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From: Presidency
To: Delegations

Subject: Migration and security challenges along the Silk Route - Focus on the most relevant developments and countries

For centuries, the Silk Route region has been a place of rich migratory flows, where trade, intellectual exchange and cultural enrichment have taken place between people coming from different parts of the world. In the more recent past, the reasons for migration have changed. The Silk Route region is being challenged by **omnipresent conflict, a poor human rights situation, religious fundamentalism and socio-economic deprivation, as well as the effects of climate crisis**. These developments have resulted in **forced displacement and increasing irregular migration**.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only led to decreased migration flows, but has also created an additional layer of vulnerability for both migrants and host communities, only to be followed by orchestrated instrumentalisation of migrants by the Lukashenko regime in 2021 with the aim of destabilising the EU, and the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021. This year, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has generated further crises, including the exacerbation of global food insecurity affecting several third countries, most of which are already facing multiple challenges posed by humanitarian crises, the prevailing organised crime situation and socio-economic setbacks. From a migration perspective, the Silk Route countries are countries of origin and of transit, as well as of destination. For the purpose of this discussion paper, the Silk Route countries are **Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Turkey (see Annex)**.

The arrival of migrants in the EU via the Silk Route/from the Silk Route countries is having a secondary impact on the downstream migration routes. Specifically, the Western Balkan route, one of the main migration routes into the EU, is being significantly affected by movements along the Silk Route. In 2021, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh accounted for a significant proportion (according to UNHCR around 55 per cent) of all irregular border crossings detected in the Western Balkans.

The situation on the Silk Route is being addressed on various intergovernmental platforms involving the EU Member States and the countries of the region. **The Budapest Process**, as the flagship platform involved in the region, aims to facilitate migration dialogue with the Silk Route countries and to support their operational capacities in terms of migration management. The EU is also chairing the Core Group of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), whose main focus is on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Increased migration flows may place a strain on the migration systems of the affected countries and place higher demands on the efficiency of migration management in the EU. If not properly managed, migrants themselves, as they fall prey to the services of smugglers, are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and human trafficking that put their lives at risk. As identified in the European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU SOCTA) 2021, drawn up by Europol, migrant smuggling represents one of the key threats, with the above-mentioned Silk Route countries being listed among the most relevant third countries in this regard. According to EU SOCTA 2021, migrant smuggling – namely, the *‘fight against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling, in particular those providing facilitation services along the main migratory routes’* – is a priority area of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT). Migrant smuggling is often facilitated and supported by document fraud, yet another lucrative criminal business generating further revenue for organised crime.

The Silk Route countries in question are also affected by trafficking in human beings. According to EU SOCTA 2021, the countries listed represent source countries for victims of trafficking in human beings for labour and sexual exploitation. Based upon the European Commission’s data collection for 2013-2020, 1 468 victims of trafficking in human beings with citizenship of the countries listed were recorded in the EU, and 53 convictions of traffickers were obtained. Migrants travelling via this route are often exposed to this type of criminality, including vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors.

While many refugees are fleeing from terrorist groups such as Da’esh in Syria and Iraq, criminals, including terrorists and returning foreign terrorist fighters, may infiltrate and hence abuse migration flows in an attempt to enter the EU undetected. In order to avoid this, the systematic feeding of data into and checks of the relevant databases at the EU’s external borders, in particular the SIS (including the use of biometrics), is key.

The Czech Presidency would like to address the complex issue of migration flows along the Silk Route, addressing both related migration and security challenges. The aim is to focus the discussion on seeking viable solutions for the future, while avoiding a situation whereby migration is viewed as a threat.

Questions for discussion:

1. *In your opinion, are sufficient efforts being made to cope with current and future challenges, from both an internal security and a migration perspective, along the Silk Route? What particular challenges do you see with regard to the current situation?*
 2. *What is your assessment of the internal security challenges arising from the current situation in Afghanistan and related migration flows?*
 3. *In your opinion, how should we, at EU level, improve our cooperation with Turkey in order to better address irregular migration and security concerns in Europe?*
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Situation in the Silk Route countries

Afghanistan

More than a year after the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan is facing a catastrophic humanitarian situation. Half of its population is currently dependent on humanitarian aid due to an ongoing economic crisis aggravated by the confluence of several emergencies such as extreme drought, a lack of access to safe drinking water, severe earthquakes and flash floods.

Despite initial concerns, there has been no massive exodus of refugees: this is also due to the closure of borders on Afghanistan's side. However, while movements will naturally reduce during the winter season, food insecurity, which will become more acute in the coming months due to the very poor recent planting season, may trigger increased internal and outgoing movements impacting the entire migration route. As a direct consequence of the significant challenges Afghans are facing, however, the number of forcibly displaced persons continues to grow, including internally within Afghanistan. Over the past 40 years, we have witnessed major migration flows both internally within Afghanistan and towards neighbouring countries (Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia), although phenomena such as circular and seasonal migration make it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the actual numbers of long-term migrants. According to the UNHCR, the largest communities of registered Afghan refugees are currently hosted by Pakistan (over 1.2 million refugees) and Iran (around 780 000 refugees). Most of them have been hosted there for decades. Overall, more than 7 million Afghans (or the equivalent of almost 20% of the estimated 42 million Afghan population) are estimated to currently reside in neighbouring countries, in addition to the around 3.5 million internally displaced people in Afghanistan in 2022.

Afghanistan represents one of the main countries of origin for irregular migration to the EU. Out of the total 537 630 first-time applications for international protection received in the EU in 2021, Afghans constituted the second largest group, with 84 555 applications. Although falling within the national competences of the Member States, the conditions necessary for carrying out returns of irregular migrants to Afghanistan are not in place, given the dire and insecure situation in the country, in line with the UNHCR's non-return advisory of August 2021.

In line with the Council conclusions of September 2021, as well as the Action Plan responding to the situation in Afghanistan and the region, one of the EU's top priorities with regard to the Afghan crisis is to support a regional approach, together with countries in Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood as well as countries along the migratory route, to the management of the situation of Afghan refugees and their reception. The regional approach should be in particular in line with the framework of the *Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees* platform (whose Core Group is currently chaired by the EU), via cooperation within the Budapest process and within the context of the proposed regional Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on the Afghan Displacement Situation. Further EU actions include the monitoring of migration and displacement flows, the provision of livelihood opportunities and basic services and support for host communities, as well as support for neighbouring countries in migration management and the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.

The alarming humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is creating fertile ground for several kinds of criminality, with illegal drugs production and trafficking in human beings and terrorism at the top of the list, as well as the risk of falling victim to traffickers. In the area of drugs production, heroin, methamphetamine and cannabis are the main commodities in the country's production of illegal drugs.

Besides drugs production and trafficking, the Council has also repeatedly stressed the urgent need to address the imminent threat of the export of terrorism from Afghanistan. In line with this priority, the EU is implementing the Afghanistan Counter-Terrorism Action Plan of September 2021.

Iraq

While irregular arrivals in the EU have diminished in recent years, Iraqi nationals are still thought to represent **a sizeable group of third-country nationals within the territory of EU Member States who have been ordered to return**. Iraq is facing long-term challenges, with forced displacement and instability due to internal and regional conflicts. As of June 2022, there were around **1.2 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)** and 225 000 Syrian refugees. A readmission clause between EU and Iraq is included as a legally binding obligation in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which has been in force since 2018. However, cooperation on non-voluntary returns remains unsatisfactory. In July 2021, the Commission proposed certain visa restrictions within the framework of the 2019 annual Article 25a Visa Code assessment. The Council decided not to act upon the proposal at that time. The EU aims to ensure that Iraq honours its legal obligations, including accepting non-voluntary returns of its nationals.

Iraqis were the largest group instrumentalised by the Lukashenko regime. Arrivals of irregular migrants from Iraq in the EU via the border with Belarus increased dramatically during the summer of 2021. Iraq has responded constructively to the EU's requests for cooperation in resolving the situation at the EU-Belarusian border. For example, the country has suspended all commercial flights from Baghdad to Minsk, cooperated with the Lithuanian authorities in identifying Iraqi nationals, and organised return flights for voluntary returnees.

The EU–Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (2018) and the EU Strategy for Iraq (2018) provide a framework for EU-Iraq relations, including on migration. The EU has an ongoing and continuing cooperation portfolio that holistically addresses the root causes of fragility and displacement. The EU has also developed an action plan on Iraq listing the priority measures to be implemented, which are not limited to financial support. Iraq is an active participant in the Budapest Process's Silk Route Partnership for the region. In addition, there are ongoing and upcoming EU-funded projects on improving border and migration management, combating migrant smuggling and return and reintegration, etc. The EU and its Member States are also working on a Team Europe Initiative for increased, diversified, sustainable and inclusive socio-economic growth, improved livelihoods and decent employment in Iraq.

In the Council Conclusions on Iraq adopted in February 2019, the EU and its Member States agreed to support Iraq, stressing the need for ‘national and local reconciliation and voluntary, dignified, safe and non-discriminatory return’. In addition, the EU reaffirmed ‘its readiness to support the Government of Iraq in the implementation of its programme of political, social, economic and security sector reforms’. Recent unrest, political infighting and the failure of the central government’s capacity to deal with the disgruntled population continues to raise concerns.

Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter referred to as Iran) is home to one of the world’s largest refugee populations, the vast majority of whom have come from Afghanistan over a period of 40 years. There are approximately **780 000 registered Afghan refugees** (Amayesh card holders) **and 2.3 million undocumented Afghans living in Iran**. Since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, the number of Afghans seeking asylum in Iran has increased dramatically as well as the number of forced returns of Afghans from Iran. Overall, according to various government estimates, between 500 000 and 1 000 000 Afghans have fled to Iran since the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in 2021. At the same time, IOM recorded 462 695 undocumented Afghan returnees from Iran in 2022 (as of 15 July) and over 1.2 million in 2021. The country is also a prominent transit country, as many migrants arriving in the EU from the Silk Route region spend time in Iran during their journey.

Although the majority of those who have left Iran in recent years have been Afghan and Iraqi refugees, thousands of Iranians make the journey to the EU every year. In 2021, around 4 500 illegal border crossings by Iranian nationals were recorded at all the EU’s external borders, and 1 300 between January and July 2022.

The prospect of establishing permanent cooperation on migration between the EU and Iran was first mentioned in the Joint Statement¹ of 2016. Both sides agreed to launch a comprehensive migration dialogue and acknowledged the need to exchange information on migration management. Since then, the Council has adopted the *Framework for Comprehensive Dialogue on Migration and Refugee Issues*, which was endorsed at the EU-Iran high-level meeting in 2020. Given the wider political context of EU-Iran relations, the migration dialogue has not been formally launched. As regards the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran, the EU provides ongoing support in relation to refugees and migration and plans to provide additional financial support for displaced Afghans in the region (notably in Iran and Pakistan) through the above-mentioned regional Team Europe Initiative on the Afghan refugee situation. The EU is also seeking to strengthen the international response in supporting Iran as a host country for Afghan refugees through the Support Platform for the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR).

From the point of view of internal security, migrant smuggling, support for terrorist groups, drugs production and trafficking in Iran remain on the radar of the EU law enforcement community. While the Council has agreed on the idea of launching a dialogue on drugs with Iran, it has not yet taken place.

Pakistan

For the past 40 years, Pakistan has hosted a large community of Afghan refugees, making it one of the world's major recipients of displaced persons. The EU has been actively engaged in responding to the situation of the displaced Afghan population in Pakistan by including Pakistan as one of the countries covered by the future Team Europe Initiative. Pakistan is also an important country of origin and transit for refugees and migrants heading for Europe. Out of the total 537 000 applications for international protection received in the EU in 2021, Pakistanis lodged 21 040 first time applications, representing one of the largest groups of applicants.

¹ Joint statement by the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Union, Federica Mogherini and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javad Zarif, on 16 April 2016.

Both Pakistani citizens and Afghan refugees were among the 33 million people affected by the devastating floods in Pakistan in the summer of 2022. Over 6.4 million people are in need of humanitarian aid and 1 200 people have died since the monsoon season began in June.

On 26 August, the EU allocated EUR 1.8 million in humanitarian assistance for flood victims. Not only is the country in need of immediate international assistance, but given that Pakistan has itself been providing a vital supply route for emergency food assistance into Afghanistan, the already severe humanitarian crisis in the neighbouring country will likely worsen. National and international actors in Pakistan are warning that smugglers and traffickers will exploit the current situation. As the chair of the Core Group of the Support Platform of the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) in 2021 and 2022, the EU is seeking to strengthen the international response to the Afghan refugee situation and engagement between donors and countries in the region hosting displaced Afghans, such as Pakistan.

In line with the EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan of 2019 and an EU-Pakistan Readmission Agreement which is in force, cooperation on readmission between the EU and Pakistan remains a priority and is mainly ensured and monitored via the *Joint Readmission Committee*. Migration and forced displacement issues are also addressed through strategic and political dialogues and through the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission. The Commission is also working towards the launch of a Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Dialogue with Pakistan and supports closer cooperation between Frontex and Pakistan, including through the possible deployment of a Frontex liaison officer (FLO). Further dialogue with Pakistan is being facilitated by regular meetings of the Budapest Process, during which a cooperation platform of law enforcement practitioners (COLEP) on migrant smuggling was established earlier this year as one of the means in the fight against this phenomenon.

As outlined in the Communication on Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU published on 27 April 2022, the **Commission intends to start assessing the feasibility of launching a Talent Partnership with Pakistan** as one of the key components of a reinforced migration management cooperation with that country.

Following the events of 2001, the European Commission provided support for Pakistan in recognition of its role as a partner in the fight against terrorism. In formal terms, Pakistan is one of the EU's partners in the fight against trafficking in human beings and drug trafficking.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the main countries of origin and transit to Europe through the Central Mediterranean, the Western Balkan and the Eastern Europe routes. Bangladesh is among the most densely populated countries in the world, with a rising number of young people under the age of 15 living in poor conditions. Bangladesh is facing multiple humanitarian crises, which include the residual impact of COVID-19, flooding and the **protracted Rohingya refugee crisis** (with around 1 million Rohingya in Bangladesh), which is provided assistance by Bangladesh with the support of the EU, the international community and humanitarian organisations. Cooperation on readmission is one of the key areas of engagement with Bangladesh. The EU-Bangladesh Standard Operating Procedures for the Identification and Return of Persons without an Authorisation to Stay (SOPs) was signed on 20 September 2017. After the possibility of adopting restrictive visa measures against Bangladesh under the annual assessment of the Article 25a of the Visa Code was invoked in 2021, the European Commission reported that overall **readmission cooperation had improved**, although some Member States continue to report challenges. **The state of cooperation is thus continuously monitored to ensure that the progress achieved last year can be sustained.**

As outlined in the Communication on Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU published on 27 April 2022, the **Commission intends to start assessing the feasibility of launching a Talent Partnership with Bangladesh** as one of the key components of reinforced migration management cooperation with that country.

Turkey

From an EU perspective, the Republic of Türkiye (hereinafter referred to as Turkey) is one of the key countries in responding to the challenge of irregular migration to Europe along the Silk Route. Due to its geographical position, Turkey is a prominent reception and transit country for refugees and migrants. The country has been hosting **more than 4 million refugees**, the highest number in the world. This includes more than 3.7 million registered Syrian refugees and 330 000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia.

With regard to irregular arrivals in the EU, around 21 300 persons had arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, and Romania by September 2022, which is a 94% increase compared to the same period in 2021. Moreover, around 13 550 arrivals had been reported in the government-controlled areas of Cyprus by September 2022, which is a 125% increase compared to 2021. In 2021, Turkish citizens lodged 20 315 first-time asylum applications in the EU, making them the fifth largest group of applicants.

The EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 provides the basis for EU-Turkey cooperation in the prevention of irregular migration and the fight against migrant smuggling. Although the Statement continues to deliver concrete results in terms of reducing irregular migration, in recent years cooperation has been constrained by provocative actions by Turkey, notably **Turkey's** efforts to use migratory pressure for political purposes. In 2020, Turkey opened up its borders with Greece, leading to a massive influx of refugees at the EU's external borders. Moreover, since 2020 Turkey has suspended return operations from Greece under the Statement with no sign of resuming them in the near future.

The impact of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine on **food security** in countries of the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa is expected to further influence migratory flows from Turkey to the EU. With Turkey's relaxed visa policy and regular cheap flights from several African countries, growing anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey and President Erdogan's repeated references to a potential new incursion into Northern Syria, the risk of migratory pressure being used for political purposes remains high. Moreover, risks may also stem from smugglers' initiatives organised in an online environment, such as caravans.

Regardless of its own geopolitical intentions, Turkey will remain an integral partner for the EU for cooperation in the area of internal security. Although there is an ongoing dialogue with Turkey on key internal security issues, the dialogue is influenced by overall EU-Turkey relations. The dialogue covers several areas such as cooperation in the area of terrorism, marked by the divergent views of the EU and Turkey, border protection and cross-border crime relating to the facilitation of illegal migration, migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings and other elements.