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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Cooperation with Lebanon as a priority third country - Discussion paper

1. Introduction

The conflict in the Middle East presents challenges that demand the mobilisation of political, diplomatic and operational tools. It has already led to the internal displacement of millions of people, notably in Lebanon. Although, the conflict has not translated into immediate migratory flows towards the EU, what the future holds remains unclear and necessitates the full mobilisation of every migration diplomacy tool we have at our disposal.

Lebanon constitutes a key partner for the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean region. There is deep concern over the ongoing escalation and the severe impact that Israel's military operations, accompanied by evacuation orders affecting a significant portion of the territory, is having on civilians, including loss of life, large-scale displacement and a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation.

Over the past years, Lebanon has faced an unprecedented combination of violent conflict, political instability, economic collapse, and social pressures, further compounded by the protracted impact of the Syrian crisis. Recent trends indicate a growing number of departures from Lebanon to Syria, reflecting the deteriorating security situation compounded with the deterioration of the living conditions and limited economic prospects for both Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugee communities.

In this context, enhanced cooperation between the EU and Lebanon is essential. The EU has maintained a comprehensive approach, combining humanitarian assistance, support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) which is also crucial for the control of borders and development support. Strengthening joint efforts to address irregular migration, improve border management, combat migrant smuggling, and support for refugees and vulnerable Lebanese populations remains a shared priority.

During their joint visit to Beirut on 9th of January 2026, the President of the European Council, António Costa and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen**,** met with the President of the Republic of Lebanon, Joseph Aoun, and the Prime Minister, Nawaf Salam. They stated that the EU stands ready to launch discussions on a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership with Lebanon once conditions allow and upon progress on key reforms.

The objective of this discussion is to enable Member States to assess the evolving situation in Lebanon from the perspective of EU external migration policy, including possible pathways and parameters for cooperation with the Lebanese authorities on migration. The discussion will also address the implications for refugees in the region and for the EU's continued support to Lebanon and other host countries, with a view to ensuring a coordinated and coherent EU approach, in line with EU law, international obligations and fundamental rights.

2. Situation in the country

A. Current situation regarding economy, security and displacement

Lebanon is facing a severe humanitarian emergency following a renewed escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in early March 2026, which has triggered new large-scale displacement and increased humanitarian needs across the country.

This development has further compounded an already fragile context marked by prolonged economic crisis, political instability, and the lingering effects of the 2024 conflict. The economic situation remains critical, with high unemployment, widespread informality of the economy, and declining purchasing power continuing to exacerbate poverty and food insecurity.[1]

The regional security environment has deteriorated sharply following numerous violations of the 2024 ceasefire and further exacerbated by the launch of the US-Israel attacks on Iran on 28 February 2026 and Hezbollah's decision to launch missiles towards Israel on 2 March, leading to a return to full-scale hostilities. Despite the continued efforts of UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces, the presence of various non-state armed actors and ongoing Israeli military operations across Lebanon have severely compromised stability, leaving state forces overstretched and under-resourced.

Displacement remains a central concern. According to the latest operational updates, approximately 1,2 million individuals have been affected by displacement, more than twenty percent of the Lebanese population, with only 140,700 internally displaced persons (IDPs) staying in 684 collective shelters (UNHCR, 14 April 2026). Overcrowding in shelters and increasing pressure on host communities continue to generate significant humanitarian and protection needs.

[1] See EUAA, COI Report November 2025- https://www.euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2025-11/2025_11_EUAA_COI_Report_Lebanon_Country_Focus.pdf.

B. Migratory situation in Lebanon:

Lebanon remains a key country within the Eastern Mediterranean route, with recent data indicating significant and fluid cross-border mobility between Lebanon and Syria. The estimated number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon was 1 million in early 2026, as over 500,000 returned to Syria since the fall of the Assad regime. Around 236,800 Syrians and 43,900 Lebanese have crossed from Lebanon into Syria since the start of the crisis (UNHCR, 14 April 2026). These movements appear to be primarily driven by deteriorating living conditions, economic hardship, and evolving security dynamics, rather than representing sustainable return trends.

i. Latest trends in irregular arrivals to the EU and in asylum applications from Lebanon

Regarding irregular border crossings **(**IBCs**)** to the EU from Lebanon there has been a consistent and significant decrease of irregular arrivals since 2024 (144 in 2024, 74 in 2025 and 13 in 2026 – until end of February). Despite challenges from the economic crisis and fragile security, Lebanon continues effective management of its maritime borders. EU delegations, during discussion in SCIFA on 12 February 2026, recognize these efforts and are open to more structured engagement once conditions in other areas of engagement allow.

EU+ countries received around 822 000 asylum applications in 2025 (19 % decrease compared to 2024), following a decrease of 11 % in 2024 (IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2026). The decrease in 2025 was largely driven by fewer applications by Syrians, Bangladeshis and Turks. Asylum applications in EU+ from Lebanese are limited.

ii. Returns to Lebanon from neighbouring countries

Since September 23, 2024, returns to Lebanon from neighbouring countries (primarily Syria) have been characterized by a volatile cycle of displacement from Lebanon and mass re-entry. Between 8 December 2024 and the end of February 2026, an estimated 115,000 Syrians have been noted arriving in Lebanon (UNHCR, 27 February 2026).

3. Actions at EU level in Lebanon and neighbouring countries

A. EU support for managing migration and addressing displacement in Lebanon

In May 2024, President von den Leyen announced a EUR 1 billion assistance package (2024–2027) designed to support stability of Lebanon. The first half of the package (EUR 500 million for 2024-2025) was adopted in August 2024 in support of Lebanon's stability, security and reforms:

- Out of this, EUR 55 million have been allocated to support Lebanon's land and sea border management and the capacity of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to ensure internal security. This support for Lebanon's security and border management will be contracted in the coming months and implemented in close cooperation with EU MS agencies.

- EUR 368 million have been allocated to basic services for both Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese as well as durable solutions to the protracted displacement of Syrians.

- This notably includes the EUR 80 million cross-border programme, implemented in Lebanon [EUR 40 million] and Syria [EUR 40 million] in support of durable solutions, including voluntary returns to Syria.

In addition, the ongoing EUR 7 million integrated border management project [funded from 2023 budget, implemented by IOM], focuses on support to inter-agency coordination.

Moreover, Frontex's has launched negotiations on a working arrangement with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Frontex is already engaging in Lebanon through the EU-funded regional EU4BorderSecurity project.

The EU continues to support "safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable" returns to Syria through the UNHCR framework, in line with Lebanon's Return Plan. Lebanese authorities continue calling for accelerating returns to Syria given the deteriorating situation in Lebanon and following shifts in the Syrian political landscape.

B. EU-Lebanon cooperation through international organisations

EU–Lebanon cooperation is primarily executed through international organisations, which play a central role in translating European funding into on-the-ground humanitarian assistance and development support. One of the key partners in this regard is the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The cooperation also relies on IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix to monitor migration trends and inform operational responses.

In addition to the IOM, the EU cooperates closely with the UNHCR and UNRWA to manage the protection basic needs and durable solutions for Lebanon's 1 million Syrian and 222,000 Palestinian refugees, respectively. This internationalized approach is further bolstered by technical partnerships with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). By channelling resources through these international bodies, the EU maintains a strategic presence in Lebanon, in addition to the bilateral EU-Lebanon cooperation, that balances urgent humanitarian mandates with the long-term goal of stability, security and prosperity in Lebanon.

In the light of the latest Israel-Hezbollah escalation, the EU has mobilised support to rapidly respond to the arising needs:

- The European Commission announced in March 2026, EUR 100 million humanitarian aid in Lebanon in 2026, for emergency health care, basic assistance for families who have nothing left, protection services, shelter, and education for children out of school.

- The EU is also adjusting ongoing programmes under the EUR 1 billion (non-humanitarian) package. EUR 10 million have been allocated for cash assistance support for vulnerable households affected by displacement through the government-led Shock Responsive Safety Net, in addition to the planned EUR 45 million grant for the Ministry of Social Affairs for the implementation of their Social Safety net programme. The ongoing programmes on health, education, durable solutions for refugees, protection for migrant workers and border management have been adjusted to respond to the evolving needs on the ground. Furthermore, the EU is reinforcing the National Operations Room, which is coordinating the emergency response.

C. EU support in the neighbouring countries

For the period 2025-27, EUR 1.5 billion has been allocated for refugee assistance and related support in Türkiye. Out of this total, a package of EUR 1.15 billion in refugee and migration management support was adopted by the Commission on 15 December 2025. The package provides for the continuation of essential needs – basic needs, integrated health care and integrated education - to ensure uninterrupted delivery until end-2027. EUR 311 million of this was also allocated to border management and voluntary returns. Together with EUR 200 million in education and humanitarian support allocated separately this leaves a balance of EUR 195 million still to be allocated under the 2027 budget.

The Commission has an ongoing project on voluntary returns from Türkiye to Syria of EUR 95 million, implemented by UNHCR, signed on 13 August 2025 with the specific objective of increasing the effectiveness of the Turkish authorities in facilitating voluntary, safe, dignified and orderly returns to Syria in line with international standards. On 15 December 2025, the Commission adopted a EUR 150 million top up to this project, with an approximate EUR 60 million component that would provide for the delivery of cash assistance support inside Syria.

The European Commission, announced on 16 March 2026 EUR 458 million in humanitarian aid for Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt in 2026 **(https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_611).**

In Jordan, a total of EUR 15.5 million will sustain essential services such as health and protection, and meet the needs of refugees, both in and out of camps.

In Syria, **EUR 210 million in EU humanitarian funding** will sustain life-saving emergency response and protection across the entire country. Funding focuses on essential services, including food, health, education, water, and shelter.

In Palestine, **EUR 124 million** will support food assistance, health, protection, shelter and education, delivered by partners operating under extremely difficult conditions. Over 3.3 million people remain in need — 2.1 million in Gaza and 1.2 million in the occupied West Bank. In Gaza, civilians face malnutrition and a collapsed healthcare system, and systematic obstruction of humanitarian aid.

In Egypt, EUR 8 million will support multi-sectoral assistance to the most vulnerable, including quality education for out-of-school children, and a regional programme on disaster preparedness. Egypt is hosting over 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, notably from Sudan and Gaza.

QUESTIONS:

The following questions are intended to support a strategic and evidence-based discussion, taking into account the sequencing between returns, reintegration capacity and regional stability.

1. How can the EU strengthen cooperation with Lebanon to address immediate economic, security and protection challenges while ensuring long-term stability and resilience?
2. What measures can Member States support for a more effective migration and border management, including preventing irregular departures, and addressing displacement in Lebanon while fully respecting international obligations and ensuring protection for vulnerable populations?
3. To what extent are existing EU instruments and frameworks adequate to support cooperation with Lebanon and how coordination among Member States be further improved to ensure a coherent and effective EU approach?