



# **ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025**

## **Silk Routes**

**Five migration issues to look out for in 2025**  
Origins, key events and priorities

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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 2025

## 1 Afghan repatriation may fuel riskier journeys

Drawing on the trend in 2024, repatriation of Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan is expected to continue in 2025 under the pretext of a new chapter in regional security. The intensity of forced returns to Afghanistan often fluctuates with the political atmosphere, surging during times of tension or heightened security and social concerns. Both Iran and Pakistan are in the process of constructing a border wall with Afghanistan, further signalling a non-welcoming environment for Afghans. Considering the absence of any reintegration mechanisms in Afghanistan, coupled with existing human rights violations and restrictive economic landscape, the drivers of migration continue to prevail, pushing many in vulnerable situations to consider irregular migration to further destinations, including Europe. However, stricter border controls by Türkiye and other countries en route, have made the journey more expensive and dangerous. The lack of diplomatic relations with the de facto Afghan regime further constrains any opportunities of exploring legal migration avenues for Afghans besides resettlement, progress on which has also stalled in the last couple of years. As a result, in the wake of mass returns of Afghans from the region, many of those in the country find themselves in “trapped” situations of compounding vulnerabilities, with limited opportunities of mobility to improve their lives, thus aggravating the existing humanitarian crisis in the country. Those deported may attempt re-migration because of the situation in Afghanistan. As a desperate measure, future flows may be redirected to lesser known, and often more dangerous routes.

## 2 New migration pressures in Iraq expected amidst regional geopolitical developments

In 2025, governments should prepare for a continued dynamic migration situation in Iraq in relation to the shifting geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. The escalation of conflict in Gaza and the Israeli air-strikes on southern Lebanon have caused instability and displacement in the region, forcing many from Lebanon to temporarily find refuge in Iraq. Similarly, the liberation of Syria from Assad's regime has had regional implications, affecting Syrians in Iraq and increasing pressures on vulnerable groups in Syria to seek refuge across the border as the country goes through a political transition. In these circumstances, Iraq has emerged as both a transit point and destination for the displaced population. Many of those displaced from southern Lebanon to Iraq have returned, and the border between Iraq and Syria has been closed. Yet, in 2025, Iraq may face increased domestic pressure from unresolved tensions in Syria and Iran's shifting influence in the region, as well as potentially new episodes of displacement to and from Iraq, should conflicts continue or escalate elsewhere.

## 3 Shifting irregular migration trends from the Silk Routes countries

Irregular migration trends from the Silk Routes countries to the EU has seen shifting trends in the past few years and may continue to fluctuate in 2025. These shifts could be related to domestic factors, but also tighter immigration and border controls along the most popular routes. Mirroring the global trend, an overall decline has been observed in detections of irregular migrants from the Silk Routes on the EU's external borders; however, this regional decline was much smaller as compared to other regions. A deeper analysis also shows shifting patterns along the routes for specific nationalities. Overall, detections along the Western Balkan and the Central Mediterranean routes declined considerably for Silk Routes countries. Meanwhile, the number of detections

of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis almost doubled in relative terms along the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2024 as compared to the previous year. Moreover, an increase in detection of individuals traveling on fraudulent documents from major international airports in Bangladesh and Pakistan has been noted based on enhanced surveillance capacities. The recent surge in maritime fatalities, particularly among Pakistanis, underscores the urgency of monitoring irregular migration. Human smuggling networks may be adapting, warranting closer scrutiny in the coming months.

## 4 Cooperation on irregular migration, returns, and labour mobility as a policy priority

Building on the momentum set in 2024, a continued prioritisation of bilateral migration cooperation partnerships between Silk Routes countries and EU Member States is expected, especially along three themes: i) curbing irregular migration, ii) implementing return agreements, and iii) facilitating labour migration. As part of these agreements, there is a multifaceted effort to address irregular migration and promote safe and orderly migration through a combination of preventative, enforcement, and capacity-building measures. Secondly, European policymakers have intensified negotiations and formalised arrangements with key partner countries to make return a central priority in migration agreements. This has involved both cooperation—facilitating returns and streamlining readmission—and pressure, using measures such as visa sanctions and third-country agreements (e.g., Germany's deal with Uzbekistan to repatriate Afghan nationals). Thirdly, elements of labour migration and skills partnerships have become firmly embedded in the EU's migration diplomacy and corresponding agreements with non-European partners (e.g., the development of Talent Partnerships, signed with Bangladesh and Pakistan in 2024). These partnerships have been high on domestic political agendas in the Silk Routes as well. Hence, as there is a heightened interest by all parties in exploring labour migration pathways, this area is likely to gain a more central policy focus in 2025.

## 5 Strengthening migration governance takes precedence

Silk Routes countries' domestic priority to strengthen their institutional frameworks related to migration is expected to pick up pace in 2025. Countries will focus on investing in the formulation and revision of comprehensive migration and reintegration policies, and governance structures. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, there is an ongoing initiative to introduce stricter licensing regimes, monitoring mechanisms, and penalties for unethical practices to ensure fair recruitment processes and protect workers from exploitation. Some countries (Bangladesh, India, Iraq, and Pakistan) are receiving technical and financial support through bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements to build the capacities of migration-related institutions. This includes upgrading technologies for managing migration data, enhancing border control systems, and training personnel involved in migration governance. By prioritising institutional reforms, Silk Routes countries aim to establish themselves as reliable partners, meeting their commitments under international agreements and building sustainable migration systems.

## Introduction

ICMPD's Regional Migration Outlook for the Silk Routes<sup>1</sup> region presents a brief analysis of recent regional migration and policy trends and provides an outlook on developments and events to watch out for in 2025. This outlook complements ICMPD's global outlook that was released earlier this year and takes a closer look at some of the events that shaped migration trends in the Silk Routes region. It relies on ICMPD's local presence and expertise, as well as desk research examining the latest developments and their implications on migration and mobility.

Based on the trajectory of policy focus within the Silk Routes region as well as in Europe, return and repatriation will be a dominant theme manifested in the form of flows, policy development, and bilateral cooperation. This trend is particularly relevant for Afghanistan and Iraq (vis-à-vis Syria as well), but also pertinent for Bangladesh and Pakistan. While return will continue to be a major theme going forward in 2025, a note of concern is the inadequate social, economic and physical infrastructure in the post-conflict countries for a sustainable reintegration of those returning. Yet, at the same time, for Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, promoting labour migration and skills development will remain a critical domestic priority, given its dual benefits of addressing domestic unemployment challenges and contributing to economic development through remittance flows.

In terms of trends, the Silk Routes region presents a complex migratory landscape where economic, political, and humanitarian drivers often intertwine and overlap. Regular migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries remains substantial, particularly from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; but labour pathways to the EU are also increasing, especially for high-skilled workers, thanks to long-standing or renewed cooperation with countries

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<sup>1</sup> Silk Routes region refers to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.



of origin. Irregular migration to the EU seems to have declined on popular routes, however, there appears to be some redirection towards previously less popular routes (e.g., Eastern Mediterranean route for Pakistani migrants). Meanwhile irregular migration appears to be rising for Bangladeshi migrants, who tend to travel to North African countries in a regular way before crossing the Mediterranean Sea towards Italy. The number of asylum applications of third-country nationals from the Silk Routes region in the EU has also seen a notable reduction, although the need for protection of some – particularly Afghans fleeing a difficult humanitarian situation in their own as well as in neighbouring countries – remains high.

The report proceeds as follows: first, it provides an analysis of the key current and emerging trends in the region’s “hotspots”, focusing on Afghanistan and Iraq. Then, the report qualifies these trends for the wider region in terms of both scale and migration patterns. Next, the report highlights the migration policy trajectory in Silk Routes countries. Finally, the report concludes by looking to the future and highlighting possible migration specific trends and policy developments, as well as focus areas for policy makers in 2025.

# Focus regions

## Focus regions

In this section, we direct the spotlight on two countries in the Silk Routes region that experienced the most pronounced migration developments in the past year and are likely to influence regional migration dynamics in 2025.

### Afghanistan

The migration outlook for Afghanistan in 2025 is headlined by drivers rooted in economic instability, human rights restrictions, climate-related impacts, and a political and humanitarian crisis. In 2024, Afghanistan's GDP grew by 2.7%, and moderate growth is expected in 2025. However, the economy remains far from recovering previous losses. It had contracted by almost one-third in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover in August 2021 due to structural challenges, trade imbalances, limited investment, and inadequate education and healthcare systems. The security situation remained stable in 2024, but the human rights situation continued to deteriorate with restrictions on freedom of assembly and political expression, suppressed civil society and media, corporal punishments, and public executions. Forecasts show that in 2025, 22.9 million people in Afghanistan will need humanitarian assistance.<sup>2</sup>

Displaced Afghans are hosted largely by neighbouring countries: Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan host a total of 5.5 million Afghans in refugee-like situations, including 1.45 million Afghans registered as refugees in Pakistan and 761,000 in Iran.<sup>3</sup> Another 5.5 million Afghans stay in these two countries as labour migrants, family passport holders, or in an undocumented situation.

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, "Afghanistan Appeal: Humanitarian Action for Children," 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/afghanistan#download>.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR Operational Data Portal: Afghanistan situation, Accessed 3 January 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>.

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The year 2024 was marked by intensified return of Afghans from the region and beyond. Considering that Afghan refugee population is the largest globally, according to UNHCR, this pace of (forced) return has turned out to be an alarming human rights concern and a disastrous logistical issue for reception and reintegration in Afghanistan. Since October 2023, following the passing of the ‘Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan’ by the Government of Pakistan, 813,300 individuals have returned from Pakistan, the majority of whom were undocumented.<sup>4</sup> Moving forward as of 2025, the Government of Pakistan plans to initiate repatriation first for the ca. 803,000 Afghan Citizen Cardholders (ACC) and then for about 1.45 million holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards. Although the government has extended the latter’s deadline until 30 June 2025, their long-term validity remains uncertain. Even those awaiting resettlement to other countries are planned to be forced returned to Afghanistan if their applications are not processed by the end of March 2025.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, growing political tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, as manifested by a recent strike by the Pakistani military on Afghan soil, may have manifold effects. On the one hand, intensification of conflict may seriously hamper Afghanistan’s trade, which being a landlocked country is anyway dependent on Pakistan for access to imports. This will further put strain on the struggling economy with dire implications for access to food and other basic needs. On the other hand, it would also further add to anti-Pakistan sentiments among the Afghan population, making Pakistan a less preferred destination.<sup>6</sup>

4 UNHCR. ‘Pakistan-Afghanistan Returns Emergency Response #26 - 14 January 2025’. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/113864>.

5 Afghanistan International. “Pakistani Prime Minister Orders New Wave Of Afghan Deportations,” February 1, 2025. <https://www.afintl.com/en/202502018245>.

6 Hameed Hakimi, “Analysis: Why Have Pakistan’s Ties with the Afghan Taliban Turned Frigid?,” Al Jazeera, December 28, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/analysis-why-have-pakistan-ties-with-the-afghan-taliban-turned-frigid>.

If tensions continue to escalate, Pakistan’s drive to expel Afghans from the country may pick up pace, putting another 1.5 million people at the risk of forced return.

Iran, too, as the host of the largest Afghan refugee population, passed a decision in September 2024 to deport two million undocumented foreigners within six months.<sup>7</sup> In 2024 alone, Iran repatriated 750,000 undocumented Afghans and has ramped up the construction of the border wall between the two countries. The civic space was anyway tightening around Afghans in Iran, with even more mobility restrictions and limitations of public services availability such as healthcare and education. While security concerns have supposedly driven such political decisions, economic factors such as runaway inflation levels and elevated levels of domestic unemployment have also fuelled anti-migrant sentiments.

Forced return of Afghans has also been initiated from Europe. For the first time since the Taliban takeover and the suspension of returns, Germany resumed deportation of Afghans, signing a migration agreement with Uzbekistan which allows Germany to send rejected Afghan asylum seekers in exchange for Uzbeki workers. Since Germany does not have any diplomatic relations with the present Afghan government, this agreement might enable third-country arrangements for the return of Afghans, encouraging other countries in the EU to do the same.<sup>8</sup>

The influx of returnees in Afghanistan has been a massive domestic challenge because of the lack of capacities in terms of reintegration. Disruption in economic and social capital due to return and restrictions on bringing assets are compounded by the lack of housing and shelter spaces, limited employment opportunities in Afghanistan on return, inadequate basic services,

7 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia and the Pacific, Quarter 3 2024, p. 5.

8 Emma Wallis, “Could Germany’s Migration Deal with Uzbekistan Enable Returns to Afghanistan?,” InfoMigrants, September 17, 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/59912/could-germanys-migration-deal-with-uzbekistan-enable-returns-to-afghanistan>.

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particularly in peri-urban areas, and the issue of landlessness, making reintegration extremely challenging.<sup>9</sup>

While the country continues to experience the arrival of millions of those forcibly returned, there are other forces at play contributing to migratory movements within and across the borders. Climate-related natural disasters, such as floods after a three-year period of droughts, wreaked havoc in the northern part of the country in 2024, leading to further internal displacement.<sup>10</sup> Droughts in other parts of the country are likely to continue in 2025, leading to worsened water insecurity and agricultural productivity. Despite the high vulnerability to climate impacts, the country has been suspended from receiving any international funding for climate action.<sup>11</sup> This will have significant consequences on adaptation capacities of the country.

The domestic human rights situation, particularly in relation to restrictions and marginalisation of women and girls, as well as ethnic and religious minorities, remains dire. The de facto Taliban government in the country introduced several morality decrees in 2024, further restricting women's presence and participation in the public sphere, prohibiting their education and employment, and even access to healthcare. Along with this, economic stagnancy and lack of economic opportunities amidst a humanitarian crisis still push many to endeavour to leave the country.

At the same time, with the shift towards migration-restrictive policies globally, the fate of pending resettlement applications for Afghans remains uncertain. The limited number of resettlement options and extremely long

9 Nassim Majidi, Katherine James, and Devyani Nighoskar, "Return to Afghanistan: Re-Migration and the Failed Reintegration of Millions of Afghans," 2024, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfe2c8927234e0001688343/t/67652102036267012d0a2035/1734680835809/ReturntoAfghanistan\\_CostsofWar\\_Dec102024.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfe2c8927234e0001688343/t/67652102036267012d0a2035/1734680835809/ReturntoAfghanistan_CostsofWar_Dec102024.pdf).

10 Andreas Stefansson, "Afghanistan: Caught between Climate Change and Global Indifference," Al Jazeera, November 21, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/11/21/afghanistan-caught-between-climate-change-and-global-indifference>.

11 While an Afghan representation was invited to the 29th Conference of Parties in Azerbaijan in November 2024, the delegation was not allowed to participate in decision-making events.

processing times have left many in an indefinite state of waiting.<sup>12</sup> The no-tolerance approach adopted in Pakistan and Iran further makes it difficult for those waiting for the processing of their resettlement claims. Moreover, political changes in many countries, particularly the US, but also Canada and Brazil, have further diminished prospects of resettlement.<sup>13</sup>

In short, high rates of (forced) return, coupled with an ever-growing array of drivers of out-migration in a restrictive global immigration landscape will push many to attempt distress (re)migration or leave many Afghans in state of forced immobility. The lack of diplomatic relations with the de facto Afghan regime further constrains opportunities of exploring legal migration avenues for Afghans, which have also shrunk in the last couple of years. Unless new pathways for legal migration for Afghans are introduced, migration may be adopted as a form of extreme coping mechanism to escape domestic problems, which may expose those attempting to migrate to further vulnerability, social fragmentation, and insecurity.

## Iraq

Despite high humanitarian and developmental needs, Iraq had achieved a relative state of stability over the past few years. In 2024, however, the country found itself in a whirlwind of geopolitical and security upheavals, mostly due to dramatic changes in the political and security landscape within the Middle East region, with stark implications on migration dynamics and movements into and out of Iraq.

12 Mogiani, Marco. "Seeking Sanctuary: Information Needs and Migration Prospects for Afghan Nationals in Pakistan." Policy Brief. PARIM-II. Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2024. [https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/61211/file/Policy\\_Brief\\_PARIMII.pdf](https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/61211/file/Policy_Brief_PARIMII.pdf).

13 Paulina Smolinsky, "Many Afghans Who Fled Taliban Takeover Two Years Ago Are Still Waiting for Asylum in U.S.," CBS News, May 30, 2024, [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghans-waiting-for-asylum-u-s/#:~:text=There is currently a congressional U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.; Megan Hogan, "Trump vs. Harris on Immigration: Future Policy Proposals," Peterson Institute for International Economics, September 9, 2024, <https://www.piiie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2024/trump-vs-harris-immigration-future-policy-proposals>.](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghans-waiting-for-asylum-u-s/#:~:text=There%20is%20currently%20a%20congressional%20U.S.%20Citizenship%20and%20Immigration%20Services.%,Megan%20Hogan,%20%20Trump%20vs.%20Harris%20on%20Immigration%20Future%20Policy%20Proposals,%20Peterson%20Institute%20for%20International%20Economics,%20September%209,%202024,%20https://www.piiie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2024/trump-vs-harris-immigration-future-policy-proposals)

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Following the spiralling regional conflict resulting from Israel's escalating hostilities in Lebanon, about 1.5 million Lebanese were displaced, with more than 39,071 arriving in Iraq by November 2024.<sup>14</sup> While most newly-arrived displaced Lebanese were hosted in Najaf and Karbala, other cities such as Babil, Baghdad, Ninewa, Basra, Samawa, Salah al-din, Diyala and Erbil also reported to have received Lebanese families and individuals fleeing the conflict.<sup>15</sup> The hostilities in Lebanon also further displaced some Syrian nationals who also sought refuge in Iraq.

In response, the Iraqi government announced a financial package of USD 2.27 million to assist and include them in the public system temporarily, while administrations especially in Karbala and Najaf have also played a proactive role in receiving and supporting incoming Lebanese nationals. After the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire declaration on 27 November, the process of return began: by the end of December about half the Lebanese had returned, but the successive developments in Syria have disrupted road journeys and flight schedules, putting a temporary halt to the process of repatriation. Besides, political developments between Israel and Lebanon may jeopardise the conditional ceasefire, including the recent strikes by Israel in southern Lebanon in early February 2025, potentially creating yet another episode of displacement.

Meanwhile, the fall of Bashar al Assad's regime in neighbouring Syria marked the beginning of a redefined political landscape. Iraq hosts more than 300,000 Syrian refugees, the majority of whom are concentrated in the Kurdish Region of Iraq.<sup>16</sup> The regime change might prompt many displaced Syrians to return to their country; however, others might wait for the situation to become more stable, while new displacements might occur, this time involving members or groups affiliated with the old regime, or minorities. In

14 UNHCR, "Update on Displacement from Lebanon to Iraq (Nov 20, 2024)," 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/iraq-flash-update-displacement-lebanon-22>.

15 UNHCR, "Iraq Flash Update #9: Update on Displacement from Lebanon (8 October 2024)," 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/iraq-flash-update-displacement-lebanon-9>.

16 UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal: Iraq," 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/iraq>.

the region, the rise of Sunni-Islamist rebels has reignited tensions with Iraq, which closed the border with Syria. There is fear that rising sectarian conflict arising from power struggles in Syria may have knock-on effects on Iraq. For instance, the spillover effects of recent clashes between security forces and pro-Assad militants on Syrian coastal areas are already felt in Iraq in the form of sectarian rivalries re-emerging. Following the clashes, Iraq reinforced border security and intensified a crackdown on Syrian nationals in Baghdad and other provinces on grounds of inciting violence and disseminating sectarian propaganda.<sup>17</sup> On an economic level, unrest and instability in the region is likely to adversely affect oil trade routes, creating shortages and inflation in Iraq, which may act as a driver of irregular migration in view of limited legal migration routes out of the region.

While Iraq continues to be an important source of migrants to Europe, the declining trend of asylum applications continued in 2024, due to tougher border controls and stronger bilateral cooperation aiming at curbing irregular migration and facilitating return of irregular Iraqi migrants abroad. Meanwhile, internal displacement is also a prominent feature of the migration landscape in Iraq. There are about 1 million Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq, approximately half of whom are located in KRI, and 117,000 of whom live in IDP camps.<sup>18</sup> Although the government announced the closure of all IDP camps by mid-2024, including incentives for families to return, the camps' closure has been delayed and a task force established to devise a more effective solution to the issue of protracted displacement. Given the continued security risks and lack of infrastructure in some communities of origin, IDP returns will continue to be a concrete challenge.

Iraq's migration outlook for 2025 is thus complex, with intertwined security, economic, political, and geopolitical factors. Later in 2025, the parliamentary elections at the federal level are expected to take place, with migration as a

17 Menmy, Dana Taib. "Fallout from Mass Killings in Syria's Coastal Areas Seeps into Iraq." The New Arab, March 11, 2025. <https://www.newarab.com/news/fallout-mass-killing-syrias-coast-seeps-iraq>.

18 UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal: Iraq."

priority in the political agenda. The outcomes are expected to influence the momentum of action in terms of migration governance and could also influence broader migration trends from the country.

The Silk Routes region presents a complex landscape of migratory movements, driven by intertwining economic, political, and humanitarian factors. This section will offer a retrospective analysis of specific migration trends witnessed over the course of 2024, covering relevant aspects including labour migration, remittance flows, asylum and protection, irregular migration, and return and reintegration.

# Migration trends in the region

# Migration trends in the region

## Labour migration

Labour migration remains a significant trend in the region, especially in countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which have seen millions of workers leaving for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Southeast Asia, and – to a more limited extent – the EU. Considering the generally weak domestic economies and the difficulties of the internal labour markets to absorb their growing working age population, countries in the region often facilitate labour migration. The characteristics and trends of these migration movements may vary, but overall data suggest that, while Indian migrants are generally highly skilled workers<sup>19</sup> and reach the GCC or the EU through regular means thanks to bilateral agreements,<sup>20</sup> Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants are mostly low- or semi-skilled workers<sup>21</sup> who are employed in the GCC countries but have limited access to regular migration pathways to the EU.<sup>22</sup>

19 MMC, “Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia and the Pacific” (Copenhagen: Mixed Migration Centre, 2023), [https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/QMMU\\_Q1\\_2023\\_Asia.pdf](https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/QMMU_Q1_2023_Asia.pdf).

20 See for example Suhasini Haidar, “Finland Faces Massive Labour Crunch, Pitches for Indian Tech Workers and Nurses,” The Hindu, December 22, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/finland-faces-massive-labour-crunch-pitches-for-indian-tech-workers-and-nurses/article66281323.ece>; Preeti Verma Lal, “Proposed Amendment Will Allow Skilled Workers to Go to Germany without a Job in Hand,” Money Control (blog), February 28, 2023, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/immigration/germany-immigration-for-skilled-workers-10175711.html>.

21 ADBI, ILO, and OECD, “Labor Migration in Asia: Trends, Skills Certification, and Seasonal Work” (Tokyo, Bangkok, and Paris: Asian Development Bank Institute, International Labour Organization, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/969876/labor-migration-asia-trends-skills-certification-and-seasonal-work.pdf>.

22 MMC, “Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia and the Pacific;” Ashraful Azad and Jennifer Vallentine, “Beyond Dichotomies: Bangladesh’s Complex Migration Landscape,” Mixed Migration Centre (blog), May 28, 2024, <https://mixedmigration.org/bangladesh-complex-migration-landscape/#:~:text=Irregular%20migration%20to%20Europe&text=In%202022%20the%20number%20of,Europe%20along%20mixed%20migration%20routes>.

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India is the world’s largest country of origin of international migrants, with more than 35 million Indian citizens that live abroad.<sup>23</sup> Migration movements from India to countries such as the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Saudi Arabia are among the world’s ten largest migration corridors. Although Indian emigration is long-standing and variegated, the most recent migration movements from the country generally include semi- and high-skilled migrants primarily employed in GCC and Western countries. With regard to migration to the EU, Indian nationals have been the largest recipients of Blue Cards in Europe, accounting for almost one in five working permits for high-skilled workers granted at the whole European level, the overwhelming majority of which released by Germany. Among other Silk Routes countries, Iraqi and Pakistani nationals follow at distance, with Germany hosting almost all of them (see Figure 1). Even when it comes to more general work permits for remunerated activities, Indian nationals account for more than 7% of the total first permits released by EU Member States (equivalent to more than 94,000 permits, see Figure 2), second only to Ukrainians.

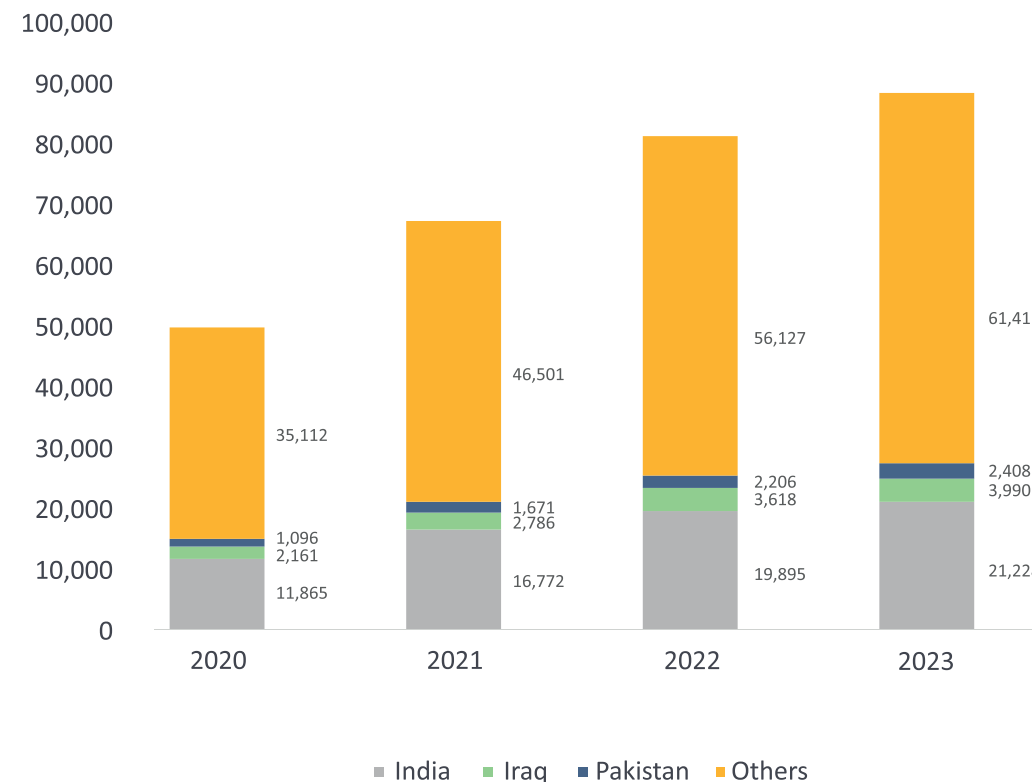


Figure 1: Number of EU Blue Cards granted to third-country nationals from selected Silk Routes countries. Given the small figures for Sri Lankan and Afghan nationals, they are included in the category “Others”. Source: Eurostat

23 <https://www.mea.gov.in/population-of-overseas-indians.htm>. Statistics from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs include people of Indian origin and non-resident Indians, while IOM statistics estimate about 18 million Indian migrants globally, see McAuliffe and Oucho, “World Migration Report 2024”.



Bangladesh and Pakistan have also long relied on labour migration as a vital economic lifeline. Between 2011 and 2024, over 10 million registered Bangladeshi migrants and almost nine million Pakistani migrants left their country in search of better opportunities abroad, overwhelmingly to the GCC countries.<sup>24</sup> Although with smaller numbers, regular labour migration to Europe has shown increased trends in the past years. With more than 33,000 first permits for remunerated activities in 2023 (+51% compared to the previous year), Bangladeshi nationals account for 2.6% of all first permits released by EU countries (mostly Croatia, Portugal, and Greece, with 55% of permits issued), second only to India among the Silk Routes countries (see Figure 2). In the same year, more than 18,000 Pakistani workers have been granted first permits for remunerated activities in one of the 27 European countries, a slight decline compared to the previous year but still an important trend among the Silk Routes countries (see Figure 2). Portugal, Spain, and Italy are the most important recipients, hosting almost 52% of them. In general, emigration of highly skilled individuals from Pakistan has been on the rise, having almost tripled since pre-pandemic levels (29,434 in 2024 compared to 9,899 in 2019).

24 For Bangladesh, see <https://old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=24>. For Pakistan, see Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE), "Number of Pakistani Workers Registered for Employment Abroad (1971-2024)," 2025, <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2025/country.pdf>. While 2022 and 2023 registered a peak in the number of outgoing Pakistani migrants after the pandemic, with more than 800,000 workers leaving the country each year, last year has seen a 15% decrease in outgoing migration in comparison to the previous year. The decrease, however, is mostly due to the recent ban imposed by the United Arab Emirates on labour migrants from the country following supposed cases of beggary among Pakistani migrants; see NDTV News Desk, "Saudi Arabia Warns Pakistan To Prevent Beggars From Entering Country," NDTV World, September 25, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/saudi-arabia-warns-pakistan-to-prevent-beggars-from-entering-country-over-hajj-umrah-visas-6643416>.

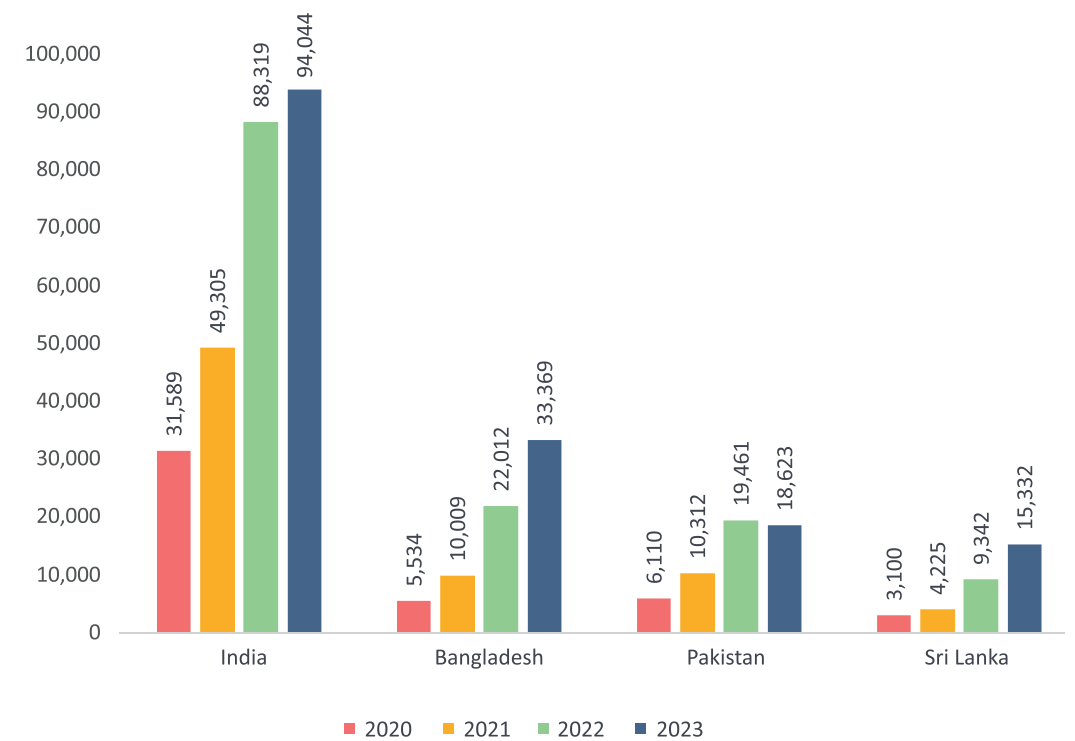


Figure 2: First permits issued for remunerated activities by European countries to third-country nationals from selected Silk Routes countries. Source: Eurostat.

While legal pathways from Afghanistan are quite limited, the Migrant Resource Centre<sup>25</sup> (established in 2018 and operating online since August 2021) has recently reported a rise in queries about regular migration abroad for both employment and protection, which might reflect the need for safer and more stable futures. The MRC has also been conducting soft skills training for students who received scholarships to study abroad, in particular Afghan women studying in Iran, Spain, Central Asia, Portugal and Germany.

25 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.

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For many, legal migration pathways remain one of the few hopes for leaving a country that offers little security or opportunities, although these options are scarce and with very limited eligibility.

As seen above, labour migration pathways to the EU have expanded in the past years (except for a slight drawback during the first year of the pandemic), vouching for the need of both high-skilled and low-skilled labour. It is likely that such trends will continue to grow in 2025, pushed by continuing demand of labour force from GCC and EU countries, as well as demographic surplus in countries of origin. Indian nationals have benefitted from such pathways, but also Iraqi, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi workers. The foreseeable expansion of regular migration pathways is certainly welcomed, and its success will likely be bolstered by ongoing efforts to reduce bureaucratic hurdles, improve skills-matching programs, and expand the recognition of qualifications.

## Remittances

Remittances continue to represent an important source of external finance for many developing countries, including in the Silk Routes region. According to the World Bank, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries in 2024 are expected to reach USD 685 billion, a 4.3% increase in comparison to the previous year.<sup>26</sup> India has constantly been the world's top remittance-receiving country since 2008, more than doubling to a staggering USD 129 billion in 2024. Remittances from Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants play a crucial role in stabilising and supporting domestic economies, counteracting the negative effects of high unemployment and inflation, and providing financial stability to millions of families. Pakistan and Bangladesh have continuously moved up their position, firmly placing themselves in the fifth and sixth positions among the world's top remittance-receiving countries,

<sup>26</sup> Ratha, D., Plaza, S., & Ju Kim, E. (2024, December 18). In 2024, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to reach \$685 billion, larger than FDI and ODA combined. World Bank - People Move.

respectively. Despite a slight decrease in the inflow of remittances in 2023, Pakistan is expected to receive about USD 33 billion in remittances in 2024, a 23% increase compared to the previous year. Similarly, Bangladesh is expected to receive USD 26 billion in remittances in 2024, 20% more than the previous year.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the positive economic impacts for many families in these countries, remittances remain nevertheless private funds that cannot replace nor count as public spending. Therefore, a significant share of remittances in relation to the GDP might signal the fragile and volatile state of the national economy. This is the case, for example, in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, where remittances amount to almost 10% and 9% of the respective national GDPs in 2024. States with high unemployment and inflation might promote emigration to relieve social pressure, becoming however increasingly more reliant on remittances. Noteworthy is also the high costs of remittances: barriers to fast, safe, and cheap transfer of remittances remain high, often impacting women and the poorest workers who, earning less than others, tend to send less money more often.<sup>28</sup>

## Asylum and protection

Beside social and economic challenges, in the course of 2024 the region has continued to experience forced displacement, which often translated into protection issues. The situation in Afghanistan remains the most challenging, as presented. In terms of asylum applications lodged in European countries, Afghans remain the second most represented nationality after Syrians. According to Eurostat, in the first ten months of 2024, almost 61,000 Afghan nationals have applied for asylum in one of the 27 EU countries (see Figure 3), in decline for the past three years. While this might suggest a reduced flow,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Prokhorova, A. (2024). Remittances in Asia and the Pacific-a focus on North and Central Asia. Bangkok: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

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push factors have intensified and the demand for protection among Afghans remains strong; but many are unable to leave the country due to strict border controls and lack of financial resources. Besides, some countries have started to return Afghans despite the appalling humanitarian situation in the country, as with the German-Uzbekistan agreement discussed earlier, as well as those under consideration recently in other EU countries, such as Austria.

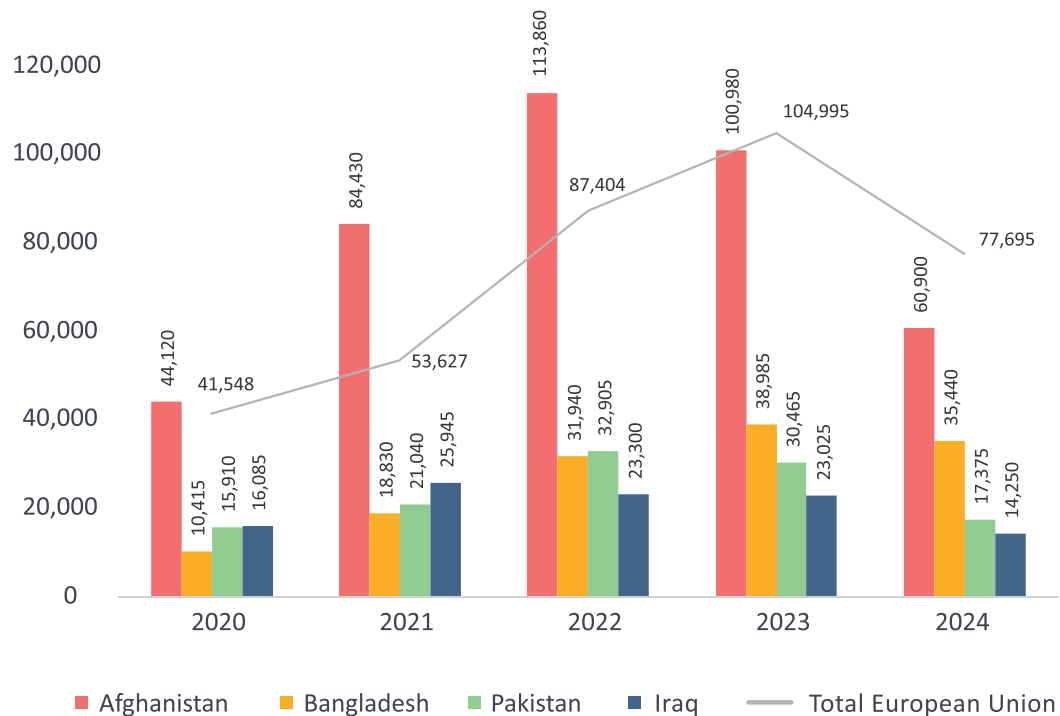


Figure 3: First time asylum applicants in Europe from selected Silk Routes countries (left-hand side) in relation to the total number of asylum applicants in the EU (right-hand side). Source: Eurostat.

Individuals from other countries in the Silk Routes region seek asylum in Europe every year. In the first ten months of 2024, more than 35,000 Bangladeshis, 17,000 Pakistanis, and 14,000 Iraqis have applied for asylum in one of the 27 European countries. According to the EUAA, asylum applications from Iraqi and Pakistani nationals have declined in comparison to 2023, mostly because of tougher border controls, increased apprehensions in Türkiye, and

stronger governmental cooperation to control irregular migration. On the other hand, asylum applications from Bangladeshi nationals seem to show a more fluctuating trend, with a slight increase since the summer of 2024 and the potential to surpass the 40,000 applications submitted by the end of the year – the highest number since 2013. However, recognition rates are significantly lower: whereas 57% of Afghan applicants have seen their claims approved, only 28% of Iraqi, 10% of Pakistani, and 3% of Bangladeshi claims have been recognised.<sup>29</sup> The significant level of rejection rates might indicate that asylum is engaged as a strategy to access Europe in the absence of other migration opportunities, highlighting the need for more labour migration pathways.

## Irregular migration

Although most migrants from the Silk Routes region tend to avail themselves of legal pathways such as asylum or labour migration opportunities within the region or GCC, irregular migration to Europe remains an important trend.<sup>30</sup> The European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex reported a 38% decrease in detections of irregular entry at the EU's external border in 2024, as compared to the previous year.<sup>31</sup> For migrants from selected Silk Routes countries, data reveal an overall decrease in irregular border crossings compared to 2023, particularly along the Western Balkan and Central Mediterranean routes; while the Eastern Mediterranean route has seen a slight increase (see Figure 4). With more than 16,000 detections, Afghan nationals, along with Syrians, continue to be among the main groups intercepted at the European borders, particularly along the Western Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean routes. However, Bangladeshi nationals have also been among the top ten nationalities of irregular arrivals into the EU since

29 <https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-asylum>.

30 McAuliffe, Marie, and L.A. Oucho. 'World Migration Report 2024'. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2024.

31 <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/irregular-border-crossings-into-eu-drop-sharply-in-2024-oqpweX>.

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2020, especially along the Central Mediterranean route.<sup>32</sup> Bangladeshi migrants often leave their country in a regular way to then attempt to migrate to the EU irregularly through Libya: in this respect, the most popular transit countries are Türkiye, UAE, and, to a lesser extent, Egypt.<sup>33</sup>

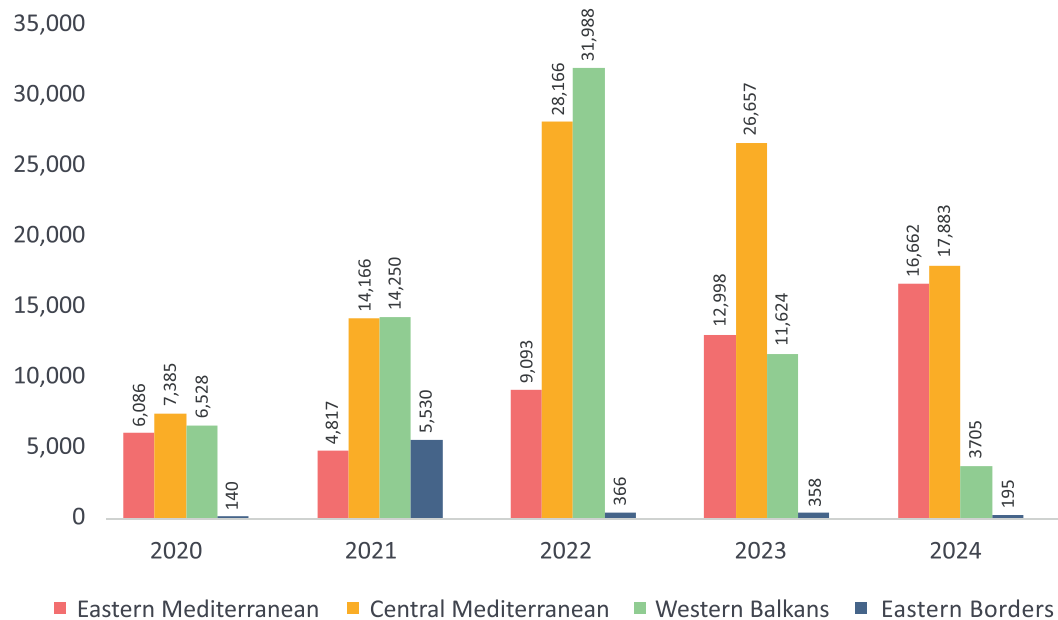


Figure 4: Detection of irregular entries by main entry routes for selected Silk Routes nationalities (i.e., Afghanistan, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Pakistan). Source: Frontex.

On the other hand, detections of irregular migrants from Pakistan and Iraq along the European external borders have generally decreased over the last years. Frontex data have shown a general reduction in the number of irregular detections of Pakistani nationals since 2022. However, while the Central

<sup>32</sup> <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>

<sup>33</sup> IOM, “DTM Libya - Migration from Bangladesh to Italy via Libya (March 2023)” (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2023), <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/libya-migration-bangladesh-italy-libya-march-2023>.

Mediterranean Route has seen the number of irregular crossings from Pakistani migrants decline sharply in 2024 (-63% from 2023), the numbers of irregular detections along the Eastern Mediterranean Sea Route, albeit significantly lower, have doubled, reaching almost 1,000 detections in the first 11 months of 2024.<sup>34</sup> While the overall number of Pakistani nationals intercepted at the external borders of Europe has dropped, irregular migration from the country continues to raise questions on irregular migration trends and smuggling operations from the country, especially after recent incidents of boats capsizing at sea where hundreds of Pakistani migrants lost their lives.<sup>35</sup>

Irregular migration from Iraq has also seen declining trends since the instrumentalisation crisis of 2021, with a 40% decrease in 2024 as compared to the previous year.<sup>36</sup> Although reduced in numbers, Iraqi citizens continue to attempt to enter the EU irregularly, often after reaching Türkiye or Northern Africa in a regular way. The Eastern Mediterranean land route seems to be the preferred way for Iraqi migrants to cross into the EU, while all other routes have seen a sharp decline compared to 2023. While the general situation in Iraq has improved, persistent challenges remain and will impact on (potential irregular) migration trends in the coming year, as discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>34</sup> FRONTEX, “Annual Risk Analysis 2024/2025” (Warsaw: FRONTEX, 2024), [https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk\\_Analysis/Annual\\_Risk\\_Analysis\\_2024-2025.pdf](https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2024-2025.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> See for example Daily Pakistan English News. ‘Boat with 65 Passengers Including Pakistan Nationals Capsized near Libya’, 10 February 2025. <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/10-Feb-2025/boat-with-65-passengers-including-pakistan-nationals-capsized-near-libya>, Faouzi, Adil. ‘Over 40 Pakistanis Among 50 Migrants Feared Dead as Boat Capsizes Off Moroccan Coast’. Morocco World News (blog), 18 January 2025. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2025/01/165698/over-40-pakistanis-among-50-migrants-feared-dead-as-boat-capsizes-off-moroccan-coast/>, Khalid, Aisha. ‘Pakistani Village Grapples with Loss after Migrant Boat Capsizes off Greece’. Voice of America, 18 December 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistani-village-grapples-with-loss-after-migrant-boat-capsizes-off-greece/7906247.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Viola Pulkkinen, “Notes from a Country of Origin: Iraq’s Position in the EU-Belarus Border Crisis,” Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP) (blog), December 16, 2021, <https://www.isdp.eu/iraqs-position-in-the-eu-belarus-border-crisis/>.

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Other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and – despite its tightening migration and border policies – Australia, are also minor but important destinations for irregular migration routes from South Asia, particularly from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The aforementioned ban imposed by the UAE on labour migrants from Pakistan might drive Pakistani workers to seek alternative opportunities in other Gulf states, potentially through irregular channels. The combination of shrinking legal pathways and restrictive migration policies in both the Gulf and Europe is creating a volatile situation, pushing more migrants from the region to resort to risky migration routes in search of work and stability abroad.

Another emerging trend is the (mostly irregular) migration of Syrian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani workers to Iraq. The improvement of the socio-economic situation in Iraq has made the country appealing to foreign workers, who often overstay their religious visa. According to media, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has claimed that Iraq hosts 40,000 registered workers, yet another 50,000 (primarily from Pakistan) have overstayed and are working irregularly.<sup>37</sup> While irregular migration is a relatively minor aspect of overall migration movements, it remains highly politicised and socially unacceptable. The intensification of border controls and the crackdown on irregular migration, however, cannot always keep pace with increasing geopolitical tensions and the need for protection of many, suggesting a continuation of irregular migration trends, including for this region.

## Return and reintegration

One of the main pillars of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, European institutions and Member States have also prioritised return policies to address domestic social and political pressures, including the development of potential return hubs, revisions to the Return Directive, and implementation

37 Arab News. 'Iraq Tries to Stem Influx of Illegal Foreign Workers from Pakistan, Other Nations'. 29 November 2024. <https://arab.news/pet3m>.

of the “safe third country” concept. Recent policy developments reflect a growing prioritisation among states to facilitate and enforce the return of migrants, leading to a surge in new programmes and frameworks aimed at promoting repatriation. However, implementation faces significant political, economic, humanitarian and even operational challenges. While some countries of origin have signed agreements with EU Member States to facilitate returns and reintegration in exchange for relaxed visa policies or labour opportunities, limited resources and operational capacities, difficult conditions in the countries of origin, and inadequate programme reach can impact on the implementation of return procedures. Thus, for a wide variety of reasons, return rates in general vary significantly, across both countries of return and countries of origin.

The implementation of return policies is also correlated with the situation in the countries of origin and the relationships between these and individual EU Member States. The case of Afghanistan is emblematic in this respect, as return procedures are intertwined with protection needs of Afghan migrants. European countries had initially frozen diplomatic relations with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and put returns of Afghan nationals on hold. Although almost 65,000 Afghan people have been ordered to leave the EU between 2022 and the first nine months of 2024, only 2.3% of them have (been) returned (see Figure 5). The aforementioned agreement between Germany and Uzbekistan, however, might pave the way for increasing – direct or indirect – return procedures to Afghanistan, which other EU countries might follow. Besides, as discussed in Chapter 2, Pakistan and Iran have each initiated major return operations and campaigns targeting Afghan nationals in their respective countries: over 800,000 Afghans have been returned from Pakistan<sup>38</sup> and more than 750,000 from Iran.<sup>39</sup>

38 UNHCR, “Pakistan-Afghanistan Returns Emergency Response #26 - 14 January 2025” (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/113864>.

39 Naseh, Mitra. 'One of the World's Largest Refugee Populations, Afghans Have Faced Increasing Restrictions in Iran'. Migration Policy Institute (blog), 7 January 2025. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-refugees-iran>.

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Regarding Iraq, return and reintegration programmes are promoted and implemented, although with social and economic challenges. Iraq has signed agreements with European<sup>40</sup> and neighbouring countries (most recently with Türkiye, in exchange for visa-free entry to the country for Iraqis below the age of 15 and above 50)<sup>41</sup> to support Iraqi citizens returning to their country and contribute to its social and economic reconstruction. In the country, several governmental and civil society organisations provide direct financial and other forms of support or consultation for returnees and migrants, and deal with government officials on issues of return. However, recent research suggests that the limited reach of these organisations might create inequalities among returnees and prompt many to try to migrate again upon return.<sup>42</sup> Beside voluntary schemes, Iraq shows one of the highest return rates among the Silk Routes countries: more than one in four Iraqi citizens who have been ordered to leave the EU in the first nine months of 2024 have indeed returned to their country (mostly from Germany, Croatia, and Greece). This increase has been attributed to extensive policy outreach and pressure from the EU and EU Member States towards Iraq, in particular the use of visa restrictions, to improve cooperation on return.

Similar visa restrictions have also been implemented for Bangladesh, with the aim of improving return cooperation. The return rate of Bangladeshi nationals has indeed increased over the past three years, from 4% in 2022 to 18% in the first nine months of 2024 (see Figure 5). However, the elaboration of a more structured national policy framework on return and reintegration is currently on hold due to the upcoming national elections.

40 [https://momd.gov.iq/pages/post\\_details\\_page.html?postId=69873](https://momd.gov.iq/pages/post_details_page.html?postId=69873).

41 [https://momd.gov.iq/pages/post\\_details\\_page.html?postId=69855](https://momd.gov.iq/pages/post_details_page.html?postId=69855), see also Haberin Devami, “Türkiye, Iraq Sign Agreement on Migration, Voluntary Return,” Hurriyet Daily News, March 10, 2024, <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkiye-iraq-sign-agreement-on-migration-voluntary-return-201154>.

42 Christina Khoury and Marco Mogiani, “Engaging Return Migrants in Information Campaigns in Iraq Challenges, Reintegration, and Prospects,” MIRAMI Returnee Report (Vienna: ICMPD, 2024).

With respect to Pakistan, between 2014 and 2023, about 11% of the almost 190,000 Pakistanis ordered to leave the EU territory have returned to their country, the majority from Greece, France, and Croatia. The first nine months of 2024, however, have seen a sharp increase in the return rates compared to previous years, with 1,720 Pakistani nationals returned from EU countries in view of 7,625 return orders (22%). In the attempt to create a more coherent and structured policy framework, Pakistan, in collaboration with ICMPD, has recently elaborated a new emigration and welfare policy including a chapter on return and reintegration for migrant workers, and is in the process of developing a stand-alone reintegration policy framework as part of a sustainable reintegration programme.

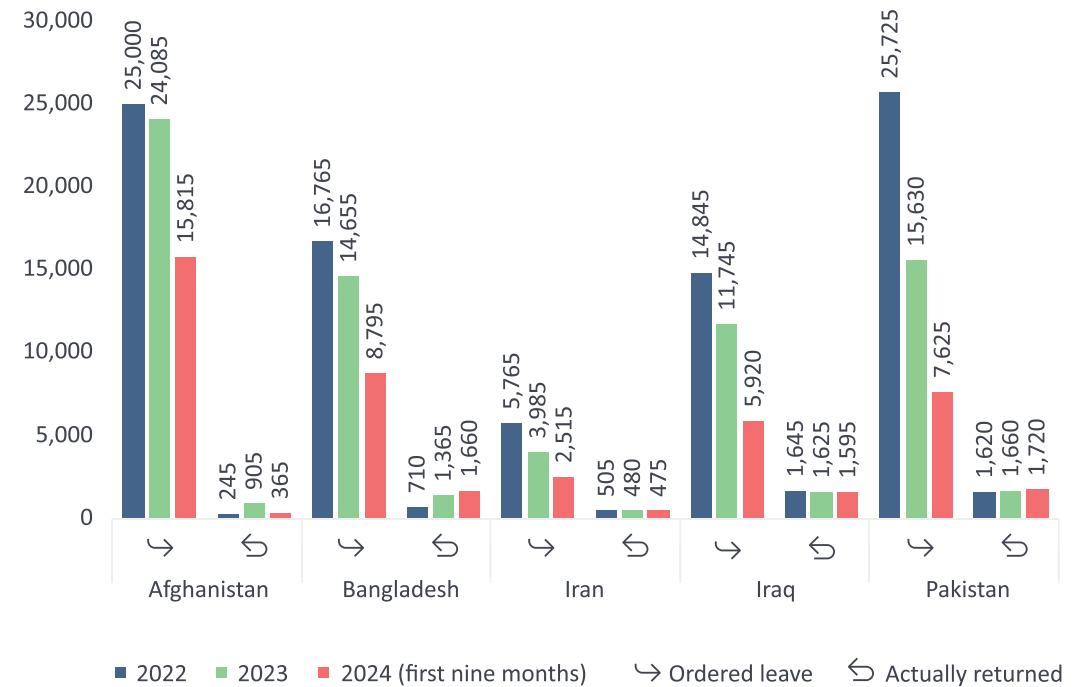


Figure 5: Third-country nationals from selected Silk Routes countries ordered to leave the EU and actually returned following an order to leave the EU. Data from 2024 refer to the first nine months. Source: Eurostat.

# Migration policy developments



## | Migration policy development

### Fostering migration cooperation as a policy priority

In 2024, a running theme high on the policy agendas of the Silk Routes countries and European partner countries was enhancing migration diplomacy and seeking formal migration cooperation agreements, particularly under the auspices of the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum that will enter its application phase in 2026.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, towards the end of 2024, members and observers of the Budapest Process endorsed a new Ministerial Declaration and Action Plan, reinforcing the commitment to cooperation between Europe and the Silk Routes region. These wider partnerships broadly incorporate four themes: curbing irregular migration; promoting cooperation on return; strengthening legal pathways; and ensuring international protection and asylum.

Also in 2024, countries including Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka signed bi- and multilateral migration agreements, memoranda of understanding (MoU), and letters of intent with popular destination countries in Europe. Not all bilateral agreements capture all four thematic elements, and there is clearly some geographical focus depending on the most pressing matter in relation to the EU Member States and the respective Silk Routes country. For example, agreements with Iraq focus more on return, while those with India predominantly concentrate on labour migration pathways. Besides formal agreements, there has also been diplomatic cooperation between respective authorities to address certain issues, e.g., Lithuania adopted a diplomatic recourse in response to the instrumentalisation of migrant

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43 European Commission, “Pact on Migration and Asylum: A Common EU System to Manage Migration,” 2024, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en).



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flows by Belarus and focused on initiating a coordinated approach with Iraqi authorities to tackle the issue by limiting flights to Belarus and facilitating the return of Iraqi nationals.<sup>44</sup>

In particular, return is a central priority in migration agreements. Against this objective, the past few years witnessed a proliferation of bilateral return agreements between the EU or EU Member States and countries of origin, including Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan in the region, sometimes by the use of pressure, e.g., the risk of facing visa sanctions as witnessed in the case of Iraq.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, some bilateral migration agreements link return with the institutionalisation of legal pathways, as is the case for Greece with Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, elements of labour migration and skills partnerships have become firmly embedded in the EU's migration diplomacy and corresponding agreements with non-European partners. A recent study mapped a complex patchwork of nearly 300 labour migration pathways at the national level across the 27 EU member states.<sup>47</sup> There is a clear demand from the Silk Routes countries for more legal pathways to be introduced for Europe, and an

obvious commitment among these countries to meet the conditions required for facilitating legal migration. Within the Silk Routes, most avenues have been created through bilateral agreements.<sup>48</sup> Cooperation mechanisms on labour mobility have sometimes also been established at the sub-national level (e.g., Dioceses of Eisenstadt, Kanjirapally (state of Kerala) and the province of Burgenland signed an agreement in 2024 with the aim to facilitate the migration of qualified care workers from India to Austria)<sup>49</sup>, or have comprised bespoke sector-specific agreements (e.g., the Triple Win programme which facilitates migration of healthcare personnel from India to Germany). Efforts are also underway by Portugal to introduce automatic recognition of academic qualifications for labour from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.<sup>50</sup>

More recently, we observe a drive towards EU-wide labour mobility frameworks, exemplified in the development of Talent Partnerships, signed with Bangladesh and Pakistan in 2024, and under the EU-India Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility framework established in 2016, the Cooperation and Dialogue on Migration and Mobility (CDMM) entered a second phase in 2023. Under the CDMM, student mobility from India to Europe has been at the forefront of discussions.<sup>51</sup> Such legal migration avenues are also most welcomed by the Silk Routes countries as they seek a pivot out of the traditional GCC destinations, particularly Bangladesh, India, Iraq, and Pakistan.

44 European Migration Network, "Migration Diplomacy: An Analysis of Policy Approaches and Instruments: Joint EMN-OECD Inform," 2024, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c49e32ee-cc8d-4aee-91e0-7769a8c6fb47\\_en?filename=EMN\\_INFORM\\_Migration\\_Diplomacy\\_final.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c49e32ee-cc8d-4aee-91e0-7769a8c6fb47_en?filename=EMN_INFORM_Migration_Diplomacy_final.pdf).

45 Statewatch. "Deportations: EU Considers Stepping up Visa Sanctions after Iraq and Gambia Change Policies," February 13, 2024. <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2024/february/deportations-eu-considers-stepping-up-visa-sanctions-after-iraq-and-gambia-change-policies/#:~:text=Iraq%20and%20The%20Gambia%20have,deportation%20flights%20from%20EU%20states>.

46 Migration Partnership Facility, "Re-Thinking Approaches to Labour Migration Potential and Gaps in EU Member States' Migration Infrastructures Case Study Summary — Greece," 2024, <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/knowledge/resources/47-mapping/261-mapping-legal-pathways-greece-summary-2024>.

47 ICMPD, "Close to 300 Avenues to Migrate Legally for Work in Europe: New Mapping of Labour Migration Pathways across the EU 27," In Focus, 2024, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/close-to-300-avenues-to-migrate-legally-for-work-in-europe-new-mapping-of-labour-migration-pathways-across-the-eu-27>.

48 For example, India has labour migration agreements with France (2021), Portugal (2021), Finland (2022), Germany (2022), Austria (2023) Denmark (2024), and there are agreements in the pipeline with Greece and Bulgaria; Bangladesh has MoUs with Greece (2022) and Italy (2023); Pakistan signed an agreement with Germany (2024).

49 Huss, Daria. "Country Profile: Austria - Migration and Skill Corridors." Link4Skills. Horizon Europe, 2024. [https://link4skills.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Austria\\_Country-Profile-01Nov2024-copy.pdf](https://link4skills.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Austria_Country-Profile-01Nov2024-copy.pdf).

50 Migration Partnership Facility, "Re-Thinking Approaches to Labour Migration Potential and Gaps in EU Member States' Migration Infrastructures: Case Study Summary - Portugal," 2024, <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/knowledge/resources/47-mapping/259-mapping-legal-pathways-portugal-summary-2024>.

51 ICMPD, "India-EU Holds Workshop to Strengthen Student Mobility and the Use of Educational Consultants in India," Project News, September 26, 2024, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/india-eu-holds-workshop-to-strengthen-student-mobility-and-the-use-of-educational-consultants-in-india>.

We further expect more avenues for labour mobility emerging as a result of the proposed Skills and Talent Mobility Package, a landmark initiative with the aim to match employers in the EU with jobseekers outside of the EU, making recruitment from outside the EU easier.

## Increased focus on strengthening institutional frameworks and domestic capacities on migration

In parallel with cooperation agreements with destination countries, countries in the Silk Routes region have also prioritised domestic frameworks and institutional reforms related to emigration of their nationals abroad. In Pakistan, the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) has undergone internal reforms and aims to pass Pakistan's first National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis in 2025. While efforts to get this policy draft approved have been underway since 2018, political instability in the country and changing government priorities pushed the issue to the backburner. However, in 2024, there was a renewed vigour to update and launch the policy. The five pillars that lay at the core of this policy draft are: promotion of safe and orderly migration; skills development; protection and welfare of overseas Pakistanis; strengthening diaspora engagement; and reintegration of returnees. With this policy, which also outlines action points and responsibility allocation, the country will enter a new phase in migration management.

Sri Lanka has similarly prioritised its labour emigration framework, launching its National Policy and Action Plan for Migration for Employment (2023–2027) in 2023. The main priority of the policy is to enhance the quality of work opportunities for Sri Lankan migrants through investment (going beyond just remittances), innovation (focusing on global skills partnerships, financial inclusion through new digital technology, training and skills matching, and better data management), and inclusion (facilitating access to services, ensuring portability of benefits, and expansion of rights and opportunities). In Bangladesh, any new policy approvals or developments were stalled under the interim government as the country awaits its general elections later in 2025.

In some countries, a particular focus has been on **digitalising** institutional structures that relate to migration. For instance, the Government of India

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revamped the E-migrate portal in 2024 which serves as a platform to facilitate job matching and narrowing the skill gaps, as well as a source of credible information on registered agents, fraud alerts, and acquiring emigration clearance. Efforts are also underway to upgrade the National Careers Portal leveraging Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning tools.<sup>52</sup> In Pakistan, the e-Protector service facilitates online protector clearance<sup>53</sup>, for which previously a visit to the Protectorate Office was mandatory.<sup>54</sup> In addition, in Bangladesh and Pakistan, some automated systems have already been established with EU support, such as the Return Case Management System, which enables a streamlined readmission process for returnees from the EU.<sup>55</sup> The creation of automated processes and integrated systems aims to promote better accountability, transparency and exchange of information for migration governance, and facilitate migration processes.

Policy development and institutional strengthening on the issue of reintegration was also a priority area in the Silk Routes countries. In Iraq, a top priority is developing and enhancing institutional capacities to manage **reception and reintegration of returnees**. While the Government of Iraq and the KRI government have been dealing with return and reintegration of IDPs in a post-conflict context, reintegration of Iraqis returning from countries in Europe is a new administrative challenge for the country. To support the process, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have joined forces, unifying their respective cooperation aimed at strengthening a multi-stakeholder

reintegration framework in Iraq called NORAQ.<sup>56</sup> In October, Iraq and Türkiye signed a memorandum of understanding to facilitate the voluntary return of Iraqis in Türkiye. The latest agreement is the Iraq-UK border security deal, signed in November 2024 to clamp down on human smugglers and promote return of rejected asylum seekers to Iraq. As part of the deal, Iraq and Kurdistan will receive a total of £500,000 to strengthen their capacities for border security.<sup>57</sup> From the Iraqi government's perspective, this move towards migration cooperation can be seen as a signal to the international community that the country is finally stepping out of its conflict-ridden past and on its path to more stability, security, and democracy.

Overall, we expect this impetus towards institutional strengthening in the Silk Routes countries to continue in 2025. In Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan, efforts to develop reintegration mechanisms are underway, but these are subject to potentially changing political administrations or priorities. The elections in Bangladesh and Iraq, expected for late 2025, might shift government concerns and prolong discussions. Moreover, as has emerged from ICMPD research, reintegration challenges persist, given that many returnees are not aware of reintegration programmes and face unemployment once they return to their country.<sup>58</sup>

52 Business Standard, "EAM Jaishankar, Mansukh Mandaviya Launch e-Migrate Portal and Mobile App," October 14, 2024, [https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/eam-jaishankar-mansukh-mandaviya-launch-e-migrate-portal-and-mobile-app-124101400512\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/eam-jaishankar-mansukh-mandaviya-launch-e-migrate-portal-and-mobile-app-124101400512_1.html).

53 A mandatory registration for all migrants that offers legal protection and assistance from Pakistani mission in the country of destination.

54 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Online Registration through E-Protector," Press Release, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/online-registration-through-e-protector?mission=Kabul%20Afghanistan>.

55 ETIAS, "EU Accelerates Deportation Procedures Amid Migration Reform."

56 Budapest Process, "Nordic Cooperation on Return and Reintegration in Iraq (NORAQ)," ICMPD, 2023, <https://www.budapestprocess.org/our-work/nordic-cooperation-on-return-and-reintegration-in-iraq-noraq/>.

57 James Landale, "UK and Iraq Strike Deal to Clamp down on People Smuggling Gangs," BBC, November 28, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy4nj8g8xn0o>.

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Conclusions

## Conclusions for 2025

In 2025, return will continue to be a major theme influencing migration dynamics in the Silk Routes. Pakistan and Iran will go forward with their plans of repatriating more Afghans, with stricter crackdowns already being enforced in the two countries. Moreover, it is expected that EU Member States may also follow Germany's move and establish third-country agreements to facilitate the return of Afghans, without necessarily engaging directly with the unrecognised Taliban administration. There may also be some consideration for dedicated investments in a reintegration framework in Afghanistan to manage the long-term rehabilitation of returning Afghans. However, the pressures driving migration from Afghanistan persist, fuelled by a struggling economy, a shrinking space for human rights, and the impacts of climate change. In the absence of legal migration pathways, these challenges are expected to lead to distress irregular migration attempts via dangerous routes or leave individuals trapped in dire circumstances.

How the political situation in the Middle East takes shape is also an important factor in determining migration dynamics in the Silk Routes countries, particularly with reference to neighbouring Iraq, and Iran's influence in the region. In 2025, governments should prepare for a continued dynamic migration situation in the Middle East which may include pendulum movements in and out of Syria, temporary and permanent returns, as well as further displacement, with obvious implications for Iraq, which hosts close to 300,000 displaced Syrians. While it is likely that return to Syria will be a major policy goal, protection concerns and operational constraints may limit feasibility. Meanwhile, Israeli strikes against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Syria if continued are also likely to influence displacement into Iraq.

With reference to migration policy priorities in the region, building on the momentum set in the last couple of years, we expect a continuation in prioritisation of bilateral migration cooperation partnerships between Silk Routes countries and EU Member States. More bilateral readmission agreements are expected, coupled with reintegration support, and further strides are likely in the field of labour migration and skills mobility partnerships, a top priority

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for the Silk Routes countries. In this regard, Bangladesh and Pakistan will be in the limelight as EU fine-tunes the practical protocols of the Talent Partnerships, and new bilateral migration and mobility partnership agreements between EU MS and India are also expected to materialise in 2025. In the era of international cooperation on migration, Silk Routes countries are expected to further refine and strengthen their domestic policies and institutional frameworks, aiming for better integrated and digital systems to enable inter-agency coordination and a coherent approach to migration governance.

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