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From: Presidency

To: Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum

Subject: EU engagement and support provision to countries of transit: Lebanon and Libya (*External dimension of migration*)

- Discussion paper

Introduction

Strengthening support provision and enhancing cooperation with key third countries remain central pillars of EU's policy, in the context of the external dimension of migration. The Council has repeatedly reaffirmed that the EU's external migration policy should be guided by a "whole-of-route" approach, addressing countries of origin, transit, and destination in a coherent and integrated manner. Effective cooperation and support along the entire migration route are essential for tackling irregular migration, combating smuggling networks, and ensuring protection for those in need, while upholding international obligations.

According to Frontex data, irregular border crossings (IBCs) at the EU's external borders decreased by 26% in 2025, reaching their lowest level since 2021. While this reduction represents a significant development, the situation at the EU's external borders remains fragile, and migratory pressure can shift rapidly in response to conflict, instability, climate-related factors, smuggling networks, or other drivers. Nonetheless, this positive trend may offer a timely window of opportunity to deepen engagement and advance cooperation with key third countries along the main migratory routes.

Countries such as Lebanon and Libya face profound and interlinked challenges of their own, including political instability, economic pressures, and limited institutional capacity, while at the same time hosting large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. In this context, sustained engagement, targeted support, and diplomatic relations with these countries are of strategic interest to the EU. As primary transit points, these countries play a crucial role in preventing third-country nationals from departing irregularly and reaching the EU and therefore constitute indispensable stakeholders in managing migration flows. In this context the synergies between the provision of humanitarian aid, capacity building, and support for economic recovery and migration management should be ensured in parallel with actions that will enhance political stability, democratic transition, and security. A comprehensive framework of cooperation and assistance could have added value in this case.

The present focus on Lebanon and Libya reflects their strategic importance along the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, which together account for two thirds of IBCs into the EU.

Background information

Lebanon

The situation in Lebanon continues to be highly complex and volatile due to multiple, overlapping crises. According to the latest data provided by UNHCR, Lebanon hosts 1,3 million forcibly displaced persons. This represents a decrease of 42 % compared to last year. 55 % of the displaced persons are Syrians followed by 37% Palestinians. 6% are internally displaced in Lebanon. 880 000 persons are protected or assisted by UNHCR, a decrease of 52 % compared to last year. The large majority of those assisted are Syrians followed by vulnerable Lebanese. Since January 2025, more than 500 000 Syrians have been inactivated from UNHCR's records due to confirmed or presumed return. 55 000 Syrians received support by to voluntarily repatriate¹.

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 triggered mixed movements, including voluntary returns as well as new refugee arrivals, notably from minority groups fleeing renewed violence. Against this backdrop, Lebanon elected a reform-oriented President in January 2025, followed by the appointment of a new Prime Minister and cabinet. Despite these political developments, the overall situation remains fragile and subject to rapid change. Furthermore, refugees residing in the country continue to face substantial obstacles in accessing legal residency, education, and basic services. These challenges are compounded by a prolonged dire socio-economic situation, political instability, and a fragile security environment. The collapse of the banking sector, high inflation, and the deterioration of public services have significantly increased vulnerabilities among both refugee and host communities (17% of the population faces acute food insecurity²), further exacerbated by the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah following the events of October 2023. Despite UNHCR's expanded assistance coverage, nine out of ten refugee households in Lebanon live in extreme poverty, grappling with hyperinflation and dwindling socio-economic conditions. Escalating poverty levels and competition for resources risk exacerbating inter-communal tensions and shrinking the refugee protection space.

¹ [Refugee Data Finder](#) (consulted on 30/01/2026)

² [Document - Voluntary Repatriation Programme - Lebanon, 31 December 2025](#)

² ISAA Early Indicators Report 509

Though IBCs decreased by 27% along the eastern Mediterranean route in 2025³ and irregular arrivals from Lebanon decreased significantly, according to UNHCR data, in 2025, there were in total 719 482 refugees and people in refugee-like situation in Lebanon⁴, while at the same time, UNHCR reports a total of 974 000 for 2026.⁵

The European Union has already established substantial and multifaceted engagement with Lebanon, reflecting its recognition of the country's strategic importance and the need for sustained cooperation and support. In August 2024, the Commission adopted a EUR 500 million financial package for 2024-2025 as the first tranche of the overall EUR 1 billion support package for Lebanon announced by President von der Leyen during her visit to Beirut in May 2024, aiming to support Lebanon's stability, recovery and reforms, including support to security and border management, as well as protection and basic services for refugees and vulnerable Lebanese and durable solutions to the protracted displacement. This includes EUR 80 million cross-border programme on durable solutions, implemented in Lebanon [EUR 40 million] and Syria [EUR 40 million], aiming to support both countries in effective addressing of displacement, including voluntary returns to Syria. In addition, EUR 20 million were allocated to address the emergency needs during the escalation between Israel and Hezbollah in late 2024.

Political stability and security remain fragile since Israeli airstrikes on southern and eastern borders continue and lead to further internal displacement. Israel maintains control over 5 positions in the South of Lebanon. Population movements and the continuing economic crisis contribute to further humanitarian needs. Humanitarian allocation for Lebanon amounted to EUR 93,25 million for 2025 and included assistance to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the response to the new wave of arrivals from Syria in North Lebanon and Akkar.

³ <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-down-26-in-2025-europe-must-stay-prepared-lyKpVb>

⁴ [Refugee Data Finder -](#)

⁵ [Lebanon | UNHCR](#)

Assistance to the security sector through different instruments (NDICI, European Peace Facility), including the Lebanese Armed Forces, has focused inter alia on supporting LAF deployment in the South, strengthening the capacity of the ISF, and enhancing border management capacities. Operational engagement has also continued to expand. Since 2024, Frontex has received a mandate to launch negotiations on a Working Arrangement with the relevant Lebanese authorities and is currently implementing the EU4BorderSecurity project.

As of December 2025, UNHCR estimated that over 500 000 Syrians had voluntarily returned from Lebanon to Syria.

At the political level, during the 9th EU-Lebanon Association Council on 15 December 2025, the EU expressed its willingness to engage in a more comprehensive and regional dialogue, potentially paving the way towards a strategic and comprehensive partnership with Lebanon. This engagement was further reinforced by the visit of the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission to Lebanon on 9 January 2026, which confirmed the EU's commitment to support economic reforms and recovery, security, refugees and host communities, and the voluntary returns of Syrians to Syria.

Libya

Libya remains a highly challenging environment for refugees and migrants. The country remains both a key destination and transit country for people on the move, largely as a result of persistent instability across the wider region and of the availability of smuggling services to and from Libya. The ongoing conflict in Sudan has led to an increasing influx of Sudanese refugees into Libya, further compounding existing mixed movements of refugees and migrants who undertake highly perilous journeys. In 2025, the Central Mediterranean route continued to be the main migration route into the EU, with more than 66 000 irregular border crossings to Italy and Malta (stable compared to the same period in 2024). Departures from Libya accounted for 89% of total departures, highlighting its central role in movements along the Central Mediterranean route. At the same time, Libya also acted as a key country of departure for the Eastern Mediterranean sub-route leading to Greece (Crete/Gavdos) from Eastern Libya. The multiplication of interlocutors and the need to maintain the sensitive balance between engagement and recognition only of the government in Tripoli remains a big challenge for the EU.

According to the latest data provided by UNHCR, Libya hosts some 515 000 forcibly displaced persons, an increase of 34% compared to last year. 75 % are Sudanese followed by 21% internally displaced Libyans and lower numbers of Eritreans and Syrians. UNHCR is protecting and assisting 440 000 persons, an increase of 9% compared to last year. The main nationalities are Sudanese and Libyans. ⁶

According to the latest available data reported by the IOM displacement tracking matrix reporting on the period August-October 2025, 930 000 migrants were residing in Libya. The main nationalities are Sudanese (36%), Egyptians (20%), Nigeriens (19%), Chadi (9%) and Nigerians (3%). According to the IOM survey, most migrants are not actively pursuing onward travel. Some 9% reported having concrete plans to move to other countries. The large majority of them indicated the EU as the preferred destination. ⁷

In 2025, Libya was the main country of departure on the Mediterranean Routes. 89 % of the 66 000 arrivals via the Central Mediterranean Route departed from Libya. On the Eastern Mediterranean the number of crossings from Libya, mainly to Crete and Gavdos more than tripled up to 16 735 arrivals in 2025⁸. According to IOM, the central Mediterranean route remains the deadliest maritime crossing globally for refugees and migrants⁹, with over 2 573 fatalities reported in 2024, and 1 873 in 2025.¹⁰

IOM reported that 27 116 people were intercepted and returned to Libya in 2025, a 25% increase compared to 2024 (21 762), and a 58% increase compared to 2023 (17 190).

The country faces a complex and multifaceted displacement situation, encompassing tens of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR and significant numbers of internally displaced persons. While some progress has been made in addressing displacement, notably where security conditions have improved, many affected individuals continue to experience severe and protracted vulnerabilities.

⁶ [Refugee Data Finder](#) (consulted on 30/01/2026)

⁷ [Libya — Migrant Report 59 \(August-October 2025\) | Displacement Tracking Matrix](#)

⁸ Frontex data

⁹ [iom-libya-mission-overview-2025_0.pdf](#)

¹⁰ [Mediterranean | Missing Migrants Project](#)

Questions for discussion

1. *In which areas do you identify the most acute needs for or enhanced cooperation and EU support (e.g. border management, anti-smuggling efforts, protection and returns, capacity-building)?*
 2. *Considering Libya's fragmented political landscape, what practical avenues for cooperation remain viable, and how can existing channels be better utilised?*
 3. *Should the EU move towards a more structured framework for engagement with Lebanon and Libya? If yes, what form shall this framework have, and which areas should it cover?*
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