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#### NOTE

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From:	Presidency
On:	7 May 2025
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Central Mediterranean route - Presidency paper

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#### Introduction

As outlined in the letter of the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, 2024 saw a nearly 60% decrease in irregular arrivals to the EU via the Central Mediterranean Route. This drop can be attributed mainly to the intensified migration management and anti-smuggling operations carried out by the Libyan and Tunisian authorities, thanks to the solid and enhanced EU engagement with the two countries. In general, the sea arrivals to Italy have significantly decreased (157 651 in 2023, 66 617 in 2024), however, a pattern of fluctuation in migration flows across the Central Mediterranean continues to be noted with 12,081 irregular border crossings in 2025 so far (as of 20 April 2025). This reflects an overall trend of migratory flows being highly dynamic and shifting in response to stricter controls or changing conditions along a given route.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://euobserver.com/migration/ar613bb89a>

According to ICMPD, changing patterns in migration routes suggest that rather than a generalised contraction of irregular movements, regional migration patterns might be following new trajectories in response to stricter border policies.<sup>2</sup>

In 2024, the main nationalities detected along the Central Mediterranean Route were Bangladeshis (22%), Syrians (19%), Tunisians (12%), Egyptians (7%) and Guineans (5%). Irregular border crossings (IBCs) by Bangladeshis and Syrians nationals increased compared to 2023, by 11% and 24% respectively, while the other nationalities decreased. So far, in 2025, the main nationalities detected are Bangladeshis (37%), Pakistanis (14%), Egyptians (9%) and Syrians (9%). With reference to the sub-route from Libya to Greece, in 2024, half of the nationalities detected were Egyptians, followed by Pakistanis (20%) and Bangladeshis (14%).

Moreover, in 2024, around 47 400 departures from Libya to the EU were reported, almost a 10% decrease compared to 2023 (around 52 400). It must be noted that, as of 27 April 2025, Italian operational data shows that departures from Libya (mostly Tripolitan area) have increased significantly since 2024. They now constitute 93% of all departures on the Central Mediterranean route, with around 13 500 departures, compared to 55% in the same period in 2024, when there were around 8 800 departures. So far in 2025 (as of 20 April), there is a 40% year-on-year increase in arrivals to Europe from Libya compared to 2024. At the same time, arrivals from Tunisia have dropped by further 90% compared to the same period in 2024. Overall, according to Frontex operational data, as of 27 April 2025 arrivals through the Central Mediterranean route are 10% lower compared to the same period in 2024.

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<sup>2</sup> ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025 Mediterranean Eight migration issues to look out for in 2025 Origins, key events and priorities:  
<https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/63876/file/ICMPD%2520Migration%2520Outlook%2520Mediterranean%25202025.pdf>

## Increased cooperation with key partner countries

Simultaneously, as expected, cooperation under the Memorandum of Understanding with **Tunisia** contributed to an 80% drop in the irregular departures from the Tunisian coast. There was also a major uptake in the assisted voluntary returns from Tunisia to countries of origin. In 2024, IOM assisted 6 789 migrants to voluntarily return to their countries of origin, supported by EU funding. Finally, in 2025, the EU supported the establishment of a regular inter-agency cooperation platform to help support migration management. While a number of EU-funded programmes with Tunisia have been adopted and contracted in 2024 in the area of border management, anti-smuggling, protection and returns, **there is a need to continue to further provide support to assisted voluntary returns hand-in-hand with sustainable reintegration.** This is pivotal in ensuring the success of one of the key migration management operations that effectively alleviates the migratory pressure from North African countries and the EU. The continuation of EU financial support for these activities, as well as sustained political engagement, are essential to build on achievements reached so far, including to intensify anti-smuggling cooperation and to further increase the return figures.

The EU has, furthermore, continued the dialogue and cooperation at technical level with the **Libyan authorities**, including through increased dialogue, **and** with close involvement of the UN. The areas of technical exchanges and cooperation include anti-smuggling, protection, search and rescue, border management and control of departures from both Western and Eastern Libya, with voluntary humanitarian returns from Libya to countries of origin almost doubling in 2024 to over 16 000 (compared to around 9 000 in 2023) as a result of EU advocacy against exit visas. The adequate management of a growing number of **Sudanese refugees** remains a key concern. Libya benefits from bilateral and regional actions (adopted between 2021 and 2023) amounting to around EUR 130 million, in the area of protection, border management and returns, with additional funding still being programmed under the 2024 budget. Given the conditions of vulnerability that migrants and refugees in Libya face, over half of migration-related funding for Libya is dedicated to protection, humanitarian returns and evacuations.

Against this background, the recent suspension of the activity of an important number of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) adds additional concerns regarding the protection of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in detention centres and disembarkation points. So far in 2025, as of 15 April, IOM voluntarily returned 4 421 migrants, with a plan to organise up to 19 000 returns by the end of the year. Significantly increased voluntary returns from Libya are also the expectation expressed by Libyan counterparts during the technical dialogues with the EU side. As of 24 March, UNHCR estimates that over 256 000 Sudanese refugees have arrived in Libya since the beginning of the conflict in April 2023. Protection of a growing number of Sudanese refugees and prevention of secondary movements is a key and pressing concern.

In **Algeria** the EU is funding the voluntary return and reintegration in their country of origin of 10,000 migrants per year for 3 years via an IOM programme. Algerians have asked for a further increase in the number of voluntary returns, aiming for 20 000 per year. In **Egypt**, under the ongoing protection action (EUR 28 million, funded under NDICI), the EU is enhancing access of Sudanese refugees to health and education, as well as to support social cohesion with the host communities. In Egypt IOM assisted 8 330 beneficiaries of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration in 2024 (up from 2224 in 2023). The EU's cooperation with Egypt on migration and mobility is also advancing in the framework of the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership launched in March 2024. Support in this area remains comprehensive, covering protection, border management, anti-smuggling, legal migration and mobility as well as voluntary returns and reintegration. Around EUR 200 million is foreseen in support of these priorities between 2024 and 2027. At the end of 2024, two contracts were signed: one topping up the ongoing border management project (EUR 82 million – total EUR 110 million), and another one to support Egypt's authorities in the fight against migrants' smuggling and trafficking in human beings (EUR 20 million). The latter action, as well as the recently signed Working Arrangement with Europol, should foster greater cooperation in the area of anti-smuggling.

Considering the increasing numbers of arrivals of Sudanese in Libya and Tunisia, the fragilization of the support given to them could increase dangerous onward movement from the shores toward the EU. While the institutional situation in Libya makes the implementation of a comprehensive migration management policy difficult, engagement with Tunisian authorities requires substantial political engagement to foster the development of such a policy and maintain current acquis.

### **Addressing migratory challenges**

Both Libya and Tunisia face significant challenges in the adequate management of migration and their borders, while notably they lack comprehensive migration and protection frameworks, posing additional challenges to EU intervention on the ground. In 2024 and 2025, media reports accused the **Tunisian** authorities of alleged border management practices violating human rights. Reports indicate that Tunisian authorities are engaged in arrests and expulsions, including abandoning individuals, women and children, in desert border regions without adequate provisions. Since June 2023, a total of 12,865 migrants and persons in need of international protection have been intercepted at the border in between Libya and Tunisia and some reports even indicate that migrants may be sold to Libyan militias. As of 31 December 2024, there were more than 15 000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered by UNHCR in Tunisia. The **registrations of new asylum seekers were suspended by UNHCR in June 2024 at the request of the Tunisian government** and have not re-started to this date. At the same time, the arrests of CSOs active in the area of migration remain of concern.

In **Libya**, the situation is complicated by fragmented governance, migrant smuggling and human trafficking networks being more difficult to be controlled in this challenging environment. According to IOM and UNHCR, as of 6 April 2025, nearly 5 000 migrants were held in official detention centres across Libya and thousands more in unofficial detention centres where they are prone to forced labour and other abuses. Moreover, recent weeks were marked by an inflammatory anti-migrant campaign targeted against the Government of the National Unity and the EU. Libya's Tripoli-based authorities announced on 2 April a decision to suspend the Norwegian Refugee Council, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Terre des Hommes, CESVI and six other groups, accusing them of a plan to "settle migrants" from other parts of Africa in the country. Local staff from a number of international CSOs have been summoned by the Internal Security Agency and interrogated; some of them were reportedly held in arbitrary detention. As a consequence, several INGOs have suspended their critical protection services to migrants, including water, sanitation/, hygiene, psycho-social support as well as assistance in detention centres and disembarkation points. UN agencies are still able to operate in the country.

In **Egypt**, the EU is committed to maintain and strengthen engagement with the authorities with a view to help set up a comprehensive and rights-based migration governance and management system. Main challenges in Egypt include the persisting irregular border crossing into Libya and onwards to the EU (often involving unaccompanied minors), as well as the increased inflow of Sudanese refugees since the outbreak of the war, leading to a hosting fatigue and to an increase in xenophobic attitudes (since April 2023, over half a million Sudanese nationals entered into Egypt). A new Asylum Law was adopted in Egypt in November 2024, providing the basis for a transition to the current UNHCR-led registration system to one autonomously administered by Egypt.

Addressing these underlying issues is crucial for the long-term effectiveness of migration policies in the Central Mediterranean region. It is, therefore, central that the EU and Member States continue their engagement and open dialogue with the relevant authorities continues, in a spirit of partnership. To this extent, all available tools must be leveraged, including the promotion of legal migration through e.g. Talent Partnerships (where relevant) and resettlement opportunities. This dialogue must address the ways in which the international organisations and other EU implementing partners can best continue operating and delivering on common migration and protection challenges. Both Libya and Tunisia are partners of the two CEPOL-led regional capacity-building projects EUROMED Police, also supported by Europol, and CT INFLOW.

### **Funding constraints**

The availability of reintegration packages remains also key element to success of the EU-funded voluntary returns from Libya and Tunisia, often serving as key incentive for migrants for voluntarily returning to their country of origin. The March 2025 Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration (MPRR) coordination committee concluded that at the current rate and given the existing financing constraints and competing priorities, the available funding for the MPRR Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) window, which covers reintegration costs for returnees from North Africa (NA) to SSA, notably from Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, will be exhausted by the end of 2025. The MPRR – NA funding available so far for the years 2026 and 2027 could not cover the necessary scale-up scenarios for returns from NA. This should be avoided, as discontinuing these projects would impact negatively the credibility of the EU as a cooperation partner and the overall European migration policy efforts.

In February 2025, IOM reported a rising demand for **return assistance** across the different migratory routes. IOM's longstanding experience has facilitated the voluntary return of more than 1,5 million migrants globally, and its work remain crucial for sustainable return and reintegration as a cornerstone of sound migration management, which is imperative for addressing migration pressures in the Central Mediterranean region.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-statement-rising-demands-return-assistance>

In addition, the Commission has already pointed to the likely negative impact of the US foreign aid funds in North Africa, notably when it comes to the migration management. The Commission also expressed concerns that the EU funding might not be sufficient to cover the gaps. UNHCR in particular is losing over 40% of its MENA budget due to the loss of USAID funding and will probably need to downscale its presence in the region, notably in Tunisia.

### Questions for discussion

In view of above, the Polish Presidency suggests the following questions for discussion, in view of continued close EU cooperation with the North African countries, as well as other countries of origin and transit on the Central Mediterranean route:

1. How can we further enhance the capacity of **the implementing partners** to continue operating in the partner countries, in respect of the Union's values and fundamental rights?
2. How can we further cooperate with the relevant countries, including **Libya** and **Tunisia**, in order to improve their border management, migration governance and anti-smuggling measures?
3. How can we ensure the continuation and strengthening of the key migration and protection programmes, notably voluntary returns and reintegration from priority countries such as Libya and Tunisia, given the current risk of **financial constraints**?