

Migration Policies at the Core of the EU's Relations with Its Southern Neighbours

Dr Angeliki Dimitriadi
Researcher, Migration

In 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative adopted a Joint Communication proposing a new Agenda for the Mediterranean.¹ The Joint Communication included a dedicated Economic and Investment Plan to spur long-term socioeconomic recovery in the Southern Neighbourhood. In the Council conclusions, migration holds a key role in the renewed relationship.

The emphasis on the Southern Neighbourhood is not new. It has been the focus of EU migration policies since the Arab Spring in 2011, due to the region's geographical proximity and its emergence as a key point of origin and/or transit for mixed migration. Countries included are: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. The 2021 Joint Communication states that the Southern Neighbourhood shares certain commonalities, including low economic integration, socioeconomic inequalities, limited capacity to meet the needs of their population – particularly youth – and a direct threat from climate change to access to food and water. These are considered push factors for displacement and migration. A “whole-of-the-route” approach is proposed to address and reduce irregular movement, with the economic and investment plan also seen as a way of improving prospects for young people during the post-Covid-19 recovery period, allowing them to remain in their countries of origin.

Migration policy is deeply embedded in the EU's relations with its southern neighbours, yet the success of the various initiatives remains dubious, partly due to the geopolitical situation in the area, and partly due to the policy tools in use.

A Neighbourhood in Flux: Conflict and Displacement Since 2021²

Since 2021, the EU's Southern Neighbourhood has witnessed escalating conflicts leading to widespread displacement, as well as financial and political crises producing uncertainty and migratory movement.

The most severe has been in Gaza, where over 54,000 Palestinians have been killed and 70% of infrastructure destroyed as a result of Israeli military offensives since October 2023. Palestinians are faced with starvation and mass displacement in Gaza and, though the majority are unable to flee to safety, countries like Greece have been recording a slight increase in Palestinian asylum applications since 2022 (in 2024 they constituted the fifth nationality in applications, 1.5% of total).

In Lebanon, clashes between Israel and Hezbollah displaced nearly 500,000 people, with Israeli airstrikes causing significant casualties and infrastructure damage. Though Lebanese presence in irregular arrivals to Europe is very low, the possibility remains, due to Lebanon's financial woes in its banking sector, economy and currency, which have been exacerbated by the clashes with Israel.

¹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Joint Communication: Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A new agenda for the Mediterranean*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/joint_communication_southern_neighbourhood_2021.pdf.

² For a detailed analysis of the situation across the region see the FES Cyprus, ELIAMEP, PRIO Cyprus Center and Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. *Mediterranean Migration project reports*. 2024, www.eliamep.gr/en/mediterranean-migration-project-reports/.

Economic crisis has also plagued Egypt, which is a country of particular strategic importance for the EU. Egypt plays a crucial role in managing migration between North Africa and Europe, with the country hosting over nine million foreigners due to multiple regional crises, including the war in Sudan. Greece is one of the main EU Member States in the reception of Egyptian migrants, as well as people transiting from Egypt via Libya's maritime border.

In 2024, Syria entered a new political phase following the reported collapse of the Assad regime, leading to a transitional government that is attempting to consolidate power. While sectarian tensions linger, the situation in Syria will remain volatile and uncertain for a long time.

North Africa has also experienced tensions affecting displacement. Algeria and Morocco's relations have deteriorated over the Western Sahara conflict. In Libya, ongoing instability has allowed the country to remain a key transit point for migrants, with EU support for the Libyan Coast Guard leading to concerns over human rights abuses.³

Despite the multiple crises affecting and shaping population movement in the region, the EU's approach to migration in its Southern Neighbourhood has largely centred on externalizing border controls and shifting migration management responsibilities to partner countries. This is achieved through a mix of bilateral agreements, partnerships and financial instruments, with the EU offering financial assistance for migration management policies and practices to be adopted by the countries of origin and/or transit in the region.

The Price of Control: EU Funding and Externalized Migration Management

Since 2021, the EU's external action has been guided by the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI), which earmarks €8 billion for migration-related initiatives. Migration and forced displacement are identified as core areas for cooperation under this instrument.

A common theme that has emerged is the EU paying its way through various deals and partnerships in exchange for migration management, border control, interdiction practices and deterrence in the countries of origin and transit.

In Tunisia, the EC, through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), has mobilized over €728 million in grants since 2021, under the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus, for programmes on education, water, renewable energy, food security, transport and access to finance for SMEs. As part of addressing root causes, financial investment in multiple sectors is seen as a way of creating opportunities and improving living conditions that may trigger movement. Yet the most controversial deal has been the 2023 agreement between the EU and Tunisia: €105 million was allocated specifically for border management, anti-smuggling and basic services for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as assisted voluntary return from Tunisia to countries of origin.

The EU's approach to migration in its Southern Neighbourhood has largely centred on externalizing border controls and shifting migration management responsibilities to partner countries

In an internal report, the European External Action Service (EEAS)⁴ expressed growing concerns over the European Union's association agreement with Tunisia, amid escalating human rights violations under President Kais Saied. The document outlined a marked deterioration in Tunisia's political climate, highlighting the erosion of democratic institutions, suppression of dissent and the arrest of opposition figures and civil society members, as well as violations of human rights targeting migrants and refugees. Following reports that EU-funded Tunisian security forces have committed serious abuses, in-

³ ECRE. External partners. ECRE, 2024, <https://ecre.org/eu-external-partners-commission-president-backs-epps-proposal-to-offshore-asylum>.

⁴ RANKIN, J. "EU fears for its human rights credibility as Tunisia crushes dissent, leak shows." *The Guardian*. 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/12/eu-fears-for-its-human-rights-credibility-as-tunisia-crushes-dissent-leak-shows.

cluding sexual violence against migrants, the European Commission stated in January 2025 that funding would proceed only if human rights are upheld, describing this shift as a “re-dynamization” of the EU-Tunisia partnership.⁵

On 17 March, the European Union (EU) and Egypt announced a new agreement to reduce irregular migration to Europe and support Egypt's struggling economy. As a key host country for refugees and migrants, as well as a country of origin for irregular arrivals to Italy and Greece, it was not surprising that the EU would follow a similar approach to the one adopted for Türkiye in 2016 and Tunisia in 2023. The overall aim of the support to Egypt is to “contribute to enhancing border security and integrity through mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation.” The intended cooperation should be “especially against organized crime groups, including those involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking.”⁶

Almost 25,000 people have died along the route since 2014, while at least 499 people have died or disappeared in the Mediterranean in 2025 alone

In other words, the focus is to set up and maintain cross-border operational cooperation between different border management authorities, replicating the approach already in place in the EU. Beyond the border – and similarly to the blueprint set up with the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement – Egypt has been asked to draft a new asylum law. Despite human rights-based objections to the bill, it was adopted in October 2024. Beyond Tunisia and Egypt, the EC signed a €3 billion agreement with Jordan on 29 January 2025. According to a statement issued by EC President Ursula von der Leyen, the “EU-Jordan Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership” will enable the EU and Jordan

to “strengthen their cooperation on border management, the fight against smuggling and human trafficking,” and “enhance co-operation on durable solutions for refugees, including complementary pathways for protection and safe, voluntary and dignified returns, also in cooperation with international agencies.”

EU funding has long supported the training and equipping of the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrant boats at sea, while also providing technical and financial assistance for border surveillance infrastructure in Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia. Algeria has, since 2024, began collaborating with Tunisia and Libya to address irregular migration and cooperate on border security in North Africa. A bilateral cooperation between Italy and Algeria in 2024 is likely a precursor for a broader EU-Algeria partnership on migration. As stated in a written response to an EU parliamentary question on cooperation with Algeria, the European Commission “continues to advocate for stronger cooperation on migration issues, including on the effective readmission of Algerian nationals to all EU Member States, as well as broader migration and security matters. To address migratory pressures on the EU, the Commission is committed to deepening cooperation in a comprehensive way with Algeria through political dialogue and development cooperation.”⁷

Across the region, EU migration policies combine different elements of an old toolbox that uses financial assistance, development and aid to support and boost governments that are willing to function as Europe's buffer zone for migrants and refugees. Legal migration is also included in all agreements and partnerships as a counterbalance to the deterrence measures being implemented. The Pact on Migration and Asylum, for example, integrates the legal migration dimension through initiatives such as the Talent Partnerships, which aim to facilitate mobility schemes between EU Member States and selected third countries by matching skills with labour market needs in the EU. Similar schemes have been implemented in the past at bilateral levels.

While there is clearly a demand across EU labour markets for both low- and high-skilled workers, the

⁵ ECRE. EU external partners. ECRE. 2025, <https://ecre.org/eu-external-partners-commission-planning-overhaul-of-funding-to-tunisia-following-abuse-revelations>.

⁶ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. Project Fiche: Support to Cross-Border Cooperation and Integrated Border Management in North Africa. Statewatch. 2024, www.statewatch.org/media/4633/6_-project-fiche-cross-border-coop-noa___redacted.pdf.

⁷ Answer given by Ms Šuica on behalf of the European Commission Parliamentary question – E-000521/2025(ASW). 2.4.2025, www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2025-000521-ASW_EN.html.

scale and scope of current legal pathways are unlikely to offset the dominance of restrictive migration policies, which continue to receive greater financial and political prioritization.

Money for Nothing? Limits and Dangers of the EU's Current Approach

Despite the geographical scope and the scale of investment in the region as regards migration, several critiques emerge.

First, the initiatives rest on the assumption that reducing poverty in origin and transit countries will lessen migration pressures. However, migration is often driven more by income gaps between countries than absolute poverty, meaning that as incomes rise, migration may increase – especially given that irregular migration remains costly and risky. At the same time, it is a much-needed source of revenue. For many countries in the region, remittances are a source of economic growth and a support system for local economies.

Second, the EU's approach involves externalizing migration governance through deals with partner governments. This can undermine the sovereignty and accountability of recipient states, and in cases like Tunisia and Egypt, may inadvertently bolster authoritarian regimes by providing them with economic or political support amid broader governance deficits.

Thirdly, the efficacy of these policies remains unclear as regards reducing irregular migration. Irregular maritime migration from Tunisia to Italy decreased with 11,055 sea arrivals during the first quarter of 2024, however research suggests that migration dynamics are once again shifting towards Libya as the main departure point. Both Tunisia and Libya are now on the receiving end of Sudanese refugees. Though the

central Mediterranean witnessed a decrease in 2024, the eastern corridor through Greece saw an increase; and that includes boats departing from Libya carrying Egyptians. All this suggests that the emphasis should be less on numbers and routes and more on establishing effective partnerships that strengthen human rights and livelihood options along the route. Finally – and most importantly – the human cost cannot be ignored. The support for authoritarian regimes comes at a steep price. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently announced that the central Mediterranean migration route is the world's most deadly. According to data published on 29 April, almost 25,000 people have died along the route since 2014, while at least 499 people have died or disappeared in the Mediterranean in 2025 alone. Though policymakers tend to focus on the numbers of irregular crossings and asylum applications, the scale of human suffering unfolding in the Mediterranean is not addressed by the migration deals and practices that have been promoted through agreements with the Southern Neighbourhood.

The EU's migration policy in its Southern Neighbourhood reflects a complex and often conflicting approach – one that seeks to balance containment and cooperation, but increasingly prioritizes deterrence and control. The policy architecture remains rooted in externalization and the funding of regimes with questionable human rights records, in exchange for curbing migratory flows. As conflicts persist, and economic, as well as sociopolitical, crises erupt, the EU's approach risks entrenching instability rather than alleviating the root causes of displacement. Without a genuine rebalancing towards policies focused on human rights and, especially, responsibility-sharing, migration will remain embedded in the relationship between the two sides of the Mediterranean, with little in the way of results.