



The implications of (mis)managing transit migration

Hervé Nicolle
Samuel Hall

Transit migration management is a major policy response to irregular migration in most destination countries. It is detrimental not only to migrants, but also transit countries instrumentalised by security and short-term approaches.

Transit migration is a politicised policy area, inseparable from attempts to externalise border controls and curb irregular migration, particularly to European countries.

The externalisation of borders, delegation of responsibilities and security threaten migrants' human rights and the political, social and economic stability of local communities.

The (mis)management of transit migration can have consequences for countries of origin, transit and destination.



Flags of Member States Flying at UN Headquarters: Tunisia

Source: UN Photo/Loey Felipe

This policy brief summarises the effects and shortcomings of transit migration management, understood as an arsenal of policy options against migrants' transit strategies.

Alternative courses of action are proposed based on MIGNEX research - particularly in Turkey and Tunisia, which are the 'last stops' on key corridors to Europe.

Transit migration is subject to politicised and security-based management incommensurate with its political and human stakes

In the European context, transit migration management seeks to redirect political responsibility for mobility issues to the countries that neighbour or are located along migration trajectories.

In practical terms, this means promoting bilateral agreements and militarised border control operations between European Union (EU) states and their close or distant neighbours. What lessons can be drawn from Turkey and Tunisia in terms of policy relevance and effectiveness?

In Turkey, migration management is exonerating Europe from its responsibilities

For Turkey, the arrival of Syrian refugees since 2011 and Afghans in increasing numbers since 2021 represent a certain tradition of hosting. Having received Iranian migrants in 1980 –

1988, Iraqi Kurds in 1988 and 1990, Turkish-speaking Bulgarians in 1989 and migrants from the former Eastern bloc countries too, Turkey has once again faced a massive influx of asylum seekers.

The closure of the EU's external borders has obliged Turkey to play a gatekeeper role to reduce irregular migration to Europe, as outlined in the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan of November 2015¹ and the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016². Consequently, Turkey has engaged in projects to ensure the security of its borders, including fence construction, security technology and the erection of walls along its borders with Syria and Iran.

In exchange, the EU offered financial aid exceeding €6 billion under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) to improve living conditions for Syrian refugees. This encapsulates the political and economic tools of the EU to externalise transit migration management to Turkey.

MIGNEX field research in Kilis, a city neighbouring Syria where nearly 40% of inhabitants are Syrian, revealed that most refugees feel trapped there due to limited socioeconomic opportunities, economic instability and discrimination in education and the labour market.

Opportunities for socioeconomic integration are limited, yet many Syrians (unlike Afghans in other parts of the country) say they want to

settle in Kilis permanently. Regardless of their intentions, the lack of an established international protection system, limited legal channels to Europe drive many refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey to European countries through irregular migration.

The EU's approach here, known as containment, ultimately results in further risk for Syrian refugees - and also Afghans, since the return of the Taliban - while imposing populist narratives among Turkish politicians and reinforcing the image of Europe as isolated from its neighbours.

In Tunisia, transit migration management stifles the prospects of young people and deprives migrants of their rights, while generating xenophobia

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has rapidly become a destination country for refugees and other migrants, particularly Libyans and Syrians. It also continues to be a transit country for migrants from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa heading to Europe.

Migration management operations include efforts to prevent onward migration to Italian shores, the collection and sharing of intelligence on EU migration flows with Frontex, the criminalisation of smuggling and trafficking, and the acceptance of return migrants who have travelled irregularly (both Tunisian nationals and third-country nationals).

Although there is ongoing formal cooperation between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Tunisia, local authorities have hampered refugee rights through judicial, institutional, and practical mechanisms.

Moreover, President Kaïs Saïed's statements on sub-Saharan transit migration - which he called a 'criminal plan to change the composition of the demographic landscape' in February 2023 – suggest that the EU's containment policies have created tensions with Tunisia, eroded EU credibility as a development actor and contributed to a wave of xenophobia. This translates into extreme vulnerability for transit migrants who, despite the known risks, still aspire to migrate.

MIGNEX research shows that some people have tried to migrate multiple times before successfully leaving Tunisia. In the city of Redeyef, east of the Tunisian–Algerian border, transit migrants contact smugglers in Gafsa, or travel directly to the port town of Sfax, facing the risk of being stranded, running out of money or getting caught and returned.

Local municipalities lack the financial resources and technical knowledge to address this and ensure decent conditions while avoiding tensions with sub-Saharan migrant communities. At the same time, many young Tunisians interviewed by MIGNEX in Redeyef aspire to leave their country, taking the same



Safouen Azouzi for MIGNEX.

routes as Ivorians, Senegalese, Malians or Guineans in transit.

Policymakers must move from a normative and politicised approach to an equitable and political framework

The (mis)management of transit migration has implications for irregular migration flows (which are criminalised) and it is detrimental to the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

Policy dialogues on mobility must move from a migration management logic to an approach that better reflects the realities of migration for individuals and communities, as well as the social, political and economic challenges and opportunities for all countries and populations experiencing transit migration. Accordingly, two priorities have emerged from MIGNEX research:

- The development of global standards to protect the rights of all migrants in transit (information, personal safety, health care, education and an adequate standard of living) and an unconditional end to the detention of transit migrants regardless of their status, gender, nationality and age.
- The creation of platforms for multi-level policy discussions between governments along migration corridors to foster equitable sharing of responsibilities between governments, municipalities as well as civil society actors from countries of origin, transit and destination.

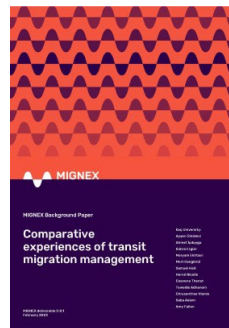
Notes

¹ EC (2015) EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. Brussels: EC (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_15_5860).

² EU Council (2016) EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016. Brussels: EU Council (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>).

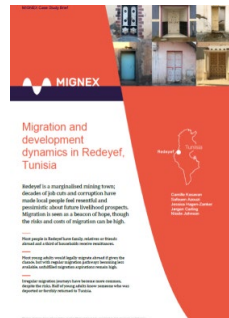
³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2023, April 27) (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/04/tunisia-must-immediately-stop-hate-speech-and-violence-against-migrants>).

Further reading



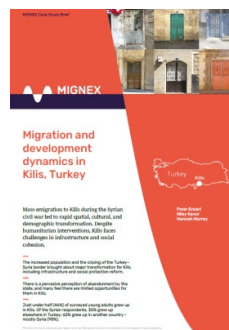
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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration-Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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