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Introduction

The Silk Routes region presents a complex landscape of migratory movements, driven by economic, political, and humanitarian factors. Labour migration remains a significant trend, especially in **India**, **Bangladesh**, and **Pakistan**, where millions of workers have left for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Southeast Asia, and to the EU. The characteristics and trends of migration movements to the EU may vary, but overall data suggest that, while India provides (and facilitates the emigration of) high and medium skilled migrants, who often reach the EU through regular means thanks to longstanding renewed or recently established cooperation with countries of destination, Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants are generally low- or semi-skilled and tend to reach the EU in an irregular way, often after reaching first a neighbouring transit country (such as Türkiye, or Northern African countries) in a regular way.

To further facilitate labour migration, the EU launched Talent Partnerships with Bangladesh and Pakistan in a Team Europe approach to offer legal pathways to the EU matching the needs of the EU's labour market. Talent Partnerships are part of the comprehensive partnerships between the EU and partner countries and aim at boosting international labour mobility and development of talent in a mutually beneficial way. Talent Partnerships are open to all skill levels and concern various economic sectors such as ICT, science, agriculture, transport, tourism, construction, logistics. They aim to ensure an equal win for partner countries, Member States, business communities on both sides and individuals benefitting from the partnerships.

For **Afghanistan** and **Iraq**, their challenges encompass also those related to post-conflict and humanitarian situation, in addition to difficult economic conditions. As a result of the Taliban takeover in 2021, over 1.6 million people – including skilled workers employed in the public administration, service sectors, or in foreign diplomatic missions – have been displaced to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Political and social tensions related to the presence of Afghans, often inflated by mass media, have prompted the two countries to adopt repatriation plans for Afghan nationals.

Introduced in October 2023, Pakistan's "Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan" has led to over 730,000 Afghan refugees returning to their country, while in Iran a bill was introduced in the Parliament to adopt stricter measures (including deportations) for foreigners without a legal right to stay in Iran. UN agencies reported a steady grow of the number of non-voluntary returnees from Iran to Afghanistan, with up to 200,000 returns monthly since May 2024. Iraq, still recovering from civil unrest as well as the conflict with ISIS, has experienced significant internal displacement and – to a lesser extent – international migration, either to neighbouring countries or to the EU. Iraq was one of the countries of origin in the 2021 Belarussian instrumentalization of migrants towards the EU. However, the political and economic situation in the country is improving, and efforts are underway to facilitate the return and reintegration of displaced persons, both internally and from abroad.

In summary, the region faces enormous migration challenges, with economic factors, displacement, and political instability driving movements within and beyond borders. The recent escalation in the Middle East, coupled with the increasing pressure on countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, might add further tensions and instabilities, potentially prompting people to leave their countries, often pushing migrants into irregular and dangerous channels. According to UNHCR, more than 11,000 Lebanese arrived in Iraq since the escalation of hostilities in Lebanon.

Bangladesh and India

Background context

Bangladesh is in a transition period and currently led by an interim government tasked with preparing the ground for elections as well as ensuring reforms and accountability. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned in August and the President dissolved the Parliament. While the political and economic situation in India seems stronger, the internal labour market often struggles to absorb its working age population (which amounts to almost 68% of its total population), thus prompting many to migrate abroad in search of higher salaries and better opportunities.

As a result, **India** has emerged as one of the top countries of origin for migration to the EU, whereby its primary drivers are employment and education. The Indian student market is now the second largest in the world after China and represents great potential for European universities seeking to internationalize their student intake. Highly skilled workers from India, particularly from the Information Technology industry make Indian nationals the largest recipient of highly skilled visas (Blue Card) in the EU (mainly in Germany and the Netherlands).

The high population density and its socioeconomic vulnerability, combined with the increasing intensity and frequency of climate events, place India and especially Bangladesh among the world's most disaster-prone countries. In 2023, 1.8 million Bangladeshi people were displaced by natural disasters, mostly storms and floods, further straining the country's resources and infrastructure.

Besides, in the past decade, **Bangladesh** has emerged as one of the world's top refugee-hosting countries, providing shelter to around one million Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar, but further complicating its social and economic landscape. The position of the new Interim Government is that voluntary repatriation to Myanmar is the primary solution for the Rohingya. In 2017 Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a repatriation agreement, although, as of September 2024, no repatriations have taken place, and as the security situation in Myanmar is deteriorating, it is unlikely that mass returns could happen any time soon in a way that does not jeopardize the safety of the returnees.

Migration trends and challenges

Bangladesh has long relied on labour migration as a vital economic lifeline. According to the Bangladeshi Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), between 1976 and 2023, over 16 million registered labour migrants left the country in search of better opportunities abroad. The GCC countries and Southeast Asia (particularly Malaysia and Singapore) have been the primary destinations for this massive workforce, with 12 and 2.5 million Bangladeshi workers, respectively. Noteworthy is also the presence of Bangladeshi nationals in India, estimated at 2.5 million individuals in 2020, driven not only by the prospect of better job opportunities but also by the cultural and historical ties between the two countries. However, reports suggest that Bangladeshi migrants in India – especially if in an irregular situation – are often socially excluded and discriminated.

Remittances from these migrant workers play a critical role in sustaining the economy. In 2022, Bangladesh ranked as the 8th largest recipient of international remittances, with \$21.5 billion flowing into the country. Bangladesh received \$22 billion in 2023 and was the 6th top receiving country worldwide (5% of GDP). These remittances help offset the impacts of high unemployment, inflation, and the country's import dependency, providing financial stability to millions of families and contributing to the fragile economic balance.

Many **Indian** citizens have also chosen migration as an adaptation strategy. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, more than 35 million Indian citizens are living abroad. Although Indian emigration is long-standing and varied, the most recent migration movements from the country generally include semi- and high-skilled migrants primarily employed in the GCC and Western countries. As of 2016, India had the world's highest number of migrants with a postsecondary degree, with more than three million residing in the 38 countries of the OECD, with over 800,000 in the EU as of 2023.

Migration to EU

While GCC countries have been – particularly since the 1970s oil boom – and remain a major destination for Bangladeshi and Indian regular labour migrants, migration movements from South Asia to the EU have also gained importance in the last years, although they are much more limited in numbers.

According to the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, since 2020 **Bangladeshi** migrants have always been among the top ten nationalities of irregular arrivals into the EU, with a peak of 17,101 irregular entries in 2022. The Central Mediterranean route from Libya is the most popular choice among Bangladeshi migrants: in 2022, more than 92% of those irregular entries were registered in Italy, making up about 14% of all arrivals in this country (up from 5% in 2019). The same report highlights how Bangladeshi migrants often leave their country in a regular way to then attempt to migrate to the EU irregularly: in this respect, the most popular transit countries before reaching Libya are Türkiye, UAE, and, to a lesser extent, Egypt. As part of the migration management, the EU launched Talent Partnership with Bangladesh in a Team Europe approach offering legal pathways to the EU, reducing irregular migration and matching the EU's labour market needs in a mutually beneficial way.

The limited availability of regular migration pathways has increased the resort to smuggling networks, either to find employment in the destination countries or to finalise the journey to the EU across the Mediterranean. News report indicates that some migrants have been asked to pay up to EUR 16,000 to fake agencies in exchange of the promise of a job opportunity in the EU. According to the IOM, the boat journey from Libya to Italy “reportedly cost between USD 3,000 to 4,000 per person, often resulting in an average overall total cost of over USD 8,000 to reach Italy from Bangladesh.” The risk of falling victims of trafficking along the journey is also heightened, in particular for the purpose of labour exploitation. It is for these reasons that as part of the broader migration dialogue (Migration and Mobility Dialogue launched in 2023) and cooperation on migration with Bangladesh, the EU launched the Talent Partnership, with a view to increase the availability of legal pathways to the EU, thus potentially reducing irregular migration and matching the EU’s labour market needs in a mutually beneficial way.

Migration from **India** to the EU is generally more varied. While numbers of low-skilled migrants remain important according to MMC, as of February 2023, Indians constituted the third largest nationality to attempt to cross the English Channel in search for asylum, after Afghans and Syrians the country aims at capitalising on semi- and high-skilled migrants, promoting agreements to facilitate their migration towards Western countries. In 2023, among the 113,000 Blue Card holders in Germany, 33,000 were from India. Since 2020, India has replaced China as the main country of origin of new migrants to OECD countries. Main destinations of Indian migrants include the EU (in particular, Germany, France, Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and Ireland), the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The availability of migration corridors allows Indian migrants often high-skilled individuals working in STEM disciplines, ICT field, or in the care sector to travel to Western countries in a regular way. The EU-India Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CAMM) frames relations in the area of migration and is supported by an EU-funded technical project. CAMM implementation is supervised by the annual EU-India High Level Dialogue on Migration and Mobility.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

Background context

Since the Taliban's takeover of **Afghanistan** in August 2021, the country has seen a sharp deterioration of its political, economic, and humanitarian situation. The situation of women and girls in Afghanistan is deteriorating. This is also in light of the recent adoption of the law on the "Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" by the Taliban – which confirms and extends severe restrictions on the life of Afghans, and in particular women and girls.

Basic freedoms have been severely curtailed, and the collapse of government institutions has plunged the nation into crisis. According to UNOCHA, 28.3 million Afghans are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, with food insecurity, displacement, and lack of healthcare being critical concerns. In response, the EU and its member states have established or reinforced numerous programmes aimed at protecting Afghan refugees and supporting vulnerable populations; however, these have been mostly insufficient to cover the protection needs. While the EU launched in 2023 a Migration and Mobility Dialogue with Pakistan – an essential partner for managing refugee flows – there is no formal cooperation with Afghanistan's de facto Taliban authorities, further complicating efforts to address the crisis.

Pakistan has recently experienced political uncertainty and economic challenges. The February 2024 parliamentary elections have come after a period of political unrest, characterised by the constitutional crisis two years before, the no-confidence motion against former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and his successive arrest in 2023. The elections themselves, which led to the re-election of a coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif, who had been appointed as Prime Minister after the constitutional crisis, were marked by political controversies, strong disputes between the main parties, and social turmoil. The political standoff between the ruling coalition, supported by the military establishment and the imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his disenfranchised political party PTI continues to poison the political landscape in the country.

Economically, the country has been experiencing several challenges, with high inflation, economic contraction, and devaluation of the Pakistani rupee, which had severe repercussions on the national industry as well as on social well-being. The perpetual economic and security challenges that the country is facing might raise a sense of frustration and disillusion especially among the younger generations, pushing many to migrate abroad. Although the export of labour is one of the main governmental priorities, which sees it as a way to receive more remittances (and therefore earn foreign currency), it might represent an issue for the country, which loses its talents in specific sectors.

Migration trends and challenges

Regarding migration and displacement patterns in the region, the Taliban's takeover of **Afghanistan** led to the displacement of approximately 1.6 million Afghans in neighbouring countries, particularly in Iran (1 million) and Pakistan (600,000). **Pakistan**, in this respect, has long been one of the world's top refugee hosting countries, due to a longstanding significant presence of displaced Afghans since the outbreak of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979. The 600,000 Afghan people that fled to Pakistan added indeed to the 2.5 million already present in the country, exacerbating social and political tensions. In October 2023, following security issues and violent incidents in the Pakistani provinces of KP and Baluchistan bordering Afghanistan, the Pakistani government launched the "Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan," which (as of September 2024) compelled 733,000 Afghan refugees, including those holding Afghan Citizen Cards, to leave the country and led to the imposition of a one-document regime, which requires that every person crossing the border to Pakistan has a regular visa. Although the Phase 2 of the repatriation plan has been launched in April, envisaging the forced return of those Afghans with an Afghan Citizen Card, the plan has reduced in pace, and the government has renewed the validity of 1.45 million Proof of Registration cards until June 2025, a move welcomed by the international community. Iran, facing similar pressures, announced plans to repatriate 2 million irregular Afghans starting in September 2024.

For **Afghans** in both countries, the future looks bleak. Social and economic integration has proven difficult due to legal and societal barriers, and options for legal migration to other countries are virtually non-existent. At the same time, returning to Afghanistan is not an option for many, as the Taliban have imposed a regime based on an ultra-conservative strict interpretation of Sharia, limit basic political, social and economic freedoms of women and girls. Of note in this context is also the recent ruling of the European Court of Justice, whereby gender and nationality alone are sufficient for a country to grant asylum to Afghan women. The country also continues to be plagued by violence, instability, and lack of basic services. Caught in this limbo, Afghan refugees face an uncertain and increasingly precarious existence in the region.

Pakistan has long been one of the world's top sending countries for (mostly low-skilled) labour migration, with 13 million registered migrants having left the country between 1971 and 2023, at a pace of more than 800,000 migrants per year since 2022. The GCC countries and the Middle East have been the primary destinations, although there is also a notable trend of Pakistani workers going to the EU. Other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and – despite its tightening migration policies and the limited possibilities to go there – Australia, are also important destinations for eastward directed irregular migration routes.

Compounding the situation is the recent ban imposed by the United Arab Emirates on labour migrants from Pakistan, following complaints from countries in the region against the behaviour of Pakistani migrants (particularly regarding cases of beggary). This development may drive Pakistani workers to seek alternative opportunities in other Gulf states, potentially through irregular channels. The combination of shrinking legal pathways and restrictive migration policies in both the Gulf and Europe is creating a volatile situation, pushing more Pakistanis to resort to risky migration routes in search of work and stability abroad. The EU takes a proactive approach to coordinating efforts at the European and international levels, in response to this ongoing displacement situation. The EU leads a Team Europe Initiative with 13 EU MS which aims at having a joined-up EU response, notably focusing on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. At the international level, the EU also participates in the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees core group which is currently under Netherlands chair.

The **Afghan** situation is again an explicit priority for the ad-hoc EU-supported resettlement and humanitarian admission scheme for 2024-2025. The European Commission continues to support Member States' efforts and to engage with international partners in different fora so to strengthen our collaboration on resettlement and other available pathways for Afghans at risk.

Migration to EU

In 2023, the number of asylum applications by **Afghan** nationals in the European Union saw an 11% decrease compared to 2022. While this might suggest a reduced flow of migrants, the reality is quite different. The demand for protection among Afghans remains strong, but many are unable to leave the country due to strict border controls and lack of financial resources.

Despite these barriers, the desire to escape Afghanistan persists, particularly among women. The Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) for Afghanistan, which has been operating online since August 2021, has reported a rise in queries about scholarships and employment opportunities abroad, which might reflect the need for safer and more stable futures. The MRC has also been conducting soft skills training to students who received scholarships to study abroad, in particular Afghan women studying in Iran, Spain, Central Asia, Portugal and Germany.

As for **Pakistan**, illegal migration pressure on Europe from that country has decreased in 2023 compared to 2022, although this can be mainly attributed to the shipwreck tragedy in Pylos in June 2023. According to the MMC, the province of Baluchistan represents the major hub for Pakistanis migrating irregularly to Europe via Iran, Türkiye and the Mediterranean Sea. Between 2013 and 2022, over 170,000 Pakistanis were ordered to leave EU territory due to irregular status. As of today, Pakistan has no clear or structured policy mechanism on return and reintegration: not only is there a consistent lack of data on the number of returnees, but there are also fragmented readmission frameworks with non-EU host countries. However, Pakistan, in collaboration with ICMPD, is elaborating a new emigration and welfare policy that is also contemplating a more coherent policy on return and reintegration as part of the development of a sustainable reintegration programme. As part of the migration management, the EU launched the Talent Partnership with Pakistan in a Team Europe approach offering legal pathways to the EU, reducing irregular migration and matching the EU's labour market needs in a mutually beneficial way. The EU-Pakistan readmission agreement entered into force on 1st December 2010 and an EU-funded programme (EUR 7 million) supporting sustainable reintegration of returnees and improved migration management in Pakistan is currently being contracted.

Iraq

Background context

Since the defeat of **Da'esh** in December 2017, Iraq remains fragile but has experienced somewhat political stability, economic growth, and security improvements. The current situation remains fragile in many areas, with different regions undergoing specific challenges. Reconstruction efforts have contributed to better infrastructure and economic revitalisation in some areas. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) shows a decline of economic growth, with unemployment remaining a significant issue, particularly for the youth, and political tensions with the federal government connected to issues of oil and border management might have social and political repercussions. The overall state of human rights remains dire across the KRI and in Iraq. Besides, despite announcements to close camps for displaced people (a decision that has been postponed to the end of 2024), more than one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) still remain in displacement, mostly in the KRI. Furthermore, the return of Iraqi citizens from Al-Hol refugee camp in Syria is slow and their reintegration in Iraq difficult in spite of EU engagement in support for building the required infrastructure adding to the complex overall situation of IDPs in the country.

Although the general security situation in the country has improved, the potential escalation of a regional conflict might negatively affect social, political, and economic conditions, since Iraq is caught between both Iran and US. As emerged from ICMPD research, a growing desire for personal and political freedoms continue to drive calls for change, particularly among younger generations who seek greater participation in contributing to Iraq's political landscape. The ongoing socio-economic challenges and rising tensions, including unemployment and environmental pressures, may continue to push many Iraqis to consider leaving the country in search of stability elsewhere.

Migration trends and challenges

Over the past decades, Iraq has seen a complex migration landscape characterised by internal displacement, migration abroad, and return. Due to the currently challenging situation in the region, Iraq has also been welcoming Lebanese citizens without papers as well as Syrian refugees from Lebanon fleeing from the country. Baghdad seems to be the most popular destination; however, if the situation escalates, the city might not have enough capacity to host the refugees. Given this, the government and in particular the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) focuses on incoming and outgoing migrants, as well as returnees and IDPs.

With regard to readmission, return, and reintegration programmes, Iraq has signed different arrangements with European and neighbouring countries (lastly with Türkiye, in exchange for visa-free entry to the country for Iraqis below the age of 15 and above 50) to support the return of Iraqi citizens to their country of origin. In the country, the EU provides a broad range of support to tackle root causes of fragility, irregular migration and displacement such as through basic service delivery as well as migration governance, and several organisations (e.g. GMAC/GIZ, ETTC, IOM, Rwanda Foundation) provide direct financial support or consultation for returnees and migrants, and deal with govt officials on issues of return. The support provided by the reintegration programmes (e.g. EURP implemented by Frontex EURP) includes counselling, as well as in kind support, and can take the form of direct financial support (cash).

Migration to EU

Although Iraq has a long history of migration, both as a host and as a sending country, in recent years migration dynamics have shifted alongside political developments in the country and region. In 2014 and 2015, in parallel with the advancement of Da'esh and the “long summer of migration”, Iraqi citizens started to move to Türkiye as well as other countries outside the region, such as the EU (particularly Germany, Greece and Sweden), USA, Canada, and Australia. With the Belarusian instrumentalisation crisis in 2021, a new modus operandi emerged: thousands of Iraqis were lured to travel to Belarus on a tourist visa to then attempt to enter the EU irregularly via its eastern borders and claim asylum. Although in reduced numbers, many Iraqi citizens continue to migrate abroad, often in a regular way to Türkiye before attempting to cross the European borders irregularly. According to Frontex, in 2023, 5,487 Iraqis were detected in the attempt to enter the European territory, almost half of whom via the Eastern Mediterranean route.

In the first six months of 2024, several queries were registered in relation to study opportunities abroad, employment opportunities both in the country and abroad, as well as possibilities of loans for job seekers and returnees. During awareness sessions, Germany, the USA, Türkiye, Canada, Russia, UAE, and the UK emerged as the most popular desired destinations for job opportunities. An increasing number of queries was also registered in relation to social and economic opportunities within the country, including psychosocial support, training and skills development programmes, and reintegration measures. Queries regarding irregular migration and asylum opportunities, family reunification and work opportunities in the EU also see similar increasing patterns in the first two quarters of 2024 in comparison with the last two quarters of 2023.

Current challenges in the Silk Routes Region and way forward

The security situation in the Silk Routes region remains highly volatile, with significant implications to migration governance and international cooperation. The whole region is facing a series of challenges, including political instability, security threats, and the impacts of economic and environmental pressures. Diplomatic complexities and strained regional relations risk to further complicate efforts to manage social and political issues effectively. Adding to this, the current escalation of the conflict in the Middle East might provoke further tensions in the region, with increasing displacements and humanitarian challenges.

While stronger international cooperation and support are necessary to achieve political solutions, it is also important to address the current challenges specifically related to migration and displacement in the region, in order to effectively address migration movements responding to the needs of countries of origin and destination, ensure humanitarian assistance, and promote stability in the region.

Questions:

- In which way could protection measures for Afghans and other displaced persons in the region be strengthened?
- What areas should be prioritised in our cooperation with the countries in the Silk Routes region?
- What opportunities do you see, either at multilateral (e.g. Budapest Process), EU or Member States' bilateral level, to contribute to both stabilising the region and reducing irregular migration to the EU?
- What opportunities do you see at the Member States' level to further engage in Talent Partnerships with Bangladesh and Pakistan, including through bilateral initiatives that can be brought under the Talent Partnership umbrella?