

Key developments

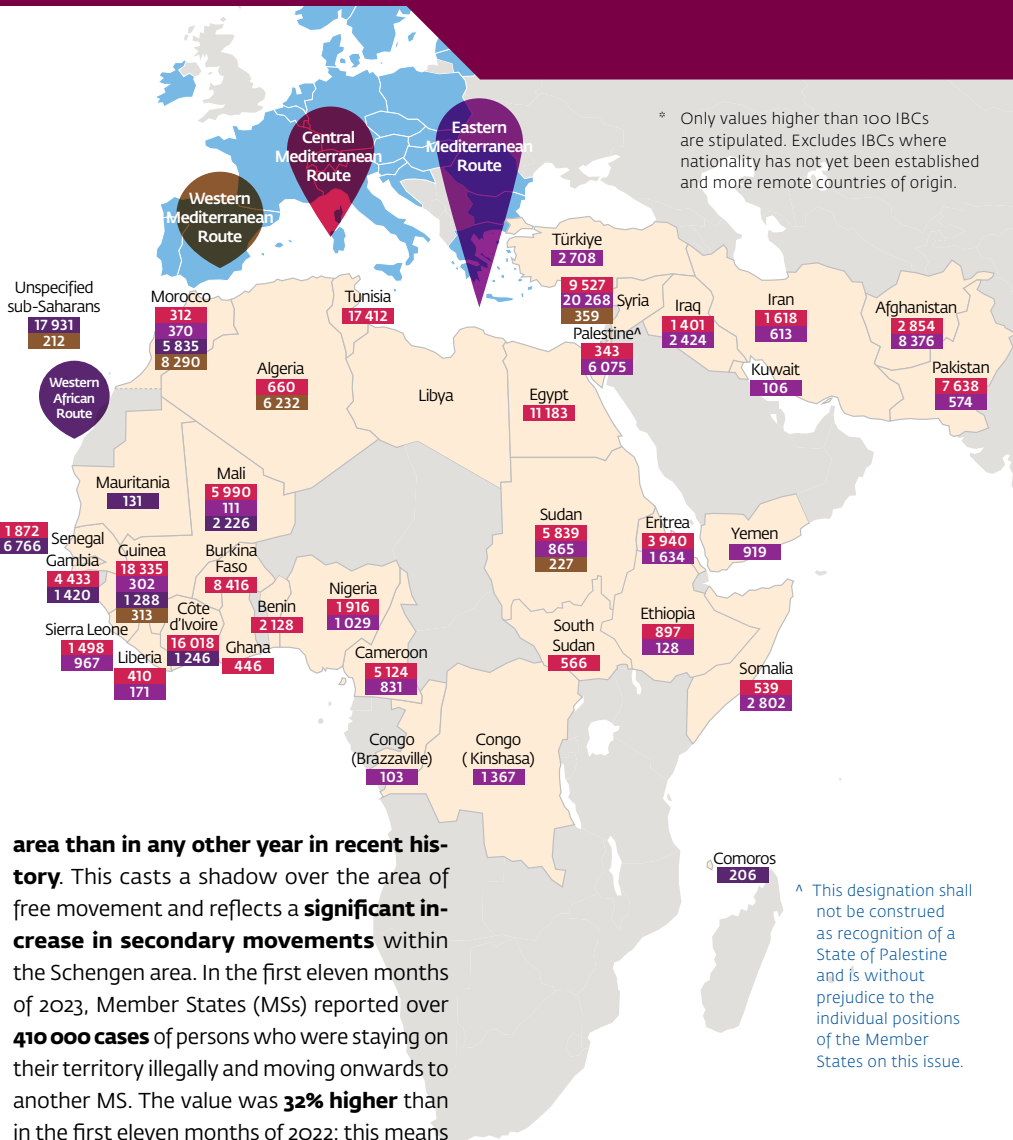
The year 2023¹ saw yet another increase in irregular migration pressure that to a large degree reflected the ever-greater geopolitical turbulence in Europe's neighbourhood. In 2023, more than **442 000 illegal border-crossings (IBCs)² were detected at the EU's external borders: roughly 380 000 on entry and 62 000 on exit.** The detections on entry **increased by 17%** in relation to the 2022 figure, making 2023 the third consecutive year with a significant rise in the number of irregular entries. 2023 also recorded the highest annual figure since the 2015-2016 migration crisis. Instability in West Africa was concomitant with a tripling of detected arrivals from that region.

The increase in illegal border-crossings in 2023 was mostly driven by arrivals at the **sea borders.** This includes increased arrivals in the **Central Mediterranean** (well over 50 000 more than in 2022), but also the highest-ever annual figure reported on the **Western African** route leading towards the Canary Islands (around 25 000 more).

A slight **increase in the number of vulnerable persons at the external borders was registered.** The share of women and children in the migratory flow went up, each accounting for a little more than one in ten detections. The increase is due to more women and children arriving on the Eastern Mediterranean route compared with 2022 and more than double the number of detections of women on the Western Balkan route. The number of unaccompanied minors increased by 28% from around 16 000 in 2022 to over 20 000 in 2023. Ensuring the protection of these children is therefore an expanding challenge for the authorities involved.

In 2023, people smugglers and migrants themselves increasingly resorted to the **use of violence at the external borders.** This even involved the use of weapons. Meanwhile, the continuing war in Ukraine in 2023 saw a stabilisation of cross-border passenger flows. Enhanced efforts by Ukrainian authorities to address arms proliferation and trafficking and targeted checks at the EU's borders proved effective in successfully mitigating cross-border crime.

2023 was also marked by more temporarily **re-introduced border-controls in the Schengen**



* Only values higher than 100 IBCs are stipulated. Excludes IBCs where nationality has not yet been established and more remote countries of origin.

area than in any other year in recent history. This casts a shadow over the area of free movement and reflects a **significant increase in secondary movements** within the Schengen area. In the first eleven months of 2023, Member States (MSs) reported over **410 000 cases** of persons who were staying on their territory illegally and moving onwards to another MS. The value was **32% higher** than in the first eleven months of 2022: this means that due to multiple detections of the same person along the route it increased more than the detections of illegal border-crossings at the external borders during the same period.

The **gap between decisions to return third-country nationals and effective returns remains sizable**, even though there was an improvement in the return performance. Whereas in 2022, there were around 86 000 effective returns and 515 000 return decisions, in the first eleven months of 2023, a little more than **90 000³ effective returns stood against 420 000 return decisions⁴.** These figures indicate room for improvement in areas such as cooperation with third countries, more efficient return procedures and the mutual recognition of return decisions.

¹ Illegal border-crossings (IBCs) include all available data on irregular migrant detections on the external borders of the European Union and Schengen Associated Countries in the period January–November 2023 and are compared with the same period in previous years. Joint Operation data and estimates were used for December 2023. It should be noted that the same person may be detected for IBC several times at different locations or on different borders.

Detections of illegal border-crossing at the EU's external borders. Source: Frontex data.

	2021	2022	2023	% change over 2022
Central Mediterranean	67 724	105 561	157 479	49%
Eastern Mediterranean	22 793	38 690	60 073	55%
Western African Route	22 351	15 463	40 403	161%
Western Balkan Route	61 735	144 197	99 068	-31%
Eastern Borders Route	8 160	6 373	5 608	-12%
Western Mediterranean	18 466	15 134	16 915 ^o	12%
Other routes	1 093	917	681 ^o	-26%
Total EU - Detections	202 322	326 335	380 227^o	17%

^oincluding estimates

² The term 'illegal border-crossing' refers to crossings of the external borders of the EU considered unauthorised at the time of the crossing under the Schengen Borders Code. This number might include persons intending to apply for asylum. The term refers to statistical data of events occurring at the border and does not presume the final legal status of the detected persons.

³ Provisional numbers as data collected for 2023 is under yearly review. Current increase from ~ 85 000 to ~ 92 000 effective returns. Following review, overall increase expected to be higher.

⁴ Provisional numbers as data collected for 2023 is under yearly review. Current decrease from ~ 515 000 to ~ 425 000 return decisions issued. Following review, overall decrease expected to be lower.

[^] This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

Composition of migrant flows

In January–November 2023, for the fourth year in a row, Syrians were by far the **most reported nationality** (100 000 IBCs), with over 8 000 more reported IBCs than in the first eleven months of 2022. Given that the overall number of detections was higher than in 2022, the share of Syrians dropped slightly to 28%. The number of Syrians increased on the Eastern Mediterranean route, in particular on direct crossings from Syria and Lebanon. There were also more Syrians in the Central Mediterranean, as they were for the first time detected in larger numbers on the Tunisian corridor (roughly 750 in January–November 2023). Syrians continued to fly to Libya to make a facilitated sea crossing to Europe in 2023, with over 8 400 Syrian nationals detected in the Central Mediterranean having departed from Libyan shores. Among the top nationalities detected in January–November, Syrians (28%) were followed by Guineans (6%), other persons of sub-Saharan origin, whose nationality couldn't be confirmed (5%), Ivorians (5%), and Tunisians (5%). These five nationality groups accounted

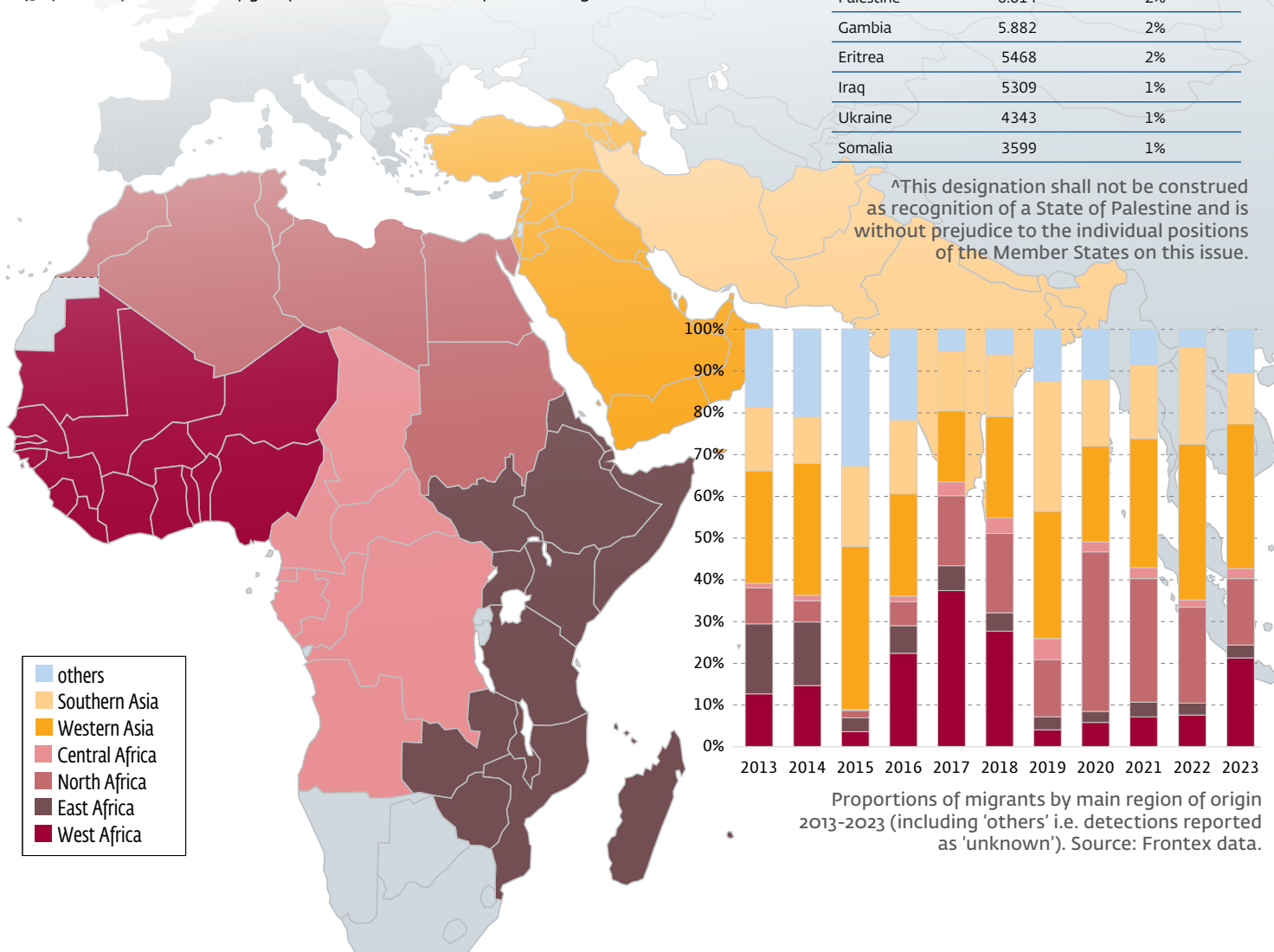
for almost half of all reported migrants, while the top 20 nationalities listed in Table 2 were responsible for 89% of the overall number. Despite fluctuations in the total number of irregular migrants reported, the composition of the top 20 nationalities has remained broadly unchanged in recent years.

As regards the **regional composition of migration flows**, detections of Asian migrants declined in year-on-year terms due to the lower number of arrivals from Southern Asia. **The overall increase in the 2023 total was driven by African nationalities, which accounted for almost half** of all migrant detections, overtaking Asian migrants. This was mostly due to the detections of West Africans tripling to over 77 000 in January–November 2023. Specifically, the figures multiplied for nationals of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Burkina Faso (an over fifteenfold surge to around 8 500 detections), Mali, and The Gambia. Migrants from East and Central Africa were also reported in higher numbers.

Nationalities with more than 3 000 illegal border-crossings on entry at the EU's external borders in January–November 2023. Source: Frontex data.

Nationalities	IBCs	Share of total
Syria	100.962	28%
Guinea	19.928	6%
Unspecified sub-Saharan nationals	18.143	5%
Côte d'Ivoire	17.165	5%
Tunisia	17.155	5%
Afghanistan	16.990	5%
Morocco	14.477	4%
Bangladesh	13.417	4%
Unknown	13.061	4%
Egypt	11.696	3%
Türkiye	11.258	3%
Pakistan	10.038	3%
Senegal	8.549	2%
Burkina Faso	8.493	2%
Mali	7.466	2%
Sudan	6.931	2%
Algeria	6.488	2%
Cameroon	6.101	2%
Palestine [^]	6.014	2%
Gambia	5.882	2%
Eritrea	5.468	2%
Iraq	5.309	1%
Ukraine	4.343	1%
Somalia	3.599	1%

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Outlook for 2024

In 2024, European integrated border management (EIBM) will likely continue to face **irregular migration** at the external borders alongside subsequent **secondary movements**, the risk of entry of high-risk individuals (including clandestinely) and a full range of cross-border crimes. Considering the number of migrants in direct proximity to the EU's external borders potentially making the journey, the associated likelihood will once again firmly place irregular migration as the greatest test to EIBM in 2024.

That said, the outlook for 2024 in terms of irregular migration flows towards the EU is more nuanced than a cursory glance at the evidently stark indicators, such as compounding push factors in key regions of origin and transit, would suggest. Efforts to noticeably mitigate the migratory pressure, both at EU and national level, will intensify in 2024. It should be said, however, that the **effects of those efforts are more likely to be seen in the medium term**. While key EU destination countries are lowering their appeal to migrants, the EU's *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* could – through chiefly its Asylum Procedures Regulation – deter irregular migration by economic migrants in particular. On top of this initiative come new migration partnerships with key countries of departure. These developments may not have direct and clear-cut implications on migration flows; for instance, the Pact will likely have dissimilar effects on different groups of migrants. While people smugglers will seek to counteract new efforts to manage irregular migration and will for instance likely bring forward/accelerate departures to take advantage of closing windows of opportunity, nationality swapping could rise by migrants looking to evade envisaged border procedures.

There are many situations that remain a concern for European border management in 2024, such as the **war in Ukraine** and the political instability and proliferation of **jihadi groups in the Sahel**. Newly concerning is the further extension of the conflict regions surrounding Europe with the outbreak of the conflict in **Gaza**. Its potential escalation to the wider region may result in large-scale refugee movements towards

Europe, especially if the paths to the well-established corridors of the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes are open(ed). Furthermore, the economic reverberations of the conflict are equally important, as for example the threat to shipping lanes in the Red Sea drives inflationary pressures on necessities such as food and energy, further burdening low-income populations in key regions of origin and threatening hopes of economic recovery.

Considering socioeconomic factors, the IMF for 2024 projects rapid GDP growth in several countries to Europe's south. As root causes of economic migration are addressed, the fact is that rising income levels in certain societal segments may actually lead to increased migration – including irregular one – in the medium to long term.

The risk of terrorists blending in with mixed migratory flows remains high. Moreover, in view of the polarisation of European societies over the Israel-Gaza war, the risk of terrorist attacks could increase. That said, in recent years, terrorist attacks/threats in the EU have materialised in the form of lone actors, most of them operating without any formal links to a terrorist organisation; a condition which sets less sophisticated/high impact attacks as the primary risk for the Union. In this sense, major sports events in 2024 may be at risk. Ensuring the systematic performance of border checks based on biometrics and consistent vigilant border controls remains paramount in interdicting the movement of high-risk individuals and mitigating the associated risks for EU internal security. This, coupled with strengthening cooperation among all actors involved in EIBM, allows frontline officers to maintain situational awareness and quickly adapt to the challenging operational environment.

Apart from structural factors fuelling irregular movements, deliberate efforts to instrumentalise migration by state actors hostile to the European Union and its Member States and **hybrid threats** will likely continue, if not intensify, in 2024. The events at Finnish border-crossing points, towards the end of 2023, attest to the keen interest on the part of the Russian Federation and Belarus in stress-testing particular sections of their extensive western borders with their EU and Schengen neighbours. In a noteworthy new development, IBCs have been detected at the Finnish border. While a major increase of IBCs between BCPs is still more likely in the spring, the

risk would evidently escalate should the Russian authorities facilitate the crossings.

In 2024, the largest migratory pressure is again expected to materialise at the sea borders, among other things because of continuing efforts to secure land borders with border fences. This enhancement of security at the land borders (and, in the longer run, the provisions of the Pact) could also increase the number of attempts to enter clandestinely via border-crossing points. This may to an even higher degree affect the soon-to-be-Schengen Bulgarian and Romanian external borders, which could become attractive targets for people smugglers, as in March they will start operating connections to key destination countries without border checks (intra-Schengen flights).

Given the increase in illegal border-crossings in 2023, the **number of return decisions is expected to re-establish an upward trend in 2024**, mainly as a consequence of negative decisions on asylum applications lodged on entry in EU territory. Regarding effective returns, the rising trend established within the recent years is expected to be maintained, although still influenced by the geo-political situation in several countries of origin.

The cross-border crime dynamics in 2024 will likely be driven by factors such as natural disasters as well as unrest- and conflict-driven displacement. Vulnerable populations are more exposed to organised criminal activities such as migrant smuggling and face an increased risk of subsequent labour and sexual exploitation. Moreover, economic challenges create a demand for illicit markets, providing opportunities for crime groups to smuggle various commodities, including drugs. There is an increased risk that smugglers will move contraband goods across sea, land, and air borders as their tactics evolve, such as adjusting routes and camouflaging contraband into legal flows of containerised transports and small parcel shipments.

In summary, in 2024 European border management will continue facing a highly challenging geopolitical environment characterised by the potential for increased migration flows and cross-border crime. Should this materialise, the known risks for 2024 can be expected to **primarily affect the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes**. The amplified pressure on the latter corridor would obviously lead to **knock-on effects in the Western Balkans**.