Irregular Migration Across the Mediterranean: The Long Road Ahead to Revamp Partnerships

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Irregular migration is here to stay

Over the past year and a half, as the pandemic wreaked havoc on the global economy and forced most of the world into lockdowns, migration has taken a back seat in policymakers' agendas. Yet, migration across the Mediterranean region has not "disappeared": despite all odds, it is already on the rise and can be expected to rise further in the near future.

The respondents of the survey, who all hail from Southern Mediterranean countries, seem to be deeply aware of this fact. Asked whether they believed if irregular migration is likely to continue to increase in the future, over 80% of them answered affirmatively, both when they were asked about migrants from other countries, and about intentions to migrate of their fellow citizens. Those respondents who identified the main driver of irregular migration as conflict or instability, or as a lack of socio-economic perspectives, were the most adamant in believing that migration was also likely to increase, with over or close to 90% of the interviewees answering positively.

This comes as no surprise to observers of migration trends. Years before the 2015 "refugee crisis" that brought 1.2 million irregular migrants to Europe in the span of eight months, irregular migration across the Mediterranean had been rising slowly but steadily. According to own data compiled from official sources, between 2002 and 2008 irregular crossings across the Mediterranean and Western African (i.e., Canary Islands) routes averaged around 39,000. These numbers roughly doubled between 2009 and 2013, as irregular border crossings detected by Frontex along the Western, Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, plus Western Africa averaged 78,000 per year (Frontex, 2021).

Over the past five years, as the "refugee crisis" subsided and previous trends resumed, irregular border crossings by sea increased and forecast models predict that regular or irregular migration to Europe will continue to slowly but steadily rise over the next two decades

The paradox of the pandemic: while its public health effects were prompting governments to restrict regular travel, its economic effects were driving irregular cross-border mobility further up.

Over the past five years, as the "refugee crisis" subsided and previous trends resumed, irregular border crossings by sea increased by another 67%, averaging roughly 130,000 each year (Frontex, 2021). Moreover, a number of forecast models predict that (regular or irregular) migration from Africa, Asia, or Southern Mediterranean countries into Europe will continue to slowly but steadily rise over the next two decades (Villa 2020, European Commission, 2019, Bijak, 2016).

Within this context, the pandemic has only exacerbated previous trends. The collapse in regular migration, as border crossings closed and lockdowns ensued, was soon offset by a noticeable increase in irregular flows along certain routes, particularly from Africa. This increase highlights the paradox of the pandemic: while its public health effects were prompting governments to restrict regular travel, its economic effects were driving irregular cross-border mobility further up. At the same time, the pandemic further "regionalised" irregular migration, with the average distance travelled by irregular migrants to reach Europe becoming shorter compared to 2014-2019 trends (Villa, 2021).

All in all, in the post-pandemic period (since March 2020 until September 2021) more than 165,000 irregular migrants managed to reach EU countries by sea.[1] At least another 40,000 were intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and brought back to Libya,[2] and less complete data from the Turkish, Moroccan, and Tunisian coast guards suggest that, overall, close to a quarter of a million of irregular migrants attempted the risky Mediterranean sea route.

Meanwhile, regular migration channels to EU countries shrunk to the lowest level since at least 2008. Last year, first residence permits released by 25 EU countries that have disclosed this information so far dropped by a staggering 30% compared to 2019, from 2.8 to less than 2 million (Eurostat, 2021). This drop, that Camie (2020) estimated as the steepest since the start of the Second World War, was even more dramatic for some large EU countries such as Italy (-75%) and Germany (-68%) which, alone, made up almost a quarter of all residence permits released by EU countries in 2019.

Further instability is increasing irregular migration pressure

When respondents to the EMM5-EuroMeSCo Euromed Survey were asked about the drivers of irregular migration, they provided different answers depending on whether the migrant was fellow citizen or a person travelling from a third country. Respondents largely ascribed migration of their own citizens to a lack of socio-economic

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[1] Author's calculations on monthly data released by UNHCR (Operational Data Portal, Mediterranean Situation, accessed on 13 October 2021).

[2] Author's calculations on weekly data released by IOM (Libya Maritime Update, 3-9 October 2021).

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perspectives or joining relatives living abroad (for a total of 67% of respondents choosing either), and just 15% to conflict or instability. On the other hand, they also responded that transiting migrants were driven to move around half of the time (49%) by conflict or instability, and 33% of the time by a lock of socio-economic perspectives or to join relatives.

GRAPH 1

Q.8 What is the main driver of outwards irregular migration from your country?

Migrants transiting through your country
Citizens from your country
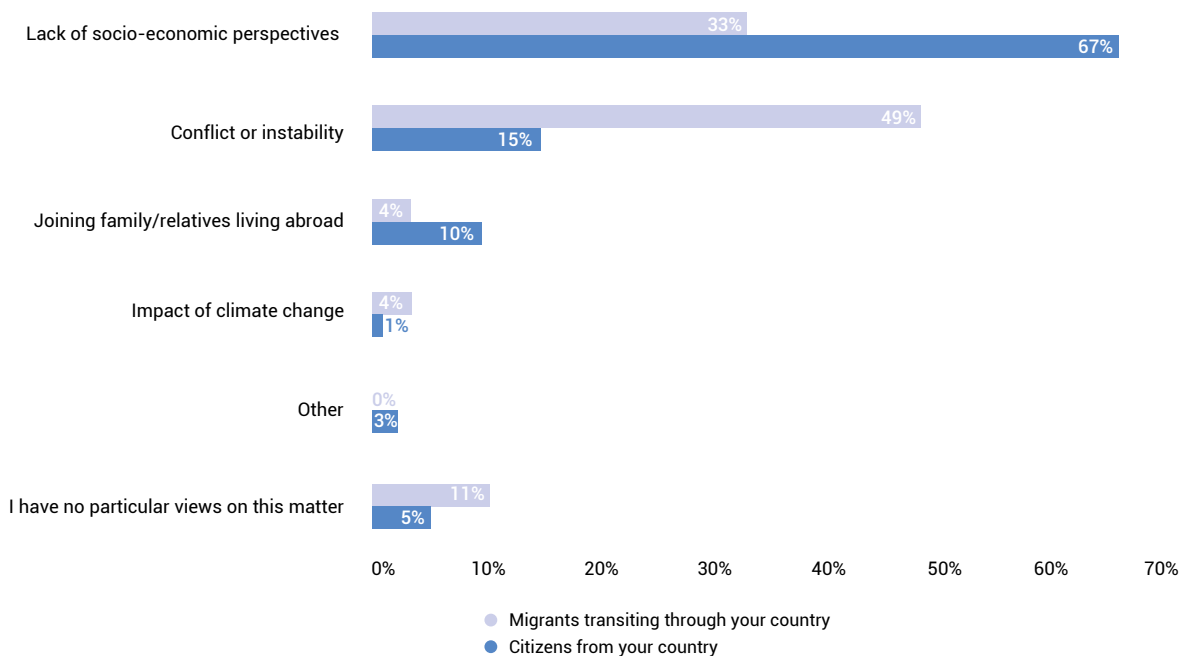
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the EMM5-EuroMeSCo Euromed Survey

This belief coincides with reality, reflecting quite closely what we know from data on irregular migration from Tunisia and Morocco, on the one hand, and Libya and Turkey, on the other. Most if not all Moroccans and Tunisians who arrive at Spain's or Italy's shores move for economic reasons. Very few of them are granted asylum or any other kind of international protection, such as the EU-level subsidiary protection or some other nationally-mandated third level of protection. Contrary to this, migrants reaching the EU irregularly from Libya or Turkey are overwhelmingly transiting migrants and have a much higher likelihood to be granted some form of international protection. These two separate drivers impacted in separate but interacting way on the dynamics of post-pandemic irregular migration, and as such deserve closer scrutiny.

Tunisia

For years, Tunisia has been plagued by chronic unemployment, compounded by a volatile socio-political climate in the years after the Jasmine Revolution of 2011. During the pandemic, border closures and the collapse of air traffic struck a serious blow to a country whose economy is heavily dependent on tourism, which accounts for about 8% of national GDP and employs close to 400,000 people, i.e. about 10% of the workforce. This serious blow has come just a few years after the terrorist attacks that had already been reducing the country's attractiveness as a tourist destination since 2015.

According to official data, tourist arrivals in Tunisia suffered an almost total wipe-out between April and June last year, and in December were still down by 90% if compared to the year before (UNWTO, 2021).[3] Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Tunisian seasonal migrants found themselves unable to reach Italy and other European destinations through regular channels. This was followed by a rapid increase in irregular sea arrivals from Tunisia to Italy. In the period January-September, migrants reaching Italy from Tunisia rose from 1,800 in 2019, to 8,800 in 2020 (a five-fold increase), and then again to 14,600 in 2021. What is more, between July 2020 and September 2021, over two thirds of these arrivals were Tunisians, whereas between 2013 and 2019 arrivals were composed by a mixture of different (mostly Sub-Saharan) nationalities.

Morocco and the Canary Islands

Irregular arrivals to Spain rose significantly in the second half of 2018, only to collapse in the first half of 2019. This was in great part thanks to the cooperation of the Moroccan government, which stepped up the level of patrols carried out by its coast guard and deepened its coordination with EU counterparts.

The irregular route via the western Mediterranean almost closed in March-April 2020, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Europe, only to grow busier again and reach 2019 levels by September 2020. In the meantime, a second route – the direct route from West Africa to Spain's Canary Islands – reopened. The high number of arrivals recorded in 2020 (over 23,000, 82% of which were concentrated in the last four months of the year) is reminiscent of the "Cayucos crisis" which brought around 35,000 irregular migrants to the archipelago between 2005 and 2006, at the time prompting the Spanish government to create detention and repatriation centres that have been reopened in recent months.

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[3] UNWTO, "World Tourism Barometer", 18:7, December 2020.

Libya

In Libya, a number of migrants living in the country face dire conditions. Sub-Saharan African migrants reaching Libya with the explicit purpose to cross to Europe irregularly probably face the worst conditions, regardless of whether they are held in detention centres or live in urban environments (Council of Europe, 2021). It is not surprising, therefore, that even in March 2020, at the peak of the pandemic in Italy, many migrants and asylum seekers in Libya boarded boats just the same, in the hope of reaching north. This trend only increased over the months, and has reached levels not seen since 2017. In the period January-September 2021, irregular migration from Libya to Italy rose from just 1,400 in 2019 to 7,800 in 2020 (a five-fold increase), and then more than doubled again to 18,100 in 2021.

The EU policy toolbox – a precarious balancing act?

Half a decade on since Europe's "refugee crisis", European governments are still looking for a shared solution to the problems of internal solidarity, coordination and harmonisation of migration and refugee policies. In 2020, the package of European Commission proposals branded the "New Pact on Asylum and Migration" was first pushed back for more than six months from its original release schedule, and after its launch it was for the most part overlooked by Member States unable to find common ground on the solidarity part of the package (i.e., how to receive irregular migrants and handle asylum applications within the EU). As often happened in the past, common ground between EU countries was largely to be found in improved (and more financed) border management, as well as in increased cooperation with third countries (especially in the fields of return and reintegration).

These are largely a continuation of policies established since 2015, when the Trust Fund for Africa was launched as a financial instrument designed to foster development, strengthen trust, as well as leverage aid for cooperation of third countries in the control of irregular transits through their territory. Reinforcing external borders is also a continuity policy: while 2016 saw the approval of a proposal to transform Frontex from the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders into the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, in 2020 proposals focused on further tightening the screening of any irregular migrants entering the EU, and on strengthening the mechanisms for their repatriation.

Yet, the scarcity of essential workers during the pandemic has shown that labour migration has become crucial for both northern and southern Mediterranean countries (Kumar et al., 2021). Indeed, current estimates show that, on average, 13% of migrant workers are employed in essential occupations in EU countries (Fasani and Mazza, 2020). Moreover, the recent increases in irregular crossings are evidence that, by closing down regular channels, irregular ones are poised to swell – especially when the propensity to migrate increases, such as during local or regional recessions.

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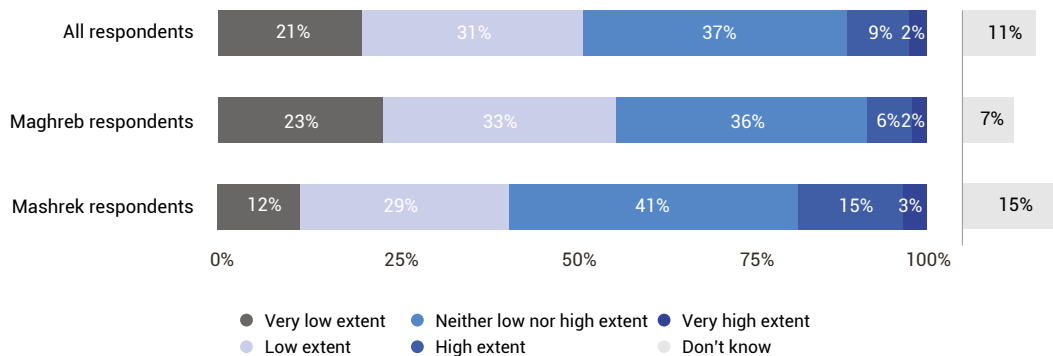
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The debate over migration governance across the two shores of the Mediterranean has grown increasingly polarised. [...]. This risks harming the relations between countries from the two shores, and to further entrench positions.

Despite the clear need for mending a "limping" intra-Mediterranean migration system, the debate over migration governance across the two shores of the Mediterranean has grown increasingly polarised. While European policymakers focus their attention on discouraging irregular migration and furthering returns, countries from the southern shore have called for widened regular migration channels (regarding benefits from remittances as being larger than the "brain drain"), and for opportunities for dialogue that do not necessarily revolve around migration. This risks harming the relations between countries from the two shores, and to further entrench positions.

Results from the survey are quite adamant: Southern Mediterranean respondents do not think the EU has been very successful in assisting their country to tackle the drivers of irregular migration. In fact, 52% of respondents rate the EU's success in this area as "low" or "very low", while just 11% rate it "high" or "very high". While only marginally, this poor result further drops in the specific region of Maghreb (56% rate the EU's success as "low" or "very low"), despite – or, possibly, exactly because – the region has been often targeted by the EU's efforts to reduce irregular border crossings over the past decade.

GRAPH 2

Q.11 To what extent has the EU been successful so far in assisting your country to tackle the driver/s you identified in Q8? (see graph 1)
Citizens from your country

	Very low	Low	Neither	High	Very high	Don't know
All respondents	21%	31%	37%	9%	2%	11%
Maghreb respondents	23%	33%	36%	6%	2%	7%
Mashrek respondents	12%	29%	41%	15%	3%	15%

- Very low extent
- Neither low nor high extent
- Very high extent
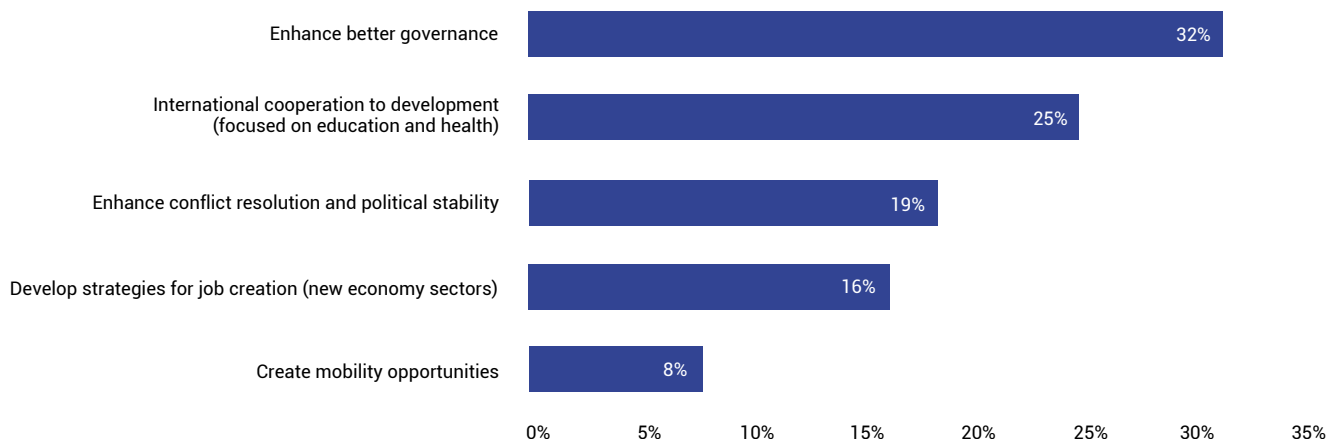- Low extent
- High extent
- Don't know

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the EMM5-EuroMeSCo Euromed Survey

Wither from here? Surely, while positive steps in migration dialogue have been few and far between as of late, they have not been absent. In fact, some proposals stand out for pointing in the right direction, striving to move towards mutually beneficial partnerships. When asked what should be done to reduce irregular migration, survey respondents single out enhancing migration governance (32%) and increasing international cooperation for development (25%), focusing especially on education and health. Another 24% points at developing strategies for job creation or creating mobility opportunities.

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GRAPH 3

Q.10 Taking into account the main driver/s you identified in Q8, what should be done to reduce iregular migration? (categories developed from the open-ended answers)

Category	Percentage
Enhance better governance	32%
International cooperation to development (focused on education and health)	25%
Enhance conflict resolution and political stability	19%
Develop strategies for job creation (new economy sectors)	16%
Create mobility opportunities	8%

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the EMM5-EuroMeSCo Euromed Survey

All this seems to fall within the remit of skills partnerships, cooperation projects that aim to address skills shortages in destination countries, while benefiting origin countries with technical and vocational education and training targeted to prospective migrants. Last June, the European Commission launched Talent Partnerships, which aim to match "the skills of workers from countries outside the EU with the labour market needs inside the EU" (European Commission, 2021). Presenting them as an explicit way to "replace irregular migration with legal pathways", EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson stroke all the right chords, emphasising that the need for legal migration is there, and that investing in education and training in third countries presents benefits that clearly outweigh the costs.

A second project worth mentioning is the EU Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF), a pilot project launched by the European Commission in 2019, working to consolidate efforts of diaspora engagement for development. There is a sore need for strong initiatives on migration diplomacy, especially those that could help addressing the fragmentation of diaspora engagement for development purposes, given that diasporas play an increasingly important role for the co-development of destination and origin countries (Villa et al., 2021). At the design, planning and implementation levels, diaspora engagement often remains quite strictly tied to bilateral relations, with one host and one origin country at its core. In this context, the EU is right to leverage regional initiatives to coordinate and support diaspora engagement, coordination, and the dissemination of best practices, and should work to strengthen such initiatives moving forward.

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Finally, a third initiative that could be explored is the revamping of the EU Blue Card. In order to make it useful to shift irregular migration towards legal channels, the EU Blue Card (currently aimed at, and limited to, high-skill workers) should move "down" the human capital chain, and offer ways to enter the EU to mid- and low-skill workers. The share of migrant essential workers shows the benefits of such a move: on average, in EU countries, around 36% of key workers in the low-qualification "cleaners and helpers" profession are foreign born, and around three quarters of these are non-EU citizens. A similar share of the 24% key migrant workers in "mining, construction, manufacturing and transport" occupations were born outside of the EU (Fasani and Mazza, 2020).

To conclude, there are ample opportunities to enhance migration partnerships across the two shores of the Mediterranean. The best way forward to restore confidence in migration policy dialogues is to explore ways to strengthen legal migration pathways, and to do so at all skill levels. By working on positive incentives to regular migration, Mediterranean countries could go back to tackling irregular migration from a position of strength, while at the same time moving towards a future in which migration along the two shores of the Mediterranean really becomes a "triple win".

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