



ICMPD Migration Outlook **Silk Routes 2024**

Four migration issues to look out for in 2024
Origins, key events, and priorities for Europe



Four migration issues to look out for in 2024

1. Securitisation of migrants will affect most vulnerable, creating high pressures on reintegration systems.

With numerous countries heading to elections in 2024, and the international community's attention on Russia-Ukraine/Israel-Hamas conflicts, the plight of over 8.5 million refugees and displaced in Pakistan and Iran is expected continue to fade away from the public/media limelight. Moreover, allegations that associate those who seek refuge with acts of terrorism and/or criminality are expected to continue over the course of 2024, as much of the region heads to the polls. Mass returns to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries is likely to have ripple effects that are expected to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable among returnees. Having moved from camps in Pakistan and Iran to temporary accommodations along the Afghan border, Afghan children, families, undocumented migrants, and women make up a majority of those who have returned. They face limited reintegration opportunities and are likely to face hunger, homelessness and animosity upon their return. Finally, as they may seek to remigrate, using informal channels, or reintegrate into communities of origin that lack livelihood opportunities, women and children are at high risk to become victims of traffickers.

Meanwhile, the Israel -Gaza conflict - and the resultant heightening of tension in the region - has reinvigorated proxy 'tensions' within and beyond Silk Routes region (Iran-Pakistan, Iraq-US). Iraq, being one of the affected countries, is seeing a sharp increase in tensions. The rising geo-political instability thus risks hampering the fragile process of peacebuilding and rehabilitation that had started to take hold in recent years.

2. Insufficient attempts to address the causes and effects of climate change will result in friction and continued displacement.

With a highly dense population, Silk Routes Region remains highly vulnerable to climate change related weather events. A string of related events reoccurred in 2023 underlining this fact: coastal erosion, warmer temperatures (glacier melting, landslides), large scale flooding (Pakistan, India), high rainfall (causing dam damage). These climate hazards once again manifested in deaths, displacement, and migration. However, increasingly, extreme weather patterns were also reported to be aggravating the



health (high number of deaths due to dengue fever in Bangladesh in 2023) and livelihoods of the region's 1.9 billion people (lower crop yields in southern Iraq meant a loss of income and food insecurity and inward mobility from agricultural states/regions and into cities).

Cooperative efforts to fighting climate change will remain an uphill task in 2024, especially in an election year, but it is increasingly becoming an unavoidable transnational issue, that if left unchecked has, and will, fuel further geopolitical discord (some observers assume that Iran and Afghanistan's dispute over water in the Helmand River, which resulted in clashes between border guards in 2023 may have spurred on the forced returns of Afghan refugees).

3. Labour and skills partnerships will evolve and are becoming more expansive.

Labour migration partnerships between labour sending and receiving countries are now taking on an increasingly important role. On the one hand, labour shortages in advanced economies continue to persist with effects on economic growth becoming more pronounced especially as high and medium skilled jobs go unfilled, while on the other hand, high levels of economic growth in select South Asian countries have led to a burgeoning middle class that seeks 'greener pastures' in search of high skilled jobs and educational opportunities. For example, throughout the EU, persistent shortages can be observed in the information and communications technology, healthcare, manufacturing, and construction sectors. To respond to these shortages, EU member states have taken a proactive role to establish bi-lateral partnerships with labour sending countries in the European neighbourhood and beyond. In 2024, it is expected that labour receiving and sending countries will move to further improve enabling environments for engaging in labour migration partnerships – such as by focusing on institutional and legal frameworks and infrastructure; bridging the gaps between the public and private sectors in terms of mandates, needs, motivations, expectations, and interests; skills matching via talent pools that become increasingly digitalised and expansive. Targeted work visa regimes are expected to expand in labour receiving countries like Italy and Germany and countries of the GCC, allowing the space for South and West Asian countries to see robust growth of labour export.

4. Persistent, structural challenges will continue to drive irregular migration in a non-crisis context.

Irregular migration from the region remained at an elevated level in 2023, with continuing high numbers detected on routes towards countries of destination, along with the displacement (but not reduction) of migrant numbers between various routes. In tandem, the complex forces and insecurities that drive migration attempts are increasing. High inflation and public debt, low growth, interruptions



in global trade and energy supply all contribute to decreased purchasing power, and increased cost of living for citizens across the region. Coupled with tense political situations, escalating insecurity (from militant groups and across borders) and weak socio-economic outlooks, migration is increasingly the coping strategy of choice for individuals seeking improved livelihoods. This is particularly relevant for middle-class and medium skilled professionals who both possess the social and economic capital to undertake migration attempts, also in an irregular fashion, and are significantly affected by reduced living standards but also by increasing return efforts from countries in the region and beyond. The consequences of these drivers of migration are likely to be compounded by the re-focusing of the international community's attention on more immediately acute crises, and the growing fatigue around the prolonged crisis in Afghanistan and the Taliban's restrictions on the rights of women. There is a risk that just as the international community reduces engagement with the region on migration issues, the silent drivers of migration are compounded, leading to a significant increase in vulnerable individuals undertaking irregular, dangerous, often deadly journeys. With no single crisis precipitating this, recognising, and mobilising a response to such a scenario will be challenging, and likely late. Continued vigilance and engagement on migration cooperation should be a priority for countries in the region, and key international partners.

Introduction

Apart from the customary change in dates, very little in the new year feels different from the one gone by. For Silk Routes Region¹, 2023 marked another year of hardship and critical events. Violence/terrorism/extremism, repressive regimes, political unrest, unresolved conflict, climate induced sudden onset disasters (cyclones and floods), but increasingly slow onset events (such as high levels of air pollution), as well as economic and social woes were witnessed across the region. To compound matters, potential proxy wars and possible escalation – linked to Russia’s war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict - had “ripple effects” across the region. The resulting high cost of living, energy cuts/supply shortages and concerns over maritime commercial traffic in the Indian Ocean drew the region’s residents and refugee populations into further vulnerability. For a region heavily dependent on liquid gas, unscheduled power cuts adversely impacted vital economic sectors such as manufacturing and garment industries. With five countries of the region (India, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) heading to elections in 2024, a lot of attention in 2023 was focused on the upcoming elections. Within such political climates the impact of geopolitical considerations on national and regional migration patterns will not be prioritised by national governments. The top four issues to look out for will help readers and officials alike to understand the migration situation in the region and related potential developments in 2024.

The regional Migration Outlook zooms in on ICMPD’s global outlook that was released earlier this year. It takes a closer look at the events that shaped the region and provides an outlook on the possible impact they may have on mobility and migration. The publication – as in later years – relies on ICMPD’s local presence and expertise, as well as desk research from public sources, where available. The report proceeds as follows. First, it takes stock of events or policy developments and their ripple effects on displacement across the region’s focus countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. It then highlights some of the 2023 trends as it relates to: 1. Labour migration; 2. Remittance flows; 3. Refugees and Protection, 4. Irregular migration flows and returns; and 5. Reintegration. Finally, the report concludes by highlighting possible scenarios for 2024.

¹ The Silk Routes Regional Office (SRRO) was established in 2016 and is currently located in Vienna. The historic Silk Road stretched from the most eastern parts of Asia to Europe; it connected continents, countries and people in trade and intellectual exchange, and brought mutual cultural enrichment. Its many different routes – called the Silk Routes – have given name within the framework of the Budapest Process to the Silk Routes region, covering Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Focus Countries

The world has entered a period of increasing volatility, characterised by systemic rivalry between the world's great powers, a multipolar international order, greater state fragility, an increasing number of violent conflicts, rising terrorism, the weaponisation of energy and food insecurity. Geopolitics has its part in migration. Security concerns are the basis for refusals of entry or the expulsion of immigrant populations. Interlinkages between migration and foreign policies are gaining in significance. Many countries in the region struggled with internal displacement, outward mobility, and reintegrating of those returning. Structural, silent drivers of migration such as high costs of living, sustained inflation, and the trickle-down effects of global conflicts, magnified the desire for outward mobility for the region's young and refuge-seeking population. In this section we focus on six countries within the region and highlight key events and policy developments that may be considered as push factors.

Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan - under the de facto rule of the Taliban - has steadily deteriorated (despite Taliban public promises to restore peace and prosperity). Between 2021 and 2023, the Afghan economy contracted by 25%, not least because of the Taliban government's restrictive policies on women's education and work. This was further compounded by the government's diplomatic and economic isolation. Last year over 70% of Afghanistan's population, amounting to nearly 30 million people, required humanitarian assistance. The situation was exacerbated by four earthquakes in the Herat province, causing human casualties and widespread destruction. More than 275,000 people were directly affected and more than 250,000 houses destroyed or damaged. The earthquakes disproportionately affected vulnerable communities already grappling with decades of conflict and underdevelopment. Due to cuts in humanitarian and development aid, the Afghan economy has deteriorated drastically. Most Afghans suffer from lack of employment opportunities and access to basic civil services.

On the security front, while the Taliban have shown efforts in dismantling the Islamic State of Khorasan Province's (ISKP) presence in the country, it is alleged that the regime has continuously provided space for Tareek e Taliban e Pakistan (TTP, the Pakistani Taliban Movement), Al Qaeda, and other terror groups to operate from Afghanistan. The increasing levels of attacks by TTP targeting Pakistani law enforcement in 2023 was one of the primary reasons behind the decision by the interim Government of Pakistan to deport undocumented foreigners residing in Pakistan in October 2023. The Pakistan government's expel, giving until November 1, 2023, to return voluntarily or face forced expulsion, was in practice primarily targeted at undocumented Afghans. Since October 2023, over half a million Afghans have been expelled back to Afghanistan through the Chaman- Torkham border crossings.

The UN has called for an additional USD 43.48 million in funding to address urgent needs of returnees/ deportees. The needs include enhancing the arrival centre capacities, protection of survivors and victims of the recent Herat earthquakes, providing cash-based interventions to vulnerable cases, improving bio metric capacities of partner organizations for registration, and monitoring purposes,

advocating for the registration of undocumented Afghans in Pakistan, and responding to natural disasters in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. UNHCR reports that this influx comes at a critical time, coinciding with winter and a prolonged economic crisis affecting two-thirds of Afghanistan's population, requiring urgent humanitarian assistance. Pakistani law enforcement imposes restrictions on the amount of cash deportees can carry, limiting it to 50,000 Pakistani rupees per person (US\$175). The Afghans forced to relocate, many leaving behind businesses, arrive in Afghanistan in dire circumstances. There are reports of shortages of food and non-food items on the Afghan side of the border, exacerbating the existing humanitarian crisis. Further phases of repatriation drives – if they take place – by Iran or Pakistan will undoubtedly place tremendous pressure on an already weakened and depleted Afghan public system.

The human rights situation in 2023 saw no change in the lives of women and girls, as excluding them from most aspects of public and daily life remained the norm. For many of them, daily survival now depends solely on the income of their male members of the family, who in turn are dependent on work opportunities in neighbouring countries.

Bangladesh

Migration and mobility issues in Bangladesh remained critical in 2023, as the country faced multiple challenges related to climate change, political unrest, and economic instability. Moreover, the lack of a durable solution for the Rohingya population in country, also resulted in secondary movements.

According to the UN, climate change and its impacts are major drivers of both internal and international migration and displacement in Bangladesh, as the country remained vulnerable to natural disasters, sea-level rise, and environmental degradation (in 2023 agricultural outputs suffered from severe heatwaves, floods, and cyclones). The World Bank estimates that the number of Bangladeshis displaced by the impacts of climate change could reach 13.3 million by 2050. Moreover, the UN reported that August 2023 monsoon rains brought additional strife to the Rohingya communities in Chattogram, Cox Bazar, Rangamati and Bandarban: 1.3 million people including 630,000 women and 480,000 children were affected while 600,000 people needed humanitarian assistance in four districts.

In advance of the January 2024 general elections, a series of events by opposition parties - such as the countrywide road-rail-waterway blockade - disrupted supply chains and significantly pushed up the cost of transportation. The resulting disorder (from October – December 2023) exacerbated a weak domestic economy that continues to face import dependency, high inflation, lowering share of formal remittance transfers, and shrinking foreign currency reserves. Leaving the governor of Bangladesh's central bank to bemoan that the country's economy had hit "rock bottom" the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) estimated that Bangladesh's economy lost 65 billion takas (\$588 million) a day in the same period. Unscheduled power cuts during three out of every four days in 2023, adversely affected key economic sectors such as the garment industry.

With its weakened economy, poverty reduction and income diversification are the main motivations driving emigration, as millions of Bangladeshis have grown to rely on inward remittances. Recent data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) estimates that 1.2 million workers went abroad with BMET clearance (till November 2023) sending home an approximate \$23 billion in 2023. This represented an increase of about 8% (see figure 1). However, according to estimates, 49% of remittances are sent via informal channels using unlicensed, or unregulated money transfer companies, known as the ‘hundi system’ (motivated by lower transfer costs and faster transactions) meaning much of the wealth incoming has not been captured by official World Bank data.

Finally, worsening conditions in Bangladesh (March 2023 Cox Bazar fire) and a lack of global attention on the plight of a displaced community has meant that, those that were forced to leave Myanmar in 2017, have resorted to extreme measures. According to UNHCR and Bangladesh’s Immigration Police,



around 4,500 Rohingya people took boats across the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal in 2023, with an estimated 730 dying or going missing (the highest it has been since 2014). The increase in arrivals and secondary movements, has resulted in growing animosity and xenophobia amongst host populations, for example in Indonesia (Aceh).

Photo: According to UNHCR, the photo illustrates the boat journey refugees take from Cox Basar in Bangladesh to Aceh Province in Indonesia.

Source: ABC News, Jarrod Fankhauser

Iraq

The country continues to have a fragile political and security environment. However, substantial progress has been made by the government to bolster public finances and improve infrastructure and economic activity and to provide increasing levels of security. Internal armed conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been seen to be receding in the past couple of years and a sense of calm is seen to have been restored, particularly in the northern and central parts of the country. However, regional geo-political developments, i.e., the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and the resultant heightening of tension between regional countries has led to a resurgence of prospects of civil unrest and armed conflict.

Moreover, Iraq continues to have acute humanitarian and development needs. There are still 1.14 million internally displaced people (IDPs), and 25 IDP camps still hosting 175,000 people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Approximately 4.84 million IDPs returned to their area of origin between 2014 and December 2023. However, it was in 2021 that the Government of Iraq took steps to address

IDPs with a national plan that seeks to close IDPs camps to prompt the people to move from the camps back to their areas of origin. The primary reasons for the return of the IDPs were challenges associated with protracted displacement, a desire to reunite with their communities, and the impacts of local animosity against their community in displacement areas. However, the post-conflict regions have inadequate basic public services such as education and health care as well fully functioning local governments, which prevents returnees from fully reintegrating into their communities. There is also a lack of employment opportunities given the devastation of war as well as a lack of development prior to the conflict itself. Social tensions remain high given the lack of measures for restorative justice and reconciliation. In 2023, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, embarked on a comprehensive verification process to analyse the eligibility of IDPs and IDP returnees for the National Social Safety Net (SSN) programme, which is a targeted social assistance programme which includes cash and non-cash assistance. However, the closure of camps has faced some issues, as many returnees to post conflict regions in central and northern Iraq have not been able to properly access government services and welfare benefits, given the poor/damaged infrastructure in those regions and the lack of verification/data. The returnees have instead been relying on assistance from humanitarian agencies to meet their basic needs. Therefore, sustained policy and operational attention is needed to ensure that the SSN functions as intended, that is – it is able to assess the eligibility IDPs and IDP returnees to ensure that the most vulnerable of them who fit the SSN criteria will be included into the national social assistance system at par with the rest of the Iraqi population.

Iraqis continue to be propelled towards outward migration due to poor socio-economic prospects and other vulnerabilities. In 2023, 26,131 asylum applications were recorded in the EU, marginally less than 27,604 recorded in 2022 and 28,760 recorded in 2021. Since 2015, over 760,000 people have migrated from Iraq and its Kurdistan Region. In particular, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is seen as having a higher share of the overall outward migration from Iraq and is consequently a higher recipient of returning migrants. Smuggling remains a primary method for leaving the country while human traffickers continue to prey on vulnerable people in urban and rural areas, especially post conflict regions.

Globally, Iraq also remains one of the most vulnerable to climate change with rising temperatures, less rainfall, increasing desertification and salinity, and recurring dust storms. The impact of climate change is causing an increasing internal displacement in Iraq, with higher rural to urban migration occurring as a result. While the effect of armed conflict in northern Iraq was the leading cause of displacement in 2023, climatic shocks such as drought and environmental degradation in central and southern Iraq also resulted in significant displacement. Overall, climate-related factors displaced nearly 131,000 people across more than ten governorates in Iraq's central and southern regions between 2019 and September 2023, according to the UN. Approximately 46% of climate-displaced individuals were displaced within their district of origin, while 47% of climate-displaced migrants relocated from rural to urban locations. Notably, nearly one-half of these climate-displaced individuals were displaced from Dhi Qar Governorate, followed by an estimated 22% from Maysan Governorate and 8% from Muthanna and Qadisiya governorates due to adverse environmental conditions.

2024 is expected to continue to pose challenges for the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government as it tackles various issues regarding its internal and external dimension of migration. However, Iraq's Government has shown an earnest interest in tackling its migration related issues, not only in partnership with civil society but also by partnering with other countries. In 2021, Iraq entered into cooperation agreements with Finland, the Netherlands, and Norway, all of which include provisions related to migration. Furthermore, in 2022, Iraq signed similar agreements with Sweden and Germany, while a declaration of intent was signed in 2023 with Austria on improving information exchange for combating cross-border crime, including human trafficking. Meanwhile, the European Union–Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (2012) remains a core bedrock for initiating substantive projects that enhance on-ground cooperation on various areas of inter-(national) migration governance. Iraq's international cooperation with the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) is expected to be structured into a joint Nordic regional partnership on migration governance.

Iran

In 2023, according to UNHCR, Iran became the second largest refugee hosting country in the world. With over 3.4 million refugee and refugee-like populations, additionally, Iran hosts over 1.1 million Afghans of varying status including, 360,000 Afghans with Iranian resident permits, 267,000 family passport holders and 500,000 undocumented Afghans. Given international pressure, sanctions, and diverging priorities globally, UNHCR Iran has received only 23 per cent of the required USD 114.1 million, needed to address the humanitarian needs of Afghans and communities hosting them. This despite, Iran's inclusive policies such as granting refugees access to education, health services, and livelihood opportunities. Though commendable, in 2023 Afghans in Iran continued to report discrimination, restricted access to services and employment.

By September 2023, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi announced that the government of Iran would expel the estimated 5 million "illegal" Afghans who lacked valid documents or permits to stay in the country. By December 2023 Iranian authorities had banned Afghans with a temporary work permit the right to seek employment in more than half of the country's 31 provinces. The decision seems to have been motivated by Iran's economic crisis, worsened by international sanctions, and politicisation of the migration debate (deteriorating political considerations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan over border disputes and water resources). As a result, fearing a worsening situation, the number of Afghans voluntarily returning from Iran grew and according to reports, more than 500,000 Afghans were expelled from Iran in 2023, many of them forcibly and under harsh conditions.

According to the data compiled through ICMPD's Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) for Afghans, from September to November 2023, 5.3 million Afghans reached out to MRC and the main inquiries surrounded Smart ID cards for Afghans in Iran and opening bank accounts; and updates on deportations/returns from Iran and Pakistan. This illustrated the worries and anxieties of Afghans as

they considered their options for return. The forced returns further exposed the most vulnerable among Afghans in Iran (women, children) for whom refugee status remained pending. The government's decision to expel also placed immense pressure upon poorly funded reintegration services in Afghanistan, where the de-facto authorities struggle to provide basic services and security to the returning population.

With parliamentary elections upcoming in March, factors such as the lasting effects of sanctions, high inflation (touched 50% mid-2023), rising rental prices, declining average annual precipitation, rising temperatures, and severe water (and power) shortages are likely to drive more Iranians to seek alternative regions for livelihoods and sustenance. In the EU, the number of Iranian asylum applications grew by 33.8% in 2023, one of the highest relative increases observed during the year. The lack of development prospects, electoral disenfranchisement, shrinking civil liberties and the authorities' clampdown on protests in 2022/23 (that followed the death of Mahsa Amini) remain the main factors contributing towards emigration, which is very likely to continue this year as well.

India

2023 was a momentous year for India as it sustained economic growth whilst managing to regain control over inflationary pressures. The country 'as the voice of the Global South' held the presidency of G20 (making the African Union a permanent member), officially surpassing China as the world's most populous nation, and announced the creation of a new trade corridor entitled India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) ensuring energy and transport connectivity: as a regional counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Due in part to the country's efforts at deregulation of the agricultural sector and lower state support, but also increasing climatic factors (high temperatures, flooding, droughts) India's workforce is slowly transitioning away from the agrarian sector and towards manufacturing and urban areas. This has fuelled internal mobility away from farming states (it is estimated that internal mobility accounts for more than 10% of GDP) as the world's most populous nation comes to terms with realities of finding jobs for eight to ten million people. The result is a dearth of well-paying jobs accompanied by high costs of living, making life in the cities a challenge – for migrant workers – and forcing families to leave behind wage earners, or to return to their rural origins disheartened. However, in select cases, internal flows in 2023 also magnified decades old ethnic tensions between indigenous people of the Northeast and informal flows from Myanmar resulting in the halting the free-movement regime (FMR) between both countries and fencing of its border.

Many continued to emigrate abroad, where the resulting increase in income can represent upwards of 500% depending on the country of destination and workers' skills. As the middle class grows, Indians are seeking 'greener' pastures for education and employment: away from the traditional Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, USA, Canada, Australia; and towards Denmark, Finland, Israel, Japan, Germany, France, Cyprus, Malta, Ukraine (prior to the conflict), Norway, and Italy.

India signed a variety of migration and mobility bilateral agreements with Australia, Austria, Israel, and Italy over the course of the year. Germany towards the end of 2022, and in 2023, announced that it would be making ‘an extra effort’ to attract more skilled workers and students from India; France not to be outdone aims to welcome 30,000 Indian students by 2030 sponsoring French courses in India and France; and Italy’s agreement in 2023 with India provides internships, post-graduation, and includes thousands of quotas for seasonal (3,000-5,000) and non-seasonal workers (5,000-7,000) for the next two years. Israel – quite controversially - also announced that it aimed to bring an estimated 70,000 foreign workers from China (30,000) and India (40,000) in the construction sector coinciding with the decision to suspend over 80,000 Palestinian workers as the conflict peaked in November of 2023. The largest impediment towards the realisation of these targets remains the recognition of skills and prior learning. To that end, the UK and Australia have Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) on the mutual recognition of some qualifications. More of similar developments are expected in 2024.

As the region struggles with inflows and millions of migrants seeking asylum, among whom notably Afghans and Rohingya, communities have grown increasingly impatient in search of stability, safety, and prosperity. 2023 witnessed a considerable increase in attention to human smuggling and trafficking cases – through crime syndicates and organised networks destined for India and further afar - especially through the border between India and Bangladesh. Efforts to curtail these channels drew the attention of the public and government as Bollywood released “Dunki”, a fictional story about human smuggling from Punjab to the UK.

Pakistan

Pakistan remains one of the world’s most important countries of origin and destination for international migration. More than 11 million Pakistani nationals work abroad as labour migrants. It is estimated that around 800,000 Pakistanis left their homeland to work abroad in 2023, mainly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar. European countries are important destinations as well but can often only be reached irregularly due to scarcity of legal migration channels. In 2023, Pakistani nationals ranked 10th among all persons detected crossing a Schengen border in an irregular way and 8th among all applicants for asylum in the EU. Households and domestic economy heavily depend on labour emigration. With a total of USD 24 billion, equivalent to 7.0% of the GDP, Pakistan was the 8th most important migrant remittance receiving country in 2023. Remittances have gone down by 23% since 2021, however, and are expected to decline by 10% in 2024, dropping below USD 22 billion.

Throughout 2023, structural challenges in the economic, political and security domains contributed significantly to divers of irregular migration from Pakistan. Pakistan’s economy contracted in 2023 and poverty increased due to deteriorating wages, high inflation and the heavy damage caused by the 2022 floods. The difficult economic situation and low expectations of a return to growth were compounded by political unrest, with the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Despite appointment of a

caretaker government in August 2023, political uncertainty persisted throughout the second half of the year, with a postponement of Parliamentary Elections from October to early 2024 due to finalisation of the national census. The country also saw a surge in violence, witnessing 1524 violence-related fatalities and 1463 injuries from as many as 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations, including nearly 1000 fatalities among civilians and security forces personnel. This marked 2023 as the deadliest year since 2017. Over 90% of the casualties were reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces, bordering Afghanistan.

The deteriorating security situation prompted Pakistan's government to announce an Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan in October 2023. The plan applies to all foreigners residing in the country illegally but mainly affects Afghan nationals. At the time of adoption of this Plan, Pakistan hosted an estimated 3.7 million Afghan immigrants, refugees, and undocumented migrants, 600,000 of whom arrived in the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. In 2022, the government had registered 1.3 million Afghan refugees with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, 129,703 unregistered members of registered families (UMRFs), 840,000 Afghan nationals with Citizen Cards and approx. 775,000 undocumented migrants from Afghanistan. On 3 October 2023, all irregular immigrants were ordered to leave the country by 1 November, otherwise they would face deportation. The Pakistani government explained this step as necessary to enforce existing migration legislation but also to react to the Taliban government's alleged support for extremists in Pakistan. According to UNHCR, approx. 428,300 persons had returned to Afghanistan by the end of November, mainly those who had stayed undocumented in Pakistan, often without the necessary assets to support themselves and adding to the humanitarian crisis in their home country. The first phase of the Repatriation Plan focused on undocumented Afghan nationals and visa overstayers.

In 2024, Pakistan's socio-economic and political realities have further exacerbated the drivers of migration. The country's economy continues to struggle, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other financial institutions expressing concerns over Pakistan's ability to manage its external debt obligations, which are due to peak at around \$24 billion by June 2024. The economic crisis, marked by high inflation and unemployment, has pushed many below the poverty line, with approximately 40 percent of the population living in poverty. The economic downturn is expected to persist, with remittances projected to decline further, dropping below USD 22 billion. Politically, the aftermath of the 2024 elections has not brought the anticipated stability. The elections have led to a coalition government that faces significant challenges in addressing the economic crisis and rising militancy. The political landscape remains volatile, with the potential for further unrest as the opposition, led by the now-imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan's PTI, continues to challenge the legitimacy of the election results.

This year, the combinations of a dire economic outlook, a tense security situation and continued implementation of the repatriation policy will affect both emigrants from Pakistan and vulnerable immigrant populations in the country. Income opportunities will be limited and the prospects for legal

or tolerated stay of immigrants and refugees is expected to diminish. The aforementioned factors increase the potential for primary and secondary movements from the country towards Türkiye and further European destinations. Thus, and in the face of a lack of legal channels, the vast majority of both Pakistani intending migrants and Afghans ordered to leave the country will have to rely on irregular patterns.

Migration trends in the region

While the previous section highlighted specific countries from the region and the plausible drivers of mobility, for 2024, the next section aims to offer a retrospective analysis of specific migration trends witnessed over the course of 2023. This will cover significant migration trends within five sub-headings: 1. Labour Migration 2. Remittance flows; 3. Asylum & Protection; and 4. Irregular migration; 5. Return and Reintegration

Labour Migration

Migrants from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan continue to be a primary source of labour for labour receiving countries. 2023 continued to see significant numbers of skilled and semi-skilled migrants from these countries go aboard in the search of employment opportunities. Indians, for example, were the greatest beneficiaries of the EU's Blue Card Scheme.

Labour exploitation however remains a major risk as most workers that go abroad from the South Asia are low paid and often take up jobs in the informal or semi-formal sectors with weak labour conditions with maltreatment/unsafe standards, facing the risk of unpaid wages and exploitation. Moreover, migrating abroad brings upon labour migrants a substantial amount of debt which can be a factor for increasing vulnerability, particularly in the case of failure to secure a job or premature return to their origin country.

The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training in Bangladesh estimates that more than 1.3 million Bangladeshis registered with BMET left the country for employment abroad in 2023. This represented an increase of 15% in comparison to 2022. Similarly, according to its Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE), more than 860,000 Pakistanis emigrated for employment overseas during the 2023 (the highest number since the peak in 2015 – 946,571). In 2023, given the absence of published data thus far, emigration from India, for the purposes of employment has remained high, as measured by the Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) clearances granted, to the 18 countries that need ECR certificates, as well as to new emerging destinations such as Israel, Taiwan, and Italy.

Rising number of overseas Indian students: Overseas Indians students are expected to double from 1 million in 2019 to 2 million by 2025.

Student mobility is rapidly emerging as a means for outward emigration from India, considering enhanced opportunities in education and easing of labour market access post-graduation. In terms of destinations, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia continue to be the top choices for Indian students. However, there is a growing interest in non-traditional destinations like Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Ireland, driven by factors like lower tuition fees, post-study work opportunities, and

favourable immigration policies. With language training programmes, internships/apprenticeships opportunities, EU member states such as France, Germany and Italy are increasingly turning to Indian students for their labour needs.

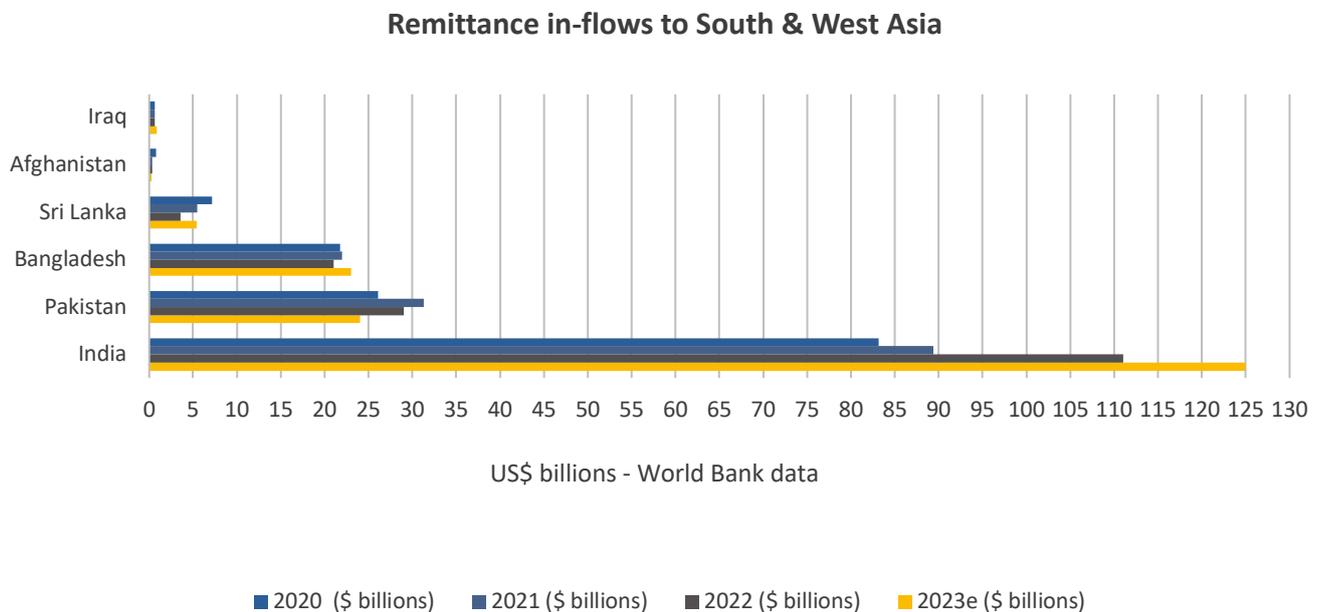
With large working force populations, limited labour market opportunities within the country, and higher salaries for jobs abroad, people continue to seek better opportunities for emigration abroad. Over the last 2–3 years Gulf states have been losing some of their appeal for emigrants from the Silk Routes region and new destinations are emerging, given anticipated labour shortages. As a result, countries within the Silk Routes region have been actively seeking employment channels for their citizens. Either through the negotiation and signing of Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements – MMPA (e.g. India-Germany, and signed intents with India-Austria, India-Cyprus, India-Finland) or through various dialogues and other labour partnerships (e.g. EU-Pakistan, Italy-Pakistan, and Greece-Bangladesh, Romania-Bangladesh, EU-Bangladesh) that complement related efforts at the EU level.

Remittances

According to early estimates, the region of South and West Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Iraq) will receive a total of over \$175 billion. The increase of \$13 billion, is largely attributable to remittance flows to India, which are expected to beat previous forecasts and reach \$125 billion in 2023. As in 2022, remittances remained a critical financial flow and source of foreign exchange for countries within the region. Remittances as a share of GDP ranged around 7 percent in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and 5.2 percent in Bangladesh in 2023. In India, the share of remittances in the economy was only 3.4 percent, despite its position as the largest recipient of remittances globally. Depreciation and exchange rate management policies have led migrants in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka to take advantage of the black-market premia and transfer funds through informal and formal channels.

The key drivers of remittance growth in 2023 are high employment figures within destination economies (EU, the United States) enabling continued transfers to communities of origin. Sending \$200 to the region cost 4.3% on average in the second quarter of 2023. In 2024, the World Bank estimates that growth in remittance flows is expected to fall due to projected weaker economic growth in the United States, the Euro Area, and GCC countries, major hosts of migrant workers from the region.

Figure 1: Inward Remittance Flows as of December 2023



Source: World Bank

The developmental impact of migration can scarcely be limited to the tangible financial flows from countries of destination to countries of origin (as outlined above). The World Bank in 2023 highlights that migration also contributes to the economic integration of origin countries into global networks. Some migrants have served as catalysts for increasing international trade between origin and destination countries. They have provided information on laws, regulations, markets, and products and have linked sellers and buyers across these countries. Migration has been linked as well to an increase in FDI flows from destination to origin countries. Migrants—especially if they are highly educated and are in high-skilled occupations—have also helped to develop industries in their countries of origin by transferring knowledge and fostering innovation. For example, Indian migrants in California’s Silicon Valley have launched large information technology–related firms in India: in 2006, firms established by returnees accounted for some 90 percent of firms in software technology parks in Bangalore.

Asylum & Protection

According to the UN mid-year trends for 2023, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide was estimated to be between 110-114 million (fractionally higher than in 2022): 10% (approximately 11 million) of whom can be found within Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, and Bangladesh. The number of total refugees globally increased by 1.2 million to 35.8 million in the first half of 2023. The share of Afghan refugees (second to Syrians), increased from 5.7 million to 6.1 million in 2023, mostly reflecting new population estimates reported by the Government of Pakistan. Together, Iran and Pakistan host 90% of all Afghan refugees, with Bangladesh hosting just under a million Rohingya.

Commitments vs Results

According to the UN mid-year trends for 2023, globally 59,500 resettlement arrivals were reported by 12 countries (mainly United States of America, Canada, Netherlands, Germany, France) in the first six months of 2023: an increase of 17,200 or 41 per cent compared to the same period of the previous year. Canada and the United States of America welcomed the resettled Afghans (5,900 and 3,300 respectively) whilst 1,400 refugees from Iran were granted permanent residency or citizenship in the Netherlands and Canada.

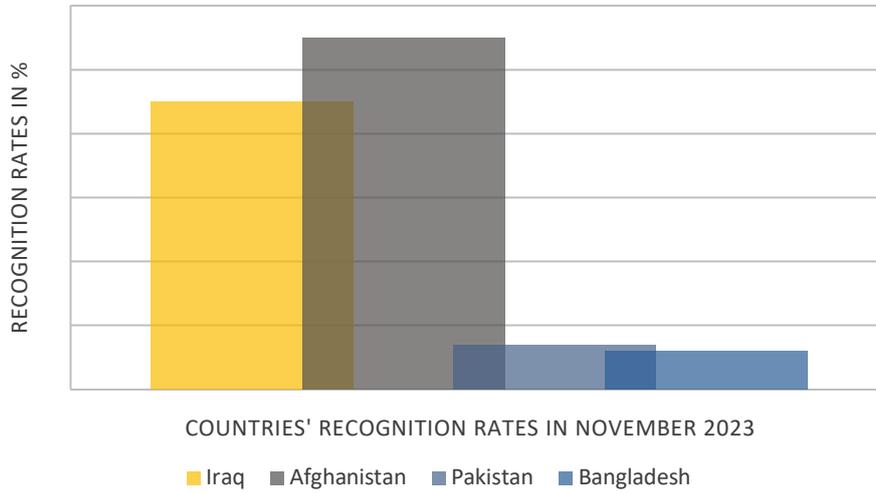
The political and economically motivated Pakistani and Iranian governments' decision to repatriate irregularly residing/unregistered migrants - on their territories - and the consequential return of hundreds of thousands of Afghans to their home country, particularly before and during winter, is expected to aggravate Afghanistan's already severe humanitarian crisis. Afghans remain the most displaced within the region (9.7 million) with predictions estimating that another 1.46 million Afghans will return to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan in 2024. The various aspects of this crisis in conjunction with the changing policy environment in the main destination countries in the neighbourhood will increase the potential for emigration from Afghanistan and for secondary movements from the neighbouring countries towards Türkiye and the EU.

A proportion of those in need of refuge and asylum, from the region, arrive at the EU borders. The total number of asylum applications recorded in the EU in 2023, 1 048 900 first-time asylum applicants (non-EU citizens) applied for international protection in EU countries, up by 20% compared with 2022 (873 700): Afghanistan 100,935; Bangladesh: 38,965; Pakistan: 30,440; Iraq: 22,985.

Over the past three years, first time asylum applications for Iraqi and Afghan nationals in the EU has decreased. This development can be attributed to the strict border control measures imposed by Türkiye and others, but perhaps also to the fact that most refugees and prospective migrants from Afghanistan do not have the financial means available to fund the expensive journey to Europe or to pay migrant smugglers for their services. However, from 2021-23 first time asylum applications from Pakistani (from 1924 to 2651) and Bangladeshis (from 1,840 to 3,836) increased.

Over the last year within the EU, the recognition rate, which reflects the percentage of asylum applications that receive decisions granting refugee status and subsidiary protection, fluctuated around 40%: with Afghans and Iraqis having recognition rates well above (55% and 45% respectively), whilst Pakistani and Bangladeshis remaining at 6–7%.

Recognition Rates in %



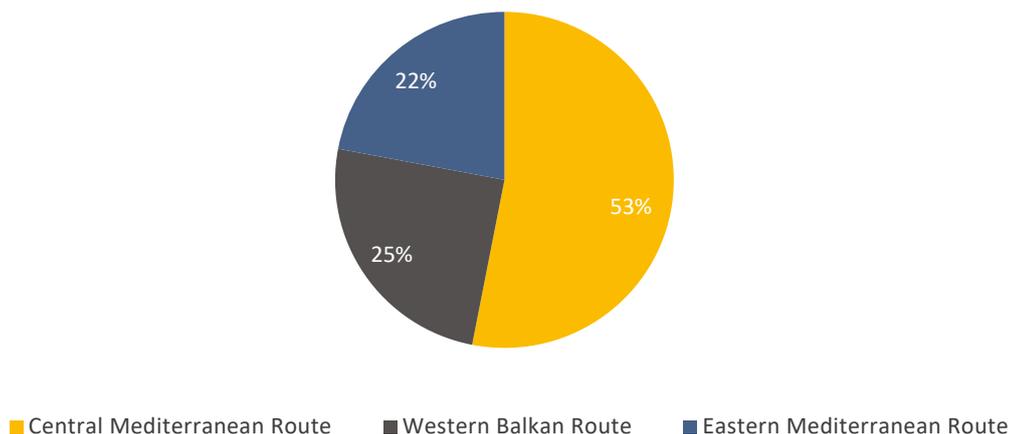
Irregular Migration Trends

Current global socioeconomic, climate and security trends, and their impact on the ground all contribute to decreased security, increased cost-of-living and a reduction in viable economic livelihoods for individual citizens in the region. Inflation, domestic political uncertainty, terrorist attacks, destruction of infrastructure and agricultural resources by climate change and lack of local employment opportunities and legal migration channels all contribute to an overall situation of persistent, complex instability. This instability will continue to generate internal and external population movements within countries, towards transit countries, and ultimately towards the EU.

In the 12 months period December 2022 - November 2023, Frontex registered a total of 384,593 irregular border crossings (sea, land, or air) at the external borders of the EU. Of these, 54,249 were identified to be from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, and Sri Lanka:

- 28,257 used the Central Mediterranean Route (sea) route, used mainly by Bangladeshis and Pakistani nationals;
- 14,068 were detected via the Western Balkan Route (land), used mainly by Iraqi, Sri Lankan and Indian nationals;
- 11,287 were detected via the Eastern Mediterranean Route (sea and land) used mainly by Iraqi and Afghan nationals.

Proportion of Irregular Detections in 2023 by route



During 2023, the number of Afghan citizen detected at the EU’s external borders saw a significant decrease (47%) on previous years, although Afghans are still the most significant nationality from the region attempting illegal border crossings. Bangladeshi citizens, followed by Pakistanis remain a significant group that saw little change in trends compared to previous years. It is reasonable to expect these nationalities to remain high or even increase, based upon the increasing pressures in these countries of high inflation, low employment, and lack of legal channels, all of which drive irregular migration flows.

Notably trends include shifts in route usage, with Afghan detections along the Western Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean routes dropping, in tandem with a notable increase along the Eastern Mediterranean route, suggesting a change in the routes. Anecdotal reporting from the countries of origin suggests that migrants are increasingly departing from their countries via regular means to transit countries, from where they embark on an irregular journey towards the countries of destination, either having travelled with but not used a previously procured fraudulent travel document or procuring one enroute.

Finally, there was a significant drop in the number of Indian citizens intercepted, with the bulk of this reduction is noted in the Western Balkan route. This may be attributed to changes in early 2023 to entry requirements to Western Balkan transit countries, with Serbia dropping visa-free access with a number of countries, including Burundi, Tunisia and also India, following political pressure from the European Union in late 2022.

The **Central Mediterranean** route overtook the Western Balkans as the most significant irregular migration route into the EU, with a total of 152,737 detections during the 12-month period from December 2022 – November 23. Detections of citizens from the region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, and Sri Lanka) remained stable on the previous 12-month period (but still high at 28,257 detections), but with trend changes in the nationalities identified within the route. Bangladeshi nationals remained prominent (13,532 arrivals), with a small reduction of 7% from the previous 12-month period, whereas 2023 saw a dramatic increase of 185% of detections of Pakistani nationals along the same route, rising from 2950 arrivals (December 21 – November 22) to 8411 arrivals during the year from December 22 – November 23. The high number of detections suggests that the previously identified trend of the use of the Libyan corridor has remained during 2023, most likely fuelled by charter flights to Benghazi (Libya), and departures of fishing vessels from the east of the country. Previous reporting by Frontex identified a growing trend of document fraud by individuals from the region, with migrants transiting through the Arabian Peninsula before attempting entry into the EU.

The ratio of irregular arrivals along the **Eastern Mediterranean route** also increased during 2023, with a 22% increase in detections of citizens from the region (9250 to 11,287). Most of this increase came from an 103% increase in the number of Afghans detected arriving by sea along the route (3379 to 6863), while other nationalities tended towards a reduction across both land and sea borders.

Along the **Western Balkan route**, while numbers of interceptions of citizens from the region remained high (14,068 between December 22 – November 23), this was a significant reduction on the prior 12 months (38,642 between December 21 – November 22). This drop is consistent with an overall reduction of 26% along the Western Balkan route across the same period, from 142,988 to 105,481. Notable changes include a significant fall in the number of Afghans detected along the route, as well as 86% drop in Indian citizens from more than 6000 detections to under 1000.

Return and Reintegration

Effective and sustainable reintegration of returning migrants remains an important area of policy and programmatic focus for the governmental and non-governmental actors in South and West Asia.

In recent years, countries of the region, in particular, Bangladesh, India, Iraq and Pakistan have enacted laws, formulated policies and put in place partnerships and service delivery mechanisms to improve the reintegration of their returning citizens.

In Bangladesh, a National Reintegration Policy for Migrants is being finalised with economic, social and psycho-social support being delivered to returnees, especially via district administration. Welfare Offices are set-up in 30 priority districts to support the government in providing welfare and reintegration services to current and returning migrants (and their families as applicable) respectively. The Welfare Offices will complement the work of the District Employment and Manpower Training which will now focus on pre-employment and pre-departure services while Welfare Offices will focus on welfare, return and reintegration services.

In India, the Central and state governments are increasingly placing policy focus on reintegration of returning migrants. Telangana is set to become the first state in India to implement a policy for integrating returning migrants into society. The state's labour department, in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Organisation for Migration, and UN Women, plans to establish a resource centre to assist migrants in reintegrating and finding employment.

In Iraq, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), the Ministry for Migration and Displacement (MoMD), along with support from ICMPD, as well as other organisations, continues to offer a variety of services for returning migrants, such as the: (1) Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) which is currently present in Baghdad and two new MRCs opening in the Kurdistan region, (2) Iraqi-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration (GMAC), and the (3) European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) which is the primary service provider of Frontex Joint Reintegration Services (JRS). The MRC placed within MoLSA and EJCC premises is currently the de facto government institution with sufficient capacity for supporting primarily labour market integration of returning migrants in Iraq and the network of MRC is set for a significant expansion in the coming years. The work of the MRCs is feeding into the national institutional framework for reintegration that also encompasses National Referral Mechanism operated by MoMD and JCC. The *National Strategy for Migration Management and Vision on Sustainable Return and Reintegration* are considered to be the guiding strategic documents of the Government of Iraq in improving conditions for effective and sustainable return and the engagement of the Government has recently also been strengthened through numerous 'declarations of intent' with EU Member States, which outline migration cooperation in a broad manner, including also on returns and readmission. Given the large number of potential returnees to Iraq from Europe in the near future, the need for a more robust system for return and reintegration is visible and key state actors are in need of increased capacities to provide the needed administrative and operational support. The primary strategic goal is to build, with the support of external partners, the in-house capacity in Iraq for managing return migration.

In Pakistan, the government has been progressing in the implementation of the Readmission Case Management System for readmission of Pakistanis residing in the EU without authorisation. There are other Pakistanis returning from other transit countries in need of reintegration, in addition to those returning from the EU. However, currently reintegration as a process and a governance area is not covered by any existing national/provincial policy in Pakistan that would lead towards consolidated

national reintegration programming. The reintegration of returning migrants as a priority area has been highlighted in the [draft] National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis. It is expected that work on a Reintegration Policy is expected will be initiated in 2024. The government is, however, improving reception facilities at border crossing points and utilising international support to provide front facing support to returning migrants through MRCs and other facilities such as the Pakistani-German Facilitation and Reintegration Centre (PGFRC), placed under the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF), supported by the GIZ. Government initiatives such as reskilling, recognition of prior learning, welfare support and monetary assistance for returnees remain operational, largely arising from the impact of COVID-19 on return and continued on limited scale. Pakistan is also one of only two countries in the region to have signed a Readmission Agreement with the EU to return Pakistani citizens illegally residing in EU Member States, with the scope limited to the reintegration of labour migrants.

Conclusions

2024 will be a tumultuous year due to the aftermath of the major geopolitical crises that emerged in 2022 and 2023, namely the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts. With no end in sight of these conflicts, their impact will continue to be felt in South and West Asia, especially when coupled with preexisting systemic national weaknesses. Most of the countries within the region face fluctuating energy supplies and high inflation, high debt burden, dwindling foreign exchange reserves and fragile political and security circumstances.

Follow up returns from Pakistan and Iran may result in additional repatriation of millions of Afghans and this is expected to generate significant hardship not only for those repatriated, but also the communities to which those people return (with little promise/horizon for employment or education). Afghanistan continues to be socio-economically devastated since its political shift in 2021, thus there will be a severe lack of reintegration opportunities for those repatriated – with vulnerable groups like women and minors bearing the brunt of the hardship. As climate change intensifies, its impact will generate substantial amount of displacement in South and West Asia, which contains countries that rank as some of the most vulnerable to the impact of climate change. It must be noted that climate change may eventually also lead to state-to-state conflict which poses risks of mass displacement of people.

Many people from countries of South and West Asia will continue to consider irregular pathways to migrate, especially young people, given that the countries of the region have seen a youth bulge in population growth in the past years. Many of the youth seek employment abroad when faced with weak prospects in their home countries. In order to dissuade irregular migration of people and to convert migration into a means for mutual economic development, labour and skills partnerships are emerging as a tool to ensure a win-win paradigm of migration. Labour receiving and sending countries will therefore move towards further cementing their partnership agreements by initiating pilot projects for labour mobility or expanding the scope and scale of previously successful pilot projects to cover more sectors and region.