



The State of Global Mobility in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This publication was made possible through support provided by the German Federal Foreign Office. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the German Federal Foreign Office or the IOM.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration

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This publication was edited by MPI. It was issued without formal editing by IOM and without IOM Research Unit (RES) endorsement.

ISBN 978-92-9268-821-9 (PDF)

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Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI

Layout: Liz Hall

Cover Photo: IOM/Muse Mohammed

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Suggested citation: Benton, Meghan, Lawrence Huang, Jeanne Batalova and Tino Tirado. 2024. *The State of Global Mobility in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Washington, D.C., and Geneva: Migration Policy Institute and International Organization for Migration.

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April 2024

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented shock to human mobility, shuttering borders and restricting movement in ways not seen in most people's lifetime. This first-of-its-kind report, resulting from collaboration between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), assesses how human movement has changed in the aftermath of this seismic event. It analyses IOM flow monitoring data gathered by surveying migrants at formal and informal border crossings in the years since pandemic-era travel restrictions waned to understand new and growing trends across world regions.

The robust recovery of human mobility in the wake of COVID-19 – from Asian labour migrants returning to Gulf Cooperation Council countries to intraregional mobility in Southern Africa – demonstrates its inevitability and resilience. The pandemic was also a turning point for irregular migration. The desire to move remained strong even as people had more limited options for regular movement, and many migrants were thus diverted to more dangerous, irregular routes. Irregular migration also began to stretch over longer distances, exemplified by Chinese nationals transiting, circuitously and at great personal risk, through the Darién jungle that spans the Colombia–Panama border, Central America and on to the southern border of the United States of America.

While it is difficult to fully and empirically assess the lasting impacts of the pandemic on human movement, IOM flow monitoring data point to a world of mobility in rapid transition. Global mobility is intensely valuable, whether as a means of conflict avoidance or of resilience in the face of climate-change-related crop failure. Movement is a normal part of life for many, from travel for business and tourism, to frontier workers who live with their families on one side of a border but work on the other, to pastoralists whose way of life has always been on the move. The multidirectional and regional ways in which mobility is changing are rarely captured, with public and political focus generally centred on the visible effects of border crises and on international migration from the Global South to Global North. At the same time, administrative data sources largely capture regular forms of migration.

The robust recovery of human mobility in the wake of COVID-19... demonstrates its inevitability and resilience.

While flow monitoring data cannot tell a universal story of mobility, given the lack of standardized data collection practices across different regions, this information is an incredible resource for understanding mobility dynamics in greater nuance. This look at the evolving face of human movement in different corners of the world illuminates several notable stories, including:

- 1 **Migration has completely rebounded in the aftermath of COVID-19.** After two years of travel restrictions that shut down most movement, 2022 saw almost a total lifting of travel measures and a correspondingly immediate, almost total recovery in human mobility. People's desire to move was not stifled by the pandemic. Travel measures had a chilling effect on regular migration, but irregular movement continued apace, including along increasingly dangerous and lengthy routes. Indeed, the need to move was often exacerbated by the pandemic, for instance in South America where already-displaced Venezuelans were especially hit hard by its effects.

- 2 The resurgence of migration to the Gulf has established the region's pre-eminence as the new migration destination.** The pandemic triggered a mass exodus of migrant workers from Gulf Cooperation Council countries, but as the crisis waned, these countries saw a rapid recovery of labour migration from South and Southeast Asia and increasing immigration from East Africa. This confounded some predictions that the pandemic, coupled with growing scrutiny of labour standards precipitated by megaevents such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and Expo 2020 in Dubai, would topple the often-criticized kafala system of migrant worker sponsorship; instead, labour reforms have been incremental both before and since the COVID-19 crisis. East African migrants to this region, meanwhile, are increasingly vulnerable. They include larger numbers of women and unaccompanied children and are frequently driven by conflict, violence, drought and food insecurity.
- 3 Climate and environmental events have begun to trigger larger, longer-distance movements.** Droughts, flooding and failed crops in East Africa triggered massive internal displacement as well as cross-border movement in the region. Meanwhile, cataclysmic floods in Pakistan displaced 8 million people within the country, catalysing an economic crisis that led rising numbers of Pakistanis to leave for Europe. While most disasters displace people within rather than across borders, and generally on a short-term basis, they can be a tipping point in countries whose economies are already on the knife's edge, wiping out opportunities and ultimately driving cross-border migration.
- 4 Southern Africa is fast becoming a microcosm for a fast-evolving, mobile world.** Demand in many Southern African countries for migrant labour in sectors from agriculture to manufacturing and mining is being met with an increase in intraregional, short-term and circular movement, rather than interregional, permanent labour migration, emulating global trends. This intraregional mobility is in part related to displacement crises, especially from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and has begun to trigger rising public anxiety and restrictive policies in some receiving countries, including South Africa.
- 5 Ukrainian refugees highlight the changing face of modern displacement.** The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the most significant displacement crisis in Europe since World War II, one defined by multidirectional – at times circular – movement. Yet the crisis also prompted innovative policy solutions, including the European Union's activation of the dormant Temporary Protection Directive and the expansion of parole and sponsorship in the United States through the Uniting for Ukraine programme, which created a blueprint for the Biden administration's executive action to open migration pathways for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans.
- 6 Irregular migration to Europe is growing and shifting to dangerous, previously less-used corridors.** The post-pandemic years have seen irregular migration to the continent reach the highest levels since 2015–2016, as demand for mobility far outpaces the availability of regular migration opportunities. Europe has tightened enforcement of its borders, but migrants have moved to more dangerous routes across the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkans and taken less common routes such as the West African/Atlantic route.

- 7 **The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan resulted in surprising, not always linear, mobility patterns.** The 2021 change in government prompted a significant increase in the number of Afghan refugees fleeing violence and the new regime. Yet at the same time, the Taliban victory ended the decades-long conflict and thus led to a drop in movements both into and out of the country, as well as a decline in internal displacement; this has resulted in an overall less mobile country following the takeover. Nonetheless, evacuations continue and the situation remains dynamic.
- 8 **Migration in the Americas has become truly hemispheric.** After years of increasing displacement and migration, Latin America is now a region of immigration as well as emigration. People leaving the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela – and to some extent, Haiti – have been met with a pragmatic, albeit uneven, welcome in neighbouring countries. But as their displacement has become protracted, more and more migrants are crossing longer distances that stretch across the hemisphere, with many crossing the Darién jungle and travelling northward to reach the US border.

These wide-ranging trends emphasize the importance of understanding the complex factors that drive shifts in migration patterns within and across regions. They also highlight the need to understand the multiple and interconnected drivers of displacement to prevent and respond effectively to crises, while underlining that migration cannot be managed by one country on its own. These trends have also shown that well-managed migration can be a form of resilience at a time when the world is undergoing frequent shocks. Migrants were critical players in the humanitarian response to floods in Pakistan, for example. And providing legal status and protection for Ukrainians in Europe and Venezuelans across Latin America has illustrated how flexible regular pathways can enable migrants to both escape conflict and economic collapse and contribute to development and growth elsewhere. These are important lessons for policymakers as they seek to manage this changing state of human mobility.

1 Introduction

On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was seeing record air passenger numbers and large volumes of people and cargo moving across borders in every direction possible. Much of this movement ground to a halt when the pandemic hit. Governments placed a stunning volume of restrictions and conditions on travel in an attempt to slow or stop the spread of the virus, exceeding 100,000 such policies by late 2020.¹ Many travel measures stayed in place for the first two years of the public health crisis, chilling migration around the world as millions of would-be migrants were prevented from moving and many others were forced into irregular channels when regular pathways closed. While this marked an incredible moment in history – and the virus continues to circulate, even though the formal public health emergency has ended – it is striking how quickly and robustly travel and migration recovered. Mobility has proved to be an intensely valuable resource for many individuals, families and groups, central both to escaping persecution and pursuing a flourishing existence – and sometimes both at once. Put simply, the ability to move is at the heart of what it means to be human.

Mobility has reached a new scale and complexity amid rapid transformations, ranging from the climate crisis to urbanization and digitalization to demographic change. In 2020, there were an estimated

¹ Meghan Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021* (Washington, D.C., and Geneva: Migration Policy Institute and IOM, 2022).

281 million international migrants worldwide, equal to 3.6 per cent of the world’s population.² Forced displacement is also at a high, reaching an estimated 108 million people at the end of 2022, though most displaced people will never cross international borders.³ Conflicts and crises in countries from Afghanistan and Ukraine to the Syrian Arab Republic and the Sudan have forced millions to move, just as a warming world has turned climate displacement from a future warning into a current reality. Meanwhile, growing demographic asymmetries (as some countries age rapidly while others see their youth population balloon) will continue to deepen the drivers of migration in the decades to come.

This uneven landscape indicates that the world is entering an age of disruption for human mobility, the impacts of which are hard to predict. What drives people to move is often a mix of factors that cannot be neatly categorized in distinct boxes. Take a Ukrainian family splitting their lives between Berlin and Kyiv as the safety situation ebbs and flows, whose matriarch supports her family by working remotely for a Kyiv-based company and whose children are registered both for Ukrainian remote schooling and for local

What drives people to move is often a mix of factors that cannot be neatly categorized in distinct boxes.

schools in Germany. Or consider a tribe of nomadic herders in East Africa, having to move themselves and their livestock ever growing distances (including across borders) to find water and sustenance in the face of droughts and failed crops. Or take a Venezuelan national who, after years of living on temporary visas in Chile, decides to move to the United States – but on a work visa rather than through a refugee pathway. While characterizing

these movements as “displacement” is linguistically accurate, it fails to capture the agency of the people involved, the multiple drivers of their movement, as well as the transnational forms of economic activity and belonging that are emerging in a mobile digital world.

Amid political division and high levels of public anxiety about immigration, rising irregular movements often capture public attention and political bandwidth. But outside of higher-income destination countries (where unauthorized arrivals can be highly visible and trigger public discomfort), irregular movements are often a central part of the tapestry of economies and societies. In countries with porous land borders in Africa, Asia and Latin America, people pass through unofficial border crossings to visit family or do trade on a daily basis, and these semi-formal crossing points proliferated as official checkpoints were shuttered during the pandemic. The reason for this is often quite practical: in Nepal and India, for example, International Organization for Migration (IOM) data show that people use informal crossings simply because it is quicker and cheaper.⁴ And even in high-income countries, while counts of unauthorized border crossings are among the migration statistics that are most swiftly published, most irregularity (in the form of unauthorized work or visa overstaying) floats below the radar of governments, the media and members of the public.

This report seeks to understand how the volume, composition and distance of movements, as well as the terms under which people move, are changing in the aftermath of the pandemic. While existing data do

2 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination—Table 1: International Migrant Stock at Mid-Year by Sex and by Region, Country or Area of Destination, 1990-2020”, accessed 10 January 2024.

3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022* (Copenhagen: UNHCR, 2023).

4 Authors’ analysis of data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Flow Monitoring Survey, Nepal, 2022.

not make it possible to sketch a full picture of mobility around the entire globe, this study marks the first attempt to bring together IOM flow monitoring data⁵ (often published on a national or regional basis) to uncover lessons about the scale and character of global movement, both regular and irregular. This report stems from collaboration between IOM and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) that began following the unprecedented shutdown of borders in 2020, and that resulted in two prior studies on the effects of border closures and reopening on migration as well as related human, social and economic impacts.⁶ The current report focuses on the aftermath of the pandemic and asks how this “post-COVID-19” world of mobility continues to be transformed.

The report begins with the lifting of pandemic-era travel measures and the rapid rebounding of cross-border mobility. It then presents seven case studies exploring different aspects of this recovery. They cover a wide range of migrant destinations: the strengthening of migration corridors to Gulf Cooperation Council countries; resurging intraregional mobility in Southern Africa; the landmark shift as Latin America has become not just a source of emigrants but also a destination for migrants; and the rise in irregular migration to levels not seen in Europe since 2015–2016. These case studies also cover a diverse set of drivers, including growing climate shocks in East Africa and Pakistan, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the displacement crisis that followed. Put together, these seven cases tell the story of an incredibly mobile world, one where disruptions and crises proliferate but the resilience and potential of migration continues to shine through.

2 COVID-19 and the Global Reopening in 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic⁷ shone a spotlight on both the precarity and the resilience of cross-border movement. The massive mobility shutdown in 2020, caused by widespread border closures and travel restrictions, would have been almost unthinkable in the pre-COVID-19 world. But even in these early months of the pandemic, mobility did not stop entirely. Irregular migrants found other, less-monitored routes, and those in essential jobs in sectors such as agriculture and health care were largely still able to move. And when travel measures were dropped in 2022, migration rebounded almost instantly.

Looking back, the COVID-19 pandemic may become cemented in history as one of the largest global mobility disruptions.⁸ The growth, evolution and eventual decline of the public health crisis highlighted

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- 5 This report features the authors’ analysis of data from the flow monitoring aspect of IOM’s DTM. This includes both flow monitoring survey and registry data sources, collected at flow monitoring points positioned at strategic border crossings and transport hubs, as determined by IOM based on a preliminary assessment of high-transit locations. As a result, the data are indicative of selected key migratory flows but do not provide a full or statistically representative picture of internal and cross-border movement in the country of operation. More information on the DTM, its components and the tracking methodology for flow monitoring can be found at: IOM DTM, “[Displacement Tracking Matrix](#)”, accessed 10 January 2024; IOM DTM, “[Methodological Framework](#)”, updated 31 January 2023.
- 6 Meghan Benton, Jeanne Batalova, Samuel Davidoff-Gore and Timo Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020* (Washington, D.C., and Geneva: Migration Policy Institute and IOM, 2021); Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021*.
- 7 As of 5 May 2023, the World Health Organization no longer classified SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). However, as of January 2024, the organization continued to characterize the outbreak as a global pandemic. See World Health Organization, “[Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Pandemic](#)”, accessed 10 January 2024.
- 8 For more information on the pandemic’s effects on global mobility during its first two years, see Benton, Batalova, Davidoff-Gore and Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020*; Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021*.

the incredible pace at which human mobility can change. Suspicions about a novel coronavirus emerged in the People's Republic of China in December 2019, and by February 2020, travel restrictions were being implemented in East Asia and promptly replicated across the rest of the world. Governments shut border entry points, restricted entry and grounded flights, all practically overnight. These were hard policy choices, made against World Health Organization advice.⁹ Governments had little information in these early days about the virus's transmissibility or risk of mortality, and no way to test for it (a critical gap, since asymptomatic transmission is common). In this context, governments adopted a precautionary approach, taking the risk that heavy-handed, blanket travel restrictions would effectively quell the spread of the virus across their borders while acknowledging the significant disruption such measures would cause.

The number and restrictiveness of these travel measures were staggering.¹⁰ By the end of March 2020, there were 43,300 travel measures implemented or extended, aiming mostly to restrict international mobility.¹¹ By the end of 2020, that number had peaked at around 110,000, although measures to manage safe travel (e.g. requiring proof of a negative COVID-19 test result or clarifying which groups were exempt from broader restrictions) had grown. Over time, the kinds of measures governments adopted reflected two divergent approaches. First, some governments pursued an "eradication" or "elimination" approach by imposing strict travel bans to prevent the virus from entering the community (e.g. Australia heavily restricted incoming flights and travellers needed permission to enter and exit).¹² In some cases, closed borders meant people could restart normal life without domestic lockdowns, but in most cases travel measures were imposed too late to prevent the virus from arriving, and once it was circulating, it took comprehensive lockdowns to bring case counts down. Moreover, the World Health Organization officially advised against any travel restrictions, because of concerns about their disruptiveness and ineffectiveness.¹³ The second approach pursued by some governments was one of "mitigation", in which travel measures were used alongside domestic tools to minimize the spread of the virus, and travel across borders was reduced but not quite as dramatically restricted. These governments later began a phased reopening of cross-border mobility, typically shifting from bans on travel to person-based health measures such as testing, quarantines and eventually proof of vaccination.¹⁴

But travel measures, and their chilling effect on migration and mobility, outlasted all predictions. Once they were imposed, travel measures were hard to lift. Many lasted well into 2021, despite questions about their effectiveness (and limited evaluation of their success). Even as COVID-19 vaccines allowed more governments to shift to a mitigation strategy, the number of travel measures in place around the world

9 World Health Organization, "Updated WHO Recommendations for International Traffic in Relation to COVID-19 Outbreak", updated 29 February 2020.

10 In this report, "travel measures" is an umbrella term for a country's travel restrictions, health measures and conditions for authorized entry. It does not include exceptions to travel measures.

11 In this report, "travel restrictions" include route restrictions, nationality restrictions and visa changes introduced to limit the entry of travellers arriving from, transiting through or having been to a given country, territory or area.

12 On 19 March 2020, the Australian Government announced it would close Australia's borders to all non-citizens and non-residents, and beginning 25 March 2020, the prime minister announced a travel ban on Australians travelling overseas, with some exceptions. See Kelsey Campbell and Emma Vines, "COVID-19: A Chronology of Australian Government Announcements (up until 30 June 2020)" (Research Paper Series 2020-21, Parliament of Australia, Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra, June 2021).

13 World Health Organization, "Updated WHO Recommendations for International Traffic".

14 In this report, these policies are referred to as "medical measures" and include quarantines, health screenings, COVID-19 testing and vaccination certificates. These are also called "health measures" in the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database.

remained at more than 100,000 throughout 2021.¹⁵ Many governments announced plans to reopen, but new variants of the virus and case surges frequently derails these plans. This had massive impacts on travel. International tourism, which collapsed by 72 per cent in 2020, barely recovered the following year.¹⁶ Labour migration dropped everywhere in 2020, although it started to grow again in 2021 between countries whose governments lifted travel restrictions earliest.¹⁷ Similarly, international students stopped moving to all major destinations in 2020, and although student mobility to Canada, the United Kingdom and United States rebounded in 2021, it remained minimal to Australia and New Zealand for some two years due to those countries' tighter travel measures. The story of the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic was, in some ways, remarkably simple: regular migration and travel inevitably drop when governments close their borders and restrict mobility.

Travel Measures Drop and Mobility Rebounds

The year 2022 marked an important turning point in the pandemic's mobility story. In January 2022, the World Health Organization officially recommended that governments begin lifting or easing COVID-19 travel restrictions,¹⁸ due to the large-scale development and roll-out of vaccines and boosters, growing population immunity and advances in testing and treatment. COVID-19 entered its endemic era, in which the virus continues to be widespread but the disease is significantly less fatal.¹⁹ Indeed, compared to 2021, although confirmed global cases more than doubled in 2022, new recorded deaths decreased by more than 24 per cent.²⁰

The decline in travel measures throughout 2022 triggered a remarkably full and immediate rebound in human mobility. The total number of travel measures dropped precipitously (see Maps 1 and 2), and most of those that remained were health measures such as testing and vaccination requirements rather than travel restrictions such as flight suspensions or bans on people arriving from a particular region (see Figure 1). By the end of the year, there were fewer than 40,000 measures in place globally, compared to more than 137,000 at the end of 2021.²¹ And in particular, travel restrictions had fallen into disuse: by the end of 2022, only 18 countries, territories or areas had at least one COVID-19 travel restriction in place, compared to 114 at year's beginning.²²

15 A considerable portion of these travel measures were health-related measures, rather than strict restrictions on movement. Around 56 per cent of all travel measures in 2021 were medical, while 28 per cent were travel restrictions. See Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021*.

16 In 2021, tourist arrivals remained 71 per cent below 2019 levels. See United Nations World Tourism Organization, "Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 Outbreak on International Tourism", accessed 12 March 2024.

17 Comparing 2021 to 2019, Czechia saw increases in temporary and permanent visa issuances, and in the United Kingdom, the number of work visas cleared was up 51 per cent in the second half of 2021 relative to 2019. See Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021*.

18 Voice of America (VOA) News, "WHO Recommends Nations Lift or Ease COVID-19-Related Travel Bans", VOA News, 20 January 2022.

19 Sarun Charumilind et al., "When Will the COVID-19 Pandemic End?", McKinsey & Company, 28 July 2022; Jackie Powder, "COVID-19 in 2022: A Year-End Wrap-Up", Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 15 December 2022.

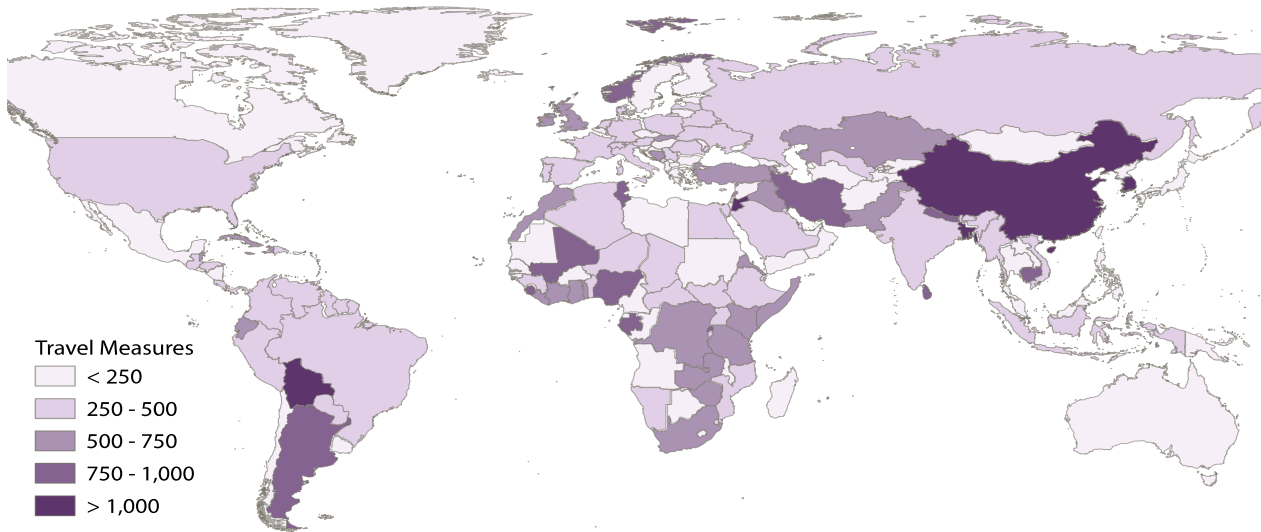
20 Authors' analysis of data from World Health Organization, "WHO COVID-19 Dashboard", accessed 10 January 2024. In the first seven days of 2022, the World Health Organization recorded 38,861 new deaths due to COVID-19. The last seven days of 2022, in contrast, had 29,273 new deaths.

21 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database. On 17 December 2021, there were 137,790 travel measures in place. On 12 December 2022, there were 39,750 travel measures in place. Across all reporting dates in 2022, health measures made up an average of almost 65 per cent of travel measures, while travel restrictions made up 13 per cent.

22 International Air Transport Association data, via the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database.

MAP 1

Travel Measures Enforced on 3 January 2022, by Country, Territory or Area

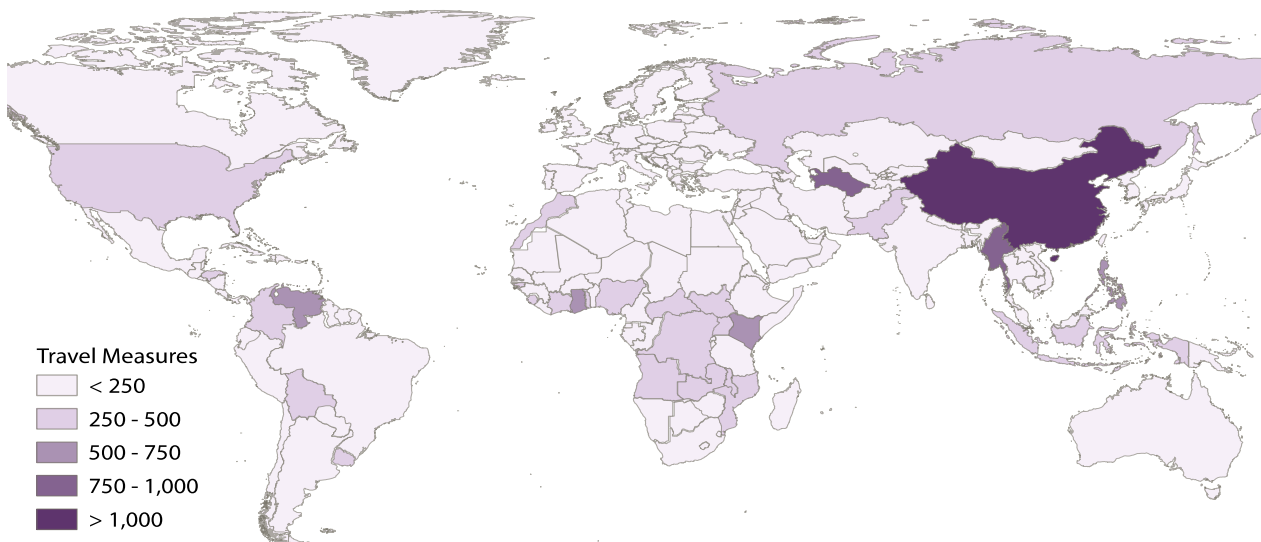


Notes: The category “travel measures” is the sum of travel restrictions, health measures and all other restrictions and conditions for entry; it does not include travel exceptions. Note that there was a change in coding structures in mid-March 2022, when more countries, territories and areas started removing all COVID-19 travel restrictions, and this may to some extent contribute to differences between Map 1 (3 January 2022) and Map 2 (12 December 2022). For additional information, see IOM, “[Global Mobility Restrictions in Response to COVID-19, Travel Restrictions Tracking – TRT \(Methodology\)](#)”, updated April 2022. This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI).

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database.

MAP 2

Travel Measures Enforced on 12 December 2022, by Country, Territory or Area

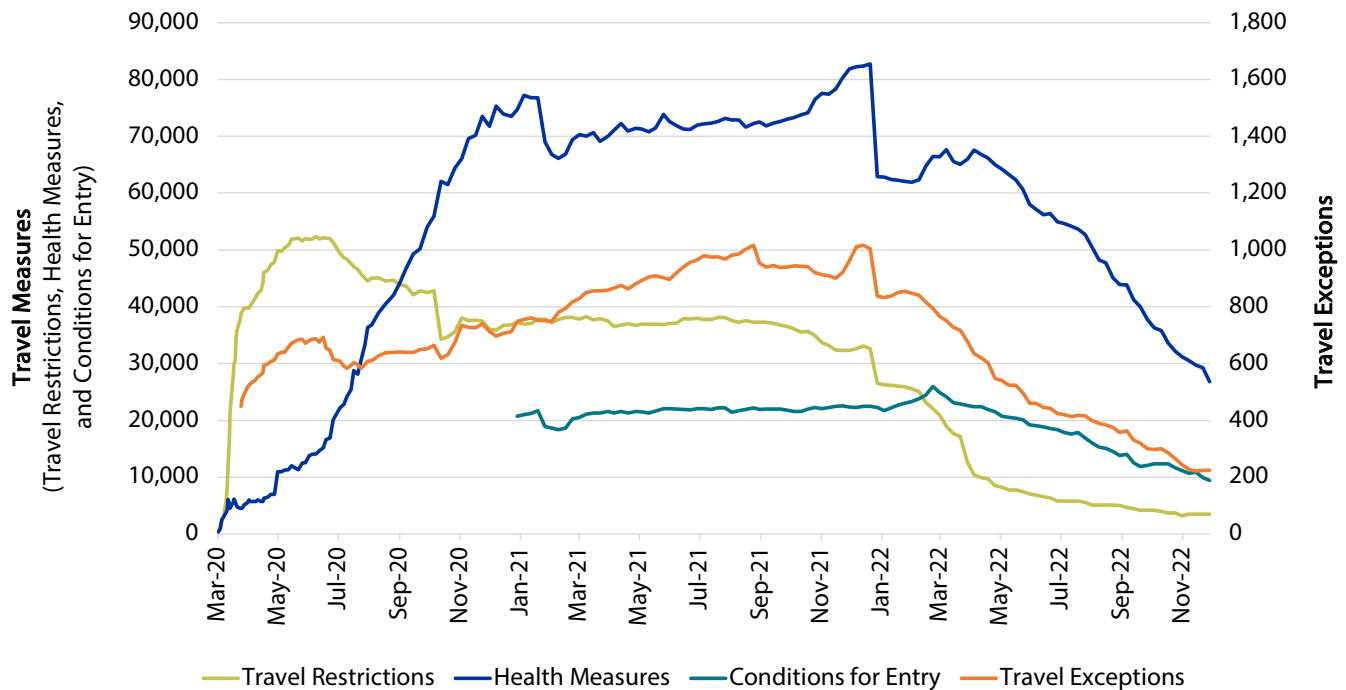


Notes: The category “travel measures” is the sum of travel restrictions, health measures and all other restrictions and conditions for entry; it does not include travel exceptions. Note that there was a change in coding structures in mid-March 2022, when more countries, territories and areas started removing all COVID-19 travel restrictions, and this may to some extent contribute to differences between Map 1 (3 January 2022) and Map 2 (12 December 2022). For additional information, see IOM, “[Global Mobility Restrictions in Response to COVID-19](#)”. This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM and MPI.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database.

Along with this easing of restrictions, 2022 saw an uneven, but often strong, recovery in movement. Tourism was only 34 per cent lower than 2019 levels, and air traffic reached three quarters of 2019 levels.²³ Resident permits issued for third-country nationals in the European Union exceeded pre-pandemic levels, driven by an 18 per cent jump in labour permits, and labour migration from South Asia to the Arabian Peninsula reached pre-pandemic levels.²⁴

FIGURE 1
Rise and Fall of COVID-19 Travel Measures and Exceptions Worldwide, 2020–2022



Notes: “Travel restrictions” include measures such as the suspension of all flights, closing of all airports, or banning travellers from specific countries, territories or areas, either with or without a time parameter. This category also includes the suspension of issuance of new visas and/or permits. “Health measures” refers to all medical measures, including quarantines, health screenings, COVID-19 testing and vaccination certificates. “Conditions for entry” refers to conditions placed on travel that are non-medical, notably changes in visa requirements and movement agreements, document changes, as well as passenger tracking systems and tools. These definitions are somewhat different from the definitions in IOM’s official methodology documents, where medical measures are often grouped together with document changes, passenger tracking systems and any other conditions for authorized entry. “Travel exceptions” refers to measures that exempt travellers from certain travel measures; these may include exceptions for groups such as children below a certain age, passengers with COVID-19 recovery certificates or a doctor’s note, students, diplomats or others engaged in specific fields of work or emergency assistance. There was a change in coding structures in mid-March 2022, when more countries, territories and areas started removing all COVID-19 travel restrictions. Due to the fact that fewer changes were noted after 28 November 2022, data were only collected once more after that date (on 12 December 2022). More information on the exact measures each code refers to, and on the reasons for coding structure changes, can be found in IOM, “Global Mobility Restrictions in Response to COVID-19”.

Sources: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database. See also Meghan Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021* (Washington, D.C., and Geneva: MPI and IOM, 2022).

23 United Nations World Tourism Organization, “Global and Regional Tourism Performance”, accessed 10 January 2024.

24 Nilim Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia: Changing Profiles and Processes* (Tokyo, Paris and Bangkok: Asian Development Bank Institute, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2023); Eurostat, “Nearly 3.7 Million First Residence Permits Issued in 2022”, updated 4 August 2023. Note that third-country nationals are defined here as any non-EU citizen.

Nonetheless, the global reopening, like the global shutdown, did not affect all regions equally. Certain countries, territories and areas in the Asia-Pacific region maintained travel measures for far longer than the rest of the world (see Map 2). This was, in part, because travel measures worked. In parts of East Asia, Australia and New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands, governments combined strict entry restrictions with domestic lockdowns whenever cases emerged or surged, bringing down case counts and enabling residents to restart some normal activities within their borders. Often, this was part of a long-term road map; for example, Australia lifted travel measures as vaccination rates grew in the country. But in China, the Government lifted restrictions abruptly only to face the worst COVID-19 outbreak yet.²⁵

China maintained its “zero-COVID” policy through much of 2022. The country had some of the strictest COVID-19 travel policies in the world, including requiring overseas travellers to stay in quarantine for at least 14 days prior to entering the country and a suite of restrictions on domestic mobility. China’s first lockdowns in January 2020 occurred during the annual Lunar New Year travel season, when millions of people visit families, preventing many internal migrants from returning home from large cities.²⁶ As COVID-19 measures remained in place, however, some reports emerged of these urban migrant workers returning to rural homes for good.²⁷ Based on its strict eradication approach, China instituted city-wide lockdowns whenever COVID-19 cases broke through tight travel restrictions (as they did in Shanghai in mid-March 2022), alongside mandatory testing and orders to work from home.²⁸ These lockdowns led to food shortages, limited access to emergency care, and in one November 2022 incident hampered efforts to rescue people in an apartment fire, sparking protests across the country.²⁹ Under increasing pressure, the Government abruptly announced plans to lift almost all COVID-19 measures in December 2022, including easing domestic and international travel requirements, eliminating quarantine, and no longer using widespread domestic lockdowns.³⁰ This sudden reopening came without sufficient preparation of public health systems or efforts to vaccinate vulnerable groups such as older people, and China found itself facing the worst COVID-19 outbreak to date. Local governments reported hundreds of thousands of infections per day, and hospitals in the country became overcrowded.³¹ Exact data on COVID-19 cases and deaths were not made public, but it is clear that restarting domestic and international mobility in late 2022 and early 2023 came with significant costs.

The tightness of border restrictions in Asia, especially in China, had a predictable impact. Migrant workers returned home³² and labour migration effectively stopped³² for two years, with at best a faltering start to recovery as long as travel was still tightly regulated with quarantines and health measures. But the demand to migrate remained strong: Nepal saw massive queues of workers trying to get vaccinated in order to migrate to the Arabian Peninsula. In particular, China’s tight travel restrictions meant that border crossings dropped to very low levels. The Government’s stringent COVID-19 response, as well as the economic

25 Evelyn Cheng, “China Cuts Quarantine Time for International Travelers in Big Step toward Easing Covid Controls”, CNBC, 28 June 2022.

26 Suoyi Tan et al., “Mobility in China, 2020: A Tale of Four Phases”, *National Science Review* 8, no. 11 (2021).

27 Evelyn Cheng, “‘Reverse Migration’ Is Picking Up in China as Workers Give Up on Big Cities”, CNBC, 28 June 2021.

28 Evelyn Cheng, “China Is Shutting Down Shanghai in Two Phases to Control Covid”, CNBC, 28 March 2022.

29 Nectar Gan, “Zero-Covid Was Supposed to Prove China’s Supremacy. How Did It All Go So Wrong for Xi Jinping?”, CNN, 28 December 2022.

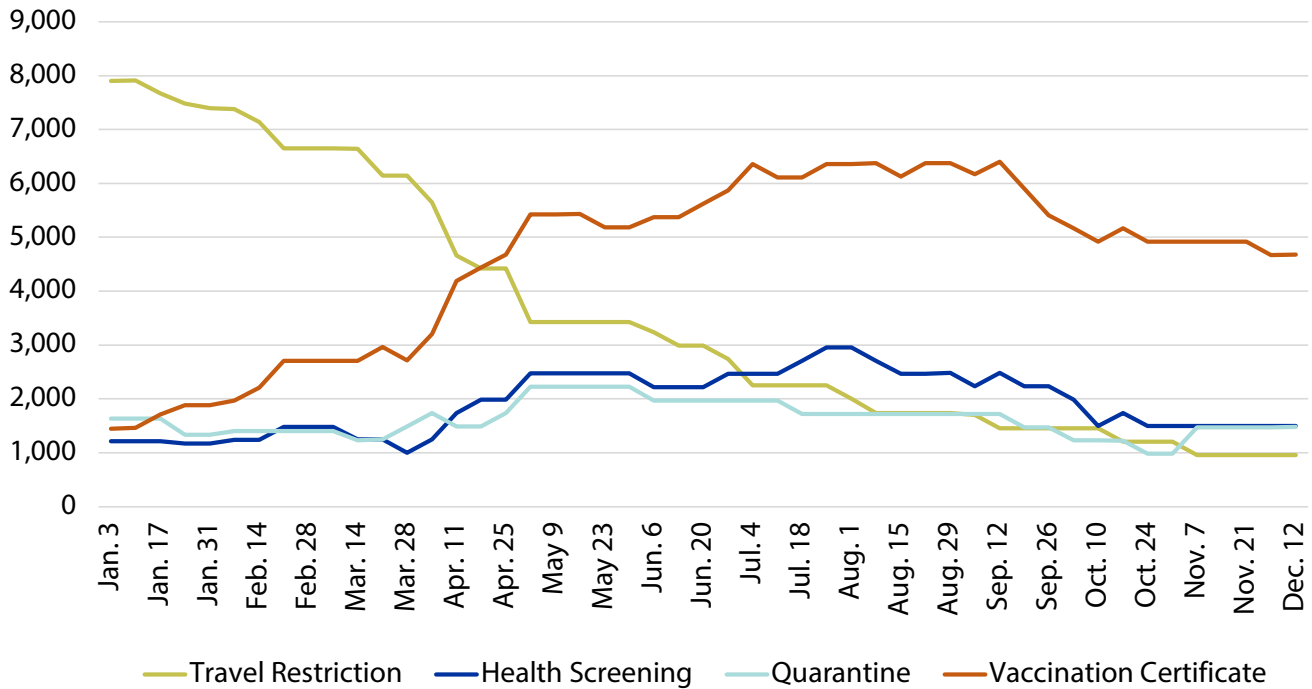
30 Jessie Yeung, “China Scraps Some of Its Most Controversial Covid Rules, in Significant Step toward Reopening”, CNN, 7 December 2022.

31 Reuters, “China Reports Another Daily Record of COVID Cases as Protests Ripple Across China”, Reuters, 28 November 2022.

32 For example, the stock of migrant workers dropped in both Thailand and Singapore in 2020 and 2021.

slowdown and political unrest in the country, eventually led to an increase in Chinese citizens looking to leave through regular pathways.³³ The increase in Chinese nationals arriving at the US southwest border without prior authorization to enter also demonstrated that many were willing to take dangerous journeys through Central America to seek asylum.³⁴

FIGURE 2
Selected Travel Measures in East Asia and the Pacific, 2022

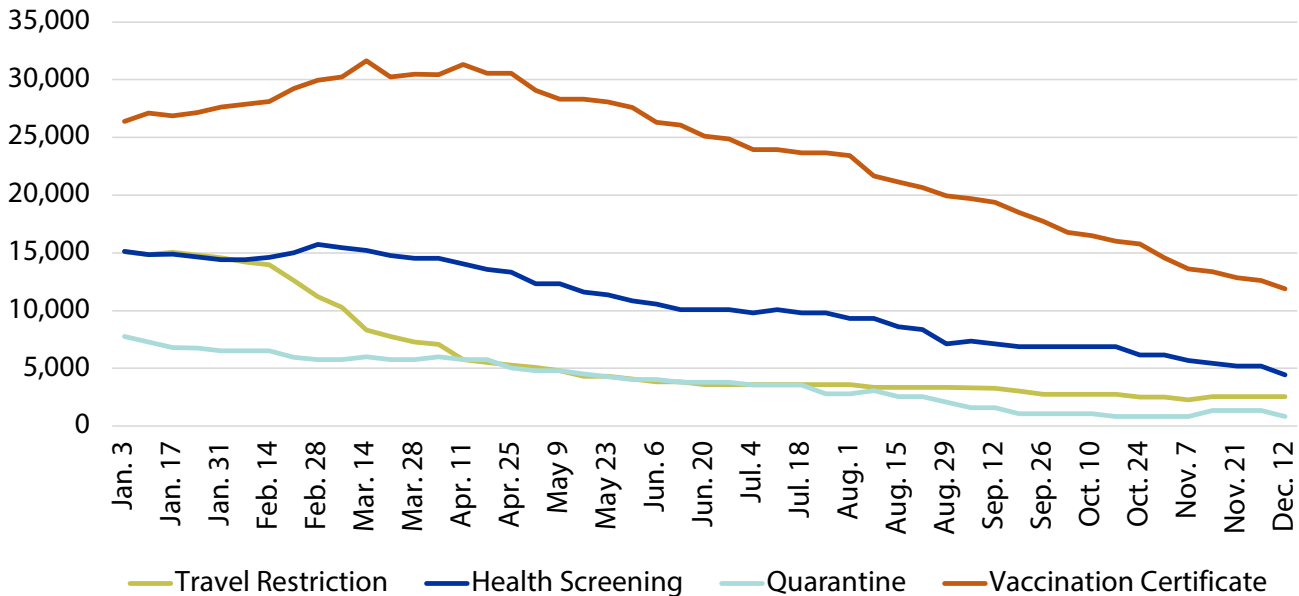


Notes: “East Asia and the Pacific” includes the following: American Samoa; Australia; Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; China; Christmas Island; the Cook Islands; the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; the Federated States of Micronesia; Fiji; French Polynesia; Guam; Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China; Indonesia; Japan; Kiribati; the Lao People’s Democratic Republic; Macao Special Administrative Region, China; Malaysia; the Marshall Islands; Mongolia; Myanmar; Nauru; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Niue; Norfolk Island; Northern Mariana Islands; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Pitcairn; the Philippines; the Republic of Korea; Samoa; Singapore; Solomon Islands; Taiwan Province of the People’s Republic of China; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Tokelau; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu; Viet Nam; and Wallis and Futuna. “Travel restrictions” include measures such as the suspension of all flights, closing of all airports, or banning travellers from specific countries, territories or areas, either with or without a time parameter. This category also includes the suspension of issuance of new visas and/or permits. “Health screening” refers to health screenings upon a traveller’s arrival, such as blood samples, temperature checks, COVID-19 tests or thermal screening. “Quarantine” refers to quarantines either prior to or after a traveller enters a country, territory or area. “Vaccination certificate” refers to measures requiring travellers to present a COVID-19 vaccination certificate showing full vaccination. For additional information, see IOM, “Global Mobility Restrictions in Response to COVID-19”.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database.

33 Xiaoshan Huang, Chingman, Qiao Long and Kai Di, “Emigration Inquiries Spike in China amid Grueling COVID-19 Lockdowns, Restrictions”, Radio Free Asia, 14 April 2022.
 34 Panamanian authorities estimate at least 1,300 people from China crossed the Darién jungle in 2022. Moreover, from January to October 2023, nearly 10,000 Chinese migrants were apprehended at the US–Mexico border, the highest figure on record. See Associated Press, “As Economy Falters, More Chinese Migrants Take a Perilous Journey to the US Border to Seek Asylum”, US News, 30 October 2023; Mengyu Dong, “Fleeing China’s Covid Lockdowns for the US – Through a Central American Jungle”, BBC, 21 December 2022; Ting Zhang, “Why Are More and More Chinese Migrants Risking Their Lives to Cross the US Southern Border?”, The Diplomat, 9 June 2023.

FIGURE 3

Selected Travel Measures in the World Excluding East Asia and the Pacific, 2022

Notes: A definition for the “East Asia and the Pacific” region can be found under Figure 2. “Travel restrictions” include measures such as the suspension of all flights, closing of all airports, or banning travellers from specific countries, territories or areas, either with or without a time parameter. This category also includes the suspension of issuance of new visas and/or permits. “Health screening” refers to health screenings upon a traveller’s arrival, such as blood samples, temperature checks, COVID-19 tests or thermal screening. “Quarantine” refers to quarantines either prior to or after a traveller enters a country, territory or area. “Vaccination certificate” refers to measures requiring travellers to present a COVID-19 vaccination certificate showing full vaccination. For additional information, see IOM, “Global Mobility Restrictions in Response to COVID-19”.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM COVID-19 Mobility Tracking Database.

3 Reinvigorated and Diversifying Movement to the Arabian Peninsula

The Arabian Peninsula has in recent years become a major migratory destination, attracting migrants from various parts of Asia, Africa and elsewhere. The six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)³⁵ are some of the fastest growing economies in the world, and in some cases are almost entirely reliant on migrant labour. The past decade has seen GCC countries become among the largest recipients of migrants in the world; by 2020, foreign nationals made up more than half of the entire GCC population.³⁶ In countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, migrant workers can make up as much as 95 per cent of the private sector workforce.³⁷ The movement of migrant workers from both South Asia and East Africa towards the GCC is not new, but these flows were notably altered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

³⁵ Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Arabian Peninsula includes the six members of the GCC as well as Yemen.

³⁶ Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*.

³⁷ Brooke Sherman, “Changing the Tide for the Gulf’s Migrant Workers”, Wilson Center, 6 June 2022; International Labour Organization, “What Has Changed for Migrant Workers in Qatar?”, updated November 2023.

The pandemic triggered a mass exodus of migrant workers from GCC countries, especially to South and Southeast Asia.³⁸ Some commentators predicted that this sudden loss of migrant workers would give more bargaining power to their countries of origin in discussions about reforming the GCC's strict and often-criticized migrant sponsorship (kafala) systems.³⁹ But these predictions were overstated, given how dependent such origin countries were on the renewed emigration of their nationals for remittances. Instead, 2022 saw a record recovery of labour migration to the Gulf, including rising numbers of East African migrants moving to these countries, for work and to flee conflict and violence. Nonetheless, the past several years have seen reforms to labour standards – especially in Qatar where the Government, under the global spotlight for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, sought to dismantle the kafala system and introduce a minimum wage. Reforms have been incremental, but the post-pandemic years have demonstrated the pre-eminence of this region as a magnet for migrants nonetheless.

A. Asian Migration to Gulf Cooperation Council Countries Rebounds

Most labour migration to GCC countries – more than 70 per cent in 2019 – comes from South and Southeast Asia, making this one of the largest migration corridors in the world.⁴⁰ The overwhelming majority of labour migrants in GCC countries are on temporary work visas and engaged in low-paid positions in sectors such as construction, domestic work and hospitality. The pandemic-era mass return of migrant workers to South and Southeast Asia emphasized the paucity of protections available to such workers in the Gulf; most could not access social protection or services in their host countries when they lost jobs, and thus had few options but to leave.⁴¹ Others were stranded and unable to afford repatriation. The pandemic also highlighted existing vulnerabilities, with many migrants forced to work in poor and unsafe conditions where they could not follow social distancing protocols. Strict travel measures throughout most of 2021 kept labour migration from Asia to GCC countries fairly low. For example, labour migration from India and Pakistan to the Gulf in 2021 was below half of 2019 levels.⁴² But this drop, while dramatic, was short lived.

Migration from Asia to the Gulf reached record levels in 2022.

Migration from Asia to the Gulf reached record levels in 2022.⁴³ This was in part due to the lifting of strict COVID-19 travel restrictions, as well as a catch-up in demand for low-wage labour migration among employers in GCC countries, fuelled by the relatively high level of oil prices through 2021 and 2022 as well as skill shortages amongst GCC nationals. In Nepal, for example, the flow of migrant workers towards GCC

38 For example, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of India estimated that more than 2 million Indian nationals had been repatriated from the United Arab Emirates and 411,000 from Saudi Arabia as of 10 March 2021. See Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "Question NO.2643 Indians Evacuated during COVID-19 Pandemic", updated 18 March 2021.

39 Rebekah Smith and Cassandra Zimmer, "The COVID-19 Pandemic Will Probably Not Mark the End of the Kafala System in the Gulf", Center for Global Development, 28 October 2020.

40 Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*. In the six GCC countries, 72 per cent of migrants are nationals of Asian countries. Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos and Sri Lankans made up 80 per cent of all Asian migrants and 46 per cent of all migrants to the GCC in 2020. Indians alone made up 38 per cent of Asian migrants and 28 per cent of all migrants.

41 International Labour Organization, *Social Protection for Migrant Workers in Countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC)* (Beirut: International Labour Organization, 2023). There were also widespread reports of wage theft affecting returning migrant workers. See S. Irundaya Rajan and Jean-Louis Arcand, "COVID-19 Return Migration Phenomena: Experiences from South and Southeast Asia", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, no. 20 (2023): 5133–5152.

42 Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*. See also IOM, *Asia-Pacific Migration Data Report 2021* (Bangkok: IOM Asia-Pacific Regional Data Hub, 2022).

43 Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*.

countries was four times higher in 2022 than in 2021 (349,000 versus 72,000 outgoing workers), exceeding even pre-pandemic levels (236,000 in 2019).⁴⁴ Global labour outflows from Bangladesh and Pakistan exceeded pre-pandemic levels as well, and India, Indonesia and Viet Nam saw global labour emigration grow more than threefold between 2021 and 2022, although it remained slightly below pre-pandemic levels.⁴⁵ Data from GCC countries confirm this recovery: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia saw a massive increase in arrivals of Asian migrant workers, surpassing the 2019 record to reach 1.5 million in 2022.⁴⁶ The second largest GCC destination, the United Arab Emirates, attracted more than 300,000 Asian migrant workers in 2022.⁴⁷

Prior to the pandemic and subsequent rebound in migrant worker flows, GCC countries began to implement a number of long-term reforms to labour practices, aimed at decreasing reliance on migrant workers and improving labour standards. These measures include, for example, efforts in Saudi Arabia to train and reserve employment for Saudi nationals, and announcements by countries such as Qatar and Kuwait that they would drastically decrease the number of migrant workers in many sectors of their economies.⁴⁸ Many GCC countries have also made incremental changes to their kafala systems, which allow companies and citizens to sponsor migrant workers and often give them the authority to manage workers' living conditions and migration status.⁴⁹ The treatment of Asian migrant workers in the Gulf has long been controversial and has given rise to regional consultative processes (including the Colombo Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogue) to bring together Asian sending countries and GCC host countries to discuss ways to enhance protections for migrant workers.

While it is unclear to what extent they catalysed such reform efforts, preparations for high-profile events such as Expo 2020 in Dubai and the FIFA World Cup put migrant worker exploitation in the region under the spotlight. As such, GCC countries continued to implement reforms to their labour migration policies in the years following the start of the pandemic. In Qatar, the 2022 World Cup host, migrants make up 94 per cent of the workforce and more than 80 per cent of the total population.⁵⁰ Qatar had taken steps to improve labour standards ahead of the World Cup, starting with legislation in 2020 that allows for migrant worker mobility, a minimum wage law passed in 2021, an anonymous online complaint platform launched in 2021 to report worker abuse, and the introduction in 2021 of limits on outdoor work during the hottest hours of the day.⁵¹

44 Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*.

45 IOM, *Asia-Pacific Migration Data Report 2022* (Bangkok: IOM Asia-Pacific Regional Data Hub, 2023).

46 Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*.

47 Baruah et al., *Labor Migration in Asia*. Note that at the time of publication, data were unavailable on flows from the Philippines to the United Arab Emirates, though the Philippines has traditionally been the largest provider of migrant workers for the country. As such, year-to-year comparisons for Asian migrant worker inflows to the United Arab Emirates are omitted.

48 Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *The Labor Market in Saudi Arabia: Background, Areas of Progress, and Insights for the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2019); Huda Alsahi, "COVID-19 and the Intensification of the GCC Workforce Nationalization Policies", Arab Reform Initiative, 10 November 2020.

49 Sherman, "Changing the Tide for the Gulf's Migrant Workers". The kafala system is used across GCC countries, as well as the Arab states of Jordan and Lebanon. Under the kafala system, national governments provide local employers with sponsorship permits to attract migrant workers. Employers normally cover all travel, housing and transportation expenses and are responsible for upholding migrant workers' employment status, legal status and visa. There have been reports of some employers abusing this power to exploit migrant workers, whose working conditions normally do not fall under the purview of state labour ministries and who may thus lack labour protections.

50 International Labour Organization, "What Has Changed for Migrant Workers in Qatar?"; Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority, "Quarterly Bulletin – Population Statistics – Third Quarter 2023", accessed 15 November 2023.

51 International Labour Organization, *Labour Reforms in the State of Qatar: Coming Together around a Shared Vision* (Qatar: International Labour Organization, 2022).

But these efforts continue to face criticism from advocates and migrant groups.⁵² Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia signed numerous bilateral migrant worker agreements, including with Indonesia and the Philippines, to provide some increased protections for migrant workers. However, all told, labour reforms in the region have been incremental rather than transformative, and it remains to be seen whether they will prevent harm and exploitation.

B. More East Africans Migrate to the Gulf, while Forced Returns Grow

While labour migrants in the GCC still predominantly come from South and Southeast Asia, movement to the Arabian Peninsula from East Africa increased in 2022.⁵³ The Eastern Corridor (which IOM defines as movement from East Africa through Yemen and onward into the Arabian Peninsula, and particularly towards Saudi Arabia)⁵⁴ accounted for 46 per cent of all interregional movements tracked in East Africa in 2022, the largest of any route.⁵⁵ During the COVID-19 crisis, travel restrictions significantly decreased migration along this corridor. In 2020, only 158,000 movements were recorded along the Eastern Corridor, compared to 468,000 in 2019.⁵⁶

Ethiopians continue to make up the largest share of migrants along this corridor, accounting for 92 per cent of all migrants recorded arriving in Yemen from East Africa in 2022.

Migration from East Africa to GCC countries began to rebound in 2022, as was the case with migration from Asia. In 2022, IOM recorded 441,000 migrant movements from East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, a 64 per cent increase compared to 2021 but still slightly below pre-pandemic levels. Ethiopians continue to make up the largest share of migrants along this corridor, accounting for 92 per cent of all migrants recorded arriving in Yemen from East Africa in 2022.⁵⁷

52 Human Rights Watch, “Qatar: Six Months Post-World Cup, Migrant Workers Suffer”, Human Rights Watch, 16 June 2023.

53 Note that IOM tracking of movements along routes in East Africa includes multiple forms of migration, including refugees, regular labour migrants and irregular migrants. Nonetheless, the majority of movement along this route is irregular. See IOM, *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa* (Nairobi: IOM, 2023).

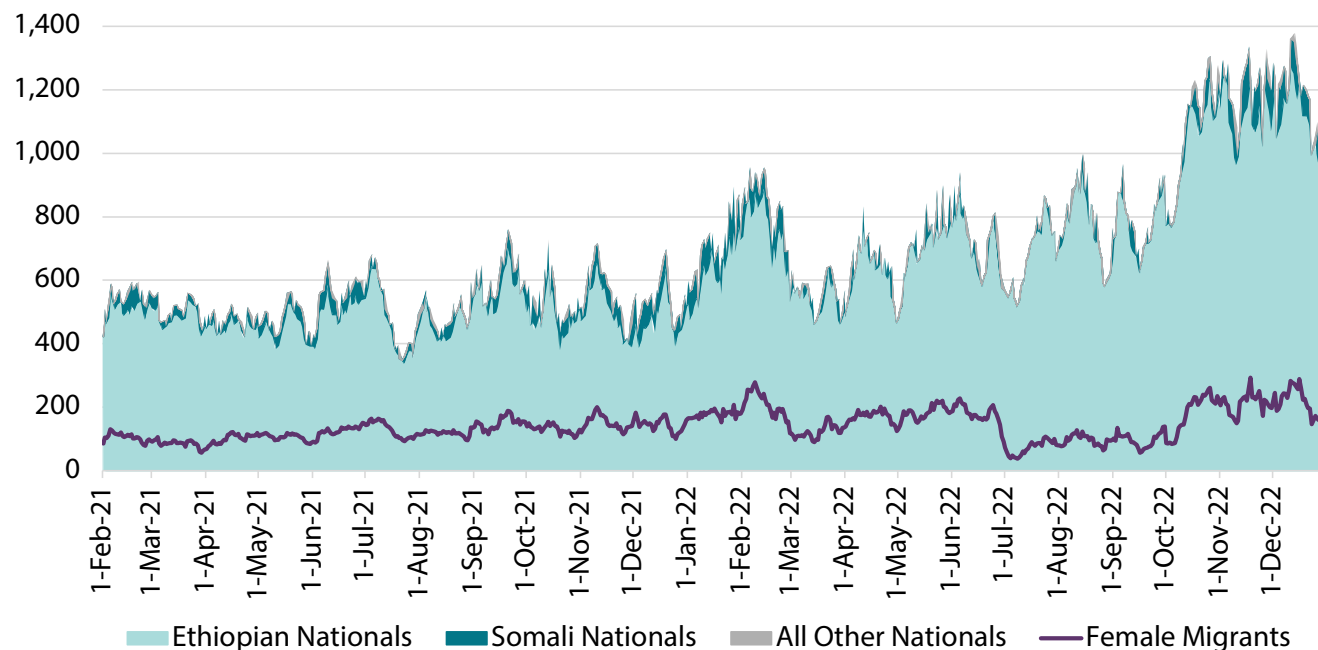
54 Tsion Tadesse Abebe and George Mukundi-Wachira, eds., *The State of Migration in East and Horn of Africa, Report 2022* (Geneva: IOM, 2023).

55 See Figure 1 from Abebe and Mukundi-Wachira, eds., *The State of Migration in East and Horn of Africa, Report 2022*.

56 IOM, *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa*.

57 IOM, *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa*. It is presumed that most migrants arriving on Yemen’s shores from East Africa are labour migrants who aim to reach GCC countries. IOM notes that Saudi Arabia was the intended destination country for 100 per cent of the 1,679 arrivals to Yemen from the Horn of Africa in December 2023. See IOM, “Migration along the Eastern Corridor” (data report 46, 29 January 2024).

FIGURE 4

Migrants Surveyed in East Africa and Yemen Travelling towards GCC Countries, Seven-day Averages, 2021–2022

Notes: IOM's Flow Monitoring Registry tracks migrant movements at different flow monitoring points. East African migrants going towards the GCC were recorded in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Yemen. Migrants are surveyed in groups, and migrant nationalities are counted by group. Groups are also asked about their intended country of destination. GCC countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The daily average counts shown here were calculated by taking the average of the daily flow of migrants in the three days before and three days after a survey date, including data collected on the survey date. "Female migrants" refers to the sum of female migrants in East Africa and Yemen who state an intended destination country in the GCC, across all nationalities.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Flow Monitoring Registry, East and Horn of Africa, 2021–2022.

This rebound in migration from East Africa towards GCC countries has included more vulnerable populations, such as women and children. Historically, irregular migration along this corridor has mostly consisted of single men seeking employment opportunities and hoping to send remittances home, while regular migration has been dominated by female migrants.⁵⁸ Yet the corridor saw increasing numbers of women and children moving irregularly, including an increase in unaccompanied and separated children, as mobility surged in 2022. Compared to 2021, IOM estimates that the number of both female migrants and unaccompanied children travelling along this corridor irregularly doubled. In 2022, 20 per cent of all arrivals from East Africa to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix flow monitoring points in Yemen were female, compared to 14 per cent in 2021.⁵⁹ IOM data collected in East Africa similarly show that women made up 17.6 per cent of the average group of migrants heading from East Africa towards GCC countries in 2022.⁶⁰

58 IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, *Gendered Patterns of Women and Girls' Migration along the Eastern Corridor* (Nairobi: IOM, 2020).

59 IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2021 Migration Overview: Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula" (fact sheet, February 2022); IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2022 Migration Overview: Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula" (fact sheet, February 2023). Note that these data likely undercount female migrants because this is a traditionally hidden population within this context. Moreover, it is unclear what drove the decline in the proportion of female migrants heading towards GCC countries from July to October 2022, although this coincided with worsening drought effects and the end of the March to May rainy season, with parts of Ethiopia receiving less than 60 per cent of the historical average rainfall.

60 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Registry, East and Horn of Africa, 2022.

IOM also recorded 14,900 unaccompanied children along the Eastern Corridor in 2022, significantly higher than both the 2021 figure (7,300) and pre-pandemic levels (8,100 in 2019).⁶¹ And of all groups of Ethiopians surveyed after arriving in Yemen, more than 77 per cent included at least one child and more than 36 per cent had at least one unaccompanied child.⁶² This increase in women and children among irregular migrants is driven both by localized violence in origin countries as well as a lack of economic opportunities and more limited access to regular migration pathways in light of the pandemic.⁶³ In 2023, the Ethiopian Government announced partnerships with GCC countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to allow more female domestic workers to move through regular migration channels (in the latter case, up to 500,000 domestic workers in 2023).⁶⁴ These policy changes may lead to a decrease in irregular female migration in the coming months and years.

The drivers of migration along this corridor are varied. While most migrants surveyed in East Africa and Yemen indicated they were moving for economic reasons, reports of movement due to conflict and violence were higher in 2022 than in previous years (see Figure 5).⁶⁵ Indeed, IOM's survey indicates that the vast majority (97% of all surveyed migrants travelling towards the GCC) reported economic reasons for moving, although 19 per cent reported economic reasons in addition to other reasons, such as conflict and violence.⁶⁶ The slow-onset effects of climate change, including a widespread drought in the region in 2022 (see Section 4.A.), as well as ongoing conflict and violence in areas such as Northern Ethiopia, have increasingly driven mixed migration.⁶⁷ Into 2023, both violence and the lingering impact of the drought contributed to worsening food insecurity in the region, which especially affected internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁶⁸ This has been a particularly concerning trend, given that migrants who move due to conflict and/or climate change are likely more vulnerable and the corridor has become increasingly dangerous.⁶⁹

61 IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2019 Migration Overview: Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula" (fact sheet, February 2020); IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2021 Migration Overview"; IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2022 Migration Overview".

62 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Registry, East and Horn of Africa, 2022; authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Registry, Yemen, 2022. Note that unaccompanied children in the context of those travelling within a group refers to children who have been separated from parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. See IOM, *Unaccompanied Children on the Move* (Geneva: IOM, 2015).

63 IOM, *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa*; IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, *Gendered Patterns of Women and Girls' Migration*.

64 Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen, Quarter 2 2023* (N.p.: Mixed Migration Centre, 2023).

65 Note that in the Flow Monitoring Surveys IOM conducted in the East and Horn of Africa region, migrants could select multiple reasons for their journey.

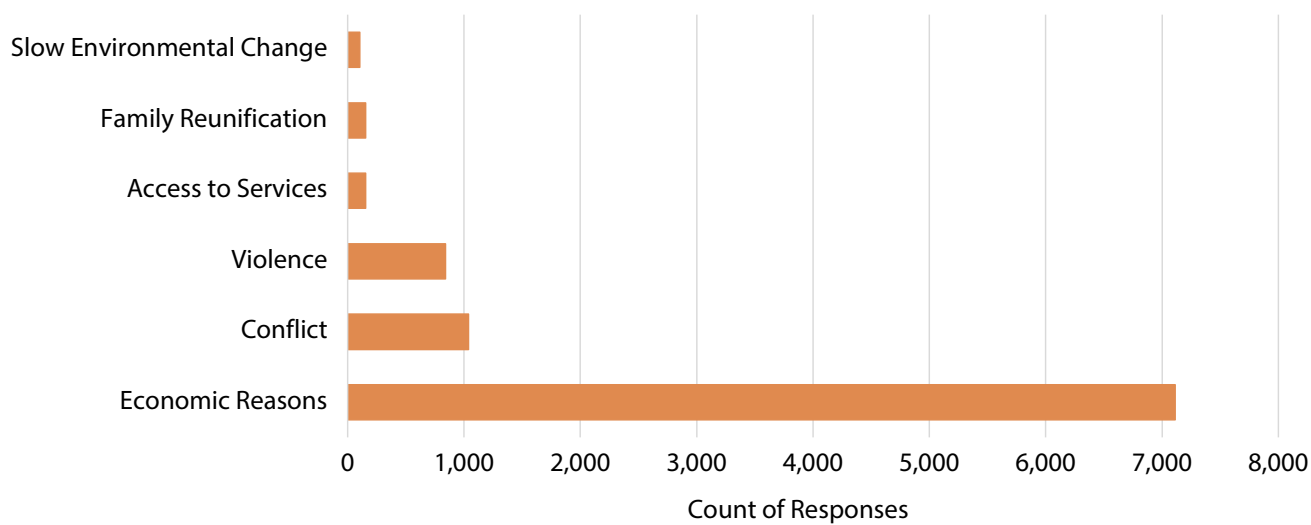
66 An estimated 11.9 per cent of all migrants who listed economic reasons as a primary driver for their journey also listed conflict as a reason, and 9.4 per cent of all migrants who listed economic reasons as a primary driver for their journey also listed violence. Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, East and Horn of Africa, 2022.

67 IOM Flow Monitoring Registry data show an increase in the proportion of East Africans migrating to the Gulf for food insecurity reasons (3.1% in 2022, up from 0.6% in 2021). See also Al Jazeera, "Rise in Migrants from Horn of Africa to Gulf States Worrying: UN", Al Jazeera, 15 February 2023.

68 An estimated 15.4 million people in Ethiopia were projected to be food insecure within the second half of 2023. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) expected the food insecurity situation to worsen from the rainy season of October – December 2023, with projections that the season would lead more than 890,000 people to be food insecure due to flooding and 372,000 to be displaced due to flooding. See OCHA, "Ethiopia Situation Report – Cluster Status: Food", accessed 10 January 2024.

69 IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2022 Migration Overview".

FIGURE 5

Surveyed East African Migrants' Reasons for Moving to the GCC, 2022

Notes: IOM's Flow Monitoring Registry tracks migrant movements at different flow monitoring points. East African migrants going towards the GCC were recorded in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Yemen. Data represent migrants who reported their intended destination is in the GCC. Migrants are surveyed individually and can give multiple responses for why they are moving. Migrants are also asked about their intended country of destination. GCC countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, East and Horn of Africa, 2021–2022.

Migration along the Eastern Corridor is dangerous and difficult. In 2022, IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded 29 deaths at sea, with many more going unreported (and an additional 794 deaths during altercations at the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia).⁷⁰ Along the corridor, migrants often resort to using smugglers and traffickers, some of whom physically assault and extort migrants and their families.⁷¹ In addition, many GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, have increased enforcement measures against those without legal status or employment authorization.⁷² According to a Human Rights Watch report, abuse and killings of Ethiopian migrants by Saudi authorities were widespread along the border with Yemen in previous years, though this has been contested by both the Saudi and Ethiopian Governments.⁷³

While the number of migrants returned from Saudi Arabia to East Africa was particularly high in 2022, this has been a long-standing practice. In March 2022, Saudi Arabia announced plans to return at least 100,000 Ethiopians by the end of the year, citing an estimate of 450,000 Ethiopians having travelled irregularly to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁴ IOM registered 93,500 Ethiopian returnees in 2022, an 18 per cent increase compared to

70 IOM Regional Office for East and Horn of Africa, "Missing Migrants Project Annual Regional Overview: East and Horn of Africa" (fact sheet, May 2023).

71 Human Rights Watch, "They Fired on Us Like Rain" – Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border", Human Rights Watch, 21 August 2023.

72 For example, see Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: "It's Like We Are Not Human": Forced Returns, Abhorrent Detention Conditions of Ethiopian Migrants in Saudi Arabia* (London: Amnesty International, 2022).

73 Human Rights Watch, "They Fired on Us Like Rain".

74 Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: "It's Like We Are Not Human"*; IOM, "Funding Needed to Assist over 100,000 Ethiopian Migrants Returning from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (press release, 30 March 2022).

2021.⁷⁵ More than 60,000 of these returnees (roughly two thirds) intended to return to conflict-affected regions in Ethiopia, and almost 5,000 were children.⁷⁶ Many returnees ultimately ended up in overcrowded and resource-strained shelters in Ethiopia's capital city of Addis Ababa.⁷⁷ The suddenness and scale of returns in 2022 have placed considerable strain on the city, particularly because many migrants use all of their assets to embark on the journey and/or remit back home, and thus return with severely limited resources.⁷⁸

4 Growing Climate Mobility Challenges in East Africa and Pakistan

Climate change can trigger mobility either directly (for instance, by fuelling floods that force people to leave their homes) or indirectly (for instance, by altering precipitation patterns so crop harvests fail and farmers lose their livelihoods). As the impacts of climate change increase, they can interact with economic and political instability and development deficits to trigger unplanned or unsafe mobility. These trends are already well underway: 2022 saw 32.6 million internal disaster displacements, primarily from floods and storms, across the globe.⁷⁹ For instance, 706,000 people were displaced by storms and floods in Brazil and 17,000 by floods in Australia.⁸⁰ Two major hotspots for climate displacement emerged during 2022 – droughts and floods in East Africa and floods in Pakistan. Such events may be the canary in the coalmine for future climate-related movements.

As the impacts of climate change increase, they can interact with economic and political instability and development deficits to trigger unplanned or unsafe mobility.

In East Africa,⁸¹ a fourth consecutive failed rainy season devastated crops, livestock and livelihoods. These droughts (alongside flash flooding) triggered massive internal displacement as well as survival migration to GCC countries, although most people crossing borders in the region still reported non-environmental reasons for moving. Cataclysmic floods in Pakistan also displaced 8 million within the country, amid the country's economic crisis.⁸²

In both East Africa and Pakistan, these climate shocks led mostly to internal, rather than international, movement. Indeed, disasters such as floods can trigger large-scale displacement, but people usually

75 IOM Regional Office for East and Horn of Africa, "Return of Ethiopian Migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (fact sheet, 2023). IOM has tracked migrant returns from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia since 2017, and total registered returns since 2020 have not reached pre-pandemic levels. This 2022 figure (93,500) was lower than the number of returnees recorded in 2019 (120,800), though it was higher than the 73,700 recorded in 2017. See IOM Regional Office for East and Horn of Africa, "Return of Ethiopian Migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (fact sheet, 2020).

76 IOM, "Returns from Saudi Arabia", accessed 10 January 2024.

77 IOM Regional Data Hub for East and Horn of Africa and IOM Regional Data Hub for Middle East and North Africa, "2022 Migration Overview".

78 IOM, "Returns from Saudi Arabia".

79 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database", accessed 10 January 2024.

80 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database".

81 The East Africa region includes Burundi, the Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania.

82 Alexandra Bilak et al., *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023).

move for short periods and over short distances. And while this fact may defuse some anxieties around massive waves of climate migrants crossing international borders, the trend does not always hold. Available data show that environmental and economic drivers can interact to increase cross-border migration, for example.

BOX 1

Climate Impacts on Migrants and Refugees in East Africa and Pakistan

The focus on climate change as a driver of mobility can sometimes obscure the fact that climate events also affect migrants and refugees who have already moved. This is important to note in places such as East Africa and Pakistan, which host millions of migrants and refugees.

In East Africa, more than 82,000 refugees and asylum-seekers moved across border into Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia between January and November 2022, primarily from Somalia, South Sudan and Ethiopia. These were not people directly displaced by droughts (conflicts and policy insecurity are prevalent throughout the region), but they moved to countries already struggling with droughts, including in camps.

Similarly, Pakistan's mid-2022 floods affected not only Pakistani citizens but also migrants and refugees living in the country. For instance, many members of the country's large population of displaced Afghans, including those who moved after the 2021 Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, were hard hit and forced to move again by the floods. This repeated displacement can be particularly problematic for refugees, who remain marginalized in Pakistan and usually lack legal status. In both Pakistan and East Africa, there is insufficient evidence on how refugees have been affected by climate disasters such as these.

Sources: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Bureau for East, Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region, "UNHCR's Drought Response in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia" (fact sheet, December 2022); Qaiser Khan Afridi, "Pakistan's Disastrous Floods Uproot Refugees and Citizens", UNHCR, 2 September 2022.

A. *Droughts Trigger (Mostly Internal) Displacement in East Africa*

When East Africa faced its fourth consecutive failed rainy season in 2022, governments in countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia declared states of emergency. The droughts, along with locust infestations, devastated countries and food systems across the highly livestock and agriculture dependent region: an estimated 9 million livestock died, and 40–85 per cent of cropland was affected by the drought.⁸³ The significant drop in crop harvests, coupled with the Russian invasion of Ukraine (which sharply limited Ukrainian grain exports) and the pandemic's rippling economic effects, meant food prices spiked and so did food insecurity. In 2021, Eritrea and Somalia imported almost all their wheat from the Russian Federation and Ukraine, while Kenya and Uganda received more than 30 per cent from those two countries.⁸⁴ By 2022, acute food insecurity was widespread, affecting 20 million people in Ethiopia,⁸⁵ 6.3 million in South Sudan, 5.6 million in Somalia, 4.4 million in Kenya and 1.1 million in Uganda.⁸⁶

83 Food Security and Nutrition Working Group, "FSNWG Drought Special Report July 2022" (fact sheet, July 2022).

84 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "The Importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for Global Agricultural Markets and the Risks Associated with the War in Ukraine" (information note, June 2022).

85 OCHA, "Ethiopia – Situation Report, 17 Nov 2022" (situation report, November 2022).

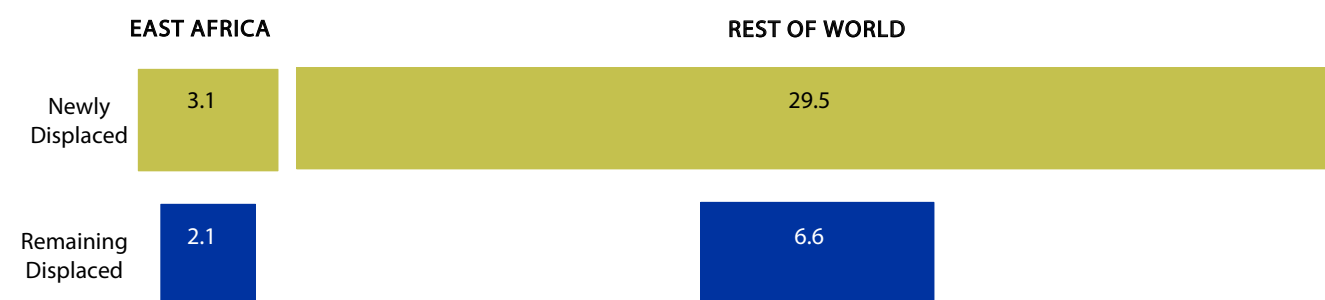
86 Kyilah Terry and Aishwarya Rai, "Amid Record Drought and Food Insecurity, East Africa's Protracted Humanitarian Crisis Worsens", *Migration Information Source*, 18 January 2023; Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, "Home", accessed 11 January 2024; Abdi Latif Dahir, "War in Ukraine Compounds Hunger in East Africa", *The New York Times*, 1 April 2022.

There is a clear need to understand the multiple and interconnected drivers of displacement in order to prevent and respond effectively to such crises. Droughts coupled with food insecurity, floods and conflict triggered massive displacement across the region, with 3.1 million internal disaster displacements in 2022 alone. This included 1.1 million drought displacements in Somalia and 686,000 in Ethiopia.⁸⁷ Ironically, droughts can make flood events even more severe, since extremely dry land is less able to absorb water than normal. Flash flooding in South Sudan (for the fourth year in the row) triggered 596,000 displacements, most in just four months.⁸⁸

Displacement caused by disasters in the region also tends to be relatively long-lasting. Compared to internal disaster displacements in the rest of the world, East Africa saw a greater proportion remain displaced (see Figure 6). Typically, disaster-displaced people return home soon after they move, but droughts, floods and other disasters can be so severe that returning is impossible and displacement becomes protracted. Floods can destroy homes, and droughts can kill enough livestock that people simply lack the resources to return. In East Africa, 3.1 million new internal disaster displacements occurred in 2022, a number equivalent to more than 10 per cent of all new internal disaster displacements in the rest of the world (29.5 million), as shown in Figure 6. By the end of 2022, 2.1 million people remained internally displaced in East Africa (including people displaced earlier in 2022 and in prior years who had not returned home), equivalent to more than 30 per cent of people who remained internally displaced in the rest of the world by the end of the year (6.6 million).⁸⁹

FIGURE 6

New Internal Disaster Displacements versus People Remaining Internally Displaced (in Millions), East Africa and the Rest of the World, 2022



Notes: In this figure, new displacements are those that occurred in 2022, while people remaining displaced are those who were still displaced at the end of 2022 (including people displaced earlier in 2022 and those displaced in prior years). Disasters include drought, dry mass movement, earthquake, erosion, extreme temperature, flood, wave action, wet mass movement, wildfire and volcanic activity.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database", accessed 10 January 2024.

87 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database".

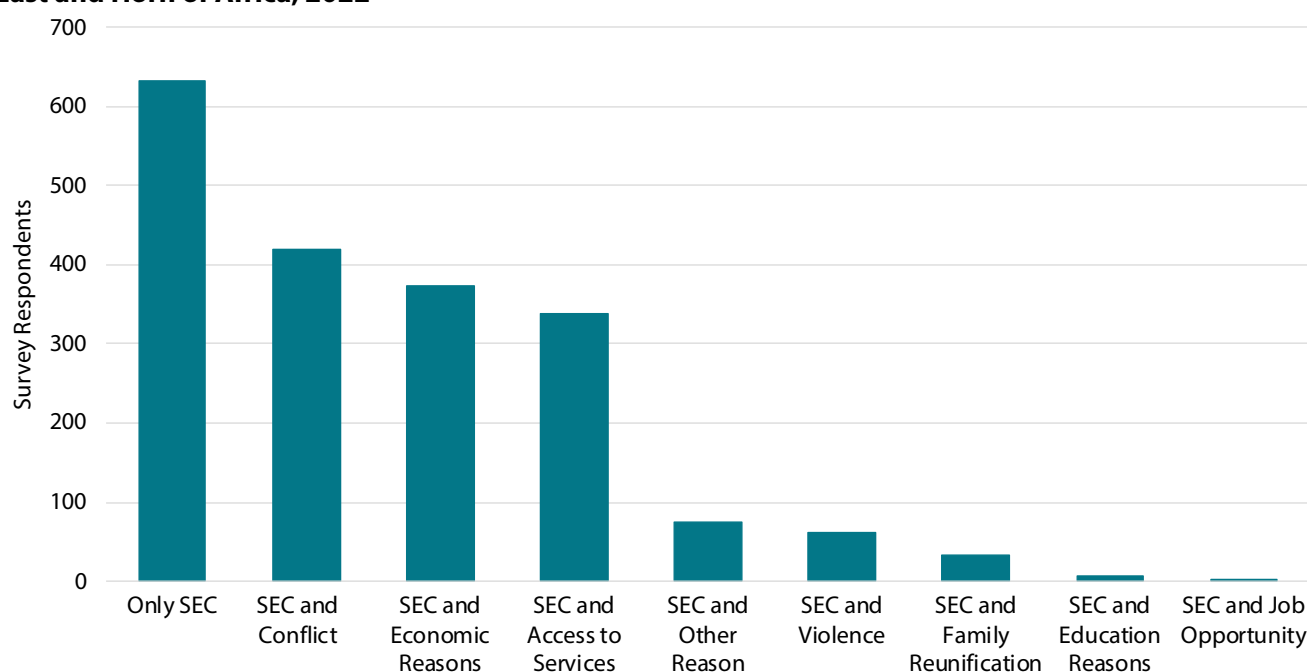
88 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database".

89 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database".

Still, most people on the move across borders in East Africa do not see their movement as related to climate change. In IOM's Flow Monitoring Survey of more than 27,000 migrants moving across borders in Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia in 2022, only 5 per cent of respondents indicated that slow environmental change was a main reason. An even smaller proportion noted natural disasters⁹⁰ as a main reason. Instead, the vast majority cited economic reasons for moving (77%), while conflict (11%) was given as a reason twice as often as environmental and disaster-related reasons. Of the relatively small group of people who said they were moving because of slow environmental change, it is striking that many said they were moving because of environmental reasons alone, rather than a combination of environmental and other drivers: 43 per cent of migrants citing slow environmental change only cited this factor, while smaller shares cited slow environmental change along with economic reasons, conflict, access to services or other factors (see Figure 7).⁹¹ This may indicate that the East African droughts were so severe that they directly triggered movement, rather than having a more indirect impact on mobility, affecting livelihoods in a way that subsequently leads to movement.

FIGURE 7

Migrants Who Moved due to Slow Environmental Change (SEC) and Their Other Reasons for Migration, East and Horn of Africa, 2022



Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, East and Horn of Africa, 2022.

90 It is uncertain why the natural hazards component is so low, but one explanation may be related to terminology. Droughts are sometimes called disasters and sometimes called slow-onset climate events, and given the persistence of failed rainy seasons over four years, some people may experience them as slow environmental change even if they are also disasters.

91 In contrast, evidence from most other contexts finds that climate change is rarely the reason people cite for moving. For example, in one survey of Central African migrants, only 5 per cent of respondents listed environmental reasons as their only or primary reason for movement, but half said environmental reasons were part of why they moved. See Francesco Teo Ficcarelli, Jane Linekar and Roberto Forin, "Climate-Related Events and Environmental Stressors' Roles in Driving Migration in West and North Africa" (briefing paper, Mixed Migration Centre, January 2022).

B. *Floods Compound Economic Collapse in Pakistan, Spiking Displacement*

The 2022 floods in Pakistan further underscore the challenges of better understanding the role of climate change in triggering mobility, both within and across borders. Catastrophic flooding between June and September displaced an estimated 8 million people, destroyed some 1.7 million hectares of crops, and accounted for nearly USD 12 billion in damages to the agricultural sector alone.⁹² The broader damages to infrastructure, including to 6,500 km of roads and 1.7 million houses,⁹³ and effects on people's livelihoods and assets, pushing an estimated 9 million people into poverty,⁹⁴ have had massive macroeconomic impacts. The Pakistani Government estimated the total damages of the floods at USD 15 billion, with the costs of rehabilitation at USD 16 billion.⁹⁵

At first, the floods triggered massive internal displacement. In the two hardest-hit provinces, IOM data indicate significant portions of the entire population were displaced. In the five districts of Sindh Province with the highest displacement, 1.5 million people (20% of the population) were temporarily displaced, with 654,000 returning within four months.⁹⁶ In the five districts of Balochistan Province with the most displacement, 230,000 people (11% of the population) were displaced, and some 170,400 had returned after four months.⁹⁷ The movement was massive, but it was largely internal and often short term.

Migrants were critical players in humanitarian and development responses to these floods. Pakistani diaspora philanthropists raised significant funds for humanitarian relief in the period immediately following the disaster,⁹⁸ mobilizing funds and sending emergency relief.⁹⁹ The diaspora's financial remittances also served as a lifeline that helped households sustain themselves during the immediate flood response.¹⁰⁰ Over time, Pakistani migrants also became partners in the longer-term recovery, for instance partnering with donors to invest in flood-affected communities.¹⁰¹

92 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Pakistan: Flood Response Update February 2023" (fact sheet, March 2023).

93 IOM DTM, "Estimated Damage to Houses in Flood Affected Districts and Existing Population Density in Pakistan" (fact sheet, 19 September 2022).

94 Erwin Knippenberg, Mattia Amadio, Nadeem Javaid and Moritz Meyer, "Quantifying the Poverty Impact of the 2022 Floods in Pakistan", World Bank, Let's Talk Development, 18 May 2023.

95 Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, "Pakistan Floods 2022 Impact Assessment" (annex, Pakistan Economic Survey 2022–2023, 2023).

96 IOM DTM, "Pakistan Flood Response Baseline Assessment – Sindh Province (October 2022)" (assessment, 28 November 2022).

97 IOM DTM, "Pakistan Flood Response Baseline Assessment – Balochistan Province (October 2022)" (assessment, 28 November 2022).

98 Aina J. Khan, "Pakistani Diaspora Groups and UK Charities Raise up to £1m for Flood Relief", *The Guardian*, 30 August 2022.

99 Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination, "Powerful Flood Response by Pakistan's Diaspora", updated 26 January 2023.

100 Diaspora remittances to Pakistan are difficult to quantify since large proportions are reportedly sent via informal channels and are therefore not recorded by the State Bank of Pakistan. The bank's data on official remittances show that remittances were high throughout much of 2022, before dropping at the end of 2022 into 2023; however, this does not reflect the full scope of remittance inflows, which historical data in Pakistan show tend to rise when disasters strike. See Farid Makhoul and Refk Selmi, "From Aspirations for Climate Action to the Reality of Climate Disasters: Can Migrants Play Key Role in Disaster Response?" (working paper hal-04137400, HAL, October 2023); State Bank of Pakistan, "Workers' Remittances (Credit) – Seasonally Adjusted" (data table, 2023).

101 US Embassy and Consulates in Pakistan, "U.S. Mobilizes Diaspora and Private Sector Resources for Flood-Affected Communities" (press release, 21 March 2023).

The floods occurred while Pakistan was already struggling with critical economic challenges.¹⁰² These challenges ranged from fiscal issues related to trade imbalances and national debt repayments, to rampant inflation, rising food prices and energy costs, and even political unrest with the ouster of the prime minister in April 2022.¹⁰³ The country's stability was already on the knife's edge, and the floods helped tip the economy into crisis. Thus, while the floods were not the only factor driving the crisis, the damages and costs to recover were significant in Pakistan's freefalling economy for the rest of 2022 and into 2023. Post-flood Pakistan saw a rise in people leaving for other countries, as well as persistent internal displacement. Well into 2023, more than 1 million Pakistanis remained internally displaced in Sindh province, even though the majority had returned home.¹⁰⁴

Post-flood Pakistan saw a rise in people leaving for other countries, as well as persistent internal displacement.

Also striking was the increase in people moving irregularly from Pakistan to Europe and of Pakistani nationals seeking asylum in Europe. The number of asylum applications from Pakistan citizens filed in EU Member States increased from about 13,900 in the first half of 2022 to 19,000 in the next half (see Figure 8).¹⁰⁵ Most were filed in Italy, followed by Austria, France and Greece. A similar trend emerged in the number of irregular arrivals across the Mediterranean, primarily to Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta: IOM recorded 1,200 Pakistani arrivals in the first half of 2022, increasing to 3,700 in the second half of the year and further to 6,200 in the first half of 2023.¹⁰⁶ This increase in arrivals and asylum applications in Europe started before the floods, given Pakistan's existing economic troubles,¹⁰⁷ but the number of Pakistanis arriving in Europe increased significantly following the flooding.¹⁰⁸ It is impossible to distinguish the relative impacts of the climate-fuelled floods versus the economic crisis – the two became tightly intertwined in the second half of 2022 and into 2023 – but this situation underscores how existing vulnerabilities can become large-scale crises in a warming world. It also highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding the complex relationship among drivers of migration if governments and their partners are to more effectively to prevent, mitigate and respond to the adverse impacts of climate change.

102 Moreover, these floods – while exacerbated by climate change and unprecedented in scale and damages – were not the first massive floods in Pakistan. The Government has come under criticism for not learning from the 2010 floods that also devastated the country, from failure to prepare properly to failure to respond quickly enough. See Steven A. Zyck, “When Aid Goes Wrong: A Lesson from Pakistan on Why We Can’t Ignore Markets”, Overseas Development Institute, accessed 11 January 2024.

103 *The Economic Times*, “Pakistan in Dire Need of \$36 Billion to Avert Economic Collapse”, *The Economic Times*, 29 May 2022; World Bank, “Long-Standing Structural Challenges Pose Risks to Pakistan’s Sustained Growth: World Bank Bi-Annual Pakistan Development Update Report” (press release, 19 April 2022).

104 IOM Pakistan, “Pakistan Flood Response” (Situation Report #3, 17 October 2023).

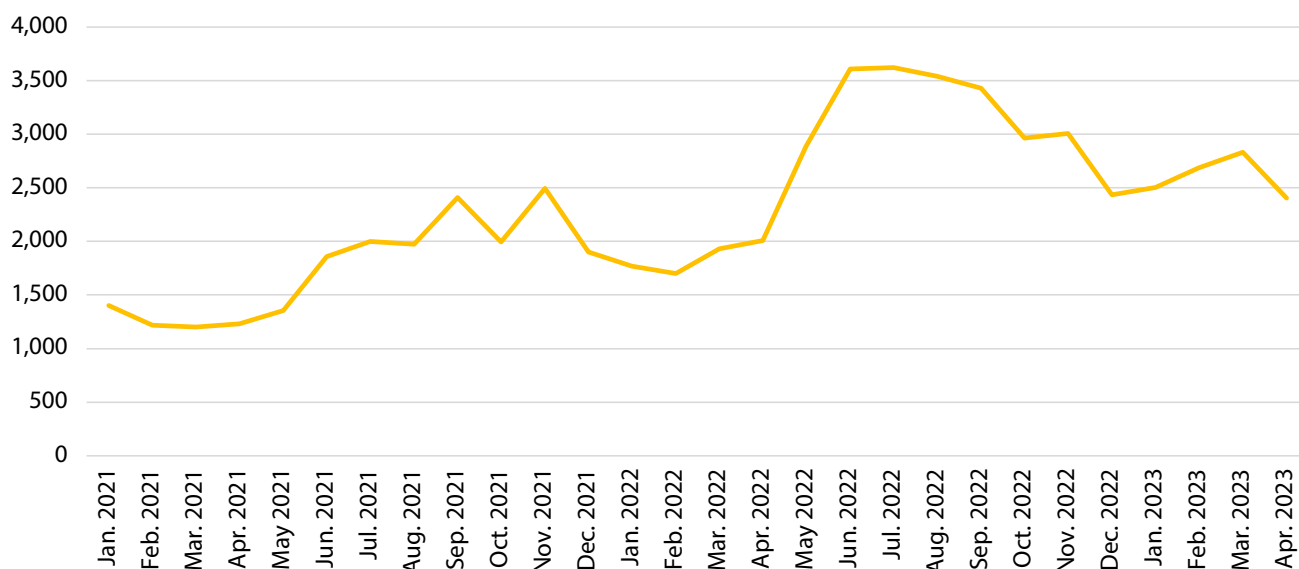
105 Eurostat, “Asylum Applicants by Type of Applicant, Citizenship, Age and Sex - Monthly Data”, accessed 1 November 2023.

106 IOM DTM, *Quarterly Regional Report: DTM Europe (October – December 2022)* (Vienna: IOM, 2022); IOM DTM, *Quarterly Regional Report: DTM Europe (April – June 2023)* (Vienna: IOM, 2023).

107 It is unclear how the floods and economic collapse interacted with labour migration. The number of Pakistanis registered for foreign employment spiked in 2022 (832,339, compared to 288,280 in 2021), but this also coincided with the lifting of COVID-19 travel restrictions and the rebounding of labour migration across South Asia (in particular, South Asian migration to GCC countries). See Government of Pakistan, Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, “Statement Showing the Number of Pakistanis Registered for Employment Abroad During the Period 1981-2023 (up to November)” (data table, 2023).

108 Roberto Forin and Peter Grant, “Pakistani Nationals on the Move to Europe: New Pressures, Risks, Opportunities”, Mixed Migration Centre, 31 July 2023.

FIGURE 8

Asylum Applications Filed by Pakistani Nationals in EU Member States, January 2021 – April 2023

Source: Eurostat, “Asylum Applicants by Type of Applicant, Citizenship, Age and Sex - Monthly Data”, accessed 1 November 2023.

East Africa and Pakistan, as hotspots of climate-related displacement in 2022, hold important policy lessons. The prevailing assumption in the evidence and policy discourse on climate mobility has been that disasters lead to short-term, short-distance displacement. This is still true, but not invariably so. The lack of data on international climate mobility makes it impossible to compare to internal disaster displacement, but as climate change makes disasters more frequent and more severe, while weakening labour markets, livelihoods and social systems, it will layer on top of a world of polycrises. Climate change therefore can upset the fragile balance of economies and societies lacking the resilience and capacities to prepare, thus triggering longer-term, longer-distance mobility.

5 Short-term Mobility, Crises and Tensions in Southern Africa

While there is a widespread perception that African migration is largely to Europe, the Gulf countries and other extracontinental destinations, Southern Africa is a prime example of significant intraregional mobility. The region has become a microcosm of the fast-evolving landscape of human mobility, with robust demand for and supply of migrant workers who circulate across the region and frequent mobility to visit and reunite with family, alongside displacement and the movement of asylum-seekers, refugees and others in vulnerable situations. Economically diverse, the Southern Africa region comprises 15 countries, including high-income, small island nations such as Mauritius and Seychelles; the large economy of South Africa; and 8 out of Africa’s 33 least developed countries.¹⁰⁹

The region has become a microcosm of the fast-evolving landscape of human mobility.

¹⁰⁹ The eight least developed countries in the region are Angola, the Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. See United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, “UN List of Least Developed Countries”, accessed 11 January 2024.

It is also part of one of the world's largest free trade areas, and there are ongoing efforts to further the region's integration. This includes efforts to facilitate mobility through the implementation of the Southern African Development Community's Protocol on the Facilitation of Movement of Persons in 2021, and numerous bilateral agreements among the community's Member States that allow the free movement of the majority of citizens in the region, under certain conditions.¹¹⁰

Southern Africa is also known, however, for decade-long structural development issues, intraregional economic inequality and peace challenges.¹¹¹ Unsettled conflicts (e.g. in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), climate disasters (e.g. in Mozambique and Madagascar), and worsened food insecurity have affected many countries in the region.¹¹² These challenges, in turn, drive mobility within the region and to countries outside it. Additionally, ongoing economic, political and climate troubles outside of the region (e.g. severe drought in the Horn of Africa; see Section 4.A.) as well as global political events (e.g. the war in Ukraine, which led to a major spike in food and energy prices)¹¹³ further complicate migration and displacement dynamics in Southern Africa.

In all, mobility within the region has rebounded from the pandemic through several channels. The story of mobility in Southern Africa includes not only an increase in the long-standing trend of short-term, intraregional mobility but also rising numbers of forcibly displaced persons, a revival of labour mobility, and with that, increasing anti-migrant sentiment in the main destination country of South Africa.

A. *Short-term, Intraregional Mobility Picks Up*

Mobility within Southern Africa takes multiple forms, both internal and international. This includes regular migration for work and family reasons, irregular migration (both short and long term), and forced displacement as a result of natural hazards and conflict.¹¹⁴ Mobility into the region from countries elsewhere increased in 2022 compared to 2021, growth that has been overwhelmingly driven by short-term movements (see Figure 9). In 2022, 72 per cent of flows were short-term movements, up from 64 per cent in 2021. This is likely an indication of a return to pre-pandemic trends, as the region has historically featured significant movement for internal and cross-border trade, particularly within the commercial agricultural sector and industrial sector.¹¹⁵ This is also supported by the fact that the top five countries of departure and intended destination were the same – Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique – and they accounted for most international border crossings in the overall Southern Africa region (see Figure 10). As such, the 2022 increase in short-term migration may indicate that the Southern Africa region as a whole is becoming more interconnected post-pandemic.

110 Samuel Okunade, "Africa Moves towards Intracontinental Free Movement for Its Booming Population", *Migration Information Source*, 21 January 2021.

111 UNHCR, "Global Appeal 2023 – Southern Africa", updated 22 November 2022.

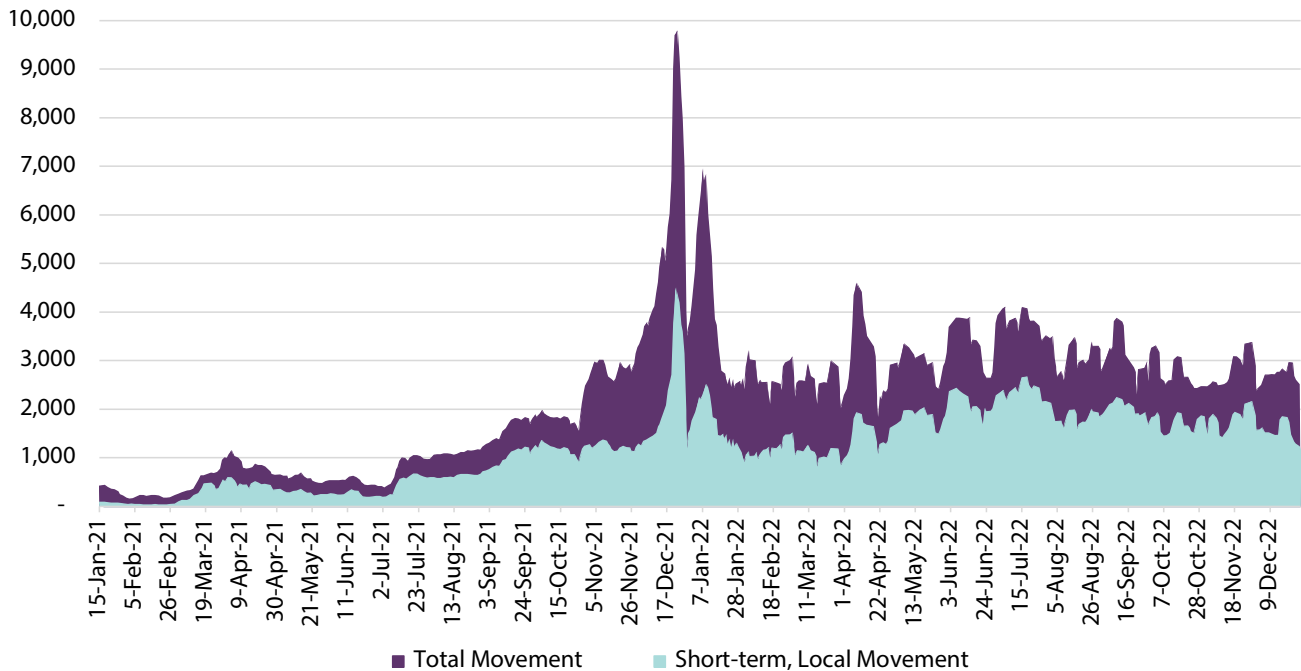
112 World Bank, "The World Bank in Eastern and Southern Africa", accessed 11 January 2024.

113 Bitsat Yohannes-Kassahun, "One Year Later: The Impact of the Russian Conflict with Ukraine on Africa", *Africa Renewal*, 13 February 2023.

114 IOM, "Southern Africa", accessed 11 January 2024.

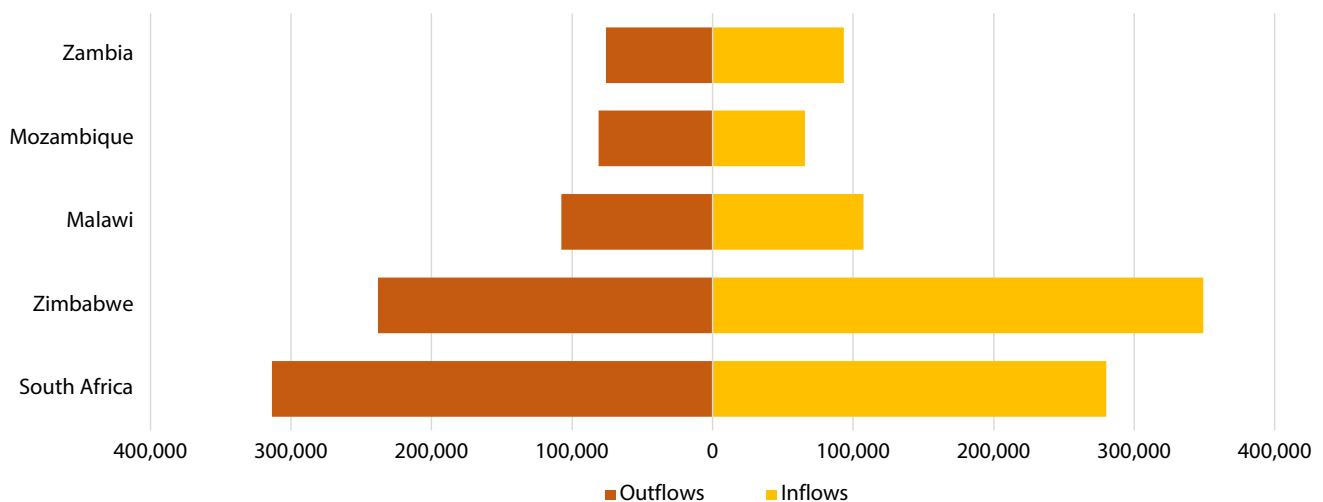
115 Jonathan Crush, Vincent Williams and Sally Peberdy, "Migration in Southern Africa" (paper prepared for the Policy Analysis and Research Programme of the Global Commission on International Migration, September 2005).

FIGURE 9
Daily Cross-border Movements within and to the Southern Africa Region, Seven-day Averages, 2021–2022



Notes: Data were collected at flow monitoring points in the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The daily average counts shown here were calculated by taking the average of the daily flow of migrants in the three days before and three days after a survey date, including data collected on the survey date. Spikes in movement in December 2021 are likely due to increased holiday travel. IOM recorded 23,964 movements on 24 December 2021 and 11,209 on 23 December 2021. In comparison, the first 15 days of December 2021 had 4,263 daily movements on average.
Sources: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Registry, Southern Africa, 2021–2022. See also IOM DTM, “Southern Africa – Monthly Flow Monitoring Registry Report (December 2021)” (data brief, 20 January 2022).

FIGURE 10
Recorded Inflows and Outflows of Migrants in Selected Southern African Countries, 2022

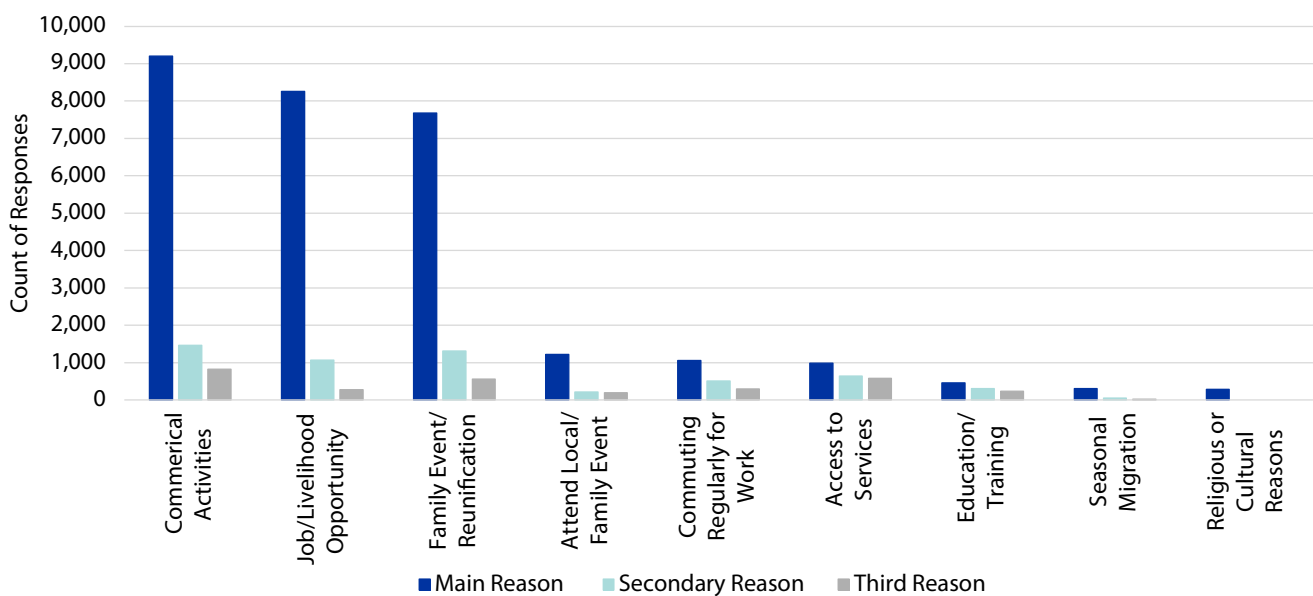


Notes: Data were collected at flow monitoring points in the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Migrants are surveyed in groups, and data on inflows are based on surveyed groups’ listed destination country, while outflows are based on their listed departure country.
Sources: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Registry, Southern Africa, 2021–2022.

Several factors could explain the increase in short-term intraregional mobility. Most obviously, the resurgence in cross-border trade in the region was likely driven by the lifting of COVID-19 travel restrictions and the return of all economic activity. But increasing climate precarity and food insecurity may explain why labourers appear to be moving farther for work and trade, increasing short-term intraregional mobility.¹¹⁶ Indeed, the majority of migrants surveyed by IOM in the region in 2022 listed travel to conduct commercial activities and travel for a job opportunity as their top reasons for movement (see Figure 11). It is, however, worth noting that many people have multiple reasons for moving, and many survey respondents cited access to services or family unification as secondary reasons, in addition to business or work. The large proportion of people moving primarily for family reasons (24%) further points to the growing interconnectedness of the region.

Instability and political changes are also likely fuelling intraregional movements, even if this was not the main reason surveyed migrants gave for their mobility (see Figure 11). For example, an uptick in violence and conflict in Mozambique in 2022, alongside Tropical Cyclone Freddy in early 2023, likely contributed to increasing food insecurity and vulnerability in the country.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Government of South Africa halted a special category of visas for Zimbabweans in August 2022, which may have also led more Zimbabweans to voluntarily return from South Africa during the year.¹¹⁸

FIGURE 11
Surveyed Migrants’ Top Reasons for Cross-border Movement within or into the Southern Africa Region, 2022



Notes: Data were collected at flow monitoring points in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. This figure displays the top responses from migrants who reported their reason for movement. “Commuting regularly for work” includes movement on a daily or weekly basis. “Access to services” includes access to health care, food and water, and education. “Seasonal migration” includes movement for transhumance, harvesting and mining.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Southern Africa, 2022.

116 Migration Data Portal, “Migration Data in the Southern African Development Community (SADC)”, updated 31 May 2023; Katongo Seyuba and Tània Ferré Garcia, “Climate-Related Security Risks in the SADC Region”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 23 November 2022.

117 Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022* (N.p.: Mixed Migration Centre, 2022).

118 Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022*.

B. *Displacement Crises and Vulnerabilities Grow in Scale and Complexity*

The Southern Africa region is also experiencing significant and growing internal and cross-border displacement connected to conflict, violence and climate change. Southern Africa hosted more than 7.6 million forcibly displaced people in December 2022, up from 7.1 million a year prior.¹¹⁹ Of the 7.6 million forcibly displaced people in Southern Africa, 6.7 million were IDPs and nearly 914,000 were refugees and asylum-seekers. There were 464,000 child refugees and asylum-seekers in the region as of August 2022.¹²⁰

A core challenge for Southern African countries, in addition to the scale of displacements, is the overlapping crises that trigger and exacerbate them. Several long-standing conflicts have displaced large numbers of people, often within the same countries that host refugees from neighbouring countries. Many of these countries are also responding to environmental shocks.

The majority of the forcibly displaced people in the region (6.2 million out of 7.6 million) were displaced, either internally or across international borders, by events in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹²¹ The country is suffering the longest conflict in Africa and had the third largest IDP population in the world in 2022, after the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine.¹²² The situation continued to deteriorate in 2022, with the number of IDPs growing from 5.3 million in 2021 to 5.7 million in 2022.¹²³ Poverty and child malnutrition are widespread, and millions of children are out of school.¹²⁴ Almost 1.1 million of the country's nationals have sought asylum abroad, including in other Southern African countries such as Angola, Malawi, South Africa and Zambia.¹²⁵ At the same time, the Democratic Republic of the Congo hosted more than 522,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from neighbouring countries, mostly from Burundi, the Central African Republic, Rwanda and South Sudan.¹²⁶ This multidirectional displacement highlights the complexity of human mobility dynamics amid multiple overlapping crisis situations. Similarly, Mozambique has the second largest IDP population in the Southern Africa region (mostly due to violence from non-state armed groups and an environmental crisis) and also hosted about 30,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in 2022, many of whom came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹²⁷

119 Authors' analysis of 2022 data from UNHCR, "Population Statistics Database", accessed 30 September 2023.

120 UNHCR, "Global Appeal 2023 – Southern Africa".

121 UNHCR, "UNHCR Calls for Urgent Support for 6.2 million People Forcibly Displaced by Conflict in DR Congo" (press release, 3 June 2023); IOM DTM, "Democratic Republic of the Congo", accessed 11 January 2024.

122 Bilak et al., *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023*.

123 Authors' analysis of 2022 data from UNHCR, "Population Statistics Database".

124 Estimates suggest that 2.6 million children under age 5 lacked food and 4 million children were not attending school. See European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, "The EU Scales Up Assistance to Victims of Forgotten Conflict in Eastern Congo", accessed 11 January 2024.

125 UNHCR, "Democratic Republic of the Congo Situation", accessed 11 January 2024.

126 UNHCR, "Democratic Republic of the Congo Situation".

127 As of the end of 2022, more than 1 million people were internally displaced and had limited access to shelter, food, water and medical services. About 65 per cent of the IDPs recorded in November were newly displaced. By the end of 2022, the share who were newly displaced fell to 35 per cent, indicating a high degree of ongoing displacement. About half of the IDPs recorded in December were children. See Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen, Quarter 4 2022* (N.p.: Mixed Migration Centre, 2023). In 2022, Mozambique also hosted about 30,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers, most of whom came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (37%), followed by Burundi, Somalia and Rwanda. See Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022*.

Despite the scale of conflict and internal displacement in the region, it is striking that most migrants do not attribute their cross-border mobility directly to conflict or violence. As shown in Figure 11, the primary reason surveyed migrants gave for moving was to conduct commercial activities. According to IOM Flow Monitoring Surveys conducted in Southern Africa, less than 1 per cent of migrants departing from the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Mozambique cited war/conflict or having been targeted by violence as their first or second reasons for moving.

Across the Southern Africa region, environmental pressures are exacerbating protection needs.

Across the Southern Africa region, environmental pressures are exacerbating protection needs. The need for food, water and basic services continued to increase in 2023.¹²⁸ For instance, approximately 659,000 people in Malawi, 184,000 in Mozambique and 73,000 in Madagascar were displaced in early 2023 when Tropical Cyclone Freddy caused flooding, landslides and the loss of crops.¹²⁹ These countries saw a rapid increase in the price of food staples and other commodities, worsening levels of food insecurity, and there was a cholera outbreak in Mozambique. The cyclone-related displacement exacerbated the existing vulnerability of these countries' residents, particularly in Mozambique, which has more than 1 million IDPs and tens of thousands of refugees and asylum-seekers.¹³⁰ As a greater number of people are affected by environmental and other crises, their risk for abuse by traffickers and corrupt officials also increases.¹³¹

C. *Labour Migration Rises Post-pandemic, as Does Anti-immigrant Sentiment*

While forced migration is a significant form of mobility in Southern Africa, so too are work- and business-related mobility, especially connected to mining, manufacturing and agriculture. More than half of people surveyed at flow monitoring points in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe – the countries with the largest inflows and outflows in the region – cited either commercial activities or work as the main reason for their journey (29% and 26%, respectively).¹³² Of those surveyed migrants who intended to go to South Africa, employment was an even greater pull: 49 per cent cited work as their main reason for migration, followed by 15 per cent who were travelling for commercial activities.¹³³

South Africa has long been the top regional destination for skilled and unskilled labour migrants, who find and create jobs in the country's prosperous economy.¹³⁴ It is also the largest remittance source country in

128 UNHCR, *Global Appeal 2023* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2023).

129 OCHA, "Southern Africa: Snapshot of Tropical Cyclone Freddy's Impact (February-March 2023)" (fact sheet, 13 May 2023).

130 OCHA, "Southern Africa: Snapshot of Tropical Cyclone Freddy's Impact".

131 United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, "Trafficking in Persons in Humanitarian Crisis" (issue brief #2, June 2017); Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022*.

132 This refers to migrants surveyed at flow monitoring points in these three countries, not necessarily originating from or intending to go there. Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Southern Africa, 2022.

133 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Southern Africa, 2022.

134 Shoghik Hovhannisyan, Christopher Frederick Baum, Helidah Refiloe Atieno and Aditya Sarkar, *Mixed Migration, Forced Displacement and Job Outcomes in South Africa (Vol. 2): Main Report* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2018).

the region, with migrants in South Africa sending about USD 1.1 billion in 2022.¹³⁵ Most migrants live and work in Gauteng, the country's richest province.¹³⁶ It includes Johannesburg, the commercial capital of South Africa, and Ekurhuleni, a manufacturing hub, and offers work opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors. With well-established migration corridors to South Africa and sizable diasporas within the country, migrant workers are employed in a variety of sectors, with greater concentration in labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture, mining, construction, retail and services.¹³⁷

However, South Africa's migrant workers are increasingly portrayed as a cause of high unemployment and other economic challenges,¹³⁸ despite evidence that migrants also create jobs and have higher entrepreneurship rates.¹³⁹ The pandemic worsened economic imbalances and fuelled political rhetoric linking economic troubles as well as crime to migrants.¹⁴⁰ This is not, however, entirely new. Even before the pandemic, the Government of South Africa established strict visa and legal status requirements and limited asylum options.¹⁴¹ And while past several legalization programmes offered pathways to permanent residence, more recent programmes for people from Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Angola only granted temporary status.¹⁴² Amid an economic downturn and with the 2024 election campaigns in the works, there have been growing calls for stronger border security and a more selective immigration system, especially aimed at limiting low-skilled migrant workers.¹⁴³ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media have also reported that police are arresting some irregular migrants and asylum-seekers and, in some cases, demanding bribes.¹⁴⁴

While South Africa remains the top destination for labour migrants in the region, some may be moving elsewhere as anti-immigrant sentiment worsens.¹⁴⁵ Botswana, for example, has been seeing an influx of migrants coming from South Africa, many of whom were thought to have sought asylum there but were forced to leave.¹⁴⁶ In December 2022, Zimbabwe recorded the arrival of more than 20,000 people, mostly returning nationals, who had similarly left South Africa.¹⁴⁷ These outflows come as public sentiment and the policy climate continues to tilt against migrants in South Africa,¹⁴⁸ most recently with a November 2023

135 Global remittances from South Africa grew by 16 per cent between 2020 and 2022, although those from Botswana and Zambia (the region's other economic pillars and migrant destination countries) increased much faster: by 45 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively. See KNOMAD, "Remittances", accessed 11 January 2024.

136 Khangelani Moyo, "South Africa Reckons with Its Status as a Top Immigration Destination, Apartheid History, and Economic Challenges", *Migration Information Source*, 18 November 2021.

137 IOM, *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa*.

138 Marie McAuliffe and Anna Triandafyllidou, eds., *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: IOM, 2021); Sergio Carciotto, "Anti-Foreigner Sentiment Won't Solve South Africa's Labour Woes", Institute for Security Studies, 15 March 2022.

139 Hovhannisyann, Baum, Atieno and Sarkar, *Mixed Migration, Forced Displacement and Job Outcomes in South Africa*.

140 Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, Alia Fakhry and Victoria Rietig, "Migration Policy in South Africa" (German Council on Foreign Relations Report No. 17, September 2021).

141 Kudakwashe Vanyoro, "The Political Work of Migration Governance Binaries: Responses to Zimbabwean 'Survival Migration' at the Zimbabwe-South Africa Border", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2023): 286–312.

142 Moyo, "South Africa Reckons with Its Status as a Top Immigration Destination".

143 Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022*.

144 US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: South Africa", accessed 11 January 2024.

145 Alan Hirsch, "Zimbabwean Migrants: South Africa's Anti-Immigrant Sentiments are Hindering Policy Reform", *The Conversation*, 21 July 2023.

146 Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022*.

147 Mixed Migration Centre, *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East and Southern Africa, Quarter 3 2022*.

148 Steven Lawrence Gordon, "Immigration Policy in South Africa: Public Opinion, Xenophobia and the Search for Progress", in *Migration in Southern Africa*, eds. Pragna Rugunanan and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama (IMISCOE Research Series, Springer, 2022).

proposal from the South Africa Department of Home Affairs that would withdraw the country (as of this writing, temporarily) from the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and create stricter rules on citizenship acquisition.¹⁴⁹

Similar concerns about migration's potential negative impacts on national economies, social cohesion and political stability have been a key stumbling block for efforts to facilitate greater regional mobility in the Southern African Development Community¹⁵⁰ – despite widespread recognition that the region's economic development is tied to its economic integration and that freer mobility is an important element of that. To date, despite agreement on the goal of regional free movement,¹⁵¹ governments in Southern Africa have not been able to translate that agreement into practice, though there have been several promising bilateral arrangements on mobility (e.g. labour mobility agreements between South Africa and Botswana, Lesotho and Eswatini).¹⁵²

6 Refugees from Ukraine and the Changing Face of Conflict-related Displacement

The large-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the most significant displacement crisis in Europe since World War II. Approximately 40 per cent of Ukraine's population of 40 million people needed humanitarian assistance, having been displaced by the war.¹⁵³ Most of the people displaced were Ukrainians who moved either within Ukraine or fled, at least initially, to neighbouring countries – particularly Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, as well as under certain circumstances to Belarus and the Russian Federation. Over the course of 2022, many displaced individuals moved onward to other countries in Europe (e.g. Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany and Spain), while some sought protection outside the region (e.g. in Canada, Israel and the United States).¹⁵⁴ Notably, the displacement of millions of Ukrainians has been followed by an increasingly large number of people crossing back into Ukraine.¹⁵⁵ These return movements have happened alongside significant circular, short-term movements

149 Republic of South Africa, Department of Home Affairs, "Publication of the White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection: Towards a Complete Overhaul of the Migration System in South Africa" (Government Notice No. 4061, 10 November 2023). The proposals outlined in the white paper have been met with significant criticism from both civil society and immigration researchers. See Tamsin Metelerkamp, "Civil Society Slams 'Poorly Drafted' White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection", Daily Maverick, 5 December 2023; Loren Landau and Rebecca Walker, "South Africa's Immigration Proposals Are Based on False Claims and Poor Logic", The Oxford Department of International Development Blog, 7 December 2023.

150 Alan Hirsch, "African Countries Are Stuck on the Free Movement of People. How to Break the Logjam", The Conversation, 16 January 2022.

151 Southern Africa Development Community, "COMESA, SADC and EAC Collaborate to Ease Movement of People and Goods in the Regions to Boost Intra-Regional Trade", updated 14 February 2022. This has also been a goal in Africa's other regional economic communities. See Alan Hirsch, "Free Movement of People across Africa: Regions Are Showing How It Can Work", The Conversation, 19 January 2023.

152 Maunganidze, Fakhry and Rietig, "Migration Policy in South Africa"; Samuel Okunade, "Slow Train Coming: The 'Natural Destiny' of a Borderless Africa?", Mixed Migration Centre, 4 January 2024.

153 IOM, *Ukraine Crisis 2022-2023: 1 Year of Response* (Geneva: IOM, 2023).

154 Eurostat, "Non-EU Citizens Who Fled Ukraine and Were Under Temporary Protection at the End of October 2023" (infographic, 2023); Reuters, "Immigration to Israel from Ukraine, Russia Jumps amid Conflict", Reuters, 10 August 2022; Julia Ainsley, "U.S. Has Admitted 271,000 Ukrainian Refugees since Russian Invasion, Far above Biden's Goal of 100,000", NBC News, 24 February 2023.

155 IOM, *Ukraine Crisis 2022-2023*.

(to visit family, obtain documents, see doctors or for work) between Ukraine and host countries, but also within Ukraine among internally displaced individuals and families.¹⁵⁶

The conflict's effects have not been limited to Ukrainians. IOM estimated that more than 470,000 foreign nationals were in Ukraine before the onset of the war, including many from India, Nigeria and Viet Nam.¹⁵⁷ These individuals included about 76,000 international students, as well as sizeable numbers of business visitors, tourists, asylum-seekers and stateless persons.¹⁵⁸ Many found it difficult to leave Ukraine and faced discrimination and other challenges on the way out.¹⁵⁹ In the Russian Federation, the political repression of opponents of the war, deteriorating economic conditions, and the unpopularity of the military mobilization over the course of 2022 prompted many Russian citizens, particularly men, to leave, including to Georgia, Armenia, Türkiye and the Baltic States as well as far-away destinations such as the United Arab Emirates, Israel and the United States.¹⁶⁰ Although no official emigration data are publicly available, estimates suggest that between 500,000 and 1 million left between February 2022 and mid-2023.¹⁶¹

The conflict has also precipitated some highly innovative policy responses. These include the unprecedented activation of the Temporary Protection Directive by the EU Council on 4 March 2022,¹⁶² and the use of parole and sponsorship in the United States through the Uniting for Ukraine programme.¹⁶³ These responses, the characteristics of the displaced population (relatively affluent and well educated), and the pandemic-driven rise of remote work laid the groundwork for many Ukrainians' early access to the labour market in destination countries while also helping them to remain connected to their home country through remote work and digital education. As the Ukraine crisis continues to evolve, the highly circular and multidirectional nature of movement and the policy innovations and experiments in response may be early signals of shifting global trends in displacement and protection.

A. *Large-scale Displacement Occurs within, out of and back to Ukraine*

The displacement of millions of Ukrainians over the course of 2022 and 2023 has been characterized by four main types of flows: initial large-scale movements to neighbouring countries; subsequent dispersal to other countries within and outside of Europe; significant returns of refugees to Ukraine from abroad and of IDPs to their pre-war places of residence; and short-term, circular migration. The size and direction of these movements reflected not only the initial shock and flight from the Russian Federation's invasion but also the existence of sizable diasporas in certain countries, long-established labour and family migration

156 IOM DTM, *Ukrainians and Third-Country Nationals Crossing back to Ukraine – Q3 2023* (Vienna: IOM, 2023); UNHCR, *Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees and IDPs from Ukraine* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2023).

157 Bram Frouws, "When War Hit Ukraine. Reflections on What It Might Mean for Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policies in Europe", Mixed Migration Centre, 9 March 2022; IOM DTM, "Ukraine Crisis Response: Displacement and Cross-Border Movement of TCNs", accessed 1 December 2023.

158 Frouws, "When War Hit Ukraine".

159 Monika Pronczuk and Ruth Maclean, "Africans Say Ukrainian Authorities Hindered Them from Fleeing", *The New York Times*, 1 March 2022.

160 Anthony Faiola, "Putin's War Prompts Russian Tech Workers to Flee Country in Historic Numbers", *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2022.

161 *The Economist*, "Russians Have Emigrated in Huge Numbers Since the War in Ukraine", *The Economist*, 23 August 2023.

162 European Commission, "Temporary Protection", accessed 12 January 2024.

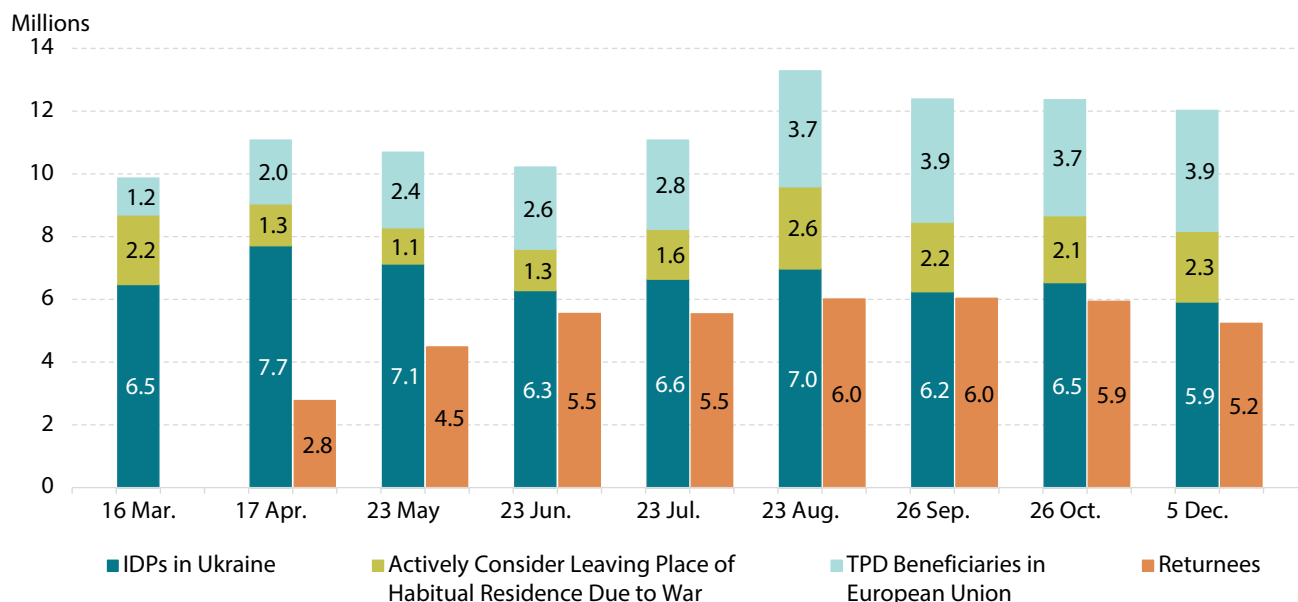
163 Muzaffar Chishti and Jessica Bolter, "Welcoming Afghans and Ukrainians to the United States: A Case in Similarities and Contrasts", *Migration Information Source*, 13 July 2022.

traditions, and humanitarian protection opportunities created with unprecedented urgency for Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians fleeing the war and occupation.¹⁶⁴

In the first three weeks of the war, nearly 10 million people – roughly one quarter of Ukraine’s population – were displaced or intended to leave. This population included close to 6.5 million Ukrainians who became internally displaced (see Figure 12); 2.2 million who were actively looking for ways to leave but could not do so because it was unsafe, they lacked information on where to go, or they did not wish to leave a family member behind; and an estimated 3.1 million people who left the country and sought refuge abroad.¹⁶⁵

FIGURE 12

Estimated Displacement and Return of Ukrainian Nationals, March – December 2022



Notes: “TPD beneficiaries in European Union” refers to Ukrainian nationals who are temporary protection beneficiaries, under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), in the EU-27 countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. Eurostat’s temporary protection beneficiary data refer to the end of each month. IOM data on IDPs in Ukraine, people who are considering leaving their homes due to war, and Ukrainian returnees refer to a specific date within each month, shown in the figure.

Sources: Authors’ analysis of data from Eurostat, “Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection at the End of the Month by Citizenship, Age And Sex – Monthly Data [migr_asypsm]”, accessed 9 January 2024; IOM Ukraine, *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey, Round 12 (23 January 2023)* (Geneva: IOM, 2023).

Large number of Ukrainians left, at least at first, to neighbouring countries, leveraging their visa-free travel access to the European Union¹⁶⁶ as well as to the Republic of Moldova. Within the first three weeks, IOM recorded 2.3 million border crossings by Ukrainians, including 1.6 million into Poland (representing 71%), followed by crossings into the Republic of Moldova (13%) and Slovakia and Romania (about 8% each), as shown in Figure 13. After the initial exodus in the first several weeks, the number of border crossings from Ukraine stabilized; Poland still received the largest numbers, but these were not as dramatically high. The choice of initial destinations was not driven by geographic proximity alone. Even before the war, approximately 1.4 million Ukrainians resided and worked in Poland, with many moving back and forth

164 Maciej Duszczyk and Paweł Kaczmarczyk, “The War in Ukraine and Migration to Poland: Outlook and Challenges”, *Intereconomics* 57, no. 3 (2022).

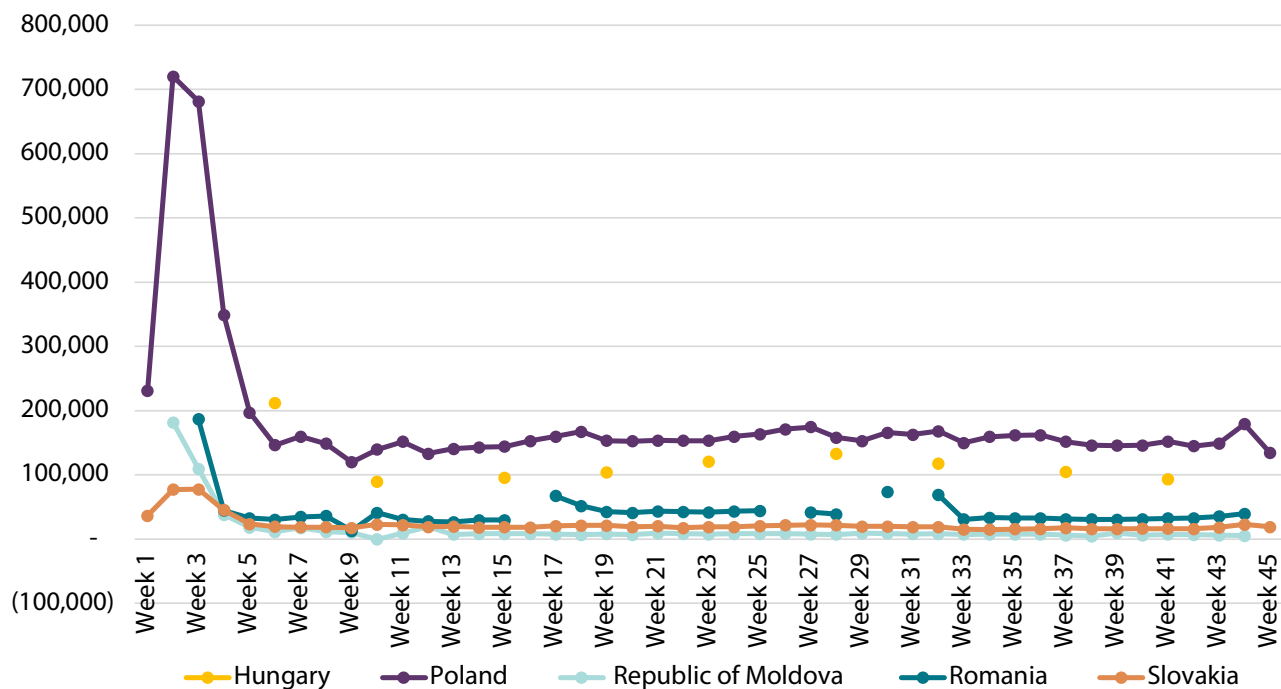
165 IOM Ukraine, *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey, Round 1 (16 March 2022)* (Geneva: IOM, 2022).

166 European Union External Action, “Visa-Free Travel for Ukrainians Comes into Force”, updated 11 June 2017.

between the two countries, taking advantage of well-established migrant and labour recruitment networks and available work permits.¹⁶⁷ The Republic of Moldova, which per capita received the largest number of Ukrainian arrivals following the onset of the war, was a choice for many who had family and friends in the country as well as some drawn by the country’s linguistic, cultural and social similarities.¹⁶⁸

Ukrainians also moved further west, as opportunities in other EU countries opened. These destinations also reflected the presence of diaspora populations and migrant networks throughout Europe, including in Germany, Czechia, Spain and Italy, that shared information about labour-market opportunities, access to accommodation, and available social support.¹⁶⁹ When the EU Council triggered the Temporary Protection Directive in early March 2022, newly displaced Ukrainians – as well as those living abroad who could not return to Ukraine – became eligible for residence status and immediate rights to work, education and benefits. Close to 1.2 million Ukrainians received temporary protection by the end of March 2022 (see Figure 12). Some Ukrainians also left for the Russian Federation, voluntarily or by coercion.¹⁷⁰ Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that more than 1.2 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded in the Russian Federation as of mid-2023.¹⁷¹

FIGURE 13
Border Crossings by Ukrainian Nationals to Selected Destination Countries, by Week of the Displacement Crisis, 2022



Note: Whereas IOM collected border crossing data for most of Ukraine’s neighbouring countries nearly every week, data for Hungary were collected less frequently and are therefore shown as individual data points.
Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Border Crossings data set, 2022.

167 Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, “The War in Ukraine and Migration to Poland”.
168 UNHCR Protection Working Group, “Protection Brief #1: Republic of Moldova” (brief, September 2023).
169 Hugo Brady, “Europe’s Ukrainian Refugee Crisis: What We Know So Far”, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 28 February 2022.
170 Erol Yayboke, Anastasia Strouboulis and Abigail Edwards, “Update on Forced Displacement around Ukraine”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 3 October 2022.
171 UNHCR, “Ukraine Refugee Situation”, accessed 1 December 2023.

The number of displaced people abroad and in Ukraine remained high over the course of 2022 (see Figure 12). By December 2022, 5.9 million people were still displaced in Ukraine, including 680,000 who had been displaced in the past 30 days, highlighting how unstable the situation remained for many.¹⁷² At the same time, 3.9 million Ukrainians were beneficiaries of temporary protection elsewhere in Europe.

As the war continued and active fighting was concentrated in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, many Ukrainians sought to return home. By December 2022, IOM estimated that more than 5.2 million people had returned to their place of origin within Ukraine, 23 per cent of whom had returned from abroad.¹⁷³ The number of people crossing the border back into Ukraine began to pick up as early as mid-April 2022, but for most, displacement was protracted. Many IDPs within Ukraine have similarly seen their displacement stretch on; at the beginning of 2023, the majority had been displaced for more than 241 days.¹⁷⁴ Surveys with Ukrainian refugees suggest that a large minority move back and forth for family, health care, work and other reasons. One survey conducted in April and May 2023 showed that 39 per cent of Ukrainians living in other European countries had returned to Ukraine at least once.¹⁷⁵ To some degree, these short-term, circular movements reflect pre-war labour and family migration patterns between Ukraine and countries such as Poland and the Republic of Moldova.¹⁷⁶

The number of people crossing the border back into Ukraine began to pick up as early as mid-April 2022, but for most, displacement was protracted.

While the overwhelming majority of people displaced by the war have been Ukrainian nationals, the conflict has also affected a sizeable number of non-Ukrainians. Approximately 602,000 border crossings by non-Ukrainian third-country nationals from Ukraine into neighbouring EU countries and the Republic of Moldova took place during 2022, peaking in March.¹⁷⁷ While Ukrainians overwhelmingly went to Poland in the first four weeks of the war, third-country nationals had more mixed initial destinations. Poland was the top destination (53% of border crossings in the first four weeks), but notable shares also went to Romania (21%), the Republic of Moldova (18%) and Slovakia (9%), as shown in Figure 14.

Of the third-country nationals arriving in Poland, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia, the 10 largest groups from non-OECD Member States were from Türkiye, India, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Nigeria and Turkmenistan.¹⁷⁸

172 IOM Ukraine, *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey, Round 11 (25 November – 5 December 2022)* (Geneva: IOM, 2022).

173 IOM Ukraine, *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report, Round 11*.

174 IOM Ukraine, *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey, Round 12 (23 January 2023)* (Geneva: IOM, 2023).

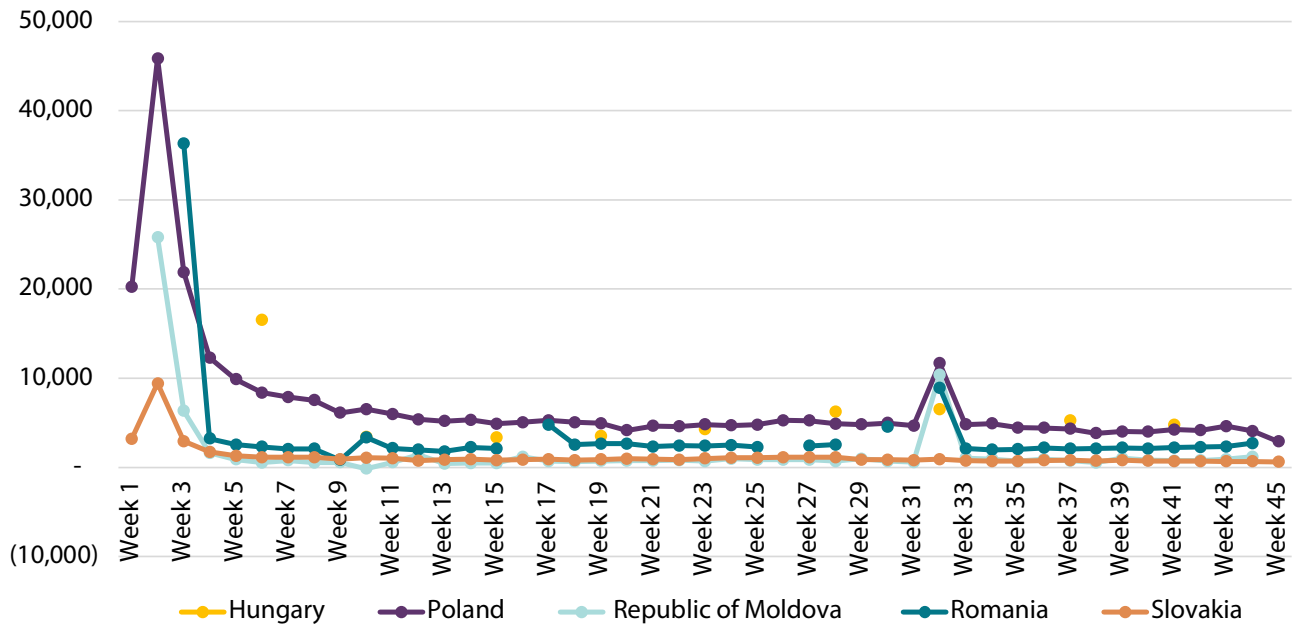
175 UNHCR, *Lives on Hold*.

176 Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, "The War in Ukraine and Migration to Poland"; Constant Méheut, "For Ukrainian Refugees, Seeing the Doctor Can Be Worth a Risky Trip Home", *The New York Times*, 14 November 2023.

177 IOM DTM, *Displacement and Cross-Border Movements of Third-Country Nationals from Ukraine to Neighbouring Countries and in Europe* (Vienna: IOM Regional Office for South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2023).

178 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Border Crossings data set, 2022.

FIGURE 14

Border Crossings of Non-Ukrainian Third-country Nationals to Selected Destination Countries, by Week of the Displacement Crisis, 2022

Notes: Whereas IOM collected border crossing data for most of Ukraine's neighbouring countries nearly every week, data for Hungary were collected less frequently and are therefore shown as individual data points. "Third-country nationals" in this figure refers to all nationalities except the destination countries' own nationals and Ukrainian nationals.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Border Crossings data set, 2022.

B. A Warm Welcome Hints at New Paradigms of Temporary Integration

One bright spot in this humanitarian crisis was the warm reception that refugees from Ukraine received. With most countries condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine,¹⁷⁹ many governments pledged to not only provide financial and military aid to Ukraine but also to open their doors to fleeing refugees.¹⁸⁰

Temporary protection in Europe became a lifeline for millions displaced by the war. By the end of October 2023, more than 4.2 million non-EU citizens were registered as beneficiaries of temporary protection across the European Union.¹⁸¹ This population included 4.16 million Ukrainian citizens and more than 76,000 third-country nationals from other countries who had fled Ukraine, including the Russian Federation, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Morocco and the Republic of Moldova.¹⁸² The United States also extended protections to Ukrainians, particularly after significant numbers began arriving at the US–Mexico border. Protection initially took the form of Temporary Protected Status, which grants individuals who are of a certain

179 Matthew Parry and Ionel Zamfir, "Russia's War on Ukraine: International Reactions" (brief, European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2022).

180 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, M. Murat Erdoğan and Lucía Salgado, *Confronting Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Arc of Public Support for Displaced Populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2024).

181 Authors' analysis of data from Eurostat, "Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection at the End of the Month by Citizenship, Age and Sex – Monthly Data [migr_asytpsm]", updated 9 January 2024.

182 Eurostat, "Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection".

nationality, present in the United States, and unable to return to their country due to violent conflict or natural disaster permission to stay, work and access some forms of assistance for a specified period. Then in April 2022, the US Government announced Uniting for Ukraine – a special programme allowing US residents to sponsor Ukrainians for admission. Approximately 176,000 people had been paroled into the United States under this programme as of November 2023, and an additional 26,000 had obtained Temporary Protected Status as of September 2023.¹⁸³ Canada also created an emergency programme approving more than 451,000 temporary residence applications from Ukrainian nationals and their families, however many of the initial registrants did not ultimately move to Canada, suggesting some Ukrainians many have had multiple options and selected other destinations.¹⁸⁴

Temporary protection initiatives in Europe and elsewhere had the benefit of facilitating refugees' immediate access to the labour market, but the integration of Ukrainians on the move has been a mixed picture.

Temporary protection initiatives in Europe and elsewhere had the benefit of facilitating refugees' immediate access to the labour market, but the integration of Ukrainians on the move has been a mixed picture.¹⁸⁵ In IOM's 2022 surveys¹⁸⁶ in seven EU Member States,¹⁸⁷ the Republic of Moldova, Belarus and Türkiye, 80 per cent of surveyed Ukrainians were women. Almost half of respondents (47%) were travelling with children. Family responsibilities, along with accommodation and transportation challenges and language barriers, likely made it difficult for many newcomers to access work immediately on arrival, despite the relatively seamless legal access to the labour market.¹⁸⁸ At the same time, many displaced Ukrainians have relatively high levels of education and/or were working in high-skilled sectors back home, and most adults were of working age – characteristics that bode well for their integration into host countries' workforces.¹⁸⁹ By the end of 2022, many Ukrainians were able to find work in their host countries, but research points to a degree of "brain waste" (underemployment), with some taking jobs below their education level, as well as some employers' reluctance to invest in hiring or training workers whose status may run out or who may choose to return to Ukraine.¹⁹⁰ In addition, many Ukrainians continued to work for

183 Data on the number of parolees under the Uniting for Ukraine programme (as of November 2023) are from Jeanne Batalova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States", *Migration Information Source*, 13 March 2024. Data on the number of Ukrainians with Temporary Protected Status (as of September 2023) are from Jill Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2023).

184 Migration Policy Institute (MPI), "Top 10 Migration Issues of 2022", *Migration Information Source*, December 2022.

185 IOM, *Access to Labour Markets and Employment in Europe for Refugees from Ukraine* (Vienna: IOM Regional Office for South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2023); IOM, *Ukrainian and Third-Country Nationals under Temporary Protection in Sweden* (Vienna: IOM Regional Office for South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, June 2023).

186 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Regional Needs and Intentions Survey, 2022; IOM, "Ukraine Response", updated 7 February 2023.

187 These countries are Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

188 Maria Vincenza Desiderio and Kate Hooper, *Displaced Ukrainians in European Labour Markets: Leveraging Innovations for More Inclusive Integration* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2023).

189 According to the authors' analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Regional Needs and Intentions Survey from 2022, 31 per cent reported having completed either a bachelor's or an advanced degree. Of survey respondents in Romania, 39 per cent reported holding professional or managerial positions in Ukraine. Across the nine countries in the survey, 18 per cent of surveyed adults were between age 18 and 29 and an additional 55 per cent were between age 30 and 49, highlighting the fact that the majority of arriving Ukrainians were of prime working or college-going age. See IOM, "Ukraine Response". See also European Union Agency for Asylum, "Surveys with Arriving Migrants from Ukraine: Employment – Education" (Thematic Fact Sheet Issue 2, October 2023).

190 Desiderio and Hooper, *Displaced Ukrainians in European Labour Markets*.

Ukrainian firms (or in the case of school-age children, to study through the Ukrainian education system) remotely – a new development and type of diaspora engagement in conflict-related displacement.¹⁹¹

Overall, and despite the relatively warm welcome, the speed and scale of displacement from Ukraine placed huge pressure on public services and housing, especially in Europe. Countries hosting large numbers of Ukrainians had to quickly muster the resources needed to accommodate newcomers, who arrived in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis across Europe. These arrivals coincided with housing shortages and spiking rent prices in multiple countries, including Poland, Germany and Ireland.¹⁹² Meanwhile, children needed access to schooling, families needed psychosocial support, and adults needed to find jobs and ways to sustain themselves. And despite the relatively favourable standing of temporary protection recipients compared to others who arrive in Europe seeking protection (see Section 7 on irregular migration to

Some of these reception and integration challenges were more acute or simply different for non-Ukrainians fleeing Ukraine.

Europe), displaced Ukrainians demonstrated some vulnerabilities. For instance, according to an IOM survey of immediate needs in 2022, 43 per cent of respondents reported experiencing some degree of financial hardship and 31 per cent reported needing health services.¹⁹³ Respondents also highlighted their need for transportation support, food and household goods, and employment. The

language barrier was an important obstacle in terms of accessing information, services and employment. To overcome this, 26 per cent of surveyed Ukrainians said they would like access to language courses. Where possible, Ukrainian temporary protection beneficiaries were able to tap into assistance provided by governments and NGOs to help meet these needs.¹⁹⁴

Some of these reception and integration challenges were more acute or simply different for non-Ukrainians fleeing Ukraine. The profile and experiences of these third-country nationals in 2022 were also somewhat different from those of displaced Ukrainians. Notably, they were more likely to be young, single men travelling alone.¹⁹⁵ In the same 2022 IOM survey, 39 per cent reported transportation support and 37 per cent cited household goods as among their most pressing needs, followed by other forms of assistance such as personal hygiene supplies and accommodations.

The use of temporary protection in Europe also raised questions about how to adapt integration policies that had been designed for people settling permanently in a country to suit the situation and needs of people who may wish to return to Ukraine when the war is over. Several governments initially excluded temporary protection beneficiaries from the benefits or services extended to refugees granted permanent status, while others sought to develop more flexible and lighter-touch, less resource-intensive integration programmes.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, because the Temporary Protection Directive was interpreted differently by different EU Member States, over time divergent policies and practices emerged that could affect mobility, including short-term trips to Ukraine. For instance, while France, Italy and Romania placed no restrictions

191 Caitlin Katsiifas, Justyna Segeš Frelak and Camilla Castelanelli, “Displacement, Integration, and Return: What Remote Work Possibilities for Ukrainians?”, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 21 February 2023.

192 Lucía Salgado and Meghan Benton, “Integration Policy for Troubled Times: Building Inclusive Societies amid Disruptions” (working paper prepared for a meeting of MPI Europe’s Integration Future working group, Prague, 16 December 2022).

193 Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Regional Needs and Intentions Survey, 2022.

194 European Council, “EU Solidarity with Ukraine”, accessed 12 January 2024.

195 Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM Ukraine Regional Needs and Intentions Survey, 2022.

196 Salgado and Benton, “Integration Policy for Troubled Times”.

on short-term movements to Ukraine (as of March 2023), Finland, Poland and Croatia required travellers to notify authorities before leaving.¹⁹⁷ And in Malta, any trip to Ukraine, however short, would result in the loss of temporary protection, although it is possible to reapply for it.¹⁹⁸

In 2024, the fate of the war in Ukraine remains uncertain, as is the future for refugees from Ukraine across Europe and globally. It is unclear how many will eventually return, how many will seek to settle in the countries where they sought refuge (especially with the extension of the Temporary Protection Directive through March 2025),¹⁹⁹ and how many will move elsewhere. Whenever and however the war ends, immense financial, economic and labour resources will be needed for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction.²⁰⁰ Estimates by the Ukrainian Government suggest that more than 4.5 million workers will be needed to help the country's economy recover in the first decade after the conflict ends.²⁰¹ The Ukrainian diaspora, returnees and potentially other migrants and displaced people will play a key role. More broadly, the long-term outcomes of this bold experiment in the use of temporary protection will hold important lessons for how policymakers respond to future displacement crises.²⁰²

7 Revived Irregular Migration to Europe

Europe has long been a major destination for migrants, both regular and irregular and moving for varied reasons. Irregular crossings into the European Union in recent years have been small compared to the 2015–2016 spike in arrivals that rocked the continent. The pandemic brought a lull, but the post-pandemic period is in some ways echoing the 2015–2016 surge in refugee and irregular migrant arrivals, especially as some destinations and corridors (namely Italy and the Central Mediterranean route) have seen levels return to those not seen since 2016.²⁰³ Since irregular migration bounced back from the initial pandemic slowdown, it has been on an upward trajectory: there were 151,500 arrivals in 2021, close to 190,000 in 2022, and more than 214,000 arrivals within the first nine months of 2023.²⁰⁴

Diversity in migrants' countries of origin, reasons for migration and protection needs make these arrivals to Europe truly "mixed flows". In IOM's 2022 Flow Monitoring Surveys, around 43 per cent of surveyed migrants reported economic conditions as the main reason for their journey, while an additional 30 per cent reported war and conflict as the main drivers.²⁰⁵ The top nationalities of arriving refugees and migrants are also constantly shifting. Although North Africans (notably Tunisians, Moroccans and Algerians) were the top nationalities of arrivals in 2021, people from the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan and Bangladesh were

197 European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "Measures in Response to the Arrival of Displaced People Fleeing the War in Ukraine" (information sheet, 31 March 2023).

198 European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "Measures in Response to the Arrival of Displaced People".

199 Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, "Temporary Protection Directive for Refugees from Ukraine Extended until 4 March 2025" (news release, 28 September 2023).

200 Mark Volynski, "The Road to Recovery: Ukraine's Economic Challenges and Opportunities", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 11 September 2023.

201 UN News, "Interview: Planning the Post-Invasion Return of Citizens to Ukraine", updated 8 October 2023.

202 Andrew Selee, Susan Fratzke, Samuel Davidoff-Gore and Luisa Feline Freier, *Expanding Protection Options? Flexible Approaches to Status for Displaced Syrians, Venezuelans, and Ukrainians* (Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2024).

203 Arrivals hit this point in September 2023. See IOM DTM, "Migration Flow to Europe: Arrivals", updated 31 December 2023.

204 IOM DTM, *Quarterly Regional Report: DTM Europe (July – September 2023)* (Vienna: IOM, 2023). IOM data are based on displacement tracking data and figures from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain.

205 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Surveys, Spain, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, 2022. References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

the largest groups in 2022, and the Syrian Arab Republic, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire were the top countries of origin in 2023.²⁰⁶ Irregular migrants to Europe skew towards a younger demographic, and young men remain the largest group; more than 87 per cent of migrants surveyed by IOM in 2022 were men, and more than three quarters were under age 30. At the same time, the number of children arriving irregularly in Europe is on the rise, increasing by 41 per cent between 2021 and 2022 to about 35,000.²⁰⁷ About two thirds of all children arriving irregularly in Europe were registered as unaccompanied or separated in 2022, and the number of unaccompanied and separated children applying for asylum in Europe increased by almost 60 per cent from 2021 to 2022.²⁰⁸

The number of children arriving irregularly in Europe is on the rise, increasing by 41 per cent between 2021 and 2022 to about 35,000.

The post-pandemic period has also seen intense politicization of immigration and asylum in Europe, as well as strong efforts to build a coordinated EU policy for a new migration age with the bloc's New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Several far-right populist parties have gained unprecedented electoral success and in some cases government positions, including in Sweden (where the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats have a confidence and supply agreement with the ruling Moderate Party); in Italy (where Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy political party was elected prime minister in 2022); and the Kingdom of the Netherlands (where the far-right Party for Freedom captured the largest vote share in the 2023 election). Alongside these electoral shifts, Europe's neighbours have exploited anxieties about migration and leveraged their ability to constrain or facilitate transit through their territory to Europe to extract concessions and agreements from the bloc. In 2020, for example, Türkiye suspended the EU–Türkiye statement (an agreement whereby it would help prevent arrivals to the Greek islands and facilitate returns), and in 2021, the Belarussian Government sought to attract migrants and refugees into the country and encourage them to move onward to the EU Member States of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (through the Eastern route).

In such a fraught political landscape – and after seven years of lengthy negotiations – many observers doubted that the New Pact on Migration and Asylum would be agreed. However, the landmark agreement between EU Member States and the European Parliament, reached in December 2023, promises a sea change in how irregular arrivals are processed and managed.²⁰⁹

A. As Sea Arrivals Shift Towards the Central Mediterranean, Italy Looks to New Solutions

The bulk of irregular arrivals into the European Union occur by water. Arrivals by sea made up 75 per cent of all irregular arrivals to Europe in 2021, rising to 79 per cent in 2022 and 90 per cent in 2023.²¹⁰ These sea crossing are by far the most dangerous routes for migrants and refugees, with recorded deaths rising

206 IOM DTM, "Migration Flow to Europe: Arrivals".

207 IOM DTM, "Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe – Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated" (data brief, October 2023).

208 IOM, "Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe". Note that as of this writing, 2023 figures were unpublished.

209 Hanne Beirens and Camille Le Coz, "One Phase Closes for the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Now Another Begins" (commentary, MPI, December 2023).

210 IOM DTM, *Quarterly Regional Report: DTM Europe (October – December 2021)* (Vienna: IOM, 2022); IOM, "Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overview (October – December 2022)" (data set, February 2023); IOM DTM, "Migration Flow to Europe: Arrivals".

along with arrivals. They have also become trigger points for European anxieties about irregular migration. Arrivals to Italy in particular reached highs in 2022 and 2023 that had not been seen since 2016, creating huge pressure on the Italian Government and the European Union to manage this growing political and humanitarian crisis.²¹¹

In the years following the pandemic, sea crossings have increasingly followed the Central Mediterranean route, and in particular departures from the Northern African countries of Libya and Tunisia towards Italy. Most migrants and refugees arriving in Europe irregularly by sea have traversed the Central Mediterranean to reach Italy: 44 per cent in 2022 and 63 per cent in the first nine months of 2023.²¹² Flow Monitoring Surveys conducted in Libya in 2022 also show that migrants departing from Libya favour migration towards Italy, rather than to countries further west such as Spain.²¹³

This increase in crossings via the Central Mediterranean route has prompted a number of policy responses, on the part of both the Italian Government and the European Union. In the first half of 2023, the Italian Government visited Tunisia several times to discuss resources and efforts to help step up enforcement to stop departures. And in July 2023, Tunisia and the European Union struck a controversial deal, centred on hundreds of millions of euros in EU development and security assistance in exchange for redoubled efforts to help manage migrant flows.²¹⁴ The European Commission also voiced continued support for Libya and Egypt through 2023, providing their national authorities with search-and-rescue vessels and additional funds to assist with border management.²¹⁵ In November 2023, policymakers announced a five-year deal between Italy and Albania that would allow for up to 3,000 migrants at a time to be temporarily sheltered in processing centres in Albania while Italy processed their asylum applications.²¹⁶ As of February 2024, both chambers of the Italian parliament, alongside Albania's parliament and Constitutional Court, had approved the deal, though it remains to be seen how the plan will unfold in practice.²¹⁷

While the Central Mediterranean route and Italy have played a more prominent role in the post-pandemic years, Spain continues to receive the second largest number of irregular migrants and refugees to Europe. It is the primary destination for those travelling along the Western Mediterranean route. Although Spain has taken many measures to address irregular crossings in the post-pandemic years (notably, increasing cooperation with Morocco on security and smuggling),²¹⁸ the country saw a remarkable resurgence in arrivals in 2023. Spanish officials recorded almost 57,000 irregular arrivals in 2023, compared to 31,000 in

211 IOM DTM, "Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Overview (2016)" (data brief, January 2017); IOM DTM, "Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Overview (2015)" (data brief, January 2016); IOM, "Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Overview Maps (Jan–Dec 2022)" (infographics, March 2023).

212 IOM DTM, *Quarterly Regional Report: DTM Europe (July – September 2023)*; IOM DTM, *Quarterly Regional Report: DTM Europe (April – June 2023)*.

213 IOM and UNHCR, "Migrant and Refugee Movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea" (Joint Annual Overview, 2022). IOM surveyed 1,521 migrants in Libya in 2022, and 43.59 per cent listed Italy as their intended country of final destination, followed by France (19.66%) and Germany (10.39%). Only 2.24 per cent of migrants listed Spain.

214 Al Jazeera, "EU to Start Releasing Money to Tunisia under Migration Pact", Al Jazeera, 22 September 2023.

215 Statewatch, "EU Planning New Anti-Migration Deals with Egypt and Tunisia, Unrepentant in Support for Libya", Statewatch, 16 November 2023.

216 Frances D'Emilio, "Albania Agrees to Temporarily House Migrants Who Reach Italy while Their Asylum Bids Are Processed", AP News, 6 November 2023.

217 Fatos Bytyci, "Albanian Parliament Ratifies Migration Centres Deal with Italy", Reuters, 22 February 2024; AP News, "Italy's Upper Chamber Gives Final OK to Deal with Albania to House Migrants during Asylum Process", AP News, 15 February 2024.

218 Tasnim Abderrahim, *Morocco: Irregular Migration Ebbs as Rabat Cracks Down on Human Smuggling* (Geneva: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

2022.²¹⁹ This increase in 2023 has been felt at nearly all major entry points into Spain, but more than half of arrivals in 2023 were registered in the Canary Islands.²²⁰ Notable exceptions to this trend are the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which have seen arrivals decrease following a June 2022 incident in Melilla in which more than 1,300 migrants and refugees clashed with border authorities while attempting to cross into the enclave, resulting in the deaths of 23 migrants and 2 police officers.²²¹

One of the reasons for the increased arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route has been changing conditions in origin and destination countries in Northern Africa. In 2020 and 2021, pandemic-era lockdowns and other public health measures devastated North African countries' economies, and many people working in hard-hit sectors such as tourism sought to move to Europe as opportunities at home diminished.²²² Then, when pandemic travel measures were eased in 2022, Libyan departures rose to the highest level in five years and the number of migrants arriving in Europe after having left Tunisia similarly hit record highs.²²³ In 2023, in a break from historical trends, Tunisia surpassed Libya as the main country of departure for migrants arriving in Italy.²²⁴ This has come amid an economic crisis in Tunisia, escalating discrimination against sub-Saharan Africans, and increasing anti-migrant rhetoric from the president, who called for a halt to sub-Saharan African migration to the country and claimed migration is part of a wider conspiracy to change the demographic make-up of the country.²²⁵

Although migrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries have long headed to Europe in large numbers, sub-Saharan Africans currently make up a larger portion of both migrants arriving in Europe and migrants present in North Africa.²²⁶ As of December

Changes in the nationalities of migrant populations may be indicative of changes in motivations for coming to Europe, which have broad implications for both Europe and Northern Africa.

2023, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire were in the top five nationalities of arrivals to Europe, collectively responsible for almost 36,000 arrivals in 2023, compared to 13,400 in 2022.²²⁷ Moreover, according to IOM estimates from July – September 2023, there were more than 697,000 migrants residing within Libya's borders, with the largest nationalities being

Nigerians, Egyptians, Sudanese and Chadian.²²⁸ Changes in the nationalities of migrant populations may be indicative of changes in motivations for coming to Europe, which have broad implications for both Europe

219 Government of Spain, Ministry of the Interior, "Inmigración Irregular 2023", accessed 12 March 2024.

220 IOM DTM, "Migration Flow to Europe: Arrivals".

221 Human Rights Watch, "Spain/Morocco: No Justice for Deaths at Melilla Border", Human Rights Watch, 22 June 2023; Guy Hedgecoe, "Melilla Migrant Deaths Spark Anger in Spain", BBC, 27 June 2022.

222 Samuel Davidoff-Gore, *Diverging Paths: The Impacts of COVID-19 on Migration in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2024).

223 CBS News, "Europe Saw Unauthorized Migrant Entry Attempts Hit a Six-Year High in 2022", CBS News, 13 January 2023; IOM and UNHCR, "Migrant and Refugee Movements". In 2022, there were 53,300 departures from Libya towards Italy and 32,400 departures from Tunisia to Italy.

224 Malcolm H. Kerr Middle East Center and The Global Initiative, "Leveraging Flows: The Surge in Irregular Migration from Tunisia to Europe" (event, 12 July 2023); Davidoff-Gore, *Diverging Paths*.

225 President Kais Saied has claimed that irregular migration to Tunisia from sub-Saharan Africa is driven by an "undeclared goal ... [t]o consider Tunisia a purely African country that has no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic nations." See Simon Speakman Cordall, "Tunisia's President Calls for Halt to Sub-Saharan Immigration Amid Crackdown on Opposition", *The Guardian*, 23 February 2023.

226 The composition of migrants moving to North Africa and onward to Europe has changed over time, as the early years of the COVID-19 crisis saw increased departures of North African countries' nationals and subsequent years have seen increased movement from sub-Saharan Africa. See Davidoff-Gore, *Diverging Paths*.

227 IOM DTM, "Migration Flow to Europe: Arrivals".

228 IOM DTM, *Libya – Migrant Report 49 (July – September 2023)* (Tripoli: IOM, 2024).

and Northern Africa in terms of the pathways available to migrants and how movement is managed. For example, in 2022 IOM Flow Monitoring Surveys conducted in Spain, migrants from sub-Saharan countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and the Sudan were more likely to list personal or targeted violence as the main reason for their journey in comparison to North African migrants such as those from Morocco or Algeria.²²⁹ It is also worth noting that sub-Saharan Africa is among the youngest regions in the world, a trend that has accelerated rapidly in recent years and is likely to affect future migration to Europe.²³⁰

Amid rising arrivals, the Mediterranean has also seen an analogous rise in deaths (see Box 2). The Central Mediterranean route to Italy is considered the deadliest migration route in the world, and thus rising use of this route prompted an increase in search-and-rescue operations in 2022 and 2023.²³¹ Nonetheless, government-led rescue efforts have often been

insufficient, with delays in government-led rescues in the Central Mediterranean reportedly a factor in at least six deadly incidents in the first quarter of 2023 alone.²³² NGOs, which have sought to fill some of these gaps, have faced numerous legal challenges and laws limiting their search-and-rescue operations.²³³ For example, early in 2023, Italy approved a new decree that requires NGO search-and-rescue vessels to return to port immediately after a rescue, rather than attempting multiple rescues on the same voyage.²³⁴ Six NGO rescue vessels were detained by Italian authorities within the first nine months of 2023 for violating the law.²³⁵

NGOs, which have sought to fill some of these gaps, have faced numerous legal challenges and laws limiting their search-and-rescue operations.

229 In 2022 IOM Flow Monitoring Surveys conducted in Spain, 92 of the 255 surveyed migrants from Côte d'Ivoire or Senegal (36%) listed personal or targeted violence as the main reason for their journey, while 124 (49%) listed economic reasons. In comparison, 28 of the 278 surveyed migrants from Morocco or Algeria (10%) listed personal or targeted violence as the main reason, while 175 (63%) listed economic reasons. All migrants reported having a destination country in the European Union.

230 By 2050, it is projected that more than one third of the world's population between age 15 and 24 will come from Africa. More than one in four young people in Africa are not enrolled in any form of employment, education or training. See Vipasana Karkee and Niall O'Higgins, "African Youth Face Pressing Challenges in the Transition from School to Work", International Labour Organization, 10 August 2023; *The New York Times*, "Old World, Young Africa", *The New York Times*, 28 October 2023.

231 IOM, "Mediterranean Shipwreck Sounds Alarm for Lifesaving Action" (news release, 19 December 2023); Emma Ogao, "Deaths on the Central Mediterranean Rise to the Highest Level since 2017", ABC News, 22 November 2023.

232 IOM, "Deadliest Quarter for Migrants in the Central Mediterranean since 2017" (news release, 12 April 2023).

233 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "June 2023 Update – Search and Rescue Operations in the Mediterranean and Fundamental Rights", updated 11 October 2023.

234 Angelo Amante, "Italy Approves Clampdown on Migrant Rescue Ships", Reuters, 23 February 2023.

235 Doctors Without Borders, "The New Normal of EU Migration Policies in the Central Mediterranean", updated 21 November 2023.

BOX 2**Deaths and Harms along the Northern Africa–Mediterranean Corridor**

Sea crossings pose an incredible human – and therefore policy – challenge because of the massive risk of harm and death. Among Mediterranean routes, the Central Mediterranean route was responsible for almost 60 per cent of all migrants recorded as dead or missing in 2022. Deaths in the Mediterranean have been steadily increasing year to year, from 2,048 in 2021 to 2,411 in 2022 and more than 3,000 in 2023. Almost 2,500 of those deaths in 2023 occurred on the Central Mediterranean route. Deaths also increased along the Atlantic route towards the Canary Islands, from 559 in 2022 to 959 in 2023. IOM's estimates of migrant deaths are likely an undercount due to lack of official reporting and limited knowledge of the true scale of shipwrecks and incidents in the Mediterranean. Most of these deaths at sea occurred off the coast of Libya, largely because of shipwrecks.

Migrants also experience risks along the broader corridor into Europe, and these may grow along with the rising proportion of sub-Saharan Africans seeking entry. There were a recorded 203 deaths on land routes in Northern Africa in 2022, more than half within the Sahara Desert. Human rights violations and abuses of migrants in Libya have also been frequently reported and, with limited access to safe and regular mobility pathways, many migrants see no other option but to accept the risks of a sea journey or assisted voluntary return to their origin countries.

Sources: IOM and UNHCR, “Migrant and Refugee Movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea” (Joint Annual Overview, 2022); IOM, “Missing Migrant Project – Migration within the Mediterranean”, updated 10 January 2024; IOM, “Missing Migrant Project – Migration in Africa”, updated 10 January 2024; IOM, “Missing Migrants Project – Annual Regional Overview: Middle East and North Africa (January-December 2022)” (fact sheet, 2023); United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Nowhere but Back: Assisted Return, Reintegration and the Human Rights Protection of Migrants in Libya* (Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2022).

B. The Balkan Route Takes on Greater Significance

Aside from migration to Europe by sea, particularly from North Africa, many migrants and refugees enter through the European Union's eastern land borders. Along this corridor, individuals primarily from the Middle East transit through non-EU countries with the hopes of eventually reaching an EU country. In recent years, many arrivals in Europe via this route are from Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic – countries whose nationals have had asylum applications approved at relatively high rates in Europe. This indicator of protection needs is in line with the findings of IOM surveys, in which many migrants in the Western Balkans indicated that their main reason for moving is war or conflict.²³⁶ These humanitarian considerations have at times come into conflict with political ones, especially amid concerns about secondary movement of migrants to other parts of Europe.

Movements²³⁷ through the Western Balkans have been on the rise since 2021, but they appear to have stabilized in 2023. For example, according to IOM estimates, in 2021 there were close to 20,000 registered arrivals to Bulgaria and Greece (EU Member States with land borders in the Balkans), rising to 35,000 arrivals in 2022 and further to almost 65,000 arrivals in 2023.²³⁸ According to Frontex data, land arrivals in three

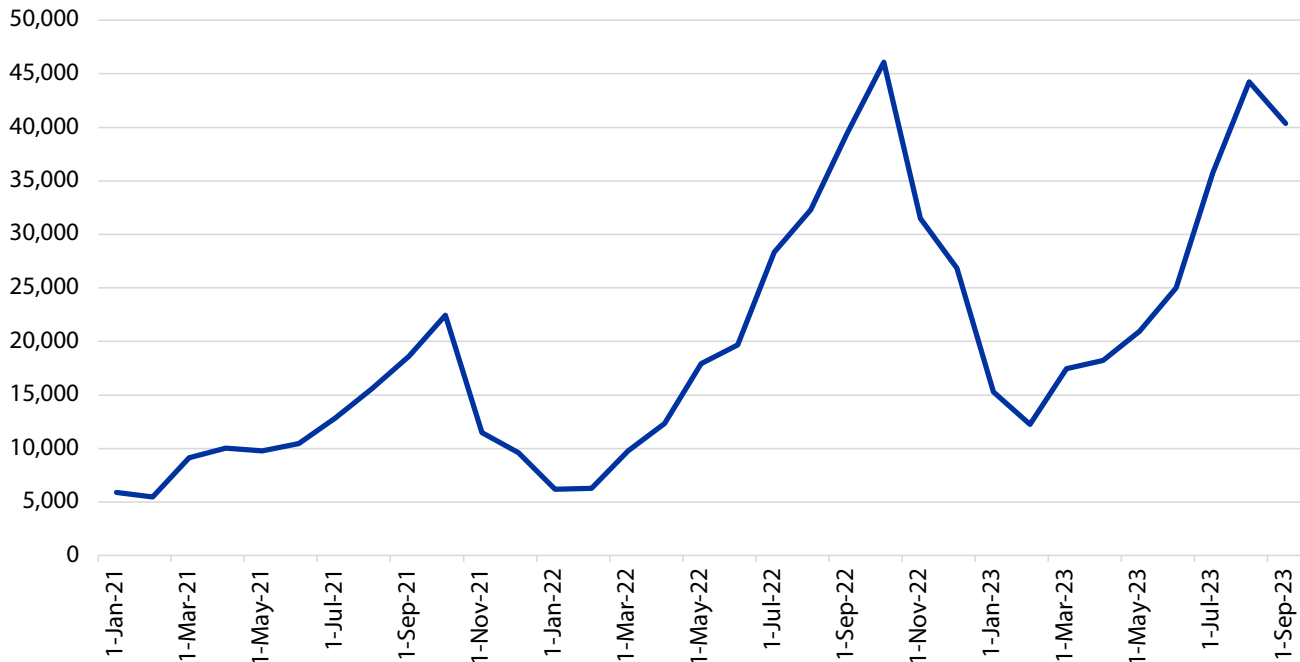
²³⁶ Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Europe, 2021–2022.

²³⁷ For figures on crossings and movement in the Western Balkans region, it is important to note that many migrants cross multiple land borders to reach their destination country. As such, it is difficult to compare movement figures in the Western Balkans with those from other major European routes, such as Mediterranean Sea crossings.

²³⁸ IOM DTM, “Mixed Migration Flows to Europe by Sea and Land”, updated 31 December 2023.

key EU border crossings in the region also increased, from 62,000 in 2021 to 144,000 in 2022.²³⁹ However, Frontex only noted about 99,000 arrivals in 2023, and IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix estimates show detections of migrants among major Balkan transit countries at 229,500 in the first nine months of 2023 (compared to 158,500 in 2021 and 276,700 in 2022).

FIGURE 15
Transit Movements in the Western Balkans, 2021–2023



Notes: These data represent monthly figures on transits in the following parts of the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia and Serbia. References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). Transit movements are recorded at key transit and exit locations in the region and are considered separately from other European migration routes to prevent the double counting of migrants crossing multiple borders.

Source: IOM DTM, “Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overview (July – September 2023)” (data set, December 2023).

In the post-pandemic years, two countries have stood out as the top origin countries of migrant arrivals in selected Western Balkan transit countries: Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic (see Figure 16). According to IOM data, the number of Afghan nationals increased noticeably through 2022, and by 2023, Afghans had come to make up the largest group of migrants transiting through the Western Balkans. This increase in Afghan migration may be attributed to the 2021 Taliban offensive and change of government (see Section 8), though strengthening border policies in transit countries such as Türkiye and the Islamic Republic of Iran may have moderated this movement somewhat.²⁴⁰ Syrians and Afghans also represented the two largest groups of first-time asylum applicants in the European Union, although they had very different recognition rates. In 2022, asylum applications filed by Syrians had a 94 per cent recognition rate

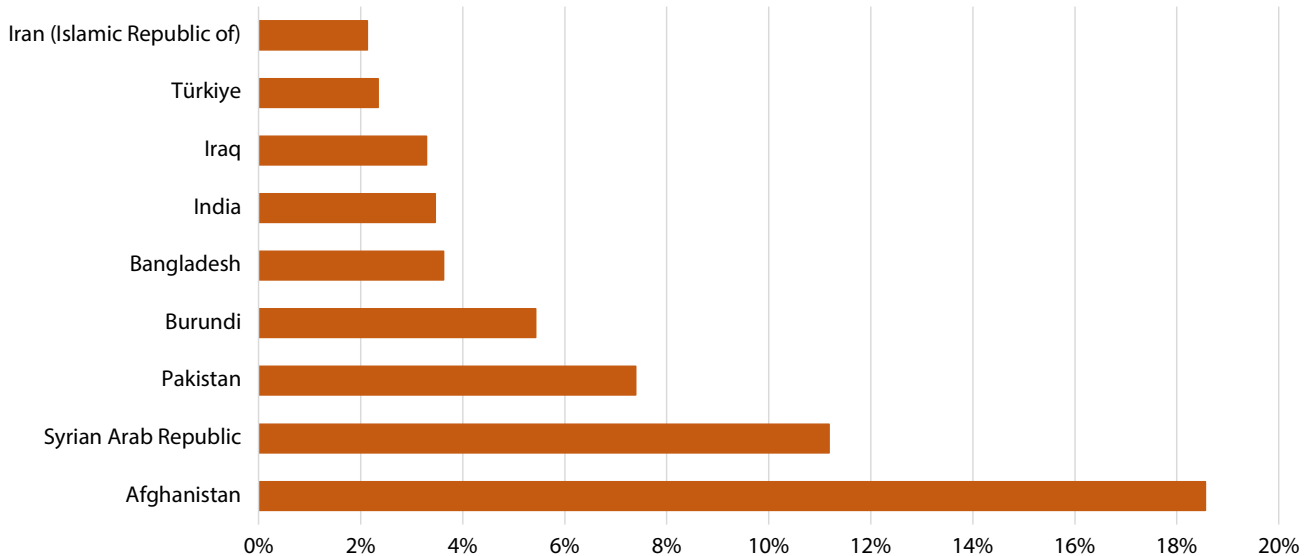
²³⁹ Frontex, “Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings Statistics Download (Updated Monthly)” (data set, March 2024), downloaded from Frontex, “[Monitoring and Risk Analysis](#)”, accessed 10 February 2024. The three border points are arrivals to Croatia from borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, arrivals to Romania from the border with Serbia, and arrivals to Bulgaria from borders with Serbia and North Macedonia.

²⁴⁰ *Daily Sabah*, “[Türkiye Tightens Iranian Border to Curb Illegal Migration](#)”, *Daily Sabah*, 17 August 2023.

compared to 54 per cent for Afghans, although that lower rate partly reflects more countries granting Afghans a separate humanitarian status under national law, rather than traditional refugee status.²⁴¹

FIGURE 16

Top Nationalities of Transit Migrants in the Western Balkans, January – September 2023



Notes: These data represent monthly figures on transits in the following parts of the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia and Serbia. References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). Nationalities are based on how migrants report their nationalities to the relevant authorities. Note that the largest group in this data set was migrants of unidentified nationality (31.9%, not shown here).

Source: IOM DTM, “Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overview (July – September 2023)”.

Increases in migration along the Western Balkans route have major implications for many EU countries. In 2021–2022 IOM surveys, the largest share of migrants in the Western Balkans stated that they were seeking to reach Germany (see Map 3). This has come amid ongoing debates and policy changes in Germany and other major European destination countries regarding stricter border controls in the region. For example, Germany introduced new border controls with Poland and Czechia in September 2023 in order to combat a sharp rise in irregular migrants entering the country, and the German chancellor expressed interest in November 2023 in studying the Italy–Albania migration management deal reached that year.²⁴² In late 2023, many other EU Member States, including Austria, Italy, Poland and Slovakia, announced a reintroduction of border controls, explicitly citing high pressure along the Western Balkans route.²⁴³

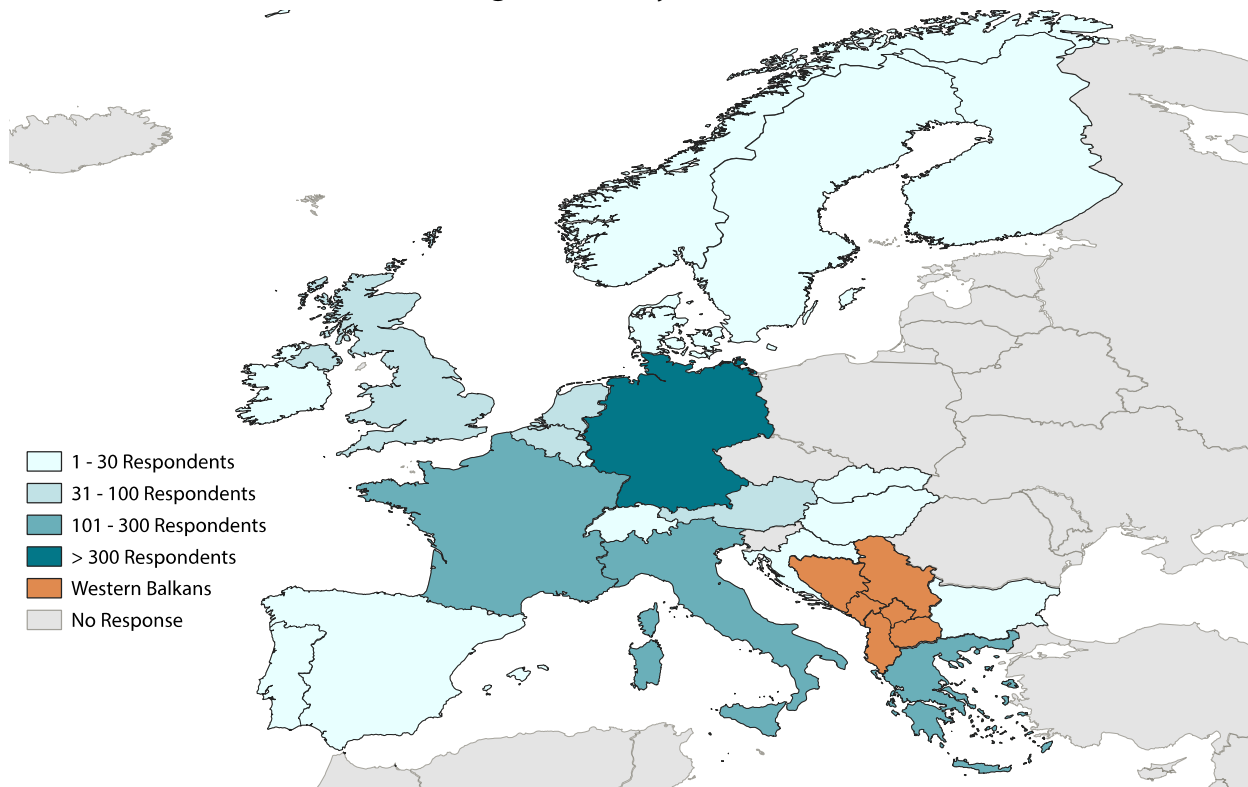
241 European Union Agency for Asylum, “Latest Asylum Trends – Annual Overview 2022”, accessed 12 January 2024. Note that these figures are for asylum to EU+ countries, which include all 27 EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland.

242 Rachel More and Alexander Ratz, “Germany Announces Border Controls to Combat Migrant Surge”, Reuters, 27 September 2023; Andreas Rinke and Vera Eckert, “Germany’s Scholz Looking ‘Closely’ at Italy’s Migrant Deal with Albania”, Reuters, 11 November 2023.

243 European Commission, “Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control”, accessed 12 January 2024.

MAP 3

Intended Destination Countries of Migrants Surveyed in the Western Balkans, 2022



Notes: For this data set, IOM established flow monitoring points in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). Migrants are asked to list their intended final destination. This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM and MPI.
Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Europe, 2021–2022.

TABLE 1

Top Reasons for Movement among Transit Migrants in the Western Balkans, 2022

Reason	Count	Percentage
War/Conflict	581	40.0%
Economic Reasons	571	39.4%
Limited Access to Services	96	6.6%
Slow Environmental Change	76	5.2%
Personal/Targeted Violence	38	2.6%
Other	34	2.3%
Education (Higher Levels) or Training	30	2.1%
Family Event/Reunification	13	0.9%
COVID-19-Related Reasons	7	0.5%
Natural Disaster	5	0.3%
TOTAL	1,451	100.0%

Notes: For this data set, IOM established flow monitoring points in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Europe, 2021–2022.

The amount of time migrants spend journeying through the Western Balkans has shortened. Many move rapidly through the region in a matter of days, rather than staying for weeks as they plan their new steps.²⁴⁴ For example, migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina spent an average of 8 days in reception centres in December 2022, compared to 58 days in December 2021.²⁴⁵ In Serbia, government data show that migrants spent on average 16 days in the country's reception centres in 2022, compared to 30 days in 2021.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, IOM reports show that, despite increases in movement in the region throughout 2022, reception centre occupancy rates remained relatively stable, suggesting that some migrants are bypassing reception centres altogether.²⁴⁷ Indeed, it may be that only the most vulnerable migrants are staying in these centres for longer periods, while most opt to continue on their journey right away²⁴⁸ and/or camp briefly in other locations (such as national parks or abandoned buildings).²⁴⁹ The lasting impacts of these changing migration patterns and enforcement strategies along routes to Europe remain to be seen, but the Western Balkans route continues to be a dynamic situation watched closely in the region.

8 Changing Migration Patterns to, from and within Afghanistan

Migration to, from and within Afghanistan has evolved considerably in the past several years, especially in the run up to and following the August 2021 Taliban takeover in the country. Initially, the change in government prompted a chaotic, large-scale evacuation effort led by the Western powers that had withdrawn from the country. This involved moving large numbers of evacuees initially to third-country transit sites (or “lily pads”) before arranging their travel to another destination, all at a time when refugee resettlement was largely paused or slowed because of pandemic-era public health restrictions.²⁵⁰ At the same time, both before and since the transition, large numbers of Afghans have left the country through their own means. Many of these mobility patterns have not been linear or predictable. For instance, after sizeable outflows in the run up to the change of government, the number of people leaving Afghanistan dropped in the second half of 2021, in part due to stricter border controls. Perhaps counterintuitively, internal displacement fell after the Taliban takeover because it ended the civil conflict, though the growing humanitarian emergency in the country could force more people to move – internally or internationally – in the years to come.

Many of these mobility patterns have not been linear or predictable.

Large shares of the Afghan nationals who have left the country due to the change in government have moved to neighbouring countries, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. This builds on well-established patterns of displacement, with both countries hosting large numbers of Afghans during

244 IOM DTM, *Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022* (Geneva: IOM, 2022).

245 IOM, *Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022*.

246 Republic of Serbia, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, “ГОДИШЊИ ИЗВЕШТАЈ КОМЕСАРИЈАТА О МИГРАЦИЈАМА ЗА 2022.ГОДИНУ”, updated 30 January 2023.

247 IOM, *Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022*.

248 Fabrizio Foschini, “Keep on Moving on the Balkan Route: No Quarter for Afghan Asylum Seekers in Croatia and Serbia”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 26 September 2023.

249 IOM, *Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022*.

250 For a discussion on how countries sidestepped or loosened COVID-19 protocols in the interest of facilitating large-scale evacuations and expediting processing, see Benton et al., *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021*.

the past four decades of instability and violence in Afghanistan. Between 2021 and 2022, the estimated number of Afghan refugees under the UNHCR mandate worldwide increase by about 2.9 million persons, to an estimated 5.7 million total.²⁵¹ Some of this increase relates to an initiative by the Iranian Government to more comprehensively count the number of Afghans in their territory.²⁵² Nonetheless, even when counts from the Islamic Republic of Iran are excluded, the global population of Afghan refugees clearly increased from 2021 to 2022 (see Table 2). Meanwhile, Pakistan launched a campaign in 2023 to encourage Afghans to return to Afghanistan (although the level of support versus coercion is unclear). Diplomatic efforts by higher-income countries are seeking to prolong status for Afghans in Pakistan and facilitate resettlement to the United States and elsewhere.²⁵³ The rising number of Afghans travelling irregularly to Europe and seeking asylum there in 2022 and 2023 (see Section 7) also points to the protracted nature of the humanitarian situation unfolding in Afghanistan, as rights (especially those of women) are curtailed.

TABLE 2

Number of Afghan Refugees in Top Host Countries and Worldwide, per the UNHCR Definition, 2021 and 2022

	Pakistan	Iran (Islamic Republic of)	Worldwide (Including the Islamic Republic of Iran)	Worldwide (Excluding the Islamic Republic of Iran)
Afghan Refugees in 2021	1,491,000	778,000	2,713,000	1,938,000
Afghan Refugees in 2022	1,743,000	3,413,000	5,662,000	2,248,000
Per cent Increase	17.0%	338.7%	108.7%	16.2%

Notes: In this table, refugees include both those under UNHCR mandate and people UNHCR deems to be “in refugee-like situations”. The growth in the number of Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran is due to both new arrivals and a government recount of the population.

Source: UNHCR, “Population Statistics Database”, accessed November 2023.

Mobility patterns following the evacuation have taken three primary forms: shifts in intraregional and interregional migration from Afghanistan as movements initially dipped and then increased; slow increases in voluntary returns and slow decreases in forced returns to Afghanistan; and a drop in internal displacement after the Taliban victory.

A. Takeover Shocks Intraregional and Interregional Outflows from Afghanistan

The Taliban takeover led to increased outflows from Afghanistan. By the end of 2021, UNHCR had registered more than 2.7 million Afghan refugees worldwide, the third largest internationally displaced population in the world behind Syrians and Venezuelans.²⁵⁴ This included more than 777,000 new refugees recorded during the year due to conflict and violence.

251 UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*.

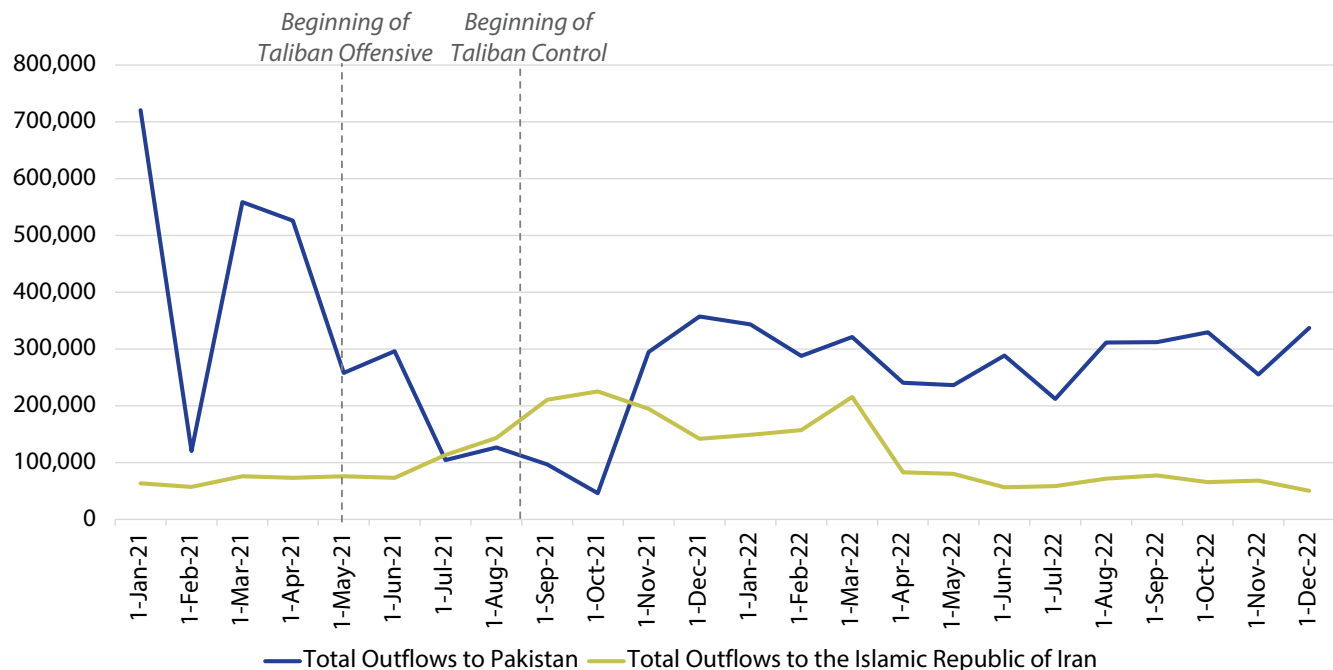
252 In 2022, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran conducted a recount of the previously “headcounted” population and extended the scope of this initiative to all Afghans residing irregularly in the country, including those who had arrived recently due to the Taliban takeover in 2021. It is reported that 2.6 million Afghans enrolled in this exercise, which provides them with a headcount slip and temporary protection from deportation. See UNHCR, “Iran: New Arrivals from Afghanistan – since 2021 (End of December 2023)” (infographic, 14 January 2024).

253 Abid Hussain, “Pakistan Extends Deadline for Afghans Awaiting Third-Country Resettlement”, Al Jazeera, 14 December 2023.

254 UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2022).

Afghanistan and its neighbours are closely linked, geographically, culturally and linguistically. As such, mobility between Afghanistan and the neighbouring Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan has been mostly characterized by circular, seasonal mobility, including migration for work, education and to access medical services.²⁵⁵ In IOM Flow Monitoring Surveys, most Afghan migrants entering the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan in 2022 attributed their movement to employment or economic reasons.²⁵⁶ Yet the magnitude of departures from Afghanistan to these two countries changed significantly following the change in government. In the first seven months of 2021, prior to the Taliban’s takeover, movements out of Afghanistan towards the two countries averaged 446,000 per month. From August to December 2021, that figure dropped to 368,000 per month.²⁵⁷ Much of this change may be attributed to stricter border controls, particularly on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, that severely reduced irregular crossings. By the first half of 2022, however, movements out of Afghanistan appear to have somewhat stabilized, averaging 342,000 outward movements per month.

FIGURE 17
Recorded Monthly Movements from Afghanistan to Neighbouring Countries, 2021–2022



Notes: Total outflows include the sum of both recorded irregular movements and regular movements (e.g. individuals moving with valid documents, including a Proof of Registration card issued by the Government of Pakistan, an Afghan Citizen Card issued by the Government of Pakistan, a valid Pakistani visa, an Amayesh card granted by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or a valid Iranian visa). For more on this population, see IOM, “Movement in and out of Afghanistan. 1 August to 15 August 2022” (fact sheet, 18 August 2022).

Sources: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM Afghanistan Cross-Border Movements data set, 2021–2022.

255 IOM, *Pakistan Migration Snapshot. August 2019* (Bangkok: IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).

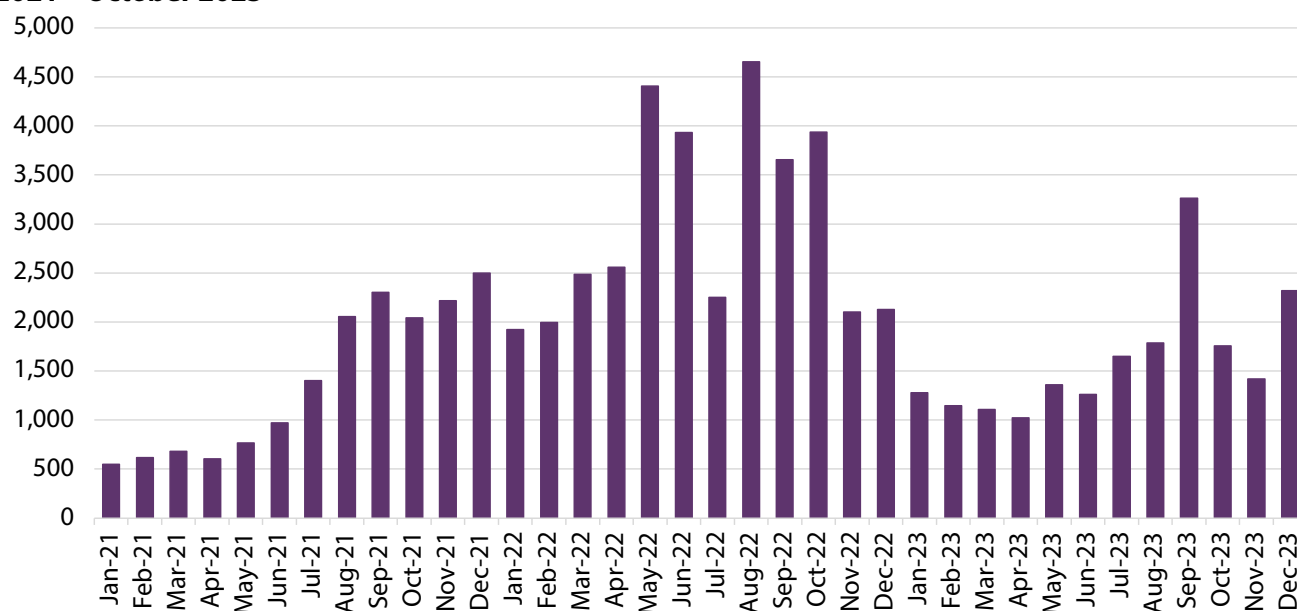
256 IOM Flow Monitoring Surveys in Afghanistan in 2022 asked 5,612 Afghan migrants travelling to either the Islamic Republic of Iran or Pakistan about their reasons for migrating; 36.99 per cent reported their main reason being a job opportunity, while 16.95 per cent cited economic reasons and 32.7 per cent reported other reasons.

257 IOM DTM, “Mobility Dynamics: Afghanistan One Year after August 15th” (issue brief, August 2022).

Afghans have also fled to countries further afield, because of border controls limiting entry into Pakistan and because of a desire to seek asylum and opportunities in other countries.²⁵⁸ According to Frontex, irregular crossings at EU borders increased significantly in the months following the Taliban takeover, with more than 13,000 crossings by Afghan nationals recorded in the first five months of 2022 – a 316 per cent increase compared to the first five months of 2021 (see Figure 18).²⁵⁹ However, Afghan migration to Europe did not truly spike until mid-2022, and it soon waned again; in the first five months of 2023, Frontex recorded fewer than 6,000 crossings by Afghans (higher than pre-takeover levels but less than half the 2022 figure). The delay in the spike in Afghan arrivals in Europe following the Taliban takeover reflects the difficulties and time it takes for an Afghan refugee to transit through the Islamic Republic of Iran and other Middle Eastern countries to reach Türkiye and then EU countries, or to find alternate routes to cross the Mediterranean into Greece, Italy or Spain. It also reflects the fact that people fled Afghanistan not just because of the immediate violence of the Taliban offensive but also because of the drastic deterioration in people’s (and especially women’s) human rights following the takeover, as well as in their livelihoods and access to services as international aid pulled out. The latter halves of 2022 and 2023 also saw increases in these extraregional movements.

FIGURE 18

Monthly Detected Irregular Border Crossings by Afghan Nationals into the European Union, 2021 – October 2023



Notes: Data are reported monthly by EU Member States and Schengen Associated Countries. Data represent detections of irregular border crossings into the European Union, rather than the number of persons.

Source: Frontex, “Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings Statistics Download (Updated Monthly)” (data set, March 2024), downloaded from Frontex, “[Monitoring and Risk Analysis](#)”, accessed 10 February 2024.

An additional notable feature of Afghan emigration during this period was the pace at which many countries across the world evacuated and resettled large numbers of Afghan nationals in the aftermath of the Taliban offensive. While dozens of countries were involved in the evacuation effort, the largest numbers of Afghan

258 UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan, January – December 2022* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2022).

259 In the first five months of 2021, only about 3,200 movements were recorded. See European Union Agency for Asylum, *Afghan Nationals in Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Central Asia* (Malta: European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022).

went to the United States, which evacuated close to 125,000 people between 30 July and 30 August 2021.²⁶⁰ Overall, the operation demonstrated the important role rapid evacuations and flexible migration channels can play in a large-scale crisis situation. However, the evacuations were also chaotic, lacked forward planning and drew criticism of several of the countries involved, including the United Kingdom and the United States.²⁶¹ A number of countries continue to examine the lessons from this period and consider ways to improve coordination in the future, including through vehicles such as the Resettlement Diplomacy Network and the European Union Agency for Asylum's Expert Platform on Safe Pathways for Afghans.

The picture for Afghans still seeking safety is more mixed. Many Afghan nationals who had collaborated with coalition forces or have vulnerabilities were instructed to go to Pakistan for resettlement processing, but many have since been stuck in legal limbo as Pakistan cracks down on irregular migrants.²⁶² Declining public interest in Afghanistan in many Western destination countries, alongside pressure on national reception, asylum and housing systems, has led to decreased political focus on facilitating Afghans' access to resettlement. For instance, only 271 Afghan refugees were resettled in the European Union in 2022.²⁶³ The United States ended its humanitarian parole programme for Afghans in September 2022, and countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom continue to fall short of filling their proposed humanitarian visa slots for Afghan nationals, leaving many of those who worked directly with these governments facing an uncertain future.²⁶⁴ In Germany, a programme initiated in October 2022 to admit up to 1,000 Afghan nationals per month was temporarily halted in March 2023, without any Afghans being admitted.²⁶⁵ In neighbouring countries as well, Afghan nationals face issues obtaining humanitarian aid or accessing regular migration pathways, often as a result of a lack of documentation and a deteriorating economic situation in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.²⁶⁶ Moreover, migration management practices by transit and destination countries, such as pushbacks and restrictions on onward movement, have disproportionately affected Afghans, some of whom ultimately turn to more dangerous routes to Europe (see Section 7).

B. *Forced Returns Decrease while Voluntary Returns Stabilize*

Both voluntary returns and forced returns to Afghanistan underwent noticeable changes as a result of the Taliban offensive and takeover. During the Taliban offensive, voluntary returns to Afghanistan fell rapidly, before picking back up in the months following the change in government and gradually stabilized

260 Jonathan Landay, "State Department Review of 2021 Afghanistan Evacuation Critical of Biden, Trump", Reuters, 1 July 2023.

261 UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, *Missing in Action: UK Leadership and the Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (London: UK House of Commons, 2022).

262 Caroline Davies, "Afghans in UK Visa Limbo as Pakistan Vows to Expel Migrants", BBC News, 13 October 2023.

263 Olivia Sundberg Diez et al., *Two Years On: Afghans Still Lack Pathways to Safety in the EU* (New York: International Rescue Committee, 2023).

264 Daniela Gavshon, "Australia Should Prioritize Humanitarian Visas for Afghans", Human Rights Watch, 17 August 2023; Becky Sullivan and Tom Bowman, "Evacuation of Afghan Interpreters and Others Who Aided U.S. to Begin in Late July", NPR, 14 July 2023; Human Rights Watch, "Joint UK Parliamentary Briefing on Afghanistan", updated August 2022.

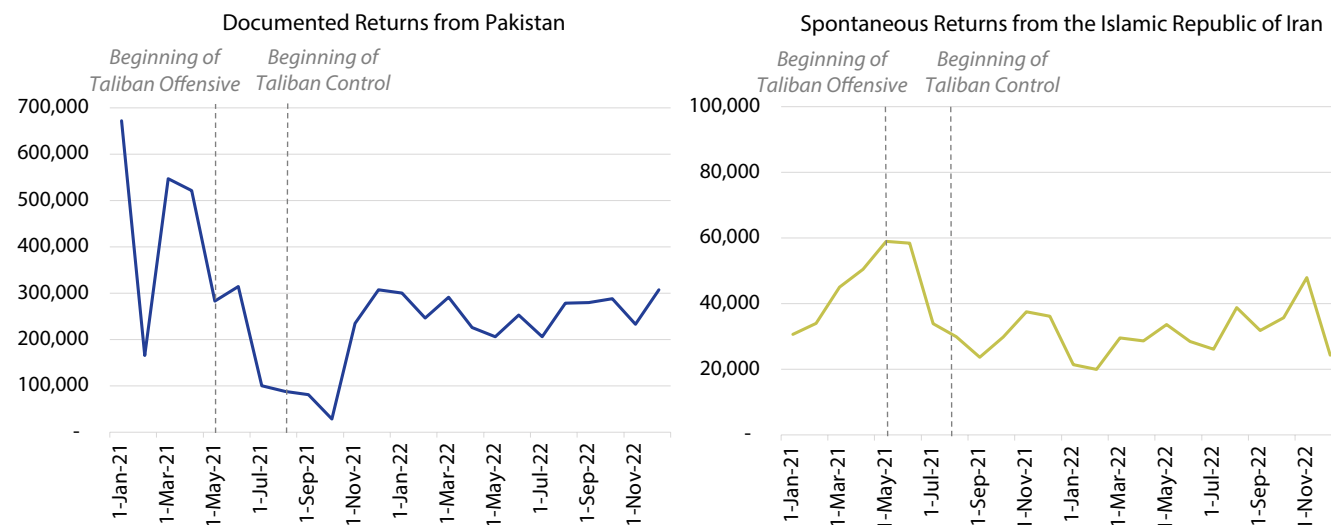
265 The programme struggled with narrow admissions criteria and requirements that Afghans be preselected by NGOs and able to travel to Pakistan to receive a visa to travel to Germany. Also, concerns about security risks and screening standards in the programme led to it being shut down, leaving more than 14,000 at-risk Afghans in Afghanistan despite promises of admission to Germany. See Benjamin Bathke, "Report: 14,000 People from Afghanistan Still Waiting to Transfer to Germany", InfoMigrants, 1 June 2023; Patricia Gossman, "Germany's Broken Promises", Human Rights Watch, 2 August 2023; Sundberg Diez et al., *Two Years On*.

266 Sundberg Diez et al., *Two Years On*.

through 2022 (see Figure 19). Surveys of voluntary returnees show that most return home for work or other economic reasons: 62 per cent of Afghan returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan said they were moving because of a job opportunity, while 15 per cent reported economic reasons and 17 per cent reported other reasons.²⁶⁷ Notably, less than 1 per cent of respondents reported returning for family reunification.

FIGURE 19

Non-forced Returns to Afghanistan from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, 2021 to 2022



Note: "Spontaneous returns" refers to the voluntary return of migrants to their origin country, usually without the support of a national government or NGO.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Afghanistan Cross-Border Movements data set, 2021–2022.

The vast majority of forced returns of Afghans come from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 2021 and 2022, Pakistan forcibly returned 4,717 Afghan nationals, while the Islamic Republic of Iran forcibly returned 1.2 million.²⁶⁸ Forced returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran began to rise in early 2021 and reached a peak around the time of the Taliban takeover in August. UNHCR estimates that average daily deportations from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan were almost 190 per cent higher in August 2021 than in August 2022.²⁶⁹ Eventually, both the number of forced returns and the ratio of forced returns to total movements from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan decreased through 2022 (see Figure 20). Pakistan has also attempted to forcibly expel Afghan refugees,²⁷⁰ including implementing its Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan that aimed for the "voluntary return" of all Afghans in Pakistan who lacked some form of documentation by 1 November 2023. From October to December 2023, IOM reported that nearly 468,000 Afghans had returned to Afghanistan from two key border points in Pakistan, with 86 per cent of surveyed returnees indicating they are returning due to fear of arrest.²⁷¹

267 No other reason accounted for more than 10 per cent. Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Afghanistan, 2022.

268 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Afghanistan Cross-Border Movements data set, 2021–2022.

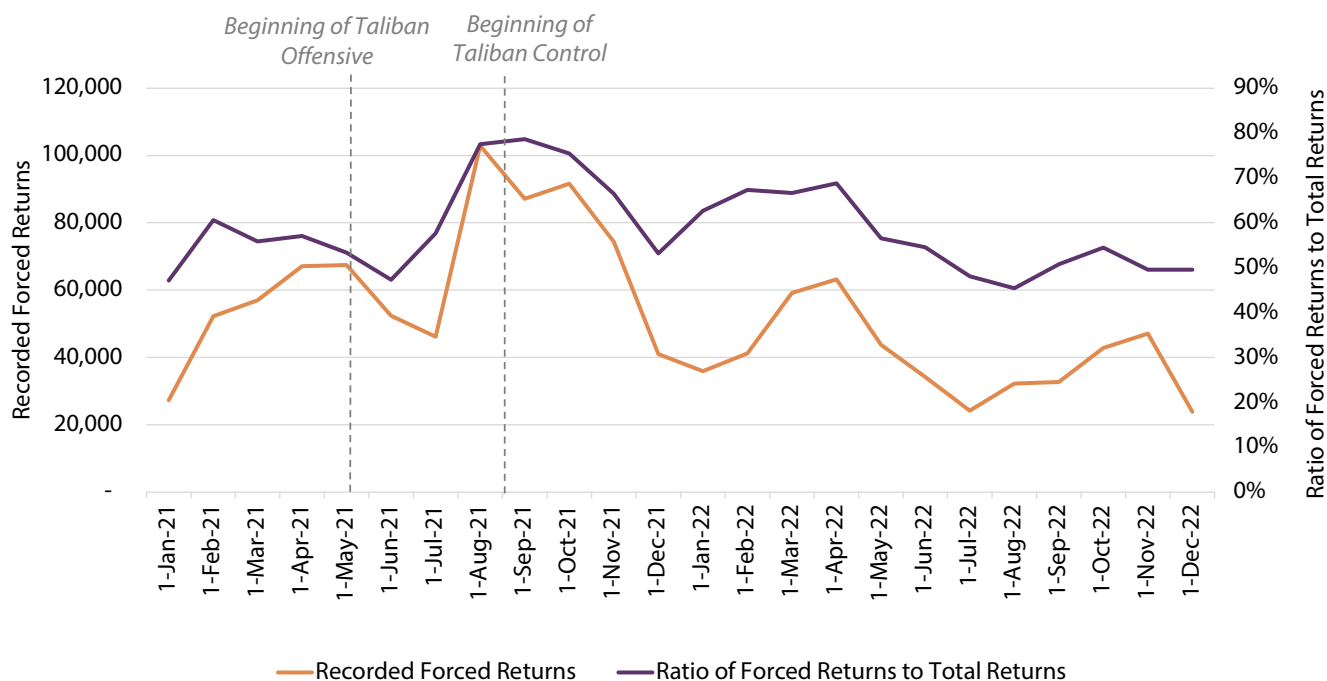
269 UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, "Flash External Update: Afghanistan Situation #9" (fact sheet, November 2021).

270 Shah Meer Baloch, "Pakistan Starts Mass Deportation of Undocumented Afghans", *The Guardian*, 1 November 2023.

271 IOM DTM, "Pakistan – Quarterly Flow Monitoring of Afghan Returnees (October – December 2023)" (fact sheet, 2024).

FIGURE 20

Monthly Recorded Forced Returns and Ratio of Forced Returns to Total Returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan, 2021–2022



Note: "Total returns" refers to the sum of non-forced and forced returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM Afghanistan Cross-Border Movements data set, 2021–2022.

C. Taliban Rise to Power Halts Internal Displacement but Triggers a Humanitarian Crisis

Internal displacement has been a long-standing issue within Afghanistan. From 2012 to 2022, IOM estimates there were approximately 6.6 million IDPs in Afghanistan, 40 per cent of whom (2.6 million) were displaced in 2021 or 2022.²⁷² However, internal displacement decreased after the Taliban took control of the government in August 2021.

The Taliban takeover ended the outright civil conflict in the country, which had caused most internal displacement in prior years. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were only 32,000 new internal displacements in 2022 – the lowest number in more than 10 years.²⁷³ IOM's Baseline Mobility Assessment in Afghanistan indicates that new internal displacements and counts of former IDPs returning to their communities of origin dropped both between the first and second halves of 2021 and in all of 2021 compared to 2022, as shown in Table 3. Despite the economic deprivation and human rights violations that have occurred since the Taliban takeover, the decrease in violence and conflict has limited new displacements.²⁷⁴

272 IOM DTM, *Afghanistan: Baseline Mobility Assessment Report, Round 16 (September – December 2022)* (Kabul: IOM, 2023).

273 International Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Afghanistan", updated 24 May 2023.

274 Bilak et al., *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023*; UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021*.

TABLE 3

New Internal Displacements and Former IDPs Who Have Returned to Their Origin Communities, Afghanistan, 2021–2022

Category	First Six Months 2021	Last Six Months 2021	% Change	Total 2021	Total 2022	% Change
New Internal Displacements	1,045,000	563,000	-85.8%	1,608,000	1,011,000	-37.1%
Former IDPs Who Have Returned	2,227,000	1,957,000	-13.8%	4,184,000	1,526,000	-63.5%

Notes: “New internal displacements” are defined as Afghans who have fled their communities of origin and have arrived in an assessed location within Afghanistan. “Former IDPs Who Have Returned” are defined as Afghans who had at one time fled their communities of origin but have recently returned to those communities.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM Afghanistan Baseline Mobility Assessment Report, Round 16 (September – December 2022).

The change in government has done little, however, to resolve protracted internal displacement. Afghanistan has the second largest number of IDPs in the world, behind only the Syrian Arab Republic, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.²⁷⁵ Conflict was long the major initial reason for internal displacement: approximately 66 per cent of IDPs from 2012 through 2022 cited conflict as the main reason for their displacement.²⁷⁶ Yet Afghans newly displaced in late 2021 and 2022 increasingly cited disasters as the primary drivers of their movement, rather than conflict.²⁷⁷ For example, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre has found that disasters (including flooding, drought and a major earthquake) triggered an additional 124,000 displacements in the first six months of 2022.²⁷⁸

Afghans also face a host of other issues that have triggered a humanitarian crisis in the country. This includes high levels of unemployment, food insecurity and a lack of basic service provision and infrastructure.²⁷⁹ These issues, alongside disasters and other shocks, can have a particularly severe impact on IDPs, who are often in fragile situations. The combination of such factors suggests that internal displacement may remain a challenge for many Afghans in the years to come.

9 Accelerating Crises and Mobility Transitions in the Americas

Migration in the Americas has increased in volume and become truly hemispheric in recent years, driven by several large-scale displacement crises, free movement arrangements, and migrants returning to their origin countries with foreign-born spouses and children. The United States remains the largest migrant destination in the hemisphere (and the world), with more than 46 million immigrants as of 2022.²⁸⁰ However, while its immigrant population grew by 16 per cent (or 6 million people) between 2010 and 2022,

275 Bilak et al., *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023*.

276 IOM DTM, *Afghanistan: Baseline Mobility Assessment Report, Round 16*.

277 European Union Agency for Asylum, *Afghan Nationals in Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Central Asia*; Bilak et al., *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023*.

278 Kathryn Giffin, “One Year On: The Taliban Takeover and Afghanistan’s Changing Displacement Crisis”, International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 15 August 2022.

279 Giffin, “One Year On”.

280 MPI Migration Data Hub, “U.S. Immigrant Population and Share over Time, 1850–Present”, accessed 16 January 2024.

the number of migrants in Latin American and Caribbean countries grew much faster, nearly doubling from 8.3 million to 16.3 million during the same period.²⁸¹ The number of people moving within their own countries and across international borders in the Americas, with families or alone and through regular or irregular pathways, has increased noticeably post-pandemic.

Today, many countries in the region that had long been countries of emigration are now also seeing significant immigration and transit migration. While the United States received the largest number of new asylum applications in the world in 2022, Costa Rica (with its population of just 5.3 million people) ranked third globally and Mexico fifth.²⁸² And in Colombia and Peru, the foreign born comprised less than 0.5 per cent of the overall population in 2010, but this figure rose to 5.1 per cent for Colombia and 5.4 per cent for Peru by 2022.²⁸³

Today, many countries in the region that had long been countries of emigration are now also seeing significant immigration and transit migration.

Migrant flows within the Americas have also become more diverse in terms of their origins. For example, while migrants travelling through the region towards the US border were in prior periods predominately Mexican or Central American, these movements now involve greater numbers of people from other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean as well as from outside of the continent.²⁸⁴ With more people on the move, another defining feature of post-pandemic mobility in the region has been increasing irregular migration, often involving difficult and dangerous journeys.

Countries in the region have been exploring new ways to manage migration. Two notable examples are the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, as part of which participating countries committed to addressing irregular migration while expanding regular pathways, and the creation of Safe Mobility Offices²⁸⁵ that aim to expedite refugee processing and to provide other migrants with information about regular mobility pathways to the United States and other destinations, all either in or closer to their countries of origin, as an alternative to irregular movement. At the same time, many countries in the region have stepped up border enforcement and contemplated or implemented stricter asylum policies. However, these attempts to find balance between humanitarian protection and migration management initiatives have at times been contentious, drawing significant criticism from both immigrant rights groups and proponents of stricter limits on immigration.

281 Andrew Selee et al., “In a Dramatic Shift, the Americas Have Become a Leading Migration Destination”, *Migration Information Source*, 11 April 2023.

282 UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*.

283 MPI calculations based on data from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination and Origin”, accessed 22 March 2023; Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), “Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela”, accessed 22 March 2023. For more information, see Selee et al., “In a Dramatic Shift”.

284 IOM and Specialized Forum on Migration of MERCOSUR and Associated States, *Recent Migration Movements in South America – Annual Report 2022* (Buenos Aires: IOM, 2023); Shabnam Surita, “More Undocumented Indians Attempt to Enter the United States”, *Deutsche Welle*, January 2023; Lizbeth Diaz and Jackie Botts, “African Migrants Bound for US Use Nicaragua to Bypass Darien Perils”, *Reuters*, 26 September 2023.

285 These Safe Mobility Offices are a partnership between the United States and Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Guatemala. See US Department of State, “Safe Mobility Initiative”, accessed 12 December 2023; MovilidadSegura.org, “General Information on the ‘Safe Mobility’ Initiative”, accessed 12 December 2023.

A. *Mobility in the Americas Increases in Volume and Diversity*

The growing number of irregular migrants and asylum-seekers heading to the United States, Canada and other destination countries is perhaps the aspect of post-pandemic mobility in the region that has captured the most public and political attention. The 2.5 million migrant encounters logged by US authorities along the US–Mexico border in fiscal year 2023 represented a record high, up from 1.7 million in fiscal year 2021 and 458,000 in fiscal year 2020.²⁸⁶ For the first time ever, in fiscal year 2023, migrants from beyond Mexico and Northern Central America (i.e. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) represented more than half (51%) of irregular arrivals at and between US ports of entry, up from 12 per cent in 2020.²⁸⁷ Top countries of origin included the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Brazil, Ecuador and Haiti, highlighting the increasingly hemispheric nature movement through the region.²⁸⁸

Many migrants seeking to reach the United States pass first from South America into Central America via the Darién jungle, the mountainous rainforest that straddles the Colombia–Panama border. Migrants, including increasing numbers of children with and without accompanying adults, generally cross this stretch of steep mountainous terrain, swamps and rivers, and dense jungle on foot. Dehydration, hunger, injuries and even death are frequently reported among migrants attempting the journey.²⁸⁹ So too are extortion and violence from paramilitary forces, gangs and drug traffickers that patrol the area in the absence of government authorities.²⁹⁰ The number of migrants making this dangerous trip shot up from fewer than 30,000 per year in the decade before the pandemic to 134,000 in 2021, 248,000 in 2022 and 520,000 in 2023 (see Figure 21, below). Migrants of the following top 10 nationalities together accounted for 96 per cent of all Darién crossings in 2022: Venezuelans, Ecuadorians, Haitians, Chinese, Colombians, Chileans, Afghans, Peruvians, Brazilians and Indians.²⁹¹ Although much smaller in number, migrants from Central and West Africa, the Middle East, and more recently from Ukraine and the Russian Federation have also travelled to South or Central America and then attempted to reach the United States.²⁹²

In response to these flows, the US Government has attempted to balance tougher migration controls with the use of a wider set of humanitarian protection tools. In October 2022, the US Government began allowing some Venezuelans to apply for entry into the country from abroad while returning to Mexico some of those intercepted between ports of entry along the US–Mexico border. The entry initiative, partly modelled after the Uniting for Ukraine programme, requires a US sponsor and offers two-year parole into the country and work authorization. The programme was expanded in early 2023 to include nationals of Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua,²⁹³ which, like the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, had been among the largest sending countries for asylum-seekers and irregular migrants. The US Government has also expanded the

286 US Customs and Border Protection, “Nationwide Encounters”, accessed 1 December 2023.

287 Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, “Shifting Patterns and Policies Reshape Migration to U.S.-Mexico Border in Major Ways in 2023” (commentary, MPI, October 2023).

288 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, “Record-Breaking Migrant Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border Overlook the Bigger Story” (commentary, MPI, October 2022).

289 Caitlyn Yates and Juan Pappier, “How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas”, *Migration Information Source*, 20 September 2023.

290 UN News, “Record Numbers Risking Lives to Cross Dangerous Darien Gap”, updated 5 September 2023.

291 Authors’ calculations based on data from Migración Panama, “Estadísticas”, accessed 12 March 2024.

292 Yates and Pappier, “How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads”.

293 Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, “In the Twilight Zone: Record Number of U.S. Immigrants Are in Limbo Statuses”, *Migration Information Source*, 2 August 2023.

number of immigrants covered by Temporary Protected Status. As of September 2023, nearly 698,000 persons from 16 countries held this status.²⁹⁴ Of them, 93 per cent were from Latin America, including 239,000 Venezuelans, 184,000 Salvadorans and 164,000 Haitians.

Sizeable numbers of migrants have also begun to settle in Mexico and other mostly transit countries, at times seeking asylum there. In 2023, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance received asylum applications from almost 137,000 persons, a significant increase from about 1,300 recorded in 2013.²⁹⁵ And in 2023, 9 of the top 10 countries of origin for asylum-seekers in Mexico were from the Americas (Haiti, Honduras, Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile and Colombia), followed by Afghanistan.

There has also been a relatively small but notable increase in irregular crossings at the US–Canada border. More than 39,500 asylum-seekers entered Canada from the United States irregularly in 2022, up from 4,200 a year before.²⁹⁶ The situation prompted the Canadian and US Governments to renegotiate their Safe Third Country Agreement in early 2023, in order to include asylum-seekers who request protection between ports of entry in the populations Canadian authorities are permitted to return to the United States and vice versa.²⁹⁷

There have also been significant post-pandemic increases in migration to other countries in the Americas. For instance, Costa Rica has experienced a record level of humanitarian migration. In 2022, Costa Rica received the third largest number of new asylum applications worldwide, after the much more populous United States and Germany.²⁹⁸ Costa Rica hosted 205,000 asylum-seekers as well as 11,000 refugees as of mid-2022.²⁹⁹ Nearly nine in ten asylum-seekers were from Nicaragua, with tens of thousands of Nicaraguans having fled to Costa Rica amid the government crackdown on political opponents and journalists before the November 2021 elections.³⁰⁰

In 2022, Costa Rica received the third largest number of new asylum applications worldwide, after the much more populous United States and Germany.

In early 2022, IOM surveyed Nicaraguans at two flow monitoring points in Alajuela and Guanacaste, Costa Rica, finding that economic and job-related reasons were the main reasons migrants cited for their journeys, followed by family reunification.³⁰¹ Notably, while those travelling for economic or job reasons intended to return to Nicaragua at some point, those who arrived in Costa Rica for family reasons intended to stay there permanently. At the same time, instead of heading south, some Nicaraguans have travelled north towards the United States. The number of Nicaraguans encountered at the US–Mexico border grew

²⁹⁴ Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*.

²⁹⁵ Government of Mexico, “*Solicitudes por Delegación*”, accessed 17 January 2024.

²⁹⁶ Muzaffar Chishti and Julia Gelatt, “*Roxham Road Meets a Dead End? U.S.-Canada Safe Third Country Agreement Is Revised*”, *Migration Information Source*, 27 April 2023.

²⁹⁷ Chishti and Gelatt, “*Roxham Road Meets a Dead End?*”

²⁹⁸ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*.

²⁹⁹ Charles G. Ripley III, “*Crisis Prompts Record Emigration from Nicaragua, Surpassing Cold War Era*”, *Migration Information Source*, 7 March 2023.

³⁰⁰ María Jesús Mora, “*Costa Rica Has Welcoming Policies for Migrants, but Nicaraguans Face Subtle Barriers*”, *Migration Information Source*, 5 November 2021.

³⁰¹ Authors’ analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Nicaragua, 2022.

more than threefold between 2021 and 2022, from about 50,00 to 164,000.³⁰² And although the numbers fell in 2023 to slightly less than 100,000, they were still twice as high as in 2021.

In addition to migrants' origins and destinations, migration in the Americas has also become more diverse in terms of family composition. While most migrants in the region were single adults in prior decades, families with children and children travelling alone now make up significant shares of people on the move. Children under age 18 made up close to one in six migrants crossing the Darién jungle in 2022.³⁰³ Some of these minors are travelling on their own without parents or guardians, often with the hope of seeking asylum. Continuing a trend that started in the region around 2014, thousands of unaccompanied children arrive at the US–Mexico every year. In fiscal year 2023, 132,000 unaccompanied children were encountered by US Border Patrol at the border, up from 76,000 in 2019.³⁰⁴ The migration of families and unaccompanied children creates unique challenges for transit and destination countries as governments are often required to provide differentiated accommodations and offer protection, given the vulnerable status of children and women.

B. Venezuelan and Haitian Crises Have Long-term Effects on Mobility and Policy

Much of the surge in intraregional mobility in the Americas in recent years has been driven by nationals of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Haiti. More than 7.7 million Venezuelans³⁰⁵ have emigrated since 2015 in response to political instability and a deepening economic crisis, forming what has become the largest human mobility crisis in the Americas – and one of the largest in the world.³⁰⁶ As of November 2023, approximately 6.5 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees had moved elsewhere in Latin America, with Colombia (close to 2.9 million), Peru (1.5 million) and Brazil (510,000) hosting the highest numbers.³⁰⁷ Significant numbers of Venezuelans are also residing in other countries in the Americas, including the United States, Ecuador, Chile and Argentina, as well as in Spain.³⁰⁸

During the first several years of crisis, Venezuelans arrived and remained predominantly in South American countries. However, as they faced narrowing economic opportunities and growing discrimination in their host countries, and as it became more feasible to cross the Darién jungle, a greater number of Venezuelans began moving north to the United States post-pandemic. Data on Darién crossings and encounters at the US–Mexico border both illustrate the rapid increase in the number of Venezuelans heading to the United States. Whereas the number and share of Venezuelans among travellers crossing the Darién were tiny in most years since the displacement crisis began in 2015, they rose to 150,000 or 61 per cent of the total of 248,000 crossings in 2022 (see Figure 21). The count then more than doubled to 329,000 in 2023, highlighting the fact that Venezuelans are on the move northward at record levels and that they are driving

302 US Customs and Border Protection, "Nationwide Encounters".

303 Yates and Pappier, "How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads".

304 US Customs and Border Protection, "Nationwide Encounters"; US Customs and Border Protection, "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019", updated 3 November 2023.

305 R4V maintains updated numbers that are tabulated by host governments, IOM and UNHCR. See R4V, "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela", accessed 31 January 2024.

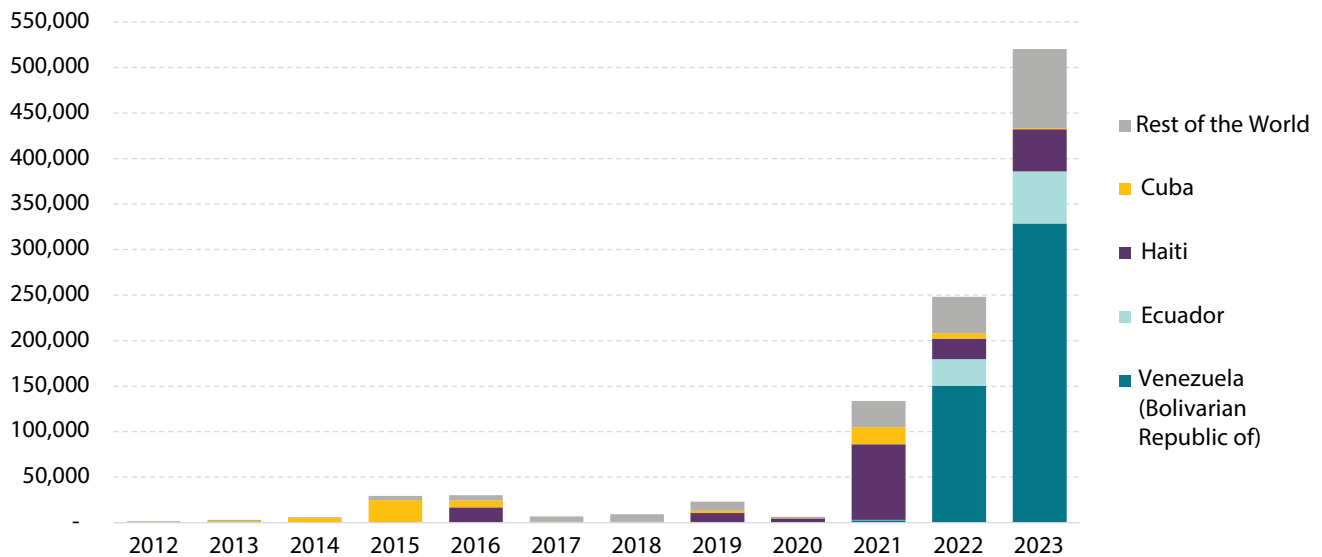
306 Selee, Fratzke, Davidoff-Gore and Freier, *Expanding Protection Options?*

307 R4V, "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela".

308 R4V, "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela".

up the overall volume of Darién crossings. Similarly, US authorities reported more than 266,000 encounters with arriving Venezuelan irregular migrants in fiscal year 2023, more than any other year on record.³⁰⁹

FIGURE 21
Number of Crossings of the Darién Jungle, by Top Migrant Nationalities, 2012–2023



Sources: Figure 3 from Andrew Selee et al., “In a Dramatic Shift, the Americas Have Become a Leading Migration Destination”, *Migration Information Source*, 11 April 2023; authors’ calculations based on data from Migración Panama, “Estadísticas”, accessed 12 March 2024.

While Venezuelans continue to move across the region, some have begun to put down roots in their destination countries.³¹⁰ Many Latin American countries have taken steps to ensure that displaced Venezuelans have a regular status, at least in the short term, and Colombia offered displaced Venezuelans a ten-year status.³¹¹ Half of the 54,000 Venezuelans surveyed by IOM at flow monitoring points in Colombia in 2022 reported that Colombia was their final destination (see Figure 22).³¹² At the same time, about 16 per cent said they planned to return home and others said they planned to leave Colombia to go elsewhere, including to Peru (14%), Ecuador (11%), Chile (5%) and the United States (2%).

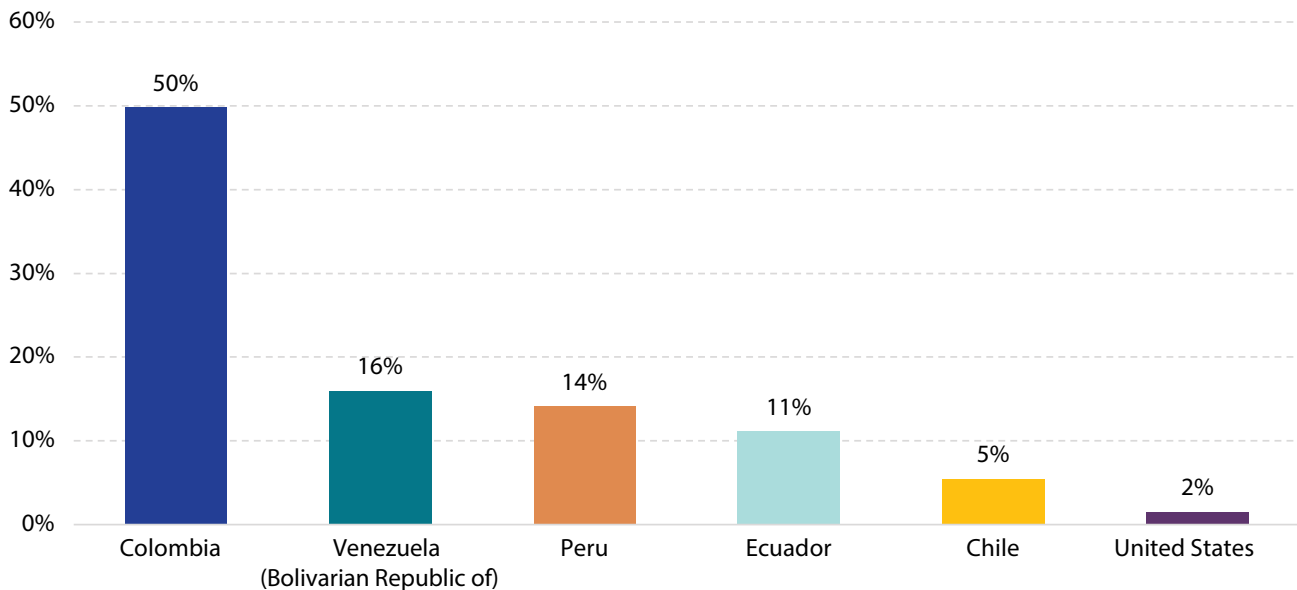
309 US Customs and Border Protection, “Nationwide Encounters”.

310 According to a survey of Venezuelans residing in Colombia conducted by the Colombian Department of National Statistics in August – September 2023, nearly 82 per cent of Venezuelan migrants stated their intention to remain in the country long term. For more information, see Colombian Department of National Statistics, “Pulso de la Migración”, accessed 5 February 2024.

311 Selee, Fratzke, Davidoff-Gore and Freier, *Expanding Protection Options?*

312 A 2023 IOM survey of Venezuelans at flow monitoring points showed some early signs that these migrants’ intentions to stay in Colombia may be waning: 47 per cent of migrants surveyed in March 2023 saw Colombia as their final destination, down from 54 per cent in March 2022. See IOM, “Colombia — Monitoreo de Flujos de Refugiados y Migrantes Nacionales Venezolanos (Marzo 2023)” (fact sheet, 2023).

FIGURE 22

Top Countries of Intended Final Destination for Venezuelan Migrants Surveyed in Colombia, 2022

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Colombia, 2022.

Another sizeable shift in migration patterns in the aftermath of the pandemic has been the heightened movement of Haitians throughout the Americas, both those newly leaving Haiti and others who had previously moved to South American countries. Persistent political instability, high rates of joblessness and poverty, and a series of disasters, including a devastating 2010 earthquake, have sent hundreds of thousands of Haitians in search of safety abroad. As of the end of 2022, there were more than 379,000 forcibly displaced Haitians, including 171,000 displaced within Haiti.³¹³ The same year, more than 174,000 Haitians were seeking asylum in the United States, Mexico, Brazil and Canada.³¹⁴

There has also been a significant increase in the number of Haitians seeking to reach the United States irregularly, some directly from Haiti but others by crossing the Darién (see Figure 21) after having previously migrated to countries such as Brazil and Chile.³¹⁵ In fiscal year 2023, US authorities encountered 76,000 Haitians at the US–Mexico border, up from about 47,000 in 2021.³¹⁶ Additionally, the US Coast Guard interdicted nearly 5,100 Haitians in the first 11 months of fiscal year 2023.³¹⁷ Within the United States, more than 164,000 Haitian immigrants had been granted Temporary Protected Status as of September 2023.³¹⁸

Haitian migrants have often had a harder time getting their protection needs met than other groups.

Haitian migrants have often had a harder time getting their protection needs met than other groups, such as Venezuelans, who have generally experienced a warmer welcome throughout the Americas. A case

313 Authors' analysis of 2022 data from UNHCR, "Population Statistics Database".

314 Authors' analysis of 2022 data from UNHCR, "Population Statistics Database".

315 For more information, see IOM, *Recent Migration Trends in the Americas* (Buenos Aires and San José: IOM, 2022).

316 US Customs and Border Protection, "Nationwide Encounters".

317 Beatrice Dain and Jeanne Batalova, "Haitian Immigrants in the United States", *Migration Information Source*, 8 November 2023.

318 Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*.

in point is the response of Haiti's neighbour, the Dominican Republic: when UNHCR asked countries in November 2022 to pause deportations of Haitians as the humanitarian and security situation in Haiti had worsened, the Dominican Republic did the opposite and doubled deportations (from 5,400 in November 2022 to 11,500 in December 2022).³¹⁹ The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands also increased their deportation of Haitians, although the scale was significantly lower than in the Dominican Republic.

Reflecting the fact that the mobility of Venezuelans, Haitians and migrants from other countries had increased significantly, and that no country can manage these flows on its own, countries in the Americas reached several regional and bilateral agreements in 2022. Although non-binding, the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection (adopted in mid-2022) is a landmark framework. Its 22 participating countries have committed to addressing the root causes and drivers of irregular migration, expanding regular pathways, combatting human trafficking, improving protection of vulnerable migrants, creating an early-warning system for large-scale crises, and strengthening dialogue and collaboration.³²⁰ Additionally, several countries signed bilateral agreements on migration and protection, including between the United States and Costa Rica; the United States and Panama; Mexico and Colombia; and Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.³²¹

The Safe Mobility Offices launched by the US Government and several Latin American partner countries in 2023 are another example of a coordinated attempt to address mixed migration in the region. By offering information about protection and regular mobility pathways to the United States, Canada and Spain to migrants in or closer to their countries of origin, these offices aim to highlight alternatives to irregular migration.³²² Thus far, Safe Mobility Offices have been established in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Guatemala.³²³ Still, these policies' impact may be limited if lawful mobility pathways and eligibility criteria remain narrow. Thus far, while refugee resettlement through these centres is moving quickly, limited numbers have moved through non-protection pathways.

Despite these notable efforts, large, sustained and diversifying migration through irregular routes remains a major policy challenge and a charged political issue in many countries throughout the Americas.³²⁴ These movements put significant pressure on border management and asylum processing systems. For instance, the influx of asylum-seekers from Nicaragua to Costa Rica led to a backlog of applications that reached 250,000 by September 2022. Similarly, Mexico saw its processing time go up from the typical 45 days to 100 days.³²⁵

In many countries, record-high border arrivals have become deeply divisive. In December 2023, for instance, an attempted bipartisan compromise in the U.S. Senate to streamline the asylum system met

319 Valerie Lacarte, "Addressing the Next Displacement Crisis in the Making in the Americas" (commentary, MPI, October 2023).

320 Andrew Selee, "The Los Angeles Declaration Could Represent a Big Step for Real Migration Cooperation across the Americas" (commentary, MPI, June 2022).

321 MPI, "Top 10 Migration Issues of 2022".

322 Andrew Selee, "Regional Processing Centers: Can This Key Component of the Post-Title 42 U.S. Strategy Work?" (commentary, MPI, May 2023).

323 Kristie De Peña and Gil Guerra, "Managing Mixed Migration in the 21st Century through the Safe Mobility Offices Initiative", Niskanen Center, 20 September 2023.

324 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto et al., *Migration Narratives in Northern Central America: How Competing Stories Shape Policy and Public Opinion in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2023).

325 Arturo Castellanos-Canales, "Mexico's Asylum System: Good in Theory, Insufficient in Practice", National Immigration Forum, 15 March 2023.

resistance from several Republican Senators, who saw it as too lenient to asylum-seekers, and a few Democratic Senators, who found the proposed system too restrictive.³²⁶ At the same time, the Biden administration's humanitarian parole programmes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans have been challenged in court by Republican-leaning states,³²⁷ while Democratic city mayors and governors in places that have received large numbers of recent arrivals have put greater pressure on the federal government to help cover the costs of housing, education and medical services for these migrants.³²⁸ Meanwhile, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile – among the largest host countries for Venezuelans – have experienced increases in negative public perceptions of migrants.

10 Conclusions

Human mobility is evolving rapidly. Migration today is not characterized by people moving from one country of origin to one country of destination, but instead by a continuum of migration – a fluid, constantly evolving series of movements, often temporary, within and across borders. Similarly, many movements do not fit neatly within the binary of forced displacement versus voluntary migration; in many cases, mobility reflects complex decisions about how to build a better life for oneself, one's family or one's community amid overlapping crises and conflicts. Thus, the state of global mobility is both resilient and precious, full of immense potential and significant risk.

Global mobility in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has vividly exemplified this duality. Cross-border mobility was shut down in previously unimaginable ways during the crisis, with some people blocked from returning to their own countries, many prevented from taking up work or study opportunities abroad, and others unable to escape dire conditions to reach a place of safety. Yet the desire to move, whether to escape conflict and poverty or to build a better life (or a mixture of both), survived the pandemic. The global reopening was rapid, full and somewhat unexpected. In 2022, governments were worried about filling labour shortages that had emerged from two years of missing labour migration. By 2023, governments were worried about too much migration straining their infrastructure and labour markets.

The state of global mobility is both resilient and precious, full of immense potential and significant risk.

This study's analysis of IOM data gathered from surveys of migrants across world regions has highlighted how fundamentally a part of economic growth and development mobility is. Despite displacement crises triggered by violence, conflict and environmental events, migration is often driven by a mix of factors related to bettering one's life: about 65 per cent of migrants surveyed across nine contexts said they were moving to better their economic livelihoods.³²⁹ The challenge for migration policymakers is to craft policies

326 Patricia Zengerle, "US Senate Republicans Block Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill over Border Dispute", Reuters, 7 December 2023.

327 Dara Lind, "With Challenge to CHNV Parole Program, the 'Right to Welcome' Goes on Trial in Texas", Immigration Impact, American Immigration Council, 20 August 2023.

328 Liz Kim, Tessa Weinberg and Rebecca Tauber, "Major Cities Are Struggling to House Large Numbers of Migrant Refugees", National Public Radio, 8 November 2023; Steph Solis, Monica Eng, Stef W. Kight and Caitlin Owens, "Blue State Migrant Crisis Sparks Political Disaster for Biden", Axios, 5 September 2023.

329 Author's analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, Afghanistan, Costa Rica, East and Horn of Africa, Europe, Iraq, Libya, Nepal, Southern Africa, and West and Central Africa, 2021–2022. Note that the data and inferences drawn from the analysis of the data are not representative of the global migrant population.

that reflect this complex reality and that serve the interests of migrants and countries of origin, destination and transit alike. The case studies of post-pandemic mobility examined in this report hold important lessons for policymakers seeking to manage increasingly complex and mixed mobility in the years to come. These lessons include:

- 1 **The pandemic demonstrated that human mobility is inevitable, indispensable and resilient.** Lifting travel measures triggered a remarkably full and immediate rebound in human mobility. Although irregular movements restarted as early as 2020 – underscoring how movement continued even as governments tried to restrict entry – 2022 saw visa issuances and air travel rebound as the bulk of travel measures were lifted. The movement of South and Southeast Asian workers towards the Arabian Peninsula, for instance, exceeded pre-pandemic levels, despite efforts by many countries of origin to stem emigration or push for enhanced migrant worker protections.
- 2 **Irregular migration is common, pointing to growing risks for harm, challenges to the credibility of immigration systems, and the critical need for robust regular pathways.** Irregular migration is not always intentionally outside the rule of law, nor does it always rely on smugglers and other nefarious actors. In many contexts outside the Global North, informal border crossings are the norm. But in other cases, irregular mobility occurs because regular pathways do not exist – as was vividly highlighted during the early pandemic mobility shutdown – and this absence of regular mobility options can place migrants in precarious, dangerous situations.
- 3 **Mobility is multidirectional and more commonly intraregional than from the Global South to the Global North.** Traditional destination countries in Europe and North America remain popular, but movement is occurring at incredible scale along a diversity of corridors, including to countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council and parts of Latin America. And in Southern Africa, mobility is circular and intraregional, involving a mix of labour migrants alongside people displaced by conflict.
- 4 **Mobility is critical to enabling people to escape conflict or violence. In most contexts, violence is not the main reason why people move, but when conflicts arise, mobility can be essential for survival.** In 2022, the war in Ukraine demonstrated how mobility can be an outlet to escape conflict; Ukrainians' access to visa-free travel in Europe meant that millions were able to move even before the European Union's landmark decision to activate the Temporary Protection Directive, echoing the movements of Venezuelans to neighbouring Latin American countries in the preceding years that were facilitated by a mix of visa-free travel policies and permeable land borders.
- 5 **Mobility can also be an accelerator for growth. Enabling mobility can foster sustainable development, peacebuilding and innovation.** Indeed, the pandemic demonstrated that migration can be indispensable, for instance in economies and societies reliant on migrant workers in health and agriculture. The key is managing this migration to harness its potentials. Regularizing Venezuelans in Colombia and other countries has helped many access labour markets and services, albeit unevenly and imperfectly. Diaspora humanitarians and philanthropists continue to be at the forefront of conflict and humanitarian responses, from support for people displaced by the war in Ukraine to donations for those affected by floods in Pakistan.

- 6 Climate and environmental shocks are amplifying other crises and becoming an increasingly important factor in human mobility.** The year 2022 saw 32.6 million internal disaster displacements, primarily from floods and storms.³³⁰ While it is well established that these disasters trigger large-scale internal displacements, the impacts of climate change are having a multiplier effect in many contexts. Increasingly severe and common climate shocks can destabilize the fragile house of cards that is the economic and political equilibrium in many low- and middle-income countries. These countries, which are usually least responsible for the emissions causing global warming, lack the resilience and capacities to prepare, so such shocks can trigger or amplify other crises and thus prompt longer-term and longer-distance mobility.³³¹

The state of human mobility in the aftermath of the pandemic is a highly diverse, complex and constantly shifting landscape. Bold, holistic interventions are needed to ensure migration is a choice and one that contributes to efforts to resolve humanitarian, development and peace challenges. Critical to this is mitigating the adverse drivers of migration and addressing barriers to safe and regular migration pathways. With human mobility's many forms deeply interconnected, comprehensive approaches to understanding and addressing the drivers of migration and displacement are more essential than ever.

With human mobility's many forms deeply interconnected, comprehensive approaches to understanding and addressing the drivers of migration and displacement are more essential than ever.

330 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database".

331 Authors' analysis of data from the IOM DTM, Flow Monitoring Survey, East Africa, 2022.

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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to their Migration Policy Institute (MPI) colleagues, including Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Andrew Selee, Samuel Davidoff-Gore, Jasmijn Slootjes, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Diego Chaves-González and Michelle Mittelstadt for their advice and peer review during the course of the project; Lauren Shaw for her careful edits; María Jesús Mora for her assistance with accessing and interpreting data; and Irene Quadrelli for research assistance. Special thanks go to Elizabeth Collett, Global Fellow at MPI, for a close read and feedback.

The authors also thank colleagues at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). For their support with data entry, analysis and the contract, the authors thank Hong Tran-Jones, Muhammad Rizki, Laura Nistri, Victoria Roa-Chaillet, Ivona Zakoska-Todorovska, Vlatko Avramovski, Chandan Nayak, Ashok Rai, Yaroslav Smirnov, Henry Kwenin, Pablo Gallego, Nando Lewis, Prithvi Hirani, Edgar Woynowski, Eminenur Çınar, Annie Bartkowski, Alessandro Nicoletti, Jasmine Tham, Marina Muñoz del Valle, Daniel Ibáñez Campos, Noe Hinck, Jiumei Jao, Camila Kirtzman, Elizabeth Griesmer, Oluwatosin Orenaike, Kiara Soobrayan, Alexandra Bate, Assad Asil Companioni, Hajar Guadar, Charlie Pitcairn, William Lumala, Esther Mulwa, Meryem El Mouhib and Isabella Salom Urrego. For their thoughtful review and feedback, the authors thank Laurence Hart, Hong Tran-Jones, Ana Aguado, Ana Dodevska, Paula Benea, Iliada Kuqi, Laura Bartolini, Sunday Tunde Omoyeni, Fitriana Nur, Jasmine Tham, Tanja Dedovic, Modher Alhamadani, Shabarinath Nair, Susanne Melde, Vanina Modolo, Eliza Clark, Ariel Litke, Mingizem Maru, Jordan DeLorenzo, Pekka Marjamäki, Haley West, Iliana Flores Pérez, Bryan Ocaya, Daniel Silva, Alexander Klosovsky, Kolitha Wickramage, Naomi Burnett, Cemre Naz Barsbay, Tamsin Fernandez-Cox, Viviane Nzeusseu, Tomas Ernst, Karolina Krelinova, Milen Petrov and Jean François Aquilera. Finally, for their database and data support, the authors thank Issa Zong-Naba, William Lumala and Yaroslav Smirnov.



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