

BRIEFING | NOVEMBER 2019

## Europe's outsourced migration controls Refocusing on peace, rights and development

**More than one million migrants tried to reach Europe in 2015, causing concern among European governments that have since intensified their efforts to keep people from reaching European shores. But despite claims that clamping down on migration saves lives by deterring people from undertaking dangerous journeys, attempts by the European Union (EU) and European governments to curb migration are feeding into suffering and instability.**

The current approach to migration – focusing on reducing arrivals at the expense of tackling conflict and instability and providing safe pathways for people on the move – should be reconsidered.

Drawing on the cases of Turkey, Libya and Niger, Saferworld's analysis of the interests driving this model of outsourced border controls, and its negative implications for peace, stability and rights, illustrates how it ends up reinforcing the very factors that compel people to move.

Europe needs to shift from a short-term counterproductive response to migration towards a more sustainable model that focuses on promoting peace, rights and development in its wider neighbourhood.

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# The current European approach to migration control

## Emergence of the border security model

Irregular migration, and risky Mediterranean Sea crossings, have been precipitated by the closure of legal routes to Europe, following the 1985 Schengen agreement on free movement in the EU and the reinforcement of border controls with non-EU countries. In response to politicised fears of migration to Europe, the EU has focused on 'fighting' irregular migration and human smuggling and on externalising border security to partners in non-EU countries. This deterrence, containment and criminalisation approach relies on bolstering naval missions, border controls and security forces, and facilitating detentions and returns. While EU Member States have disagreed over sharing responsibility for hosting refugees, they have found a common cause in developing security responses to migration – culminating in the EU as a whole adopting a security-focused model by 2015. This model has had important implications for Europe's wider neighbourhood.

EU migration policies rest on the four pillars of the European Agenda on Migration: reducing incentives for irregular migration

### Key facts and figures

- In sub-Saharan Africa, 75 per cent of migration occurs within the region.
- Nine out of ten refugees today are hosted by lower-income countries.
- EU funding for refugees in Turkey equates to one-fifth of its 2014–20 development budget for all of Africa.

(including addressing its root causes and managing migration); improving border control; developing a common EU asylum policy; and strengthening legal migration. With the focus on reducing arrivals to Europe, other priorities, including protection and development, have been downplayed or distorted: the links between migratory movements and abuses or exclusion in repressive and conflict-affected countries have not been adequately addressed; common asylum system reforms and an increase in legal pathways remain stymied; and some policies – such as the 2016 EU Partnership Framework on Migration – increasingly tie EU aid to countries' cooperation on migration.



Migrants from Chad return from Libya, July 2011.  
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# The impact of outsourcing border security: case studies

## Turkey/Greece

Turkey hosts four million refugees, including 3.6 million Syrians. The March 2016 EU-Turkey deal committed Turkey to preventing refugees from reaching Europe and allowed Greece to return new arrivals. In exchange, Turkey was promised visa liberalisation, accession talks, €6 billion in support of refugees and the resettlement of up to 72,000 Syrians to the EU.<sup>1</sup> Arrivals from Turkey to Europe have fallen, but refugees and host communities have paid the price. The Greek islands have become *de facto* 'processing centres' where asylum seekers are kept in inhumane conditions – a situation criticised by non-governmental organisations as purposefully using suffering to deter would-be migrants. In Turkey, tensions between refugees and host communities in low-income urban areas, the informal sector and historically marginalised minority groups have resulted in rising xenophobic incidents and increased political polarisation.

Turkey has used the deal and the 'threat' of migration to Europe to discourage European criticism of its authoritarian tendencies, repression of domestic opposition and its ongoing conflict with the Kurds. The EU has also muted criticism of Turkey's hardening refugee policies – including forced returns – and the consequences of its military actions within Syria, which have been partly intended to stop refugee crossings but which have undermined people's security.

## Libya

In just a few years, Libya has gone from a destination country to a departure point for migrants. Following Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's ouster in 2011, warring parties increasingly targeted migrants – with mounting reports of sexual violence, forced labour and torture in detention centres. Colonel Gaddafi's strategy of creating a 'hostile environment' for sub-Saharan African migrants has continued under the patchwork of authorities in the country, with many using the 'threat' of migration as a bargaining chip in dealings with Europe.

The EU's preoccupation with containing migrants and terrorism in Libya has been at the expense of addressing the country's descent into chaos. The EU and its member states have trained and equipped the Libyan border and coast guards, including militias suspected of extorting migrants and with links to smuggling and conflict, while at the same time being tasked with intercepting migrants. In 2017, European leaders supported a second 'friendship pact' between Italy and Libya's Government of National Accord to combat 'illegal immigration'. EU funding to alleviate appalling prison conditions for migrants has not been matched by efforts to end Libya's repressive and arbitrary detention and extortion system. EU support for 'voluntary humanitarian returns' ignores migrants' stark choice of enduring abuse in Libya or being sent back home to danger or despair. The EU approach has served to entrench war economies and illicit border trades, furthering instability and suffering that Libyan factions use to gain additional favours and funding from Europe.



## Niger

Since 2015 Niger has become a hotspot for EU interventions on migration, with the EU tasking its Common Security and Defence Policy mission, EUCAP Sahel Niger, with preventing irregular migration. As a site for counter-terror operations and ruled by a government seeking to consolidate power, Niger has adopted draconian laws against human smuggling under EU pressure – while receiving security and policing support to help prevent migration. The regime has used the threat of migration to leverage more funding and political backing, despite corruption and repression risks. It has become the largest recipient of EU aid per capita in the world – with over €1 billion of EU development assistance in the 2014–2020 period<sup>2</sup> – even though the World Food Programme could raise barely a third of the funds needed to feed a tenth of Niger's people in 2018.

EU interventions that seek to disrupt migration flows through Niger have indirectly undermined livelihoods dependent on cross-border trade and movement, ignoring their benefits for local economies. Livelihoods have suffered in Agadez – until recently a bustling transit point with a vibrant economy – increasing inter-ethnic grievances that fuelled previous armed rebellions. More migrants and transporters are detained, while migration routes have become more dangerous.

# Vicious circle

## European migration control, conflict and displacement

### Short-term 'benefits' for some create long-term risks for others

The current system persists despite its failings, because it provides short-term benefits for some European governments and their partners. For some European politicians, stoking public fears of migration – and pledging to cut arrival numbers – wins them support among voters. Defence and security sectors likewise are given greater resources. This approach also redistributes the perceived political, social and economic costs of hosting large numbers of migrants from wealthier European countries to poorer states and communities in 'buffer zones'. As non-EU partners are tasked with containing migrants, Europe is able to sidestep responsibility in case of mistreatment or increased fatalities of migrants. Countries hosting the lion's share of refugees deserve support, but some of Europe's partners are leveraging the threat of more migration to Europe in the hope of obtaining political legitimacy, funding and silence when engaging in repressive or destabilising behaviour.

### The unequal distribution of risks

The short-term 'benefits' of the current approach are not sufficiently weighed against the costs and long-term risks. The containment of large numbers of migrants in 'buffer zones' may take pressure off Europe,

but this risks intensifying socio-economic tensions with host communities or political instability in poorer, less stable states. EU support for initiatives such as jobs for refugees in special economic zones rests on double standards: on the one hand, it stresses the benefits of refugees integrating in these 'buffer' zones *outside* Europe, and the risks for host countries are downplayed; on the other hand, the benefits that migrants can bring to European countries are ignored, while the perceived risks of migration are highlighted. This plays into the nationalist and fear-based narrative that is perpetuating a damaging system.

### Outsourcing responsibility enables suffering and abuse – and undermines stability

Europe's deterrence policies result in human suffering. Migrants face inhumane detention conditions, serious rights abuses, returns to unsafe conditions and the risk of dying at sea – facilitated by European governments' actions to disrupt and criminalise rescue efforts. Deterrence policies result in increasing dangers on migratory routes rather than protecting migrants, feeding into the professionalisation of smuggling networks and restricting regional mobility options.

Supporting governments with authoritarian tendencies and abusive or unaccountable security forces carries risks not only for migrants, but also for societies in host and transit countries. Abusive security actors –

such as Libyan militias – are increasingly involved in border controls, while often playing a violent role in conflicts and fuelling instability. The provision of security equipment and training to such groups can exacerbate repression and corruption – both important risk factors for instability that can ultimately cause *more* people to migrate.

In Niger, EU migration policies have indirectly undermined cross-border trade and livelihoods. Worsening inequalities in this way can feed tensions, instability and migratory pressures. Short-term investments in border security also distract from longer-term investment in addressing instability, inequality and community needs in fragile contexts.

Desperate people flee violence, abuse and hardship



Desperate migrants risk lives on more dangerous routes



Greater instability and forced displacement



Mobility, livelihoods and development are undermined



Migrants face abuse and detention in inhumane conditions



'Partners' grow more repressive and abusive



Less focus on peace, rights and development



Manipulation of public anxieties with migrants as scapegoats



Migration portrayed as a security threat



Political pledges to take a 'tough line' and cut arrivals



Policy 'success' is defined as cutting migrant arrivals



POLITICAL PRESSURE TO DEAL WITH MIGRATION 'THREAT' TO EUROPE

GROWING REPRESSION, INSTABILITY, POVERTY AND DISPLACEMENT

EUROPE REINFORCES BORDER SECURITY TO CONTAIN MIGRANTS

Problematic 'partners' get equipment, training, funding and political support



Legal migration pathways are shut down



Hostile environment is used as deterrence



Security establishment and industries grow



### A coherent approach to migration and its drivers?

In all these respects, Europe's migration control approach is at odds with its many genuine efforts to alleviate suffering and promote peace in conflict-affected countries. The approach fails to account for the complexity of what drives people to flee their homes, including broader political, social and economic dynamics.

The increasing drive to curb migration ignores the fact that most migration is regional, rather than to Europe, with roughly nine in ten refugees hosted by low- and middle-income countries. In addition, the labels applied to migrants – 'regular', 'irregular', 'refugees' and 'non-refugees' – can be inadequate descriptors for mixed or secondary migration, and risk reinforcing assumptions that some deserve protection while others do not.

As Europe 'fights' against irregular migration, European governments should also reflect on the role played by their foreign and economic policies – such as military intervention in Libya, arms sales or trade policies – in

contributing to instability or worsening conditions that cause people to move.

The current approach damages Europe's standing and its leverage to promote human rights and the rules-based international order. Where Europe chooses to support repressive partners, this risks feeding into instability in Europe's borderlands, which is unsustainable for Europe itself. The EU and its member states need to weigh the longer-term risks more carefully, and shift towards a more sustainable framework for engaging with migration that focuses on peace, rights and development.

# Towards a more humane, peacebuilding response

## Recommendations for the EU

- Evaluate the long-term impact of externalised migration policies on peace, stability and rights, including the consequences of partnering with governments and security forces with problematic rights records. Evaluations should use both rights and conflict-sensitivity criteria to assess progress (in line with the EU's integrated approach to conflicts and crises), take into account independent assessments, and include migrants' and civil society's views.
- Increase the transparency of migration-related strategies, funding and implementing partners, to allow better public debate and oversight of their effectiveness and impact. Migration policies that contribute, directly or indirectly, to abuses or conflict should be discontinued or overhauled and those who are responsible for abuses held accountable.
- Place conflict prevention and peacebuilding, respect for human rights, and tackling unequal access to resources, justice and security at the centre of the EU's foreign and development policy, as highlighted in its integrated approach to conflict and crises and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Prioritise peacebuilding and the protection of human rights in conflicts such as Syria and Libya, building on existing expertise in conflict, gender and human rights and partnerships with civil society.
- Condition aid to partner governments on progress in human rights and good governance, and not on the cooperation of recipient states with border controls. EU funding instruments – such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – should be delinked from migration control objectives and reformed. They should focus on conflict prevention and sustainable engagement to reduce unequal access to resources and security, and help maximise the development potential of migration.
- Rigorously assess risks in migration-related strategy, design and programme development through gender-sensitive conflict analyses and human rights risk assessments.
- Focus security sector reform efforts on strategies to improve rights, good governance and accountability, supporting civil society and communities that can foster positive change.
- Avoid supporting measures that criminalise migration, restrict freedom of movement within a country or contradict regional mobility agreements. Shift law enforcement priorities to improving migrants' access to rights and safeguarding against arbitrary detention and deportation.
- Support positive non-European perspectives on mobility and regional free movement initiatives – including those of the Economic Community of West African States, the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development – that can increase safe and regular migration and support livelihoods.
- Adopt a comprehensive approach to migration premised on the protection of people, instead of the protection of borders. A sustainable approach – and discourse – requires protecting the rights of citizens and foreigners alike, responding to the social and economic concerns of voters in Europe and safeguarding migrants' rights, including by improving safe movement and reception for people in need of protection.



A woman walks through Osmaniye Cevdetiye Camp, Turkey, February 2016.  
© Yasin Akgül/  
European Parliament

## Recommendations for EU Member States

- Improve the transparency of national migration-related policies, funding and implementing partners, to foster public debate – including through national parliaments – on their effectiveness and impact.
- Reconsider interventions that risk fuelling instability, including military and counter-terrorism interventions, arms sales and support to unaccountable security apparatuses. Prioritise addressing the drivers of conflict, repression and exclusion that drive people to embark on dangerous journeys.
- Share responsibility with countries hosting the most refugees through resettlement and complementary pathways, including with EU Member States such as Greece and Italy – as recommended by the European Commission and European Parliament. A more equal share of responsibility would alleviate pressure on the largest host countries and increase influence to improve refugee protection in other countries. This in turn could reduce the drivers of secondary movement. Providing safe pathways for movement would also decrease dangers on migratory routes.
- Avoid political rhetoric that blames voters' socio-economic grievances on migration. Work towards safeguarding the rights of both voters and migrants, including in labour markets, and make the case for a sustainable and humane approach to migration in public discourse.

## Recommendations for the UK government

- In order to provide greater transparency – and in line with previous government commitments – publish a comprehensive version of the National Security Council's 'Illegal Migration Strategy', alongside regional and priority country strategies, withholding information for security reasons only when strictly necessary.
- Instead of treating migration as a national security threat and as a 'criminal' issue, adopt an approach that prioritises conflict prevention, the improvement of migrants' rights, good governance and stability abroad, communicating publicly how this guarantees the UK's long-term security interests. Programmes should support initiatives via engagement with civil society and migrant and host communities, and rules to ensure that UK security assistance does not feed into human rights abuses should be rigorously applied.
- Regardless of the outcome of Brexit, premise migration cooperation with the EU on prioritising migrants' protection and long-term responses to the root causes of displacement, rather than policies focused on countering migration through hard borders and other security investments.
- Avoid political rhetoric pitting the socio-economic concerns of UK voters against migrants' rights and instead adopt a discourse and policies focused on safeguarding the rights of all, including in labour markets, making the case for a sustainable and humane model of migration.
- Promote and participate in greater sharing of responsibility for hosting refugees with other states, including by increasing resettlement and complementary pathways and improving guarantees for safe movement and reception across host countries.

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## Recommendations for civil society

- Continue to analyse and evaluate the legal, financial and political costs of European migration policies – scrutinising not only European decisions and policymakers but also the defence and security sector's involvement in border controls and conflict.
- Strengthen coalitions between migrant communities and civil society groups in partner countries and Europe, to reinforce national and international civic oversight of the consequences of external border security measures and to promote humane alternatives to the current approach.
- Widen efforts to make the case for a global approach to migration that protects people over protecting borders. This includes a more equitable sharing of responsibilities for hosting people in need of protection, expanding safe migration routes, safeguarding the rights of all in the international labour market and supporting regional mobility initiatives.
- Development agencies and non-governmental organisations with EU and European governments' funding for migration programmes should strengthen their due diligence and conflict- and gender-sensitivity standards.



A Lebanese woman hosts Syrian refugees and Lebanese activists in her home to work together on community cohesion.  
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Saferworld

## Notes

- 1 By July 2019, €5.6 billion had already been allocated, with the remaining balance due to be allocated over the summer. European Commission (2019), 'EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey: €5.6 billion out of €6 billion now allocated in support of refugees', July ([https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-19-4389\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-4389_en.htm))
- 2 European Commission (2018), 'The European Union is stepping up cooperation with Niger', December ([https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/european-union-stepping-cooperation-niger\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/european-union-stepping-cooperation-niger_en))



## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Cover photo – Migrants in a detention centre near Gharyan, outside of Tripoli, Libya, April 2014.  
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