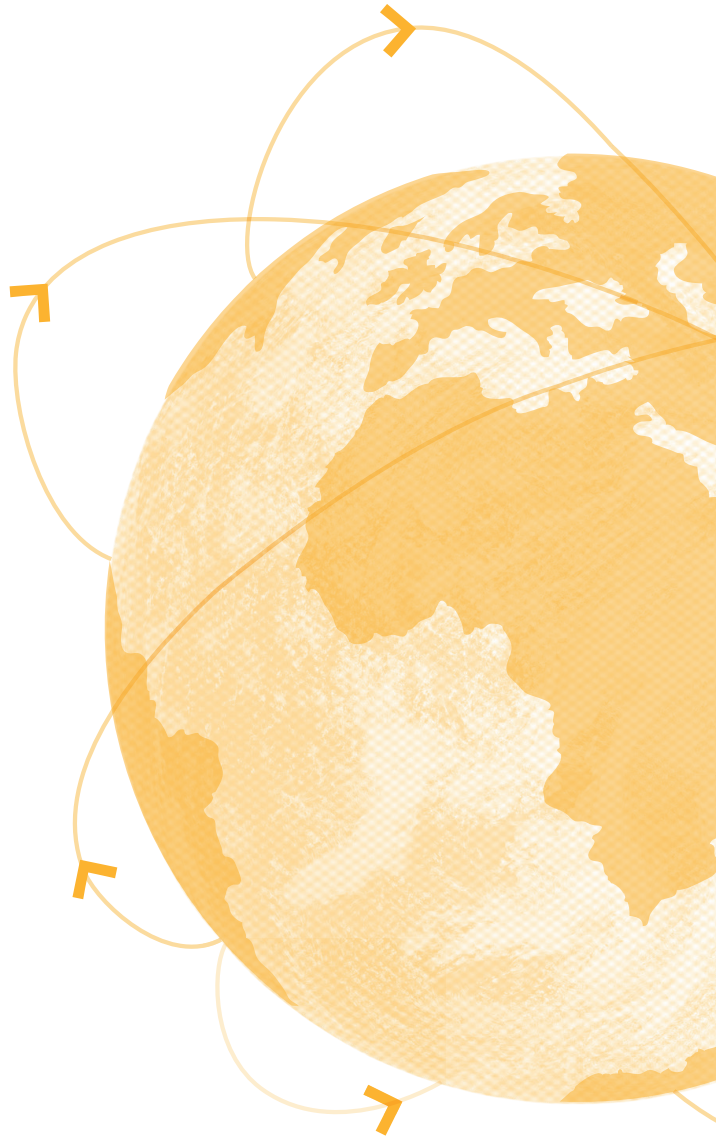




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Migration Outlook 2026

Silk Routes

Five migration issues to look out for in 2026

Origins, key events and priorities

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Migration Outlook 2026

Silk Routes

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Origins, key events and priorities for Europe

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Five migration
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Five migration issues to look out for in 2026

1 Model labour mobility frameworks are put to the test

Cooperation between Silk Routes countries and global partners on labour mobility has further advanced in 2025 and will remain high on the agenda in the near future. Silk Routes countries seek to find new markets for their rapidly growing and young labour force, in the attempt to tackle unemployment and reduce social pressures. At the same time, driven by growing labour shortages, European countries aim to attract qualified labour force to fill gaps in key socio-economic sectors such as IT and healthcare. Yet, structural constraints limit labour mobility, from limited legal channels for aspiring migrants to Europe, to bureaucratic hurdles such as qualification recognition, to visa constraints such as degree requirements where labour opportunities do exist for specific sectors (e.g. IT). In a crowded field, the EU's Talent Partnership and first pilot European Legal Gateway Office in India offer models for cooperation with high potential of achieving mutual benefits in labour mobility. Cooperative efforts to institutionalise the development of skills aligned to European needs and standards, the recognition of these qualifications and the facilitation of such talents' mobility will be key action areas in 2026 and beyond for countries in the region. These models are being put to the test as they are laying the groundwork for long-term strategic partnerships.

2 Rapidly evolving geopolitical developments weigh on migration outlook

At the time of writing,¹ violations of the ceasefire between Afghanistan and Pakistan have escalated from long-running tensions to open confrontation. Yet its timing in parallel with the rapid escalation of the US-Israel conflict with Iran leaves unclear whether and how decisively the international community will intervene to de-escalate, or if the conflict becomes protracted. Indeed, the joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran, subsequent retaliation from Iran, additional Israeli strikes on Lebanon and ensuing attacks throughout the Middle East region have already generated significant turmoil for the region and neighbouring Silk Routes countries, particularly Iraq. While historically, social unrest in Iran has not tended towards mass cross-border displacement, internal displacement and shorter- to mid-term displacement to neighbouring Iraq is likely, together with Lebanese displaced by recent strikes, as occurred in late 2024 and early 2025. Given the high number of Afghans hosted in Iran, the current conflict will likely exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and may translate into further displacement within the region or to neighbouring countries like Türkiye. While it is uncertain how the two conflicts will progress, it is likely that they will aggravate existing vulnerabilities and might lead to additional displacement, internally or across borders.

3 Central Mediterranean Route emerges as major irregular route for nationals of Silk Routes countries

In 2025, irregular border crossings to Europe have declined by 26% compared to previous year, with some routes including the Western Balkan and the Eastern Mediterranean ones experiencing marked downturns. While the Central Mediterranean Route has seen a similar amount of irregular border crossings in the past two years, detections

¹ Early March 2026.

of nationals from the Silk Routes region along this route have increased. This rise is driven mostly by Bangladeshi nationals, who represent the first nationality overall among irregular crossing to Europe. The route, however, is becoming popular also among Pakistani and Iraqi migrants, who can reach Northern African countries in a regular way. While visa restrictions and border controls in countries along the EU external borders might restrict mobility, it is expected that this route will continue to be one of the most active also in the near future.

4 Displacement within the region could exacerbate fragile situations in the context of climate change

Alongside evolving geopolitical dynamics, countries in the Silk Routes region have extensive experience with conflict- and disaster-induced displacement – often resulting in protracted situations that disproportionately affect already vulnerable groups, including refugees and internally displaced persons. While return of Afghans is a priority for different host countries in the region and in Europe, the difficult socio-economic conditions and current volatile geopolitical situation represent elements of uncertainty for sustainable return. In addition, the recent escalation of the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the US-Israeli attacks on Iran might cause additional forced mobility, including increasing repatriations of Afghan nationals and displacements of Iranians within and beyond the region. In the context of massive cuts to humanitarian aid and refugee support, this risks exacerbating already precarious situations for vulnerable populations and secondary movements.

5 Cooperation on returns increases, but reintegration remains a challenge

As labour mobility schemes and talent partnerships are expanding, so is cooperation between EU countries and Silk Routes countries on return and reintegration. The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which will be officially rolled out in June, establishes a series of measures on such topics to expand, operationalise, and accelerate return procedures. As recent data show, European countries have already started to intensify the return of third-country nationals without a legal right to stay in the European territory, often driven by mounting internal political pressures. Conversely, Silk Routes countries are building their capacities to improve the reintegration of returnees, often with the support of international organisations and partners. As return procedures are expected to increase in the future, reservations remain regarding the persistent reintegration challenges faced by Afghan nationals, especially with the intensification of the border conflict with Pakistan. Uncertainty also concerns the recent elections in Iraq and Bangladesh, which might cause lack of continuity in the implementation of migration cooperation agreements with host countries. For 2026, while return will continue to be prioritised, the sustainability of these returns as related to still nascent reintegration structures and recent tensions in the region will constitute a real challenge.

Introduction

ICMPD's Migration Outlook for the Silk Routes region² presents a brief analysis of recent regional migration and policy trends and provides an outlook on developments to watch out for in 2026. Complementing the recently published ICMPD Migration Outlook,³ this Regional Migration Outlook takes a closer look at some of the dynamics that shape migration trends related to the Silk Routes region. It relies on ICMPD's region-wide presence and expertise, as well as desk research examining the latest developments and their implications on migration and mobility.

The Silk Routes region presents a highly dynamic and complex migratory landscape, with many countries simultaneously acting as places of origin, transit, and destination. Migration within and from the region is shaped by a wide array of geopolitical, socio-economic, humanitarian, environmental, and cultural drivers, with marked differences across countries. Labour migration continues to be the main engine of mobility, with hundreds of thousands of workers from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan leaving every year towards the Gulf and, to a much smaller extent, Europe. At the same time, conflicts and violence, which have historically displaced millions within the region and beyond, have recently re-erupted in a dramatic way. The long-term implications of such developments are emblematic in the situation of Afghanistan – one of the focus topics of this Outlook – where more than three million people remain displaced within the country,⁴ another three million have been repatriated from Pakistan and Iran in 2025 alone,⁵ and thousands attempt to migrate irregularly towards Europe every year.

2 The Silk Routes region includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

3 ICMPD, ICMPD Migration Outlook 2026 (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2026).

4 UNHCR, UNHCR Global Appeal 2026 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/mid-year-trends-2025>.

5 UNHCR, 'Afghanistan Situation', Operational Data Portal, 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>.

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As a result of this complex migratory scenario, the policy landscape underlying national frameworks and bilateral agreements lies at the intersection of multiple migration policy areas, including labour mobility, return and reintegration, and protection. In the Silk Routes region, most countries aim to enhance migration cooperation with European countries as one of the strategies to alleviate internal socio-economic problems, including unemployment and a growing labour force, while providing financial and operational support for reintegration programmes that foster the sustainable reintegration of returnees. Growing interest to strengthen migration cooperation has also led to enhanced collaboration on prevention of irregular migration, return and sustainable reintegration. For the EU, collaboration with Silk Routes partners across these policy areas is framed by ongoing and upcoming work under the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

This Regional Migration Outlook therefore takes stock of the current situation by analysing recent trends in mobility and policy development for the region, in order to identify prospective areas of work and mobility trends for the region for the upcoming year. First, it focuses in on two cross-cutting issues for the region as a whole: the evolving situation in Afghanistan over the past year and its wider regional implications, and the growing significance of climate-induced displacement across the Silk Routes region. Then, the Outlook analyses migration trends for the region, in terms of labour migration, asylum and protection, irregular migration, and return and reintegration, drawing primarily on EU data. Complementing this, it then dives into recent and upcoming migration policy developments, which for the region are primarily concentrated on the areas of labour mobility and return. The Outlook concludes by outlining key focus areas for policy makers in 2026.

Focus regions

Focus regions

Afghanistan

Despite relative improvements in the security and economic situation in 2025, Afghanistan still faces severe social and humanitarian challenges. According to the World Bank, after sharp contractions following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the national economy has seen signs of slight recovery and is expected to continue growing over the next year.⁶ However, the growth is not sufficient to compensate the lost ground and the rapid increase in population (including repatriations from neighbouring countries), which might lead to a four percent contraction of GDP per capita. Compounding this risk, international sanctions, political and financial isolation, and the decrease in humanitarian aid – which the country had significantly relied on⁷ – might represent another blow for the already fragile economy, pushing many into poverty. According to the UN OCHA, in 2026, 21.9 million people – about 45% of the population – will need humanitarian assistance to survive, with many facing hunger, acute food insecurity and inadequate access to water and sanitation services.⁸

After the regime change in 2021, the security situation in the country had been improving; levels of armed violence and civilian casualties in 2025 have

6 The World Bank, Macro Poverty Outlook. Country-by-Country Analysis and Projections for the Developing World (World Bank, 2025).

7 International Crisis Group, After the Aid Axe: Charting a Path to Self-Reliance in Afghanistan, Asia Report no. 350 (International Crisis Group, 2025), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/afghanistan/350-after-aid-axe-charting-path-self-reliance-afghanistan>.

8 UN OCHA, Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025), https://www.unocha.org/attachments/0a995c74-1bea-401b-be47-bbe697adae9c/AFG_Humanitarian_Needs_and_Response%20Plan_2026.pdf.

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significantly declined in comparison to previous years.⁹ Yet the recent escalation of conflict with Pakistan, in which major cities such as Kabul and Kandahar were affected, and the intensification of the conflict in Iran will likely reverse or stall these trends, potentially generating further repatriations from neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, and despite signs of discontent and localised clashes with armed resistance groups, the Taliban leadership has centralised and consolidated its power, taking over political, and administrative structures, curtailing social and civic spaces, in particular for women, and stabilising the de facto government.¹⁰

The relative internal stability of the country had positive repercussions on functional work of international actors in-country, as well as the government's diplomatic ties abroad. Internally, despite ongoing operational constraints, many humanitarian and international organisations have adopted innovative modalities to remain active on the ground, often through partnerships with civil society organisations and other local actors. These adaptive approaches have enabled continued service delivery and could offer a useful model for the Migrant Resource Centre¹¹ in Afghanistan, which has been operating online since the Taliban's takeover. While re-establishing a stronger physical presence would be vital to ensure more comprehensive support to Afghan migrants and returnees – particularly to facilitate sustainable reintegration through skills registration, access to TVET, microfinance, and training in soft and financial literacy skills – such efforts will largely depend on how

9 EUAA, Afghanistan: Country Focus, Country of Origin Information Report (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2026). <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/publications/coi-report-afghanistan-country-focus-1>

10 William Byrd, 'Where Does Afghanistan Stand After Four Years of Taliban Rule?', Lawfare, Lawfare, 21 August 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/where-does-afghanistan-stand-after-four-years-of-taliban-rule>.

11 Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) are dedicated centres that provide outgoing, potential, and returning migrants with comprehensive information on migration-related challenges and opportunities through awareness-raising initiatives and campaigns, community education, and reintegration support and referral. MRCs operate in the capitals and major cities of the Silk Routes and Central Asian countries and are jointly supervised by the ICMPD and national governments. Within the Silk Routes, MRCs are currently operating in Afghanistan (remotely), Iraq, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

the situation in the country continues to evolve. Regarding diplomatic ties abroad, Russia officially recognised the Taliban government in July 2025 and China intensified its economic and political relations for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹² Even without formalising their diplomatic relations, other countries have established a connection with the de facto government, particularly for the repatriation of Afghan nationals, including neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, Türkiye, as well as some European countries.

According to the UNHCR, in 2025 alone, almost 2.9 million Afghans returned from Iran (65%) and Pakistan (35%),¹³ adding to the about 2.3 million people who already returned in the previous two years¹⁴ due to tightening migration policies, deportations, and reduced humanitarian assistance.¹⁵ Although statistically negligible, returns from Europe are politically relevant, as they might pave the way for larger, systematic deportations also from other countries. After Germany, which resumed deportations of Afghan nationals in 2024¹⁶ and continued in 2025,¹⁷ Austria deported a convicted criminal in October 2025, announcing more deportations in the future.¹⁸

12 Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, 'Afghanistan: Are the Taliban Still Isolated after 4 Years?', Deutsche Welle, 14 August 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-are-the-taliban-still-isolated-after-4-years/a-73637691>.

13 UNHCR, 'Afghanistan Situation', Operational Data Portal, 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>.

14 UNHCR Afghanistan, Border Monitoring Report January-December 2023 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/108178>; UNHCR Afghanistan, Border Monitoring Report January-December 2024 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/114012>.

15 International Crisis Group, After the Aid Axe.

16 Euronews and AP, 'Germany Departs Afghan Nationals for First Time since Taliban Takeover', Euronews, 30 August 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/08/30/germany-deports-afghan-nationals-to-homeland-for-first-time-since-taliban-takeover>.

17 Diana Resnik and Oman Al Yahyai, 'Germany Departs 81 Afghans under Tougher Migration Policy', My-Europe_europe-News, Euronews, 18 July 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/18/germany-deports-81-afghan-nationals-under-tougher-migration-policy>.

18 Kieran Guilbert, 'Austria Departs First Person to Afghanistan since Taliban Takeover', Euronews, 21 October 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/10/21/austria-deports-first-person-to-afghanistan-since-taliban-takeover-sparking-outcry>.

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Against this backdrop, millions of Afghans remain displaced within their country or in neighbouring countries, while thousands attempt to reach Europe every year, often through irregular means. At the global level, Afghans constitute the fourth-largest refugee population,¹⁹ and the nationality with the highest resettlement needs, with almost 600,000 people in need of resettlement.²⁰ According to UNHCR, as of December 2025, 4.4 million Afghan migrants are still in Iran (1.4 million of whom in an undocumented situation) and almost two million in Pakistan.²¹ As of 2025, they already faced across various contexts a deteriorating security situation, limited livelihoods, and deportation threats. Given the developments in the conflict with Pakistan, as well as the US-Israeli strikes on Iran, existing vulnerabilities are likely to be exacerbated.

These developments emerge amidst global cuts in humanitarian aid and restrictions in resettlement and humanitarian admissions programmes. Altogether, returns or further displacement of Afghans from these two major host countries are likely to increase in 2026, and may potentially push those with means towards irregular migration. Although the trend of irregular border crossings to Europe has reduced in recent years, including for Afghans (in 2025, a 17% decrease compared to the previous year), this group remains the third most represented nationality overall for irregular border crossing, suggesting a consistent trend.²²

In this scenario, prospects for the situation in Afghanistan as well as of Afghan nationals displaced abroad are dim. While the de facto authorities are trying to reinforce their internal and international position, they are confronted with renewed tensions with Pakistan and shifting global attention to-

ward the conflict in Iran. Moreover, the displacement caused by the current border conflict with Pakistan (already affecting 66,000 people in its early days),²³ the return of millions of Afghans from abroad, and the reduction in international support will strain the already fragile socio-economic situation of the country, further aggravating poverty and unemployment. Climate-related and natural disasters,²⁴ including droughts, floods, and the recent seismic events²⁵ that have struck the eastern and northern parts of the country, might disrupt livelihoods and exacerbate the humanitarian situation. Yet how this will translate into further displacement and migration, and how regional dynamics will impact mobility trends, including towards Europe, is difficult to predict.

19 UNHCR, Mid-Year Trends 2025 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/mid-year-trends-2025>.

20 UNHCR, UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2026 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/mid-year-trends-2025>.

21 UNHCR, 'Afghanistan Situation'.

22 IOM-DTM, 'Europe Arrivals', Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2026, <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>.

23 Al Jazeera Staff, AFP, and Reuters. 'Nearly 66,000 Afghans Displaced amid Fierce Fighting on Pakistan Border: UN'. Al Jazeera, n.d. Accessed 5 March 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/4/nearly-66000-afghans-displaced-amid-fierce-fighting-on-pakistan-border-un>.

24 UNDP, Afghanistan Socio-Economic Review. Fragile Gains, Deepening Subsistence Insecurity, 2023–2024 (United Nations Development Programme, 2025).

25 IOM. Afghanistan Climate Vulnerability Assessment: Population and Mobility. Round 3 - December 2025. International Organization for Migration, 2025.

Climate-induced displacement

According to the IOM, with almost 3 million people already displaced and over 11 million people at high risk of severe impacts, over the last three years climate-related events in Afghanistan have overtaken conflict as the main cause of displacement, worsening the humanitarian and security situation.²⁶ More generally, climate-related events severely impacted on countries in the Silk Routes region in 2025, causing loss of livelihoods, infrastructural damages, and displacements. Over the summer, monsoon floods hit India and Pakistan with extreme rainfalls, causing almost 2,000 fatalities, millions of displaced, and over five billion USD in economic damages.²⁷ Between late November and early December, the rare convergence of a tropical typhoon and two cyclones caused hundreds of deaths across south Asia, including in Sri Lanka and Pakistan.²⁸ Periodic and flash floods severely hit Afghanistan during the summer and in late December 2025, with their negative impacts intensified by deforestation and poor land-use planning.²⁹ In addition, two devastating earthquakes struck the northern part of the country in August and early November, worsening the already fragile humanitarian situation.

As a region with a longstanding history of displacement, the adverse impacts of climate change may further undermine communities and livelihoods, potentially triggering new waves of displacement – especially among already

vulnerable populations. Despite their relatively negligible contribution to greenhouse gas emissions (with some exceptions),³⁰ countries in the Silk Routes region are among the world's most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.³¹ Slow-onset climate events and climate-related rapid-onset disasters disproportionately affect local communities, causing loss of lives, jeopardising livelihoods, altering social networks, and widening economic inequalities. The most destitute and vulnerable communities, especially those with livelihoods tied to the natural economy, face a growing risk of bearing the brunt of climate change impacts, pushing them into cycles of extreme poverty.³² This is also true for refugees and returnees, for which disasters may prompt secondary displacements.³³ In most extreme cases, climate-induced displacement might also make people more vulnerable to exploitation, including gender-based violence, forced labour, and trafficking.³⁴

As compared to displacement caused by climate-related disasters, planned migration in response to the slow onset climate impacts may manifest itself

26 IOM, Afghanistan Climate Vulnerability Assessment (International Organization for Migration, 2025).

27 Martina Igini, '2025 One of Costliest Years for Climate Disasters: Report', Earth.Org, 27 December 2025, <https://earth.org/2025-one-of-costliest-years-for-climate-disasters-report/>; Save the Children, 'Pakistan Floods: Almost 1 Million People Evacuated from Punjab as Children Miss out on Third Week of School', Save the Children International, 2 September 2025, <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/pakistan-floods-almost-1-million-people-evacuated-punjab-children-miss-out-third-week-school>.

28 Shanna Hanbury, 'More than 87m People Impacted by Climate-Related Disasters in 2025', Environmental News, Mongabay, 29 January 2026, <https://news.mongabay.com/short-article/more-than-87m-people-impacted-by-climate-related-disasters-in-2025/>.

29 UN OCHA, Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025).

30 M. Crippa et al., GHG Emissions of All World Countries - 2025 Report, JRC/IEA Report no. 40443 (Publications Office of the European Union, 2025), <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/9816914>.

While India is the world's third largest emitter of greenhouse gases after China and USA, contributing to over 8% of global emissions, its level of per capita emissions is relatively low. On the other hand, several Gulf and Middle East countries heavily relying on fossil fuels have relatively high levels of per capita emissions, although not visibly contributing to the global shares in absolute terms.
31 Lina Adil et al., Climate Risk Index 2026. Who Suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? (GermanWatch, 2025), <https://www.germanwatch.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/CRI%2026%20full%20report.pdf>.

32 Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change (Ipcc), Climate Change 2022 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844>.

33 UNHCR Afghanistan and Samuel Hall, Climate Impacts Return and Displacement in Afghanistan, Research Brief (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025); IOM, Bangladesh Crisis Response Plan 2025 (International Organization for Migration, 2025).

34 Wasim Riaz, 'Climate Change and Human Trafficking in Pakistan', South Asian Voices, 20 March 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/pol-m-pk-n-climate-change-human-trafficking-03-20-2024/>; Chloé Farand, 'The Cycle Pushing Bangladeshi Climate Migrants into Slavery', Climate Home News, 18 February 2025, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2025/02/18/bangladeshi-migrants-climate-change-modern-slavery-iiied/>.

as an adaptation strategy.³⁵ However, climate-adverse events alone are rarely drivers of migration: they often intertwine with and influence other drivers.³⁶ For the region, this is particularly relevant when compounded with scarce adaptive capacity, limited access to basic or emergency services, insufficient planning or preparedness, limited infrastructural resilience, and local conflicts, exacerbating their impacts and producing further displacements.

Responses from the international community and national governments testify to the growing political willingness to continue working together to adapt to and mitigate the adverse effects of climate change – although considerations for repercussions on migration and displacement vary. At the global level, the COP30 held in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025 achieved large financial pledges in climate action and the operationalisation of the loss-and-damage fund to improve infrastructural resilience.³⁷ At the national level, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have made significant efforts to tackle the effects of climate change, including adopting national adaptation plans to identify adaptation needs, reduce vulnerabilities, and build capacities and resilience. However, limited resources, scarce cooperation, and geopolitical tensions might jeopardise their implementation. Despite political progresses, the overall outlook remains therefore uncertain.

35 Lucy Szaboova et al., 'Evaluating Migration as Successful Adaptation to Climate Change: Trade-Offs in Well-Being, Equity, and Sustainability', *One Earth* 6, no. 6 (2023): 620–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2023.05.009>.

36 IOM, *Environmental Factors in Mixed Migration. Insights from Surveys in Italy, Malta, and Spain*, DTM FMS Europe Report (International Organization for Migration, 2025).

37 Felipe de Carvalho, 'Belém COP30 Delivers Climate Finance Boost and a Pledge to Plan Fossil Fuel Transition | UN News', *UN News*, 22 November 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166433>.

Migration trends in the region

Labour migration

Labour migration continues to be a key priority for most countries in the Silk Routes region. Outward labour mobility remains predominantly directed to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries,³⁸ reflecting strong bilateral co-operation between countries of origin and destination and well-established national mechanisms in place. Over the past years, however, Europe has also attracted more migrant workers from the Silk Routes region in the attempt to counterbalance negative demographic trends and fill labour shortages. More recently, emerging trends have also shown limited numbers of migrant workers and students (particularly from Pakistan) also going to Central Asian countries. Although the overall number of outward labour migrants has slightly decreased after a peak in 2023, remittances reached historically high levels in 2025, underscoring the role of migration for household resilience and national economies for the region.

Zooming in on specific country trends, Indians constitute the world's largest group of migrants, with 18.5 million people living abroad, and Bangladeshis and Pakistanis rank fifth and seventh overall (excluding countries with displaced populations), with 8.7 and 6.9 million migrants, respectively.³⁹ The Gulf countries host nearly half of all Indian migrants, while another quarter live in North America (4.2 million) and about 7% in Northern Europe.⁴⁰ Labour migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh is instead much more concentrated in the Gulf.

38 GCC countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

39 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 'International Migrant Stock 2024', 2024.

40 Nileena Suresh, 'International Migration from India', Data For India, 7 February 2025, <https://www.dataforindia.com/international-migration/>.

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After a peak in 2023, in 2025 about 1.1 Bangladeshi million workers have found regular employment abroad, 81% in the Gulf countries.⁴¹ However, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar have seen increasing trends of Bangladeshi workers in the last few years, other Gulf Countries, including UAE, Kuwait, and Oman, have experienced a drastic decline.⁴² Similar figures apply for overseas Pakistanis: while in 2022 and 2023 more than 800,000 workers migrated abroad, the past two years have seen a slight decrease in the number of Pakistani workers abroad, with 727,000 in 2024 and 762,000 in 2025. Saudi Arabia has absorbed about 70% of this workforce, with Qatar and UAE following well behind, with 9% and 6%, respectively – the latter experiencing a sharp decline in the past two years.⁴³

While on a much smaller scale, labour migration from the Silk Routes region towards the EU has gradually increased over the years, although slightly declining in 2024, in line with a general reduction (see Figure 1). Among the Silk Routes countries, Indians remain by far the nationality with the highest number of first permits issued for remunerated activities in the EU in 2024, with more than 84,000 permits, despite an 11% decrease compared to the previous year.⁴⁴ They also account for the highest number of EU Blue Cards (over 6,000) and permits for high-skilled work (more than 13,000), which, although representing a sharp 44% decline from 2023, still underscore the significance of high-skilled migration from the country.⁴⁵

41 Overseas Employment Platform, 'Country Clearance', 2026, <https://www.oep.gov.bd/reports/country-clearance>.

42 Government of Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 'Annual Foreign Employment and Remittance Flows by Country', 2025, <http://bmet.gov.bd/pages/static-pages/6922de24933eb65569e1887f>.

43 Government of Pakistan, Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment, 'Reports & Statistics', 2026, <https://beoe.gov.pk/reports-and-statistics>.

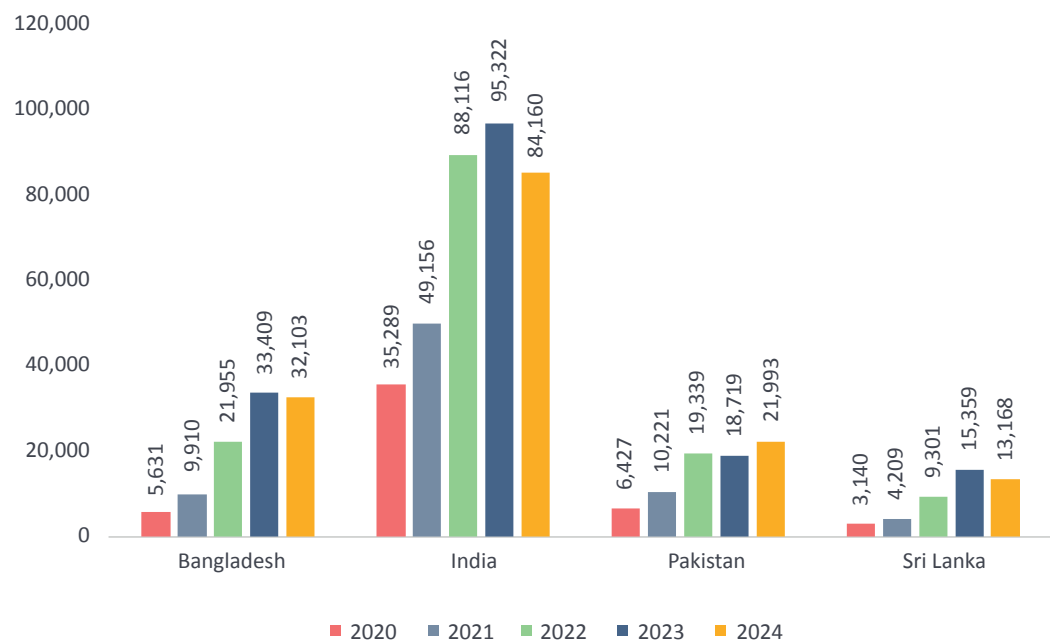
44 EUROSTAT, 'First Permits Issued for Remunerated Activities by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resocc_custom_18783063/default/table.

45 EUROSTAT, 'Persons Subject to EU Blue Card Decisions by Length of Validity, Age, Sex, Citizenship and Occupation', 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resbc11_custom_19888132/default/table.

Labour migration from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka has shown similar patterns. In 2022, the number of first permits for remunerated activities in the EU issued to these countries has approximately doubled in comparison to the previous year and stabilised since then. According to Eurostat, in 2024 more than 32,000 permits for remunerated activities have been issued to Bangladeshis (over half of which in Croatia and Portugal), almost 22,000 to Pakistanis (almost half of which in Greece and Portugal), and over 13,000 to Sri Lankans (with Romania alone accounting for over half). The overwhelming majority of first permits for employment activities have been issued to low-skilled workers: only 0.8% of Bangladeshis, 3% of Sri Lankans, and 7% of Pakistanis have obtained an EU blue card or a first permit for high-skilled activities.⁴⁶

46 EUROSTAT, 'First Permits Issued for Remunerated Activities by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', 2025.

Figure 1: First permits issued for remunerated activities by European countries to third-country nationals from selected Silk Routes countries.



Source: Eurostat

While labour migration has experienced a slight decrease in the past years, the amount of remittances to Silk Routes countries have peaked in 2024, in some cases after a period of stagnation or fluctuation. According to the World Bank, remittances to India have reached a staggering \$137.7 billion in 2024, increasing 15% from the previous year.⁴⁷ After experiencing a continuous growth from 2017, remittances to Bangladesh reached a plateau in 2020 and stabilised at around \$22 billion for the following three years, before rising again to \$26.9 billion in 2024.⁴⁸ The latest data from the govern-

47 World Bank Group, 'Personal Remittances, Received (Current US\$) - Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka', 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?end=2024&locations=BD-PK-IN-LK&start=2010>.

48 Ibid.

ment show that the amount of remittances has reached \$13.7 billion in the first five months of 2025, a figure that is supposed to reach another record by the end of the year, if the trend continues.⁴⁹ Following a steady increase until 2021, the amount of Pakistani remittances saw a sharp decline, falling to \$26.5 billion in 2024, only to rise again the next year to \$34.9 billion.⁵⁰ The constant prominence of high-skilled migration from India – especially in STEM and health sectors – and the persistent government efforts in both Pakistan and Bangladesh to use formal transfer channels instead of informal ones represent important factors for the continuous growth of remittances and might push a further increase in the immediate future.⁵¹

In comparison, Iraq has seen comparatively lower levels of outward labour migration than other Silk Routes countries, given recent trends of refugee outflows and reemergence as a destination for refugees and migrant workers. Regarding labour migration to Europe, among the 24,000 first permits issued to Iraqi citizens in 2024, only 694 (2,8%) of them were for remunerated activities – a quarter of which for high-skilled jobs.⁵² The approval of the National Plan on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration by the Iraqi government in August 2025 could represent an important step to kickstart cooperation with countries of destination in the Gulf and the EU for labour mobility of skilled and unskilled Iraqi workers abroad. In this respect, labour migration trends from Iraq constitutes an interesting laboratory that should be continuously monitored in 2026 and beyond.

49 Government of Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 'Annual Foreign Employment and Remittance Flows by Country', 2025, <http://bmet.gov.bd/pages/static-pages/6922de24933eb65569e1887f>.

50 World Bank Group, 'Personal Remittances, Received (Current US\$) - Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka', 2025.

51 UNDESA, Developments in Global Remittance Flows and Implications for Sustainable Development, Monthly Briefing no. 196 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025), <https://policy.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2025-11/mb196.pdf>

52 EUROSTAT, 'First Permits Issued for Remunerated Activities by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resocc_custom_18783063/default/table.

Asylum and protection

Even in 2025, ongoing conflicts neighbouring and within the region, as well as more localised tensions at the national and local levels, have continued to drive forced displacement and protection needs. However, asylum applications lodged in the EU by nationals of Silk Routes countries have generally declined (see Figure 2), in line with an overall reduction in asylum claims within the EU. With almost 112,000 asylum claims submitted, Afghans constitute the most represented nationality overall, marking a staggering 40% increase from 2024.⁵³ Germany represents the main country of asylum for Afghan nationals, accounting for approximately 56% of all asylum claims lodged by this group, with Greece and France following at distance, with 14% and 13% of asylum claims, respectively. With the security and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan still volatile, particularly given recent geopolitical developments in the region, the protection needs of Afghan nationals remain high. This is reflected in the consistently high recognition rate of Afghan asylum claims, which has remained above 50% since 2021.⁵⁴

After increasing for four consecutive years, asylum applications from Bangladeshi nationals declined by 15% in 2025 compared to the previous year, reaching almost 37,000 claims – over three quarters of which lodged in Italy. Despite reduced numbers, Bangladeshi nationals rank fourth overall in terms of asylum claims submitted in the EU. However, they rarely see their claim recognised (97% rejection rate).⁵⁵ Asylum claims from Pakistani and Iraqi nationals have seen an even more pronounced decrease in 2025 compared to the previous year, continuing a downward trend observed since 2022. The number of asylum claims submitted by Pakistani nationals in 2025 is almost 19,000, representing an 18% decrease compared with 2024, while claims by

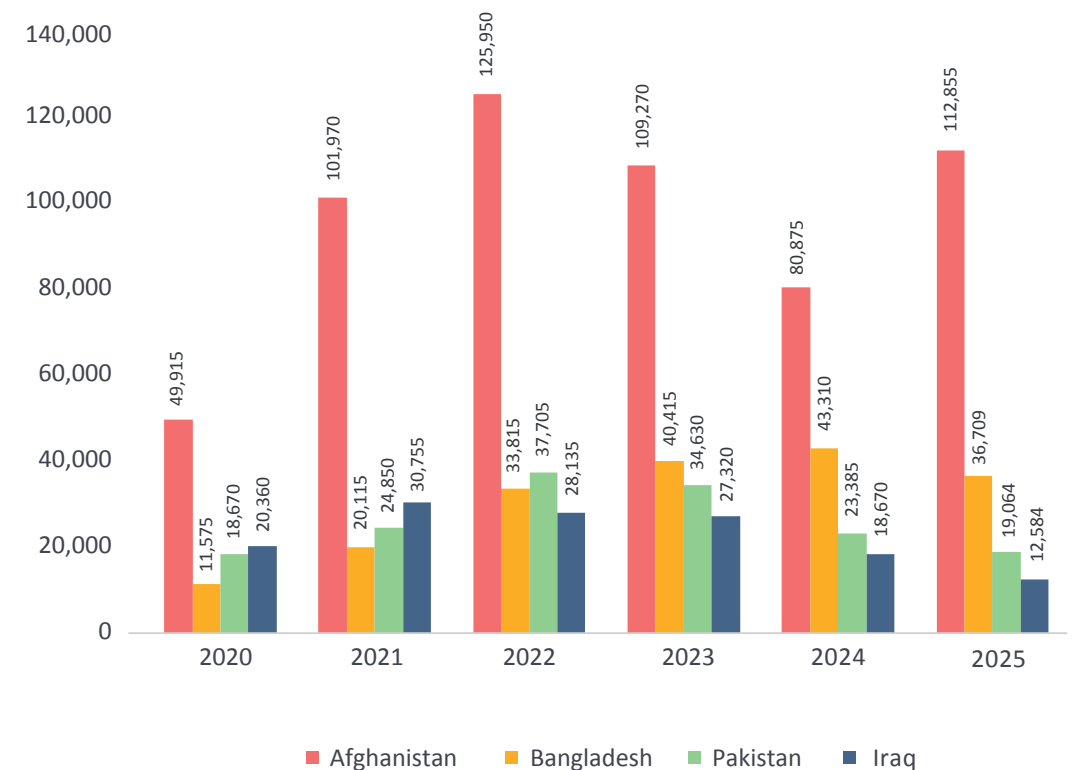
53 EUROSTAT, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex - Monthly Data', 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctzm_custom_19978444/default/table.

54 EUAA, Latest Asylum Trends: Mid-Year Review 2025 (Publications Office of the European Union, 2025).

55 EUROSTAT, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex - Monthly Data', 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctzm__custom_19978444/default/table.

Iraqi nationals are just over 12,000, a 33% decline. Italy is by far the main destination for Pakistani nationals seeking asylum, accounting for 53% of their claims, followed by Greece (10%) and France (9%).⁵⁶ Among Iraqi nationals, 39% submit their asylum claims in Germany, with Greece (18%) and Italy (7%) trailing behind. According to the EUAA, however, only 10% and 22% of claims submitted by Pakistani and Iraqi nationals, respectively, are accepted.⁵⁷

Figure 2: Total number of asylum applicants in Europe from selected Silk Routes countries.



Data from 2025 is an estimate based on the first 11 months. Source: Eurostat.

56 EUROSTAT, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex - Monthly Data', 2026.

57 EUAA, Latest Asylum Trends: Mid-Year Review 2025 (Publications Office of the European Union, 2025).

Looking ahead, positive socio-economic developments in certain Silk Routes countries and ongoing cooperation on labour migration between origin and host countries – including those that have experienced significant refugee movements – might alleviate some vulnerabilities. However, rising geopolitical tensions in the region and persistent security and humanitarian concerns – illustrated by the sharp increase in asylum applications from Afghan nationals – might deteriorate the situation, potentially triggering further displacements and protection concerns.

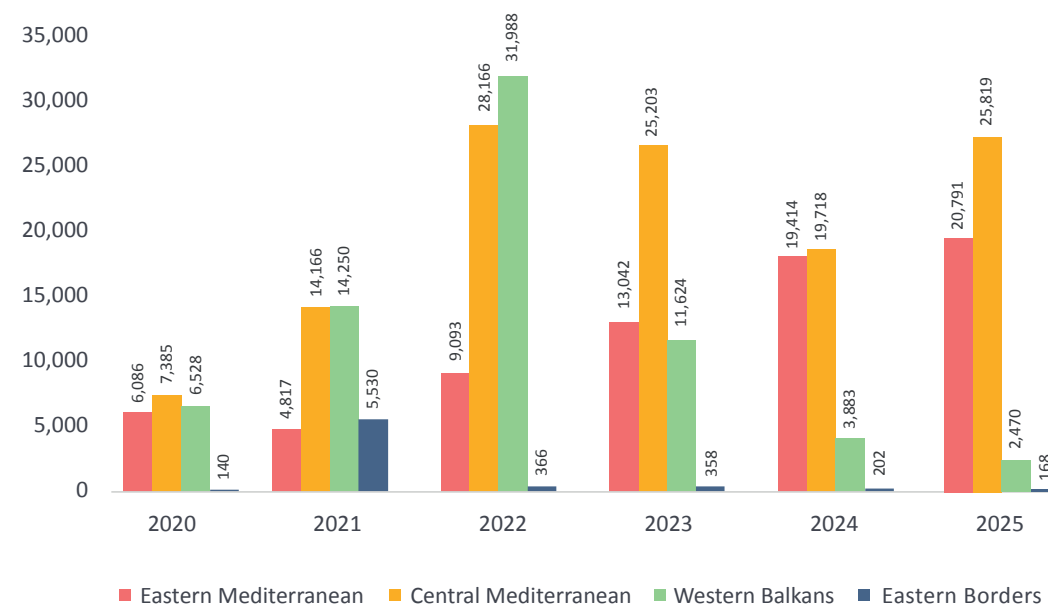
Irregular migration

Political and economic instability, conflict and persecution, lack of regular migration pathways, as well as personal aspirations and desire to increase individual status represent important drivers that prompt many to embark on irregular journeys, including for the Silk Routes region. According to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX, in 2025, irregular entries into the European Union decreased by 26% compared to the previous year, reaching almost 178,000 detections.⁵⁸ However, irregular migration from Silk Routes countries has slightly increased in 2025 compared to the previous year (see Figure 3), particularly along the Central Mediterranean Route, which remains the most active corridor overall. Confirming previous years' trends, Libya has become the main point of departure towards both Italy and Cyprus – a 38% increase in departures compared to the previous year.⁵⁹ It seems to be increasingly used as a transit point by migrants from the Silk Routes region, who can travel there in a regular way directly or via the Gulf countries, especially given more restrictive visa requirements and border controls in Tunisia and Türkiye.

58 FRONTEX, 'Frontex: Irregular Border Crossings down 26% in 2025, Europe Must Stay Prepared', FRONTEX News, 15 January 2026, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-down-26-in-2025-europe-must-stay-prepared-lyKpVb>.

59 FRONTEX, Annual Brief 2025 (FRONTEX, 2026), https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/2025/Annual_Brief_2025.pdf.

Figure 3: Detection of irregular entries by main entry routes for selected Silk Routes nationalities (i.e., Afghanistan, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Pakistan).



Source: Frontex.

Although migrants from Asia accounted for only 17% of total detections of irregular crossing to the EU between 2020 and 2024, Afghans and Bangladeshis together represent over four-fifths of this regional contingent.⁶⁰ This concentration suggests persistent drivers in Central and South Asia, including economic precarity, limited legal migration opportunities, and continuing instability in Afghanistan, which do not seem to mitigate in the near future. For Bangladeshi nationals, the high cost of regular labour migration (consular and administrative costs, additional costs for middlemen), as well as low income in countries of destination, may contribute to trends of irregular arrival and stay in European countries. Bangladeshi nationals have emerged as the

60 UNHCR, 'A Panoramic/Route-Based Approach. Refugees and Migrants from South-West Asia to Europe' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118456>

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largest national group detected crossing into Europe irregularly, with almost 24,000 detections, a 61% increase compared to 2024. With over 14,000 detections in 2025, Afghans represent the third-largest group overall, reflecting an approximate 10% decrease compared to the previous year. However, while 86% of Bangladeshi migrants reached the EU via the Central Mediterranean Route (constituting more than 30% of overall border crossers along this route), the majority of Afghan migrants have continued to use the Eastern Mediterranean Route.⁶¹

In comparison, irregular migration from Pakistan and Iraq seem to follow similar patterns, although with much smaller scales. According to Frontex, in 2025 there were over 5,000 detections of irregular entry of Pakistani nationals, representing a 13% increase compared to the previous year, but remaining well outside the top ten countries of origin for irregular arrivals. Conversely, irregular migration from Iraq has slightly decreased to 2,500 detections, continuing a downward trend observed over recent years. The tighter migration restrictions between Türkiye and Greece and the cooperation on migration management between Iraq and Türkiye might have led to a decrease in detections of Iraqi along the EU external borders.⁶²

Noteworthy in terms of recent trends is that, while most Iraqis continue to choose the Eastern Mediterranean Route, 86% of Pakistanis have attempted to enter the EU via the Central Mediterranean Route, often after reaching northern Africa in a regular way either directly or via the Gulf Countries. Although numbers are still low, the Central Mediterranean might turn into a new route also for irregular migration from Iraq, particularly given the current situation in the region. Increasing repatriations of Iraqi and Kurdish

migrants from Libya⁶³ as well as numbers from IOM-DTM seem to confirm this trend, with about 120 Iraqis detected every month along this route in the first six months of 2025 in comparison to the 57 identified monthly in the whole of 2023.⁶⁴

Despite social turmoil and heightened geopolitical tensions, irregular migration from Iran to Europe has remained relatively limited, consistent with patterns observed during previous conflict- and crisis-induced displacement events. Since 2023, the number of Iranian nationals intercepted at EU borders has been stable at around 2,700 detections per year. Even during the Twelve-Day War in June 2025, when Israel attacked several nuclear facilities, military bases, and critical infrastructure in Iran, there was no noticeable increase in outward migration from Iran towards Europe. However, a further escalation of the conflict at the international level could trigger increased population movements from Iran and neighbouring countries in 2026, with potential implications for rising (irregular) migration flows towards Europe.

Return and Reintegration

Between 2022 and 2025, the number of third-country nationals from Silk Routes countries ordered to leave the EU declined – despite an overall increase in return orders issued in the EU – while the number of effective returns generally increased (see Figure 4). This suggests stronger political will among EU countries in enforcing return procedures – in line with the provisions of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum – as well as more effective cooperation on return with partner countries in the region. However, significant variations for the different nationalities remain. Data on return procedures from other regions – such as the GCC – remain fragmented. Relevant

61 FRONTEX, Annual Brief 2025 (FRONTEX, 2026).

62 In October 2024, the two governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding to prevent irregular migration and enable the voluntary return of Iraqi citizens. ‘Türkiye, Iraq Sign MoU on Voluntary Return of Iraqi Citizens’, Middle East Monitor, 3 October 2024, <https://www.middleeast-monitor.com/20241003-turkiye-iraq-sign-mou-on-voluntary-return-of-iraqi-citizens/>.

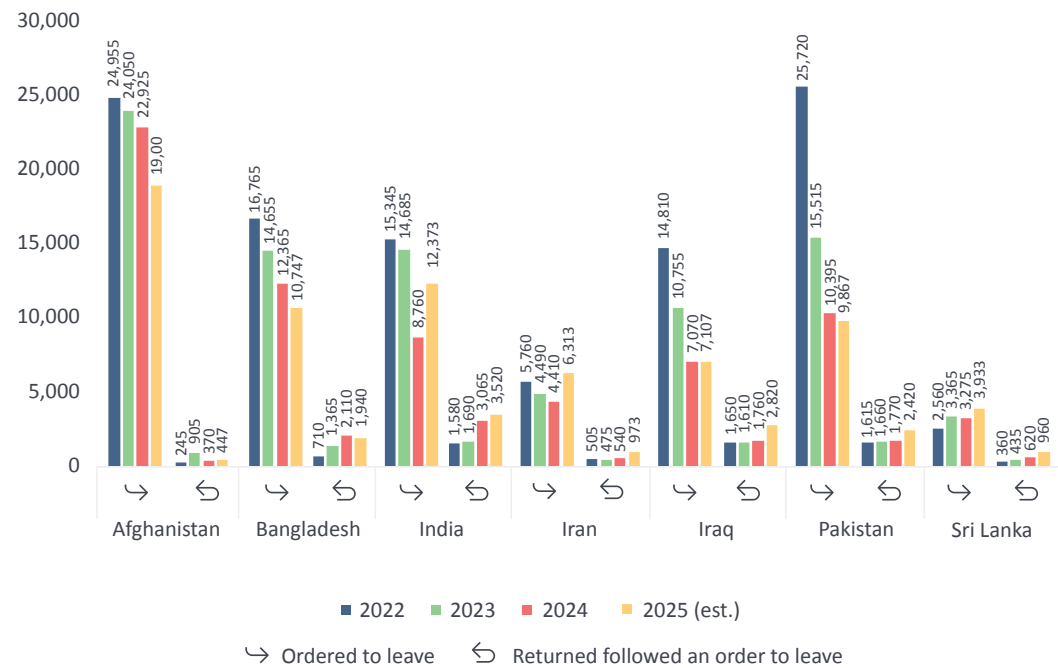
63 ‘Iraq Repatriates Fresh Batch of 25 Kurdish Migrants from Libya’, Rudaw, 6 November 2025, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/061120251>.

64 IOM-DTM, ‘Europe — Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Overview (2024)’, 2025, <https://dtm.iom.int/datasets/europe-mixed-migration-flows-europe-yearly-overview-2024>; IOM-DTM, ‘Europe — Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overview (April-June 2025)’, 2025, <https://dtm.iom.int/datasets/europe-mixed-migration-flows-europe-quarterly-overview-april-june-2025>.

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figures come from Pakistan’s Federal Investigation Agency, which indicates that more than 66,000 individuals were returned to Pakistan from countries other than the EU in 2025, almost 80% of whom by air.

Figure 4: Third-country nationals from selected Silk Routes countries ordered to leave the EU and actually returned following an order to leave the EU.



Source: Eurostat.

Among the Silk Routes countries, Afghanistan has consistently been the country with the highest number of nationals ordered to return – except for 2022, where Pakistanis ranked first.⁶⁵ However, in light of the difficult humanitarian,

security, and socio-economic situation following the Taliban takeover, European countries have largely suspended the deportations of Afghan nationals, who consistently rank among those with the lowest return rates after an order to leave.⁶⁶ At the same time, large-scale returns of Afghans from neighbouring countries – particularly Iran and Pakistan – continued throughout 2025 amid tightening migration and protection policies, shaping broader regional mobility dynamics. With the escalation of border conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as the US-Israeli strikes on Iran, return or further displacement of Afghan nationals from the two countries are expected in 2026.

European return procedures for Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Iraqi nationals have followed similar trends, with total return orders decreasing since 2022, but effective returns stabilising (Bangladesh and Iraq) or rising (Pakistan). In more detail, the number of Bangladeshi nationals ordered to leave the EU dropped from around 17,000 in 2022 to almost 11,000 in 2025, whereas that of Pakistani nationals decreased from over 25,000 in 2022 to an estimate of 10,000 by 2025, showing a steady contraction. Return orders issued to Iraqi nationals has more than halved since 2022, reaching about 7,000 in 2024 – a figure that is estimated to be comparable in 2025. Return of Indian and Sri Lankan nationals have followed different patterns since 2022. The number of Indian nationals who have been ordered to leave the EU almost halved between 2022 and 2024, before rising sharply again in 2025, with more than 12,000 orders to leave – the second-highest nationality among the Silk Routes region after Afghans. Conversely, the number of Sri Lankans nationals ordered to leave the EU has seen a continuous upward trend in the last four years, from about 2,500 to almost 4,000 return orders.

When it comes to the implementation of return orders, all Silk Routes countries have experienced a general increase in the number of people returned from the EU since 2022, both in absolute and relative terms, with few exceptions.

65 EUROSTAT, ‘Third Country Nationals Ordered to Leave by Citizenship, Age and Sex - Quarterly Data (Rounded)’, 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_eiord1_custom_19896987/default/table.

66 EUROSTAT, ‘Third-Country Nationals Returned Following an Order to Leave, by Type of Return, Citizenship, Country of Destination, Age and Sex - Quarterly Data’, 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_eirtn1_custom_19897806/default/table.

In 2025, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have seen the highest increase in return rates compared to the previous year, with 40%, 25%, and 24% of return orders to these countries executed, respectively. On the other hand, the number of Bangladeshi nationals returned from the EU in 2025 remained relatively modest compared to other nationalities, decreasing in absolute terms from 2024, but remaining stable in terms of return rates, due to fewer return orders issued. Conversely, the staggering increase in the number of return orders to Indian nationals in 2025 has caused a reduction in their return rate from 35% to 28%, despite an overall increase in the absolute number of Indian nationals returned to their country.

While host countries aim to make returns more effective, the post-return reality and the limited socio-economic opportunities in the countries of origin might pose significant challenges for returning migrants, particularly for those who have been forcibly returned. A 2021 study among rejected asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan has shown how limited access to reintegration opportunities, social stigma, and lack of trust in political institutions have a strong impact on the reintegration process of returnees, leading in some cases to re-migration intentions.⁶⁷ Similar ICMPD research among Pakistani and Iraqi returnees has highlighted the discrepancy between supply and demand of reintegration services in both countries, with returnees often unaware of socio-economic opportunities upon return.⁶⁸ While return continues to be one of the policy priorities pursued by the EU, it remains to be seen not only how effectively return orders will be implemented, but also how the reintegration process in the countries of origin affects migration dynamics and intentions in respective countries.

67 Cited in OECD, Return, Reintegration and Re-Migration. Understanding Return Dynamics and the Role of Family and Community (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1787/625fb5e6-en>.

68 Ayesha Qaisrani and Marco Mogiani, Voices of Return: Leveraging the Influence of Returnees in Migration Information Campaigns (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2024), <https://research.icmpd.org/publication/voices-of-return-leveraging-the-influence-of-returnees-in-migration-information-campaigns/>. Christina Houry and Marco Mogiani, Engaging Return Migrants in Information Campaigns in Iraq Challenges, Reintegration, and Prospects, MIRAMI Returnee Report (ICMPD, 2024), https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/60719/file/2.3_Returnee_Report_MIRAMI.pdf.

| Migration policy developments

Labour mobility

Fostering fair and decent labour mobility of own nationals continues to be a central priority for countries in the Silk Routes region, which have long-standing experience in this regard, both as countries of origin and of destination. Iraq is in a unique situation in the region, as a sending country for Iraqi migrants abroad, as well as a growing country of destination for nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Pakistan. Iraq's First National Plan to Promote Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration is a key milestone that will frame upcoming work in this area. While the Plan aims to promote regular migration of Iraqis abroad, it also establishes the groundwork for regulation of migrant workers to Iraq. As a key area of work ahead, training and capacity building programmes under the Plan aim to reinforce Iraqi stakeholders' work supporting and protecting potential Iraqi migrants, Iraqi returnees, and migrant workers. Another pillar of this Plan focuses on strengthening regional and international cooperation, with countries of destination of Iraqis abroad, and countries of origin of migrants in the country. In this respect, bilateral cooperation with Bangladesh and Pakistan is already underway. This work is important given the growing attractiveness of the country for foreign labour, in the context of concerted improvements in the economic and security situation experienced in recent years. Yet, regional developments, particularly with neighbouring Iran, may hinder progress in this area.

International cooperation with Silk Routes countries on labour mobility has indeed progressed significantly in recent years. Newly concluded partnership agreements have ranged from MoUs to Declarations of Intent to programmes and individual projects, with varying levels of practical cooperation in labour mobility and effected workers' mobility to new destinations. Agreements with Bangladesh, with India and with Pakistan have already been concluded, both at the EU and at the Member States level (especially Italy and Greece in recent years, and Germany as a longstanding partner). However, not all of them have yet translated into concrete labour mobility to the EU.

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Labour mobility partnerships with other countries, particularly in Asia, are also quite well established (such as with South Korea or Japan) or newly launched. Pakistan's recent MoUs with Japan and with Belarus in 2025 and Afghanistan's recent agreement with Qatar and ongoing negotiations with UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye demonstrate labour mobility as a global priority, and South Asian countries are looked to as key partners in this regard.

For this reason, the EU's recent efforts to establish cooperation on labour mobility with Silk Routes countries in the forms of Talent Partnerships and the European Legal Gateway Office initiative are particularly noteworthy as models aiming to integrate mutual benefits into their respective designs. As highlighted in last year's Silk Routes Regional Migration Outlook, Talent Partnerships are considered a key tool for the EU in managing migration with partner countries, with Bangladesh and Pakistan among the priority countries. Ongoing mobility programmes and projects under this initiative focus on sectors of common interest, such as transport, agriculture, tourism and care work.⁶⁹ Moreover, they engage actors from both the public and private sectors, including trade unions, vocational training institutions and businesses, to support labour mobility that benefits destination and origin country priorities. For Pakistan, Germany (GIZ in particular) has taken the Member State lead (under a Team Europe approach) to develop the Partnership. In 2026, efforts will focus on operationalising the mutually agreed-upon roadmap: aligning skills and qualification recognition frameworks, as well as supporting training institutions and activities to align with European labour needs. Demonstrating the Partnership's potential in cooperation beyond mobility, April's launch of the EU-Pakistan Business Network will mark joint efforts to foster trade and investment between the countries.⁷⁰ From the perspective of Silk Routes countries, Talent Partnerships can be a tool to address employment needs of their respective growing youth populations,

69 Migration Partnership Facility, MPF Projects, accessed 5 February 2026, <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects>.

70 European Commission International Partnerships, Stronger Together High Level EU-Pakistan Business Forum 28-29 April 2026, accessed 5 February 2026, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/high-level-eu-pakistan-business-forum-stronger-together_en.

as well as support longer-term institutional and economic development needs in their own countries.

While these programmes are important for opening the door to Europe for skilled workers, there are specific risks and gaps that still exist. First, lack of information regarding regular pathways and labour mobility opportunities might push some into irregular migration – a gap that MRCs fill by supporting potential, outgoing migrants and returnees with information and assistance during their migration and reintegration processes. Recent research has shown that following announcements of Talent Partnerships, fake job advertisements for these destinations may flourish, aiming to defraud and even exploit potential migrants.⁷¹ Moreover, access to educational opportunities are uneven across Silk Routes countries, qualification recognition is an ongoing challenge, and (re)integration support is not always common. Recent analysis of skills mobility partnerships⁷² has found that less than half specify some form of social integration support, largely limited to language training, while reintegration support is even less common (17%).⁷³ Given the ongoing protection needs in the region, it is noteworthy that these partnerships rarely focus on underrepresented groups, such as ethnic and cultural minorities and women, and almost never focus on those with protection concerns, which, for the region, could be a key added value.⁷⁴ Thus while Talent Partnerships will remain an important tool to improve cooperation on labour mobility, these challenges are important ones to be addressed to maximise their potential.

71 ICMPD, "From Click to Crime. How Fake Job Ads Fuel Irregular Migration and Trafficking from Pakistan", 2026.

72 Agreements, programmes or projects that facilitate both mobility and skills development, as compared to more traditional labour agreements.

73 Hohwieler, L., S. Kessler, C. Katsiaficas, E. Fabbri, S. Boukari, Link4Skills Partnership inventory, Working Paper, 2026.

74 Ibid.

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As a complementary approach under the EU's Union of Skills approach, Multipurpose Legal Gateway Offices are considered critical to address workforce needs in Europe and skills development in partner countries.⁷⁵ President von der Leyen's announcement of the first pilot European Legal Gateway Office in India, launched in early 2026, demonstrates the commitment of the EU at the highest levels.⁷⁶ The initiative reflects common goals for both the EU and India as part of its joint strategic agenda, in which mobility is considered an enabler of strategic engagement across economic, technological, security, global initiatives and fostering people to people ties.⁷⁷ Concretely, the one-stop hub for Indian potential migrants, students and researchers, EU employers and higher educational institutes aims to provide information and facilitate the movement of Indian mobility candidates to the EU, beginning with the ICT sector. The work of this first Office will both support the deepening of cooperation between EU and India on mobility, but also serve as the foundation and model for future Legal Gateway Offices. The model is considered already for the Mediterranean region, and may focus on other areas of mutual interest, such as construction, care, , transport, bioeconomy, tourism, agriculture, or culture.⁷⁸ Thus, the launch of the European Legal Gateway Office in India is a significant milestone for the EU and India alike, as the first practical test of a longer-term strategic partnership.

75 European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, The Union of Skills, COM(2025) 90 final, Brussels, 5 March 2025, accessed 6 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090>.

76 European Commission – Speech, Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the second Conference of the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, Brussels, 10 December 2025.

77 European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda, JOIN(2025) 50 final, Brussels, 17 September 2025, accessed 12 January 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025/documents/JOIN_2025_50_1_EN_ACT_part1_v9.pdf. Sinha, R. and Tercovich, G., Global Gateway: Advancing EU-India Priorities in the Indo-Pacific, brief, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, New Delhi, July 2025, accessed 12 January 2026, <https://in.boell.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/global-gateway-advancing-eu-india-priorities-in-the-indo-pacific.pdf>

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Labour mobility will remain a strategic priority for the Silk Routes region in 2026 and beyond, while new cooperation frameworks with the EU may offer models for achieving mutual benefits in this area. 2026 will be key for launching and assessing the effectiveness of these models in facilitating mobility, including addressing ongoing obstacles.

Return and reintegration

Return and reintegration are increasingly addressed through bilateral agreements and national policies; yet remain difficult to implement in practice. On the one hand, European countries are striving to promote, expand, and accelerate both forced and voluntary return procedures, often in response to mounting social and political pressures. More effective return and readmission constitute one of the five priorities of the European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy, which will shape the EU's vision on migration and asylum over the next five years and will be implemented as of June 2026 as part of the Pact on Migration and Asylum.⁷⁹

At the same time, countries of origin are strengthening their capacities to improve reintegration mechanisms for returnees, often with the support of European states or international organisations, and within broader cooperative efforts on migration. These efforts aim to sustain negotiations on labour mobility partnerships with destination countries while improving return processes and ensuring the sustainable reintegration of returnees, fostering local socio-economic development, and reducing the risk of remigration. In this respect, many countries in the Silk Routes region are moving away from ad hoc and fragmented reintegration programmes towards more institutionalised and structured approaches within broader migration governance, including operationalising MRCs, as well as advancing cooperation with NGOs,

79 ICMPD, ICMPD Migration Outlook 2026 (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2026) <https://www.icmpd.org/publications/icmpd-migration-outlook>.

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civil society organisations, local stakeholders, and community and religious leaders to foster effective and sustainable reintegration.⁸⁰

Iraq and Bangladesh constitute illustrative examples in this sense. In 2023, Iraq adopted the National Migration Management Strategy, which led to the operationalisation of the National Referral Mechanism to refer returnees to legal, financial, and psychosocial resources. To further bolster governmental efforts towards sustainable reintegration, three new MRCs have been established since 2024 in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and a second centre in Baghdad. These centres operate in close coordination with the National Referral Mechanism and form part of a multilateral cooperation framework with Nordic countries.⁸¹ In parallel, Iraq has also been implementing bilateral agreements with several European countries and Türkiye to facilitate the return and reintegration of Iraqi nationals, further strengthening the institutional framework for migration management. For Bangladesh, building on extensive collaboration with international organisations, the government outlined the National Reintegration Policy in 2025. The policy aims at digitalising and harmonising returnee databases, establishing one-stop centres for the provision of legal, financial, and psychosocial services for returnees, and fostering cooperation among local stakeholders for the sustainable reintegration of returnees within local communities.⁸²

Based on “substantial and sustained improvements in readmission cooperation”, the European Commission is considering withdrawing the visa measures implemented in 2021 under Article 25a of the EU Visa Code for both Bangladesh and Iraq, thus easing visa processing times and fees. Despite the overall improvements, however, the provision of reintegration services remains

fragmented or, as in the case of Bangladesh, limited to those who migrated through formal channels. Besides, it remains to be seen whether political changes following its recent national elections will lead to shifts in policy priorities.

In Pakistan and India, the situation differs. Despite having a long-established framework for labour migration and ongoing cooperation with host countries, only in recent years has Pakistan begun to develop and strengthen reintegration measures, often within the context of labour migration agreements with international partners. Among other things, these measures included the establishment of Airport reception desks at major Pakistani airports, managed by MOPHRD/OPF and FIA and supported by ICMPD. In February 2025, the Government of Pakistan has formally launched the Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees and Improved Migration Management project, funded by the EU in partnership with ICMPD with the aim of improving the socio-economic reintegration of returnees and develop rights-based and gender-responsive reintegration policies and processes. The project situates the work of MRCs and Airport Reception Desks at the core of national institutional framework focusing on achieving sustainable reintegration. More recently, in the context of the long-awaited National Emigration and Welfare of Overseas Pakistanis Policy, the Pakistani government developed a national reintegration policy to facilitate return procedures and improve reintegration mechanisms, in the attempt to prevent social stigma and remigration. Looking ahead, uncertainty remains as to whether this new policy initiative will lay the foundation for a more structured and coherent return and reintegration framework, moving beyond its current fragmentation and reliance on project-based interventions.

80 Reintegration Is Complicated: Frameworks and Outcomes in the Silk Routes Region, Budapest Process knowledge product (Budapest Process, 2026).

81 ICMPD. ‘Inauguration of Nordic Cooperation on Return and Reintegration in Iraq (NORAQ) Framework - ICMPD’. International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 11 June 2024. <https://www.icmpd.org/news/inauguration-of-nordic-cooperation-on-return-and-reintegration-in-iraq-noraq-framework>.

82 Ibid.

Comprehensive institutional frameworks

Already highlighted in 2025's Regional Migration Outlook, the development and launching of comprehensive institutional migration frameworks has indeed been a key area of work for Silk Routes countries over the past year.⁸³ These aim to establish and outline future national migration approaches and activities, build capacities on migration management, and align their migration policies to international standards. The most interesting development in this respect is Iraq's First National Plan to Promote Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration launched in August 2025. The plan reflects the positive social and political changes in the country since the defeat of ISIS at the end of 2017. The plan aims at protecting the rights of migrants and fostering safe and orderly migration, as both a host and origin country. It does so by strengthening international cooperation on migration with countries of destination, supporting the wellbeing and integration of Iraqi migrants, building internal capacities for the sustainable reintegration of returnees into their community, and regulating and reinforcing the integration of foreign workers in the country. 2026 will witness how the new government will build or shift approach on the basis of these policy developments.

Political developments in Bangladesh might also affect the implementation of the current five-year plan to achieve the Government's Vision 2041, which was supposed to cover the period 2025–2030 but was suspended in 2024 due to expected governmental changes following the political elections.⁸⁴ Through its five-year plans and migration policy strategies, Bangladesh has always recognised the significant and longstanding role of labour migration for the country, not only to alleviate social and economic issues at home including high unemployment and growing workforce but also to generate

83 ICMPD, ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025 Silk Routes (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2025). <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/63924/file/ICMPD%2520Migration%2520Outlook%2520Silk%2520Routes%25202025.pdf>

84 'Interim Government Won't Implement 9th Five-Year Plan: Wahiduddin', The Business Standard, 18 September 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/interim-govt-wont-implement-9th-five-year-plan-wahiduddin-944281>.

and channel remittances.⁸⁵ Although the promotion of overseas labour migration and the fight against irregular migration remain high on the agenda, particularly through specific border management programmes and training initiatives,⁸⁶ a revised agenda under the newly elected government might represent an uncertain variable in the near future.

Despite its longstanding tradition of promoting overseas labour migration and protecting migrant workers abroad, Pakistan is still awaiting the approval of the National Immigration Welfare Policy. However, as mentioned before, in the past months a national reintegration policy – anchored on the broader national migration framework – has been developed to promote the sustainable reintegration of returnees, strengthen cooperation among local stakeholders, and foster local socio-economic development. It is therefore hoped that the development of the national reintegration policy could help drive progress across the broader migration agenda for the country.

85 Mira Burmeister-Rudolph, 'Reproducing and Reformulating Categories of Skill in Regional and Global Migration Governance: Evidence from India and Bangladesh', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 48, no. 4 (2025): 763–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2404485>.

86 'ICMPD and Bangladesh Sign Cooperation on Border Management and Migration - ICMPD', ICMPD, 12 November 2025, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/icmpd-and-bangladesh-sign-cooperation-on-border-management-and-migration>.

Conclusions

Conclusions

The Silk Routes region is a dynamic one, shaped by at times rapid developments. While countries in the region have become looked-to partners globally in terms of labour mobility, the multiple conflict situations will likely shape both migration dynamics and the potential for further policy development. Firstly, labour mobility will continue to be looked to as an economic strategy, both for migrants at the individual level, and at the macro political level. The opening of labour migration channels with the EU aim to address joint strategic needs: the new partnership models in Talent Partnerships and the Legal Gateway Office will be tested in 2026, but with long-term perspective for both Silk Routes and EU countries. Iraq's re-emergence as a destination country, following significant challenges in reconstruction and protracted internal displacement, is unique to the region. It has set ambitious targets in its First National Plan to Promote Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, which will be challenging in the current geopolitical regional context; partners in the international community will likely be key in supporting Iraqi priorities in this area.

Secondly, protection needs will remain high for nationals of countries in the region, particularly as related to climate-induced displacement, protracted displacement and the recent conflict situations. Short- and medium-term displacement are likely within and to the region, particularly affecting Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, compounding already challenging humanitarian and security situations. For Afghans with protection needs, their situation within the country and protracted displacement in neighbouring countries, will likely be exacerbated.

Thirdly, given these developments, knock-on effects in terms of mobility trends along migration routes to the EU, particularly on the newly emerging (for nationals of the region) Central Mediterranean Route, can be expected.

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While detection of irregular entries towards the EU has recently declined, it is likely that the current escalation and regionalisation of conflict with Iran, as well as between Afghanistan and Pakistan, will materialise in a rise in asylum and irregular migration trends in 2026.

Finally, while progress has been achieved in terms of policy developments in return and reintegration, implementation remains fragmented in some cases and recent political changes may reorient approaches going forward. For Silk Routes countries, improving reintegration, including through operational structures such as referral mechanisms and MRCs, is a central policy priority, connected to comprehensive migration governance frameworks.

In 2026, main issues to monitor and develop include ensuring the effectiveness and continuity of these policies, promoting more institutionalised frameworks to reintegration, and enhancing cooperation with local and international stakeholders to foster more coordinated, inclusive, and sustainable reintegration practices.

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