

## IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: BORDER POLITICS AND GENDERED SPACES

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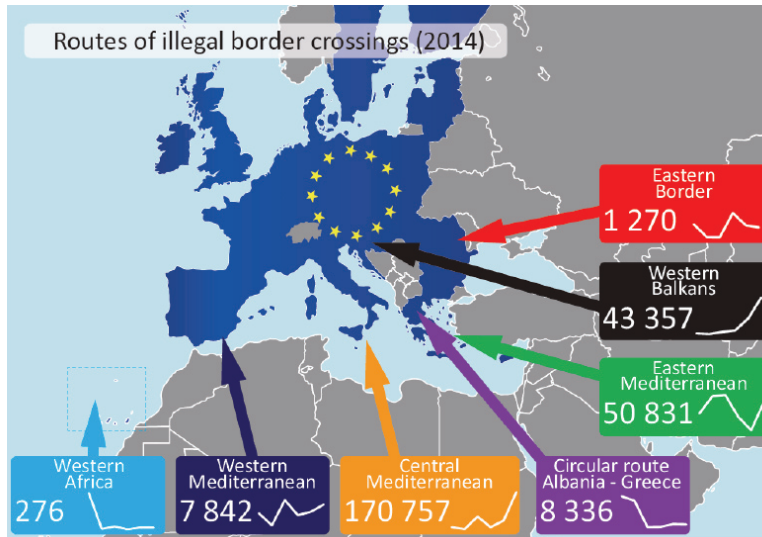
### Introduction

Human history is the history of human mobility. Migration in the Mediterranean has always been the standard pattern in the region, but more recently, due to a combination of factors, irregular migration has become the norm. One factor is the issue of transit migration that involves many “illegal” actors of the migration industry – such as those travelling without proper documents, those entering with documentation but drifting into illegality for one reason or another, those using certain countries as a stepping stone for better living standards and, of course, migrant smuggling networks consisting of migrants themselves, other intermediaries, and even officials either pushing migrants back or allowing them to enter in return for monetary gains. The other factor is the difficulty of access to asylum-seeking. Instead of obtaining the protection of the country of asylum, legal constraints and lack of recognition in getting refugee status make it harder for many resorting to irregular migration at some point either for exit or entry. This article will take up the issue of irregular migration in the Mediterranean. The topic is highly significant in migration studies, since it is one of the most important routes for irregular migration flows in terms of humanitarian issues and loss of lives, but is also a politicized issue between the countries bordering the region. After providing some maps of migration flows and statistics on three main routes in the Mediterranean – the East Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean and West Mediterranean –, the article is divided into three main subheadings: migration narratives and the persistence of the irregular migration problem; conceptualization of borders and boundaries; and borders as gendered spaces, giving only two examples from the fieldwork carried out, which involves many other nationalities.

### Maps and statistics on irregular migration in the Mediterranean

Irregular migration flows in the Mediterranean can be divided into two main timeframes: before 2015 and after 2015. The year 2015 was an important turning point in recent irregular flows due to the complexity of crises, internal conflicts and civil wars that affected many countries bordering the region and even beyond. It also signaled the period when migration became a hotly debated topic among political circles and inhabitants due to much larger numbers involved in these irregular flows. Different nationalities dominate the three different routes: on the Western Mediterranean route, Northwest and sub-Saharan Africa, but also Syria; on the Central Mediterranean route, Egypt, Bangladesh and Tunisia; and on the Eastern Mediterranean route, Syria, Afghanistan and Nigeria (Frontex, 2023).

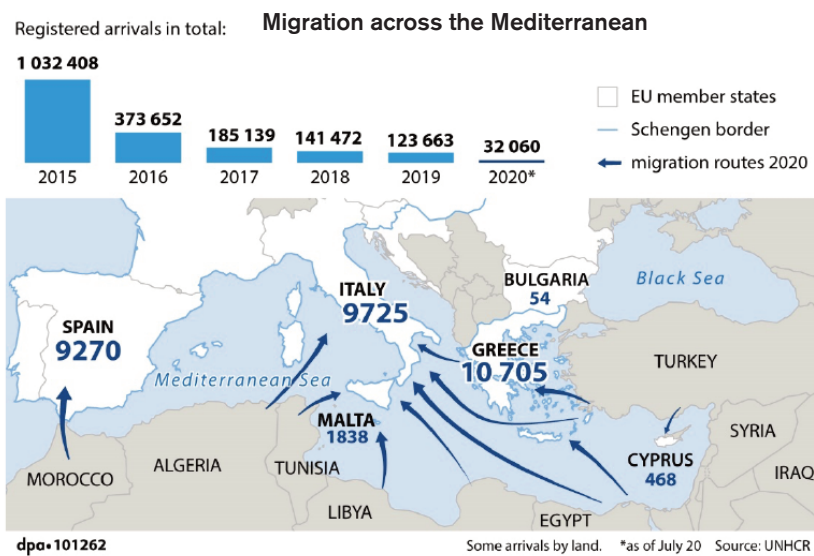
**Map 1. Irregular Migration Flows**



Source: European Parliamentary Research Service. Available at: [https://epthinktank.eu/2015/04/27/irregular-immigration-in-the-eu-facts-and-figures/illegal\\_border\\_crossing\\_sea\\_land-map/?iframe=true](https://epthinktank.eu/2015/04/27/irregular-immigration-in-the-eu-facts-and-figures/illegal_border_crossing_sea_land-map/?iframe=true)

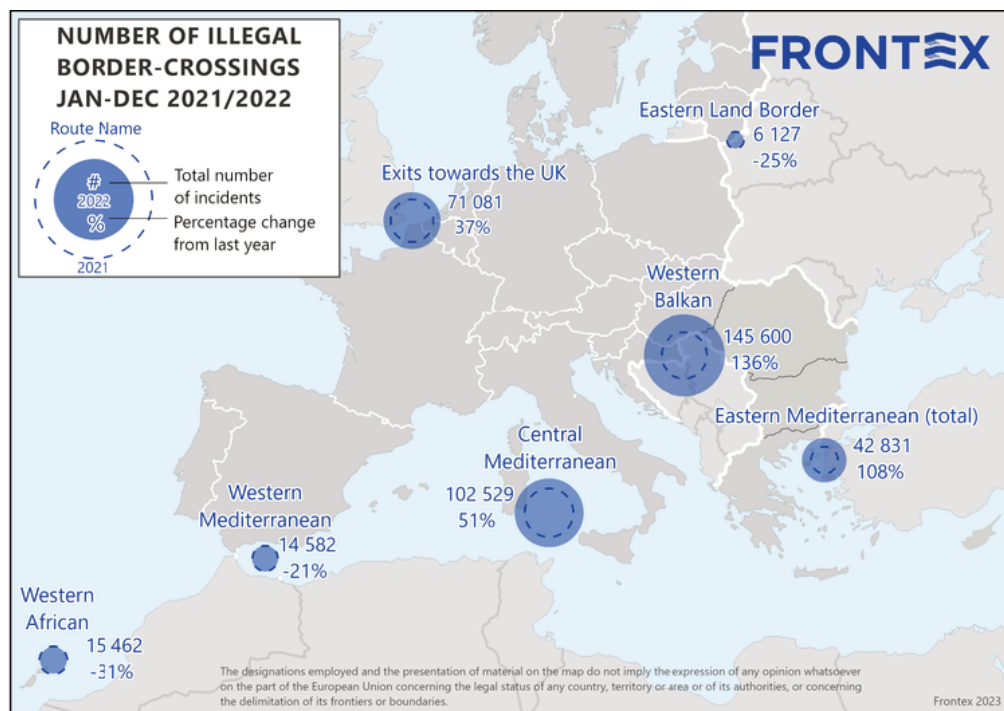
Map 2 below shows the increase in the numbers peaking in 2015 and gradually declining thereafter. Even the pandemic and strict border closures did not put an end to these flows, but rather resulted in a heavy toll of human lives, making the Mediterranean a sea of dead migrants. On top of official statistics on migrant deaths while crossing the Mediterranean from any Global South shore to the Global North shore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Missing Migrants Project reported that there have been more than 26,089 missing migrants in the region since 2014 (IOM, 2023). Unfortunately, it also pointed out that border controls and harsh restrictions have given way to “necropolitical brutality” and acceptance of almost daily deaths of irregular migrants as the new normal.

**Map 2. Irregular Migration Flows between 2015-2020**



The last two years (2021-2022) have shown a decrease in certain areas, such as the Western Mediterranean Sea route by 21% and Eastern land border by 25%, but an increase in others, such as the Western Balkan land route by 136% and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea route by 108% (see Map 3). Overall, 330,000 irregular migrants were detected on three routes across the Mediterranean, which was the highest recorded since 2016. This indicated that the migrant smugglers are quite informed and capable in changing well-used paths and coming up with alternative routes in line with border closures, patrols, and imposed restrictions.

**Map 3.** Irregular Migration between January 2021 and December 2022



Source: Frontex, 2023; cited in: [https://frontex.europa.eu/thumb/Images\\_News/2023/Jan\\_Map\\_2022.prop\\_750x.4f3cac7212.png](https://frontex.europa.eu/thumb/Images_News/2023/Jan_Map_2022.prop_750x.4f3cac7212.png)

### Migration narratives and persistence of the irregular migration problem

Migration discourse usually revolves around two opposing narratives. While the first focuses on an urgent need for deterrence due to great risks and perception of threats that migrants pose in society, as well as securitization and externalization of migration, the second is the humanitarian approach rallying for human rights of migrants and suggesting that irregular migration takes place because of closure of safe and legal pathways, pushing vulnerable people to endanger their lives (Steinhilper & Gruijters, 2018). Search and rescue (SAR) operations have become more difficult since 2015 and even penalized.

Other than a clash of two dominant discourses on migration, this trend is a result of global inequality in the aftermath of decolonialization, leading to deepened political instability, economic problems, and uneven distribution of wealth. Some scholars call this “21st century fascism” (Robinson, 2015) and “reproduction of racialization of sexuality of colonial past by Western hegemony” (Holzberg et al. 2021); others refer to these inhumane restrictions in

mobility as “fortress capitalism” (Georgi, 2019). Regardless of the term, the current era is witness to a major structural crisis in the neoliberal economy. Therefore, the political and economic elites are consistently trying to control the global working class in repressive ways. This explains why irregular migration persists, not only because of the absence of safe and legal pathways to migration but also due to the widening gap between the Global North and Global South during the digital age when news and images travel faster than before. These images often create a false expectation for many people in dire situations, luring them to risk their lives in the hope of changing fate for themselves and their families.

### **Conceptualization of borders and boundaries**

Although used interchangeably, concepts of borders and boundaries refer to different but often related spaces. Borders are usually about the geographical territory of a nation-state whereas boundaries are real or imagined lines dividing people in many ways. Different positionings in society also draw further boundaries, such as gender, political opinion, culture, ethnicity, race and class (Yuval-Davis & Stoetzler, 2002). It is important who crosses the borders of a nation-state as it is an imagined community sharing the same values. Hence, borders play a central role in the discourse of nation-building and making claims on membership, and determine boundaries and social identities, unifying those living within them and distancing them from others. Most often, regardless of the diversity and existence of social boundaries within the territory, borders are jealously fenced, patrolled and marked, and crossing them is a *casus belli* – a justified reason for going to war. When people cross borders, they also cross boundaries, which poses a perceived threat to society; hence the securitization of irregular migration in many countries around the world. Since states use visa regulations to determine who can enter and who should be kept out, they make this decision by dividing people into different categories: unwanted outsiders, those allowed to enter for a limited time, and *personae gratae* – those not only accepted into the territory but who also hold the right to do so. Irregular migrants fell into the first category, i.e., unwanted outsiders, as they are different from the majority because of the collectivity boundaries separating “us” and “them”.

### **Borders as gendered spaces**

Borders are also gendered spaces as they are regarded as fragile and feminized, and should be guarded. As a metaphor, borders are often associated with women and a nation’s honor. It is men who safeguard the borders from any trespassers, thus protecting the honor of the nation. When irregular migrants cross international borders, they are dehumanized just as in war situations. They are not the persecuted in need of protection but rather regarded as people – usually men – tarnishing the honor of the nation, disgracing the men and women living there. If they have the possibility of getting to the other side and claiming asylum, they also have to overcome boundaries marked by gender and patriarchy. While some men and women find relative freedom and emancipation in the country of settlement, there are many cases in which that patriarchy was reproduced, albeit in a different way, after migration. The two cases from the recent fieldwork in Turkey show that intersectionality in gender, sexual orientation, nationality and social class differences is an important indicator of how migration experiences are lived and how identities are recreated.

## CASE 1

Amir is a gay Syrian man from Aleppo. He is also a devout and practicing Muslim. Before the civil war erupted in 2011, he was having lots of problems with his family but he never had the courage to share his sexual orientation with them. He went first to Lebanon, then to Egypt, then finally came to Istanbul. There he learned about a Turkish NGO bringing together LGBTQ people of Syrian origin on Sundays where they shared their experiences and troubles. He started to visit them and only came out to his sister. While saying that "Istanbul offers a free environment compared to Syria", he was exposed to much social pressure at work and from his own community as they concentrated mostly in certain neighborhoods. Social media helped him to contact with other gay Syrians living across the world. He was one of the only few resettled in Northern Europe based on UNHCR vulnerability criteria.

### **In lieu of conclusion**

Despite all impediments, men and women cross borders, transcend boundaries and respond to restrictive migration regimes, even if it means risking their lives. In order to have a win-win scenario for countries of origin, transit and settlement, migration policies should put human security back at the center while maintaining safe and legal pathways to migration. Furthermore, we should consider political economy, resource allocation, labor exploitation, outsourcing and wage differentials, gender-based violence, and climate justice to understand the core reasons why 3.6% of the world's population is on the move. Looking at the glass half empty rather than half full, there is another important question pertaining to immobility: why is that most people do not and cannot migrate?

## CASE 2

Rabia is a young Afghan woman of Pashtun origin who had to migrate because, when she lost her husband, his family forced her to get married to her brother-in-law (levirate marriage), as it was common practice in the region. She crossed the border from Afghanistan-Iran-Turkey through smugglers. She applied for asylum, got international protection, and settled in a small city with some Iranians. Soon, she was introduced to Christianity by Iranian proselytizers. In time, she became more involved with the Evangelical church led by an American pastor and the church-goers became her fictive kin. At the time of the interview, she was about to be resettled in a third country through sponsorship.

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