have historically not been a priority in the Eastern Mediterranean corridor. In fact, limited legal pathways appear to be a common theme across all four countries, despite their obvious differences.

What we do find is that certain pathways are attractive to specific groups within the region.

For example, both Greece and Cyprus have extensively utilized the Golden Visa as a way of attracting investment. The Golden Visa program[41] has attracted around 36,200 individual permanent investors from 2020 to 2023 to Greece. Although the majority of the applicants are from China, Turkey and Russia, now Lebanese and Egyptians are also appearing in the data, particularly in the last few years. For 2024, 165 permits have so far been issued/renewed to Egyptians and another 121 to Lebanese investors. The numbers are small (particularly when compared to irregular movement) but that is to be expected, as the minimum price tag of the Golden Visa for Greece is at 250,000 euros until December 2024, after which the Greek parliament voted into law the establishment of two "zones" for investment, one of which raises the price tag to 800,000 euros while all other areas of the country will increase to 400,000 euros.[42]

It was not until 2022 that legal migration acquired prominence in Greece, and this is largely due to the growing needs of the labour market and the scarcity of workers in key industries like agriculture, construction and, above all, hospitality. Seeking to develop bilateral labour agreements, it looked to Egypt for one such partnership, and in November 2022 the two countries signed an agreement. This sets out the conditions for the entry and residence of 5,000 Egyptian citizens in Greece for the purpose of their employment in the agricultural sector. The lists are put together from the Egyptian side, which is responsible for the selection of applicants. However, the agreement does not appear to have been implemented yet.[43]

Neither Greece nor Cyprus has a bilateral agreement with Lebanon for legal migration despite the close ties the three countries share. Limited legal migration channels to the EU can be utilised by the Lebanese, particularly through the Blue Card Scheme. The total number of reported emigrants from the country between 2018 and 2021 was estimated at 195,433.[44] Those who migrated first, i.e., during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, were those with significant financial capital and dual citizenship. Accessible immigration pathways for Lebanese are available outside the EU, while some Lebanese also opt to pursue their higher education abroad as a pathway out of the country, or through available work visa programs for high-skilled workers.[45] However, these are limited pathways.

Cyprus became a favoured destination for Greeks migrating during the financial crisis. The ease in mobility, cultural and language similarities, and the available labour market options rendered Cyprus attractive to a significant number of Greeks. Cyprus also hosts a large community of South Asians resident on the island under various work visas, predominantly for domestic and agricultural work purposes. These are mainly individuals from the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Vietnam, whose access and visas are usually facilitated by labour agents.[46]

Although both Egypt and Lebanon host a significant number of migrants, the percentage of those who have legalized

38 UNHCR Flash Update (2024, October). UNHCR Syria Flash Update #18, Response to Displacement from Lebanon to Syria- Reporting period: 24 September - 25 October 2024. https://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/10/UNHCR-FLASH-UPDATE-18_Displacement-from-Lebanon_25-October-2024.pdf

39 Baroud, M. (2024).

40 Messa, A. (2024, December).

41 It is a "residence by investment program" that allows individuals to obtain temporary or permanent residency in a given country so they can live and work there. The investments may include (depending on the country) buying property, investing in a business or opening up one. Golden Visa programs were popular in southern EU MS during the financial crisis period as a way of attracting investment.

42 For the Region of Attica, the Regional Units of Thessaloniki, Mykonos, and Santorini, and the islands with a population of more than 3,100 inhabitants, the minimum value of real estate at the time of acquisition is 800,000 euro.

43 Dimitriadi, A. (2024, July). Looking for seasonal workers: Greece's search for migrant labour. ELIAMEP Policy Paper. https://www.eliamep.gr/en/looking-for-seasonal-workers-greeces-search-for-migrant-labor/ ; Fahry, A. (2024, December).

44 Baroud, M. (2024).

45 Ibid.

46 Messa, A. (2024, December).

their stay is not known. The number of foreign workers in Egypt's private and investment sectors reached 17,357 in 2023 up from 13,331 in the previous year according to the Egyptian Central Public Mobilization and Statistics. Under Egyptian law, non-citizens' right to work is strictly regulated under the Labor Code (Law No. 12 of 2003) and key ministerial decrees. Non-citizens must obtain a work permit, secure authorization for entry and residency for work purposes, and adhere to a quota system that restricts foreign employees to no more than 10% of a workplace's total workforce. The conditions for obtaining a work permit are highly restrictive, with permits being valid for only one year and requiring annual renewal. Additionally, the process is costly, with high fees for acquiring and maintaining a work permit. Meanwhile, although investors are required to obtain work permits, the process is streamlined under Investment Law No. 72 of 2017, which prioritizes foreign investments and provides several benefits such as tax incentives. In Lebanon foreigners wishing to work must be sponsored by a Lebanese national (a kafeel or sponsor) under the Kafala or sponsorship system, a set of procedures based on the entry and exit law, which ties their residency permit to their employer. They must also obtain a work permit. The Kafala system has been compared to "modern-day slavery," particularly for migrant domestic workers, who are also excluded from Lebanon's Labor Law and its protections.[47]

Things to watch out for regarding migration in the Eastern corridor

- High levels of uncertainty in post-Assad Syria make the mass return of Syrian refugees in the short term unlikely. At the same time, fears related to the new government are likely to prompt the displacement of Syrian minorities.
- The Israeli operations in Lebanon have exacerbated existing socio-economic conditions while creating significant displacement of the Lebanese people
- Egyptian migration will likely increase as a result of socio-economic pressures
- Absence of legal pathways will continue to push people to irregular journeys in the year ahead
- Greece and Cyprus are likely to continue undertaking deterrence measures if faced with an increase and push for returns to the region

47 Majzoub, A. (2022). Lebanon's abusive kafala (sponsorship) system. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/04/lebanons-abusive-kafala-sponsorship-system

3

POLICIES OF DETERRENCE

The external dimension of migration offers a framework in which policies develop; Greece and Cyprus are increasingly engaged in this dimension in terms of their support for deals with Lebanon and Egypt as well as the different bilateral agreements they have reached with the respective countries in the region. However, beyond bilateral agreements, when we look at the Mediterranean, and particularly the south / southeastern part, it becomes clear that we have a proliferation of deterrence policies, with different "recipients" depending on the country in focus. To an extent, across all countries these are also shaped by domestic preferences.

Greece has a long history of deterrence as a core element of its approach to migration; however, since 2019 it has sought to further strengthen deterrence as a practice. Persistent issues since 2020 remain, including the alleged pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish maritime and land borders,[48] loss of life at sea (including the Pylos wreckage in 2023),[49] poor reception conditions (especially on the Greek islands in the Aegean), and an anti-Turkish discourse that was partly facilitated by the "border crisis" of February-March 2020[50]. The latter proved to be a game changer for Greece. In February 2020, thousands of migrants moved towards the Greek-Turkish land border of Evros. In response, Greece closed its border and suspended access to asylum in its territory. It would be one of the first countries to do so, and eventually Cyprus would also replicate the "suspension" approach with regard to Syrians. Deterrence, goes beyond legislation. Greece has expanded and will continue to expand the building of a fence across the Evros land border.[51] It has also pushed for reinvigorating the EU-Turkey Statement and/or establishing deals with third countries such as Lebanon and Egypt supporting European Commission plans.

A similar approach has been adopted in recent years by Cyprus. In 2022 Cyprus started to more intensely implement accelerated procedures for asylum applications,[52] utilising the list of safe countries, stricter criteria to filter applications, and prioritizing the return and deportation of individuals whose claims are rejected.[53] An increased use of detention and deportation policies has also been noted during the last five years. Furthermore, applications from Syrians have been suspended since April 2024[54] leaving over 14,000 Syrians in limbo,[55] while the Cypriot government has refused entry to the internationally recognised south from the Turkish-occupied north of 30 asylum seekers, who have remained in the UN-Controlled buffer zone. This became a significant issue in the summer of 2024, creating tensions between the Cypriot authorities and UNFICYP and UNHCR, with UNHCR criticising Cyprus of pushbacks to the UN buffer zone.[56] Finally, the government has also sought to increase the number of returns. In 2023, Cyprus had the highest percentage of returns among EU countries, while ranking fourth in absolute numbers (9,193 persons in 2023; 5800 in 2022).[57]

Considering EU externalization policies such as deals with Lebanon and Egypt including the EU readmission agreements to facilitate returns to third countries and bilateral agreements such as that between Cyprus and Lebanon to facilitate returns it is not surprising that countries in the region are increasingly mirroring the policies of the EU and its member states.

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48 European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) (2024). Report on the visit to Greece. 21, https://rm.coe.int/1680b0e4e1 ; ECRE (January 2024). Greece: Ongoing Pushbacks and Tragedies – More Reports Highlight the Country's Inhumane and 'Failing' Asylum System. https://ecre.org/greece-ongoing-pushbacks-and-tragedies-more-reports-highlight-the-countrys-inhumane-and-failing-asylum-system-ecthr-rules-against-the-authorities/

49 UNHCR (2024). One year on from the tragic shipwreck off Pylos, Greece. Joint Statement UNHCR-IOM. https://www.unhcr.org/europe/news/news/one-year-tragic-shipwreck-pylos-greece

50 Bailey-Morley, A. and Lowe, C. (2023). Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Greece country profile. London: ODI. https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-greece-country-profile

51 Dimitriadi, A. (2023). A Steel Fence for Europe's External Borders. Border Criminologies. https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2023/05/steel-fence-europes-external-borders

52 Messa, A. (2024, December).

53 Article 12A IPAC Law, see Messa, A. (2024, December).

54 Messa, A. (2024, December).

55 Litzkow, J. (2024). Cyprus' migration dilemma: hardline measures, regional conflict and rising pressures. Mixed Migration Centre. https://mixedmigration.org/cyprus-migration-hardline-measures-regional-conflict-and-rising-pressures/

56 Messa, A. (2024, December).

57 ibid.

In Lebanon, increasing raids and crackdowns on Syrian refugees with irregular status, coupled with forced deportations and the reintroduction of the "Voluntary Return Plan" that seeks to "facilitate" the return of Syrian refugees to Syria in cooperation with the Syrian regime, have contributed to a very hostile environment for Syrian refugees. The situation is further exacerbated by rising anti-Syrian refugee sentiment among the general population, decreasing aid, difficulties in regularizing their stay, and restrictions on their freedom of movement,[58] including due to security measures and curfews imposed by municipalities in several cities and towns across the country.[59] According to InfoMigrants, the "Lebanese General Security appealed to fellow citizens not to hire or host Syrians unless they hold a regular residency permit, threatening with sanctions those who do not respect this measure." The Lebanese government has further restricted access to residency permits, making it more difficult for Syrians to obtain and renew them.[60] In May 2024, the Lebanese GDGS (General Directorate of General Security) announced strict regulations restricting the basis on which Syrians could enter and stay in Lebanon.[61] The regulations cancelled previously allowed residency categories, making some refugees irregular overnight. In 2023, only about 20% of Syrian refugees over the age of 15 held a residency permit.[62]

Egypt has been intensifying its regulatory measures on refugees within its territory, which has had a significant impact on the Sudanese community. The Global Detention Project (GDP) issued an appeal following allegations of push backs by Egyptian authorities of Sudanese back to Sudan. In addition, access has been restricted since 2023. In the appeal, the GDP details the shift in Egyptian policy. Although in 2024 Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement known as "Four Freedoms Convention," which allows free movement between citizens of the two countries, in June 2023 Egyptian authorities issued a decision requiring women, children under 16, and men over 50 to obtain entry visas to cross into Egypt. Since the eruption of the conflict in Sudan in April 2023, Egypt has been criticised for engaging the deportation of Sudanese refugees, in addition to large numbers of non-Sudanese seeking to transit Sudan en route to Egypt and other destinations.[63]

The EU deal with Egypt, which was heavily supported by Italy and Greece, has received criticism both in the EU and in Egypt, albeit for different reasons. In the EU, concerns have been expressed that the focus has been overwhelmingly on enforcing borders, reducing movements, and leveraging migration to support Egypt's economy, with some arguing that the financial package will simply push Egypt further to increasing arrests, arbitrary detention and (unlawful) deportations.[64]

Despite the GoE's support for the partnership, human rights organisations are urging the EU to ensure that financial assis tance to Egypt leads to tangible human rights improvements. The organisations stress that economic measures should not worsen social rights or contribute to poverty, as addressing these issues is crucial for tackling Egypt's economic instability and migration pressures towards the EU.[65]

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58 HRW (2024).

59 UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP (2024). VASyR 2023: Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2023-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon

60 InfoMigrants (2024, May). Lebanon cracks down on Syrian refugees, who flee to Europe. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/57060/lebanon-cracks-down-on-syrian-refugees-who-flee-to-europe

61 GDGS (2024 May 8). Statement issued by the #Media_Affairs_Office [Facebook Post]. https://www.facebook.com/share/p/Qt6982LA13e-16GQd/

62 UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP (2024). VASyR 2023: Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2023-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon

63 Creta, S. and Khalil, N. (2024, April). Inside Egypt's secret scheme to detain and deport thousands of Sudanese refugees. The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigations/2024/04/25/exclusive-inside-egypt-secret-scheme-detain-deport-thousands-sudan-refugees

64 van Moorsel, J. and Bonfiglio, A. (2024, April). A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt 'strategic and comprehensive partnership'. Mixed Migration Center. https://mixedmigration.org/eu-egypt-partnership/

65 Baroud, M. (2024, June 13). Joint NGO letter on the EU's macro-financial assistance to Egypt and human rights. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/13/joint-ngo-letter-eus-macro-financial-assistance-egypt-and-human-rights

4

SOCIETIES

Despite the differences among the countries in the region, they all share commonalities in the societal challenges that refugees and migrants face.

Protection and Access to Rights

Across both sides of the Mediterranean this remains a critical issue, as it necessitates different policy responses and capacities.

Egypt is signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as to the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. These Conventions are focused on providing temporary protection for refugees, mainly in partnership with UNHCR and international organizations, and avoiding pathways to permanent settlement. Refugee status determination is undertaken by UNHCR. However, in November 2024, the Egyptian parliament approved a new bill to regulate asylum in the country. The law "aims to establish a comprehensive legal framework for refugees, establishing a committee led by the prime minister."[66] The approval of the Cabinet's bill for a new asylum law marks the first step toward institutionalizing Egypt's international obligations in the asylum file. The draft law is set to offer refugees various basic rights for the first time, notably the right to apply for Egyptian citizenship. It also restricts many of the new gains, as well as eligibility for refugee status, by linking them to consideration of "national security" and "public order."[67]

In contrast, Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Additional Protocol. Lebanon has only one domestic law pertaining to asylum that is highly politicized and maintains an informal relationship between the government and the UNHCR, which is responsible for RSD (Refugee Status Determination). The entry and stay of migrant workers and foreigners in Lebanon are regulated by the 1962 Law "Regulating the Entry and Stay of Foreigners in Lebanon and their Exit from the Country," and they must obtain a residency permit to stay in the country. The law also applies to refugees, with Syrian refugees needing a residency permit, while Palestinians must register with the Ministry of Interior and are issued an Identification Card for Palestine Refugees, which serves as a residency permit.[68]

Both Greece and Cyprus are EU member states, and apply the Common European Asylum System, in addition to having ratified the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. However, they diverge regarding how they have utilized the asylum legislation to reduce safeguards.

Since 2016 Greece has undertaken several reforms in its asylum system, driven by adoption of the EU-Turkey statement of 18 March 2016. Following the July 2019 elections, the new government announced a more restrictive policy on migration and asylum, amending once more the asylum procedure with Law 4636/2019 (hereinafter International Protection Act/IPA), which entered into force on 1 January 2020. The new Law has been criticised for reducing safeguards for people seeking international protection and for creating additional pressure on the overstretched capacity of administrative and judicial authorities. Since then, several reforms have been implemented to speed up the asylum procedure, but which also further weaken basic guarantees for persons in need of protection.[69] Throughout the years, various deficiencies have plagued the asylum system, from limited staff to delays in issuing decisions to, more recently, absence of interpretation, which has resulted in postponing asylum registrations and interviews, directly impacting asylum applicants who are often uninformed of the postponement of their case.[70]

Cyprus also amended its asylum system in October 2020. The Refugee Law provides for both a regular and an accelerated

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66 InfoMigrants. (2024, November). Egypt: Parliament approves controversial asylum law. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/61288/egypt-parliament-approves-controversial-asylum-law

67 Bakr, A., & Kassab, B. (2024, November 5). Egypt's 1st bill on asylum-seekers to balance rights against 'stability of Egyptian society'. Mada Masr. https://www.madamasr.com/en/2024/11/05/feature/politics/egypts-1st-bill-on-asylum-seekers-to-balance-rights-against-stability-of-egyptian-society/

68 Fahmy, A. (2024, December).

69 Greek Council for Refugees (2024, November 10). Short overview of the asylum procedure. AIDA Report. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure/

70 Refugee Support Aegean (2024, November). Major deficiencies in the provision of interpretation services in Greece. https://rsaegean.org/en/major-deficiencies-in-the-provision-of-interpretation-services-in-greece/

procedure. The latter was not particularly used until 2022, since which time it has increased and is focused mainly on nationals of Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Nigeria. The decision issued by the Asylum Service can lead to various outcomes: recognition of refugee status, subsidiary protection status, rejection. As a result of the amendments to the Refugee Law that entered into force October 2020, the Asylum Service can issue a single negative and return decision.[71]

One important common right across all countries is that of non-refoulement. Non-refoulement is a fundamental right of refugees and asylum seekers: it means that no matter how one arrives to a country, they are protected from deportation or return before a decision is issued on their refugee application. However, as previously mentioned, several pushbacks over the last five years have been reported across all countries in focus.

Integration in the different countries

Integration is a multi-dimensional issue that involves the mutual adaptation of migrants/refugees and the host society, based on principles of protection of fundamental rights, respect, tolerance and non-discrimination. In other words, integration is about equal rights and equal access to services. In the EU, member states prepare and submit integration plans in line with EU priorities and receive funding through the AMIF for the integration of refugees and migrants.

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) points out that integration in Cyprus is categorised as "immigration without integration," since the policies on the island do not reflect the reality, scoring a mere 41 out of 100 points on the scale for 2020.[72] This has been largely the case over the last five years. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, a consortium was assigned through EU funding to develop a new Strategic Integration Plan but was abandoned until 2023, when new information suggested that the plan was being revised.[73] Finally, after years in the making, the new strategic integration plan was unveiled at the end of March 2024, which includes a 50-point action plan.[74]

In 2022 Greece released the third National Strategy for the Social Integration of Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection.[75] The Action Plan focuses exclusively on asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and is harmonised with the current legislative framework of Greece. It includes four main pillars: pre-integration of asylum seekers; social integration of beneficiaries of international protection; prevention of, and effective protection from, all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse; and monitoring the integration process.

Overall, "the organized reception and integration of people entering Greece were not a priority for many years. Au contraire, the focus was placed on managing migration flows."[76] Although the actions of the last five years aim to replace the absence of an inclusive integration plan, it still needs more coherence and continuity. The Migrant Integration Policy Index notes that migrants in Greece "enjoy basic rights but not equal opportunities. So, the country's approach is thus, classified as providing 'equality on paper.'"[77]

Health Care

The Egyptian legal system stipulates differentiated access to health care for citizens and non-nationals, reserving full services for citizens and guaranteeing only emergency care for others. A new health insurance law and an agreement with the UNHCR aims to protect refugees from discrimination in healthcare, but its implementation for non-citizens remains uncertain. For now, refugees can only access healthcare if employed or enrolled in school.[78] Syrian refugees enjoy special status in Egypt's healthcare system by having access to the primary health care system through public health clinics. Refugees in Egypt face significant barriers to health care due to inconsistent legal knowledge among officials, discrimination, language barriers, and poor hospital conditions, with reports of overcrowding, long waits, and misdiagnoses.

Healthcare in Cyprus is accessible to all. Refugees, but also asylum seekers while their applications are being processed, have access to healthcare. However, asylum seekers do not have access to the National Health System (GESY), despite the fact that when they are employed, contributions to GESY are automatically deducted from their salaries.

The right to healthcare is not enshrined in Lebanon's constitution; as such, it is not guaranteed for Lebanese or non-citizens. Healthcare is not universally available, the system is fragmented, there is a large reliance on private healthcare, and high out-of-pocket spending. Non-citizens also fall outside most available social protection schemes and are excluded from Lebanon's recently launched National Social Protection Strategy. Palestinian refugees receive subsidized healthcare through UNRWA and the Red Crescent Society, while Syrians and refugees of other nationalities receive subsidized healthcare through UNHCR. Some international and

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71 Messa, A. (2024, December); Cyprus Refugee Council (2024, July). Short overview of the asylum procedure: Cyprus. AIDA. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/cyprus/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure/

72 Governance of migrant integration in Cyprus (June 2024). European Commission https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-cyprus_en

73 Drousiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (May 2024). Asylum Information Database: Cyprus Country Report -2023 Update https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AIDA-CY_2023-Update.pdf

74 Charalambous, S.(April 2024). Cyprus: New action plan for migrant integration, European Commission, https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/cyprus-new-action-plan-migrant-integration_en

75 Ministry of Migration & Asylum (2022). National Integration Strategy. https://migration.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NATIONAL-STRATEGY-FINAL.pdf

76 Sarris, N., Mouriki, A., Stathopoulou, T. and Frangiskou, A.(2020). From reception to integration: migrant populations in Greece during and in the aftermath of the crisis. Research Report N.36. National Centre for Social Research, p.17.

77 Migrant Integration Policy Index. (2019). Greece-2019. https://www.mipex.eu/greece

78 ibid

non-governmental organizations offer subsidized healthcare for migrant workers.[79] Nevertheless, migrants and refugees continue to face barriers to accessing healthcare, including direct costs such as for treatment or consultation fees, and indirect costs such as for transportation, and geographical accessibility, while those without a valid residency permit may face difficulties accessing healthcare centres due to limited freedom of movement.[80]

Healthcare in Greece is different on paper and in reality. Free access to healthcare for beneficiaries of international protection is provided under the same conditions as for nationals. Despite the favourable legal framework, actual access to healthcare services is hindered in practice by significant shortages of resources and capacity - a problem for both natives and foreigners.[81] To access healthcare, a Social Security Number (AMKA) is needed, which since December 2023 is conditioned upon having a "valid residence title in the country with labour market access." According to a survey conducted by UNHCR[82] from July 2022 until June 2023 with 424 beneficiaries of international protection, "Twenty-nine per cent of respondents had difficulty accessing healthcare because of language barriers, challenges to securing appointments and lack of information on the national health care system," while the number of households that have at least one member with specific needs is 36%. Chronic illnesses, mental health issues and physical disabilities are the top three reported vulnerabilities.

Education

Education is one area where we see more convergence across the Mediterranean, with access to school and alternative measures prioritised for minors.

Refugees in Egypt are entitled to education, yet access varies widely, often depending on immigration status and nationality. Irregular migrants are excluded as enrolment in any school requires a valid residence permit. Certain nationalities, such as Syrian and Yemeni students, can enrol in Egyptian public schools at the same cost as nationals; however, children of other nationalities do not have access to public schools. Community schools provide an alternative but lack accreditation and stable funding, leading the UNHCR to advocate for improved access, government collaboration with community centres, and systemic improvements to benefit all students in Egypt.[83]

In Cyprus, access to education is mandatory for everyone under the age of 15 years, regardless of the legal status, or lack thereof, of the students, as outlined in the Guide to Education in Cyprus available at the Ministry of Education website.[84]

In Lebanon, access to education is free of charge for Palestinians through UNRWA-operated schools. Syrian refugees can access education in second-shift afternoon schools within Lebanon's public education system. Enrolment is free for primary education, while fees apply for secondary education. Nevertheless, the majority of Syrian children are not in school, while a significant number are registered in non-formal education programs that may support transition to formal education. Barriers to enrolment exist, including the need to submit identity documents and a valid residency permit in some cases.[85] Associated costs may also act as a barrier, including the cost of both transportation and educational materials. Cost is also a barrier to enrolment in education for migrants and refugees of other nationalities.

In Greece, the IPA frames education as a right and an obligation of children seeking asylum. Children who wish to opt out of education face restrictions in accessing material reception conditions, while their parents may face sanctions-- also applicable to Greek citizens.[86] Non- formal education is offered to minors in partnership with UNICEF via the Open Accommodation Sites, which serve as a bridge to accessing formal education. Though progress has been achieved, many still remain without access. UNICEF's Annual Report on Greece for 2023[87] estimated that by October 2023 there were 25,000 refugee and migrant children in Greece, including 7,000 children from Ukraine, while by the end of the year the number of unaccompanied and separated children was at 2,000. Of the 25,000 at the end of 2023, 15,134 refugee and migrant children, including 1,289 children from Ukraine, were enrolled in schools. According to the available data provided by the Ministry of Education, as of 10 January 2024, out of the total 15,134 children enrolled, 14,222 attended.[88]

Employment

Employment is likely the most contested of all the "integration" elements across all countries. This is largely due to the structure of the labour market as well as the fact that Lebanon, Egypt, and Greece until recently, are facing and/or have faced a financial crisis.

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79 Baroud, M. (2023). Right to health in times of crisis: A review of barriers and challenges to achieving the right to health in Lebanon. https://annd.org/en/publications/details/barriers-to-achieving-right-to-health-lebanon-maysa-baroud

80 Government of Lebanon & United Nations (2023). Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2023. https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-lcrp-2023

81 Greek Council for Refugees (2024, November 10). Report: healthcare. AIDA. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/content-international-protection/health-care/

82 UNHCR (2022, August). Key Findings: July 2022 – June 2023 Protection Monitoring of Refugees in Greece. https://bit.ly/4dgyE2l

83 Fahmy, A. (2024, December).

84 Οδηγός Υποδοχής στην Κυπριακή Εκπαίδευση, Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Πολιτισμού https://www.moec.gov.cy/odigos-ekpaidefsis/documents/greek_odigos_ipodoxis.pdf

85 Randhawa, M. (2024). Stop politicizing education for Lebanon's refugee children. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/28/stop-politicizing-education-lebanons-refugee-children

86 Dimitriadi, A. (2024, December).

87 UNICEF (2023). Country Office Annual Report 2023 – Greece. https://bit.ly/4baeZiL.

88 Greek Council for Refugees (2024, July). Access to education: Greece. AIDA. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-education/#_ftn11

In Cyprus, employment and access to the labour market for asylum seekers has been a big issue. After many years of advocacy from civil society, and also from the private sector due to the need for additional labour in specific sectors, between 2018 to 2023, favourable changes were enacted, such as earlier access to the labour market (after one month from the date of application) and the expansion of the eligible sectors of employment. However, in October 2023, after Ministerial Decision 312/2023, access to the labour market was pushed back to nine months, while a new administrative process for hiring asylum seekers was stipulated.[89] This significantly affects access to the labour market for asylum seekers, while alienating the private sector that was already dissatisfied with the administrative process for hiring asylum seekers even before the latest change. Recognised refugees and subsidiary protection holders have full access to the labour market.[90]

Egypt is obligated under the Refugee Convention to offer refugees equal treatment to nationals regarding work conditions. High permit costs and a cap on foreign workers limit refugees' formal employment opportunities, pushing many into vulnerable, informal jobs. Easing work permit requirements, recognizing foreign qualifications, and establishing formal job-matching programs could help refugees secure sustainable livelihoods and reduce their dependence on aid. However, the economic situation in the country limits available job opportunities.

In Lebanon, policies and facilitations differ based on the migrant's nationality and work category. Integration is generally out of the question for migrants (and refugees) who reside and work in Lebanon, while pathways to naturalization are also limited.[91] Current domestic law criminalizes the irregular entry and stay of migrants, and without a residency permit, migrants and refugees risk being arrested, detained and/or deported. The latter restricts their freedom of movement, which may affect their access to employment and basic services (such as healthcare).[92] Foreigners wishing to work in Lebanon must be sponsored by a Lebanese national (a *kafeel* or sponsor) under the *Kafala* or sponsorship system. They must also obtain a work permit. Migrant workers have limited access to legal or protection services, while their employers are not likely to face repercussions. Furthermore, migrant workers are not allowed to change employers.[93] Foreigners in Lebanon can only work in limited sectors, as set out in a decision issued by the Minister of Labor in December of every year specifying the occupations, trades, and businesses that are restricted to Lebanese nationals.[94] Other barriers to accessing formal employment for migrants and refugees exist, including the cost of the work permit for some nationalities, and the required documentation, such as a residency permit. Most migrant workers and refugees in Lebanon work in the informal sector or through informal work arrangements, where they are likely to face poor working conditions, including lower wages, long working hours, limited protection, and risk of exploitation.[95]

Refugees in Greece have the same rights as citizens. Differentiation exists for asylum seekers. Following the entry into force of the IPA on 1 January 2020, a six-month time limit for asylum seekers' access to the labour market was introduced and remained in place until the reform of the Asylum Code (L. 5078/2023) in December 2023. Article 57 of the Asylum Code, as amended, provides that applicants have a right to access the labour market within sixty days of lodging their application and receipt of the relevant legal documents, as long as no first instance decision has been taken by the Asylum Service and the delay cannot be attributed to the applicant. As long as they hold a valid asylum applicant card, under article 57(2) of the Asylum Code they have access to paid employment or the provision of services or work throughout the period of validity of the card. However, the reality is that access to the labour market is difficult, due in part to the lack of skills and skill recognition/transfer, reduced opportunities as a result of a decade of austerity, and lack of language skills. This is an area where civil society has become very active. NGOs have set up Job Fairs to facilitate connections between employers from various sectors and refugees or migrants seeking employment. Additionally, UNHCR has launched the ADAMA online platform, which plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between refugees looking for jobs in Greece and prospective employers across the country. The Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS) programme has been supporting, based on a specific set of criteria, beneficiaries of international protection since July 2019. HELIOS was funded by the European Commission (AMIF) over the June 2019 - December 2021 period, as well as from the national budget currently and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Greece.[96] By November 2023, the project supported a total of 45,221 beneficiaries, yet since it is the only program of its kind it is unable to cater to the growing needs of people.

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89 Ministerial Decision 312/2023, pursuant to art. 9ş(1)(b) of the Refugee Law available in Greek, at: https://tinyurl.com/ycycztjy

90 UNHCR Help Page: Cyprus – Refugees rights and duties https://help.unhcr.org/cyprus/refugees-rights-and-duties/refugee-rights/

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92 International Commission of Jurists [ICJ] (2020). Unrecognized and unprotected: The treatment of migrants and refugees in Lebanon. https://www.icj.org/resource/lebanon-recognize-and-protect-refugees-and-migrants-human-rights-icj-new-report/

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EU's contribution to developing Resilience and Capacity in the region

Both member states like Cyprus and Greece but also third countries like Egypt and Lebanon have been on the receiving end, and continue to be, of EU support that seeks to boost resilience and capacity of countries of origin, transit and destination in undertaking migration and asylum management, while also improving the living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers. The common theme is economic and technical support.

Whether in Egypt, Lebanon, Cyprus or Greece, the EU provides funds that seek to cater to national contexts and needs. Among the member states, Greece has received the most funding on migration management since 2016, reaching 2.27 billion euros from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, 450 million euros from the Internal Security Fund and 668.9 million euros from the Emergency Support Instrument.[97] Indeed, the financial contribution has been the biggest factor in boosting Greece's resilience as a frontline state, followed by the deployment of EU Agencies as well as national experts from different member states. Cyprus has also received financial support, from two EU funds, including 46.69 million euros from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and 70.92 million euros from the Internal Security Fund. The implementation phase of the Pact on Migration and Asylum is also expected to offer more solidarity to the frontline states, which has been a key demand of both Greece and Cyprus. At the same time, the Pact prescribes that in order to receive solidarity contributions member states must adhere to their responsibilities. This will require better management not only of the asylum procedure, but overall improvement in conditions of reception, and eventual integration.

The EU supports Egypt and Lebanon with economic and technical assistance to help manage migration, aiming to improve conditions for migrants and locals alike to ease migration pressures on Europe.

From the EU side, there is a clear prioritisation of boosting capacity in third countries to function as gatekeepers to the EU. The external dimension of migration is increasingly being prioritised through deals with third countries, and it is strongly supported by frontline member states along the Eastern Mediterranean route–particularly Greece and Cyprus. As the main recipients of mixed migratory movements, both countries have taken the position that irregular mixed migration should be prevented, and this can only be done in partnership with countries of transit and/or origin. The experience from the Eastern Mediterranean has shown that, in their current format, the effectiveness of the external dimension is patchy at best since the different partnerships offer financial and technical assistance for migration and border management, without supporting long-term legal pathways, burden redistribution or enhancing the capacity of countries like Lebanon or Egypt to undertake reforms in a manner that would benefit their domestic needs. These two countries face economic challenges, limited resources, and public resistance to migrants due to strained infrastructure and rising costs, leading to scepticism over their role as a primary host country. Both also collaborate with the EU while prioritising policies that align with their own interests, in the case of Egypt towards increasing legal pathways for Egyptians to Europe, while for Lebanon increasing returns of Syrians. This means that resilience acquires a very different meaning from how it is interpreted and understood within the EU context.

To this we should add also the agency and resilience of the people on the move. Increasingly encountering deterrence practices, hostility and unwillingness across different countries to either host them in the long term or to offer them holistic protection (which includes integration), they face multiple obstacles in a journey that is becoming longer and more dangerous, while risking returns, pushbacks and legal limbo in countries of transit and destination. Here, the EU script is less clear, because while funding is provided to civil societies and international organisations as well as the countries in the region to protect the rights of people on the move, the primary goal remains their deterrence. It is a contradiction that lies at the heart of the EU's migration and asylum policy, and one that is being exported in its external dimension, affecting countries in the broader region as well as people on the move.

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MIGRATION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:

Commonalities and differences among Egypt, Lebanon, Greece and Cyprus

The Mediterranean is characterised by mixed irregular migratory movement, consisting of forced migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees and economically motivated migrants. The absence of legal pathways pushes these groups to undertake irregular journeys, via both maritime and land borders. Although this has been a consistent feature of the Eastern Mediterranean route since the early 2000s, in recent years noticeable shifts have taken place not only regarding nationalities, but also in how countries of destination and/or origin take on different roles (transit, destination, origin) for different groups on the move. Despite their differences, research shows several commonalities exist in how Greece and Cyprus but also Lebanon and Egypt approach and attempt to manage their position in the migratory journey, as countries of departure, destination and/or transit.

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