

Migration FutureMED Report



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Migration

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Executive Summary

This report was made as part of the FutureMED Postgraduate Program, a collaboration between Leiden University's MA in International Relations and the Alwaleed Centre at the University of Edinburgh's MSc in the Globalised Muslim World. This programme offers the possibility to think about ways to reshape the relationship between the Mediterranean Region and EU in the context of migration.

The FutureMED programme has brought together students to analyse migration developments in a critical but constructive way, followed by a series of policy recommendations on how we can re-imagine the EU's political relationship with the Southern Mediterranean, in particular on how to address post-colonial legacies that still plague the relationship.

As one of the articles argues, the aim here is to move beyond criticism, and instead propose alternative visions of cooperation based on mutual accountability and recognition by building a future of equality, founded on the rich shared pre-colonial past and the free fluctuation in the closeness of the relationship between the northern and southern coasts of the Mediterranean region.

Topics discussed in this report range from the history and future of the Mediterranean region to EU-Mediterranean relations, and from migration management in the Mediterranean at a government level to migrant's lived experiences at the ground level. Furthermore, several key suggestions are put forward throughout this report. For instance, the safeguarding and centring of human rights norms within migration policy must be asserted. Additionally, accepting and responding to the historical responsibilities and continued inequalities will create greater security across the region.

The region has long been a site that has facilitated development, growth and exchange across cultures and communities, and the diminution of this to one of securitisation and migration management comes at a great loss to peoples throughout the Mediterranean. Through the support of localised, grassroots and rights-based approaches and movements, this report finds the means for providing security for those across the region.

1-Pager: Recommendations

The Mediterranean as a Historical Region

1. A future postcolonial Mediterranean community should abandon the concepts of ‘managing the Mediterranean’ as a space of securitisation, replacing this concept with one that recognises its shared history as a pivotal element to build a future of mutual recognition and democratic debate.

EU’s Political Relationship with the Southern Mediterranean

1. Retire the European neighbourhood frameworks of political engagement rather explicitly recognise power imbalances that shape EU-MENA relations.
2. Abandon conditionality-based integration: cooperation in the Mediterranean should not be contingent on alignment with EU norms or internal market frameworks.
3. Build genuine cooperation: policies should be co-written and co-implemented with input from all groups of civil society, and not just the political elite. This includes integrating bottom-up approaches that engage civil society, local communities, and grassroots movements in MENA, recognising their agency and contributions to regional stability and justice.
4. Shift funding from border militarisation and surveillance technology (currently prioritised in agreements with North African countries) to humanitarian border infrastructure, including rescue operations, reception facilities, and legal assistance.
5. Establish a joint EU-MENA human rights commission to oversee the implementation of migration cooperation agreements.

Migration Management

1. Reframe securitised language by adopting communication strategies promoting inclusive and dignified language centred on rehumanising migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, and funding campaigns for public awareness.
2. Repoliticize migration through democratic accountability in all EU institutions to avoid technocratic and far-right instrumentalization of migration, through regular reporting on compliance with humanitarian values and human rights law. Include spaces for citizen deliberation, such as forums or assemblies, to increase compliance and participation.

3. Dismantle coercive return mechanisms and prioritise non-deportation policies by establishing a permanent halt to non-voluntary return agreements, especially to those countries with poor human rights records. Reaffirm the principle of non-refoulement, prioritise pathways for regularisation and residence permits for undocumented individuals with established ties, integration records, or vulnerabilities not recorded under asylum status.
4. Establish an EU-wide legal framework to formally recognise and support NGOs conducting SAR and migrant assistance, including guaranteed port access, funding mechanisms, and legal protections for humanitarian workers.
5. Reinforce EU responsibility in SAR operations by reinstating well-resourced and humanitarian operations such as the former Operation Sophia, to ensure safe disembarkation, rather than relying on outsourcing SAR.
6. End externalisation through reimagining and rebuilding the EU-MED partnerships based on mutual mobility and development. By redesigning migration management frameworks from containment to circular mobility and cooperation, we can promote exchanges and partnerships and dismantle the typologies of “origin, transit, and destination” countries in favour of multidirectional mobility in the region

Migrant Experience

1. Improve accommodations on arrival for migrants in line with human rights such as healthcare provisions.
2. Improve opportunities for growth for migrants, showcasing the benefits of migration with improved social cohesion.
3. Make it easier for asylum seekers to access the process of asylum application. This can be done through social services, translations, and legal advice for those seeking refuge from their country of origin.
4. Prevent restrictions which might allow for the manipulation of vulnerable people. If asylum seekers cannot access the jobs legally, for example, some will turn to illegal methods, which allows for human trafficking and labour exploitation.
5. Encourage cultural cooperation as opposed to division to prevent further social division and potential conflict.
6. Acknowledge racial biases in the granting of asylum seeker status and work to reduce future preferential treatment. This could be done by making asylum applications blind: i.e. removing names, photos and countries of origin in the initial stages of the application process.

Introduction

Prof. Sarah Wolff (Leiden University)

In her policy priorities 2024–2029, European Commission president von der Leyen decided to appoint a new Commission for the Mediterranean and to establish a new Pact for the Mediterranean that should aim to “reshape this essential relationship and provide a clear political signal of partnership in a more contested and unstable world” (von der Leyen, 2024). The FutureMED Postgraduate Program, a collaboration between Leiden University’s MA in International Relations (Faculty of Humanities) and the Alwaleed Centre at the University of Edinburgh’s MSc in the Globalised Muslim World, has precisely offered the possibility to think about the ways to reshape this essential relationship. The programme includes engagement with local communities through focus groups and a policy workshop, culminating in a policy brief that reimagines Mediterranean futures. Very early on, students decided to focus on migration as a critical policy area where the relationship is mostly one of restrictions, detention, pushback and increasing illiberal practices inside and outside of the EU’s borders. In fact, having worked more than twenty years on the topic and being also embedded within Euro-Mediterranean networks of academics and experts, I have seen this relationship evolving towards what I call embedded illiberalism (Wolff, 2024). Namely that next to harmonising migration and asylum policies and increasing the rights of foreigners within the EU, it is possible to identify increasing illiberal practices amongst EU member states but also from EU institutions. This may include for instance not raising infringement procedures when member states violate EU law, allowing them to limit asylum rights or striking deals with authoritarian leaders in Tunisia or Egypt. The Mediterranean, which has historically been conceived and practiced as a space of mobility (Braudel), is mostly understood as a space of crisis and where the integrity of Normative Power Europe has been regularly questioned, including in Gaza. Our FutureMED generation of students is analysing these developments in a very critical but constructive way and making a series of policy recommendations on how we can re-imagine the EU’s political relationship with the Southern Mediterranean, and in particular on how to address post-colonial legacies that still plague the relationship. Second, they also insist on the need to go beyond states, including in the Mediterranean, and to connect people, local communities, youth, and to work on bottom-up approaches. Dignity, human rights, and inclusiveness are at the core of their reflection.

The Mediterranean as a Historical Region

Francesco Toniatti (Leiden University) and
Egi Tanadi Taufik (University of Edinburgh)

1. A shared past, a fragmented present

For many centuries, the Mediterranean has played a central role in shaping European identity. From the Late Antiquity to the later expansions of Islam and Christianity over the Southern Mediterranean, the Mediterranean has always been a space of exchange and duality. Contemporary European discourse continues to frame the region as the dichotomy between stability and crisis, a space of cultural dialogue and a security threat, and as having a great shared past and a fragmented present. In this section, we challenge this interpretation by arguing that the Mediterranean should not be considered a ‘natural region,’ but rather as a historically constructed and politically divided space, which has, in recent times, been largely shaped by asymmetric colonial relationships of power and memory.

We argue that a postcolonial future for Europe and the Mediterranean is both possible and desirable. However, this will only be achieved through a widespread of historical awareness of the region’s colonial legacy, which continues to influence policy making processes. Rather than criticising Europe or the policies of the European Union, our aim is to move beyond criticism and propose alternative visions of cooperation based on mutual accountability and recognition. We want to build a future of equality, founded on the rich shared pre-colonial past and the free fluctuation in the closeness of the relationship between the northern and southern coasts of the Mediterranean region. Although conflict and rivalry have long been present in the region’s history, it was only with modern colonialism in the 19th century that power asymmetries became structurally and culturally embedded in the political, economic, and epistemic relations between two sides of the Mediterranean. These asymmetries transformed a shared space of interaction into one of control and hierarchy, with Europe playing the role of the ‘core’ and other Mediterranean regions playing the role of the ‘periphery.’

The Mediterranean is described as the cradle of civilization, a place where East and West, North and South have been closely intertwined for millennia through travel, trade and cultural fusion. While this is somewhat romanticised, it is not without historical foundation. From the Greek city-states to the multicultural courts of Sicily and Andalusia, the region experienced periods of profound cultural integration and connection, as well as religious tolerance and coexistence. Ferdinand Braudel emphasises the role of the Mediterranean as a space where, despite differences in ideas, ideologies, and politics, a shared geography, environment, and way of life connected people more than they were divided, forming a shared cultural and economic ecosystem (Braudel 1972, 168–170). This is an extremely valuable point, allowing contemporary scholars

to study the shared history of a geographical space beyond artificial national borders within the discipline of oceanic studies and correcting interpretations of the Mediterranean as merely a battlefield of civilisations.

At the same time, however, Braudel's view obscures the violence and asymmetry that often accompanied more positive connections in the shared history of the Mediterranean. Forced conversions, imperial conquest, the slave trade, crusades, and Ottoman raids demonstrate that the Mediterranean was also, at many times, a theatre of domination. Henri Pirenne's thesis that the Islamic conquest was the breaking point of Mediterranean unity reinforced the modern European colonial narrative of Europe as the rightful heir to the Mediterranean order, and of the Arabic-Islamic world as a menacing presence to be contained and reformed (Pirenne 1939, 163-164).

The imperial-colonial era of the Mediterranean formally ended in the mid-20th century, but its institutional and ideological legacy still endures in the modern world. European policy towards the Mediterranean is currently structured around frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Global Gateway, and the Union for the Mediterranean. Although these mechanisms are framed in terms of mutual benefits and shared values, in practice, they reproduce the dependencies and hierarchies of the past. In 'Orientalism,' Edward Said demonstrated that Europe's power over the Mediterranean has never been purely military or political, but also epistemic and cultural (Said 1978, 40-42). This has shaped how the South is known, interpreted, governed, and imagined. These representations depict the southern Mediterranean as a zone of conflict, chaos, and disorder that must be controlled and civilised, rather than as a reliable partner for Europe and the Global North. According to this neo-colonial interpretation, Europe can offer its neighbours in the southern Mediterranean 'good governance' based on the 'rule of law' and 'gender equality.' This logic is evident even in migration policy, with distinctions being made between deserving and undeserving immigrants, reflecting neo-imperial dynamics of migration management (Said 1993, xx, 15-19). European internal cohesion is often built on the externalisation of instability towards the southern periphery. However, not all European action is cynical. Scholars such as the historian Alessandro Vanoli have emphasised the Mediterranean's long history of positive mutual exchanges, calling for a renewed political vision of the sea as a space for understanding. Vanoli's narrative, which recalls Braudel, analyses the Mediterranean as a place of shared human experience and mutual influences that should not be forgotten (Vanoli 2018; 2022).

2. Toward a shared future for the Mediterranean

A future postcolonial Mediterranean community should abandon the concepts of 'managing the Mediterranean' as a space of securitisation, replacing this concept with one that recognises its shared history as a pivotal element to build a future of mutual recognition and democratic debate. This future is already being built through transnational networks, movement of people, and academic debates, and the institutions and national government should recognise the

existence of these elements. From feminist organisations in Tunisia to migrant cooperatives in Sicily, climate activists in Alexandria and youth collectives in Marseille, the Mediterranean is politically vibrant with many movements and alternatives for a decolonised future. As Achille Mbembe writes, the aim for such a future is “creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism” (Mbembe 2015; 2021, 79). A Mediterranean future worth imagining is one where no people are a problem to be solved, and no sea is a barrier to be policed, but rather a space of circulation, cohabitation, and shared becoming.

EU's Political Relationship with the Southern Mediterranean

Nefret El-Masry (Leiden University) and Nihal Miaaz (Leiden University)

Introduction

To imagine the future of the Mediterranean beyond its Eurocentric framing, this section will examine the political frameworks employed by the European Union (EU) in its engagement with the Southern Mediterranean region in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The EU's political engagement with the Southern Mediterranean has evolved through frameworks such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and later the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Originally intended to promote regional cooperation, political reform, and economic integration, the ENP has increasingly shifted toward a transactional approach that prioritises European security and migration management. By critically analysing this process, this section provides a means for moving beyond such Eurocentric frameworks, towards a more equitable means of supporting peoples throughout the Mediterranean region.

This section is organised into three parts. First, it traces the evolution of the ENP, situating it within the broader institutional and geopolitical shifts shaping EU–MENA relations. Second, it critically assesses the structural limitations and Eurocentric assumptions embedded within the ENP framework. Third, it examines how the ENP has increasingly prioritised securitised migration control over regional solidarity, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. Ultimately, this section argues that ENP institutionalises asymmetrical power relations, positioning MENA countries as peripheral actors within a Eurocentric hierarchy and spatial order. This perpetuates a model of top-down engagement that limits equal and fair partnerships, hindering the possibilities for equitable, reciprocal, and decolonial futures in the Mediterranean.

The European Neighbourhood Policy

EU relations with countries in the Southern Mediterranean have undergone several transformations, evolving into their current institutionalised framework. Since 1995, EU relations with the MENA region have been guided by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was subsequently created in 2004 in response to major geopolitical shifts—including the Second Intifada and the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—as well as the EU's significant enlargement in 2004. This shift was further driven by the disappointing results of the EMP, which had failed to achieve the desired political and economic reforms in MENA countries (Stivachtis, 2018,1).

Under the European Security Strategy of 2003, the ENP was established to strengthen the stability and security of the EU and its neighbouring states, as a strategic regional area for the EU (Stivachtis 2018, 2). The ENP aims to promote

cooperation between EU Member States and partner countries by establishing shared priorities to foster closer political and economic ties (Stivachtis 2018, 1–EC 2004, 1). This cooperation is formalised through jointly agreed Action Plans that outline short- and medium-term reform priorities over three to five years. These include political dialogue, trade, preparatory steps for integration into the EU’s internal market, security, energy, transport, and social policy (Stivachtis, 2018, 2). A second review in 2015 sought to better address underlying economic and political challenges in the MENA region (Stivachtis 2018,4). The updated approach emphasised differentiation, flexibility, joint ownership, stronger EU Member State involvement, and shared responsibility, through tailored, multiannual, and cross-border cooperation frameworks (Stivachtis, 2018, 8).

Critique of the ENP and EU-MENA Relationship

Regional experts have criticised the ENP for adopting a top-down model in which the EU promoted its own principles, such as democracy, the rule of law, and a market-based economy, without adequately engaging with or considering the viewpoints of its MENA partners (Besliu 2023). This model has been critiqued for the way that the ENP has integrated the MENA region’s political and economic elites under European norms and practices, while simultaneously excluding them from the decision-making process (Del Sarto 2021, 28). If access to the EU’s internal markets is contingent on such partner countries aligning their legal and regulatory frameworks with the EU, these policies act to integrate the “neighbouring” countries into the EU, blurring the EU’s external boundaries and creating a buffer zone (Del Sarto 2021, 28). This is also done through its projection of a governance model through its political reform (Del Sarto 2021, 28). As such, the ENP reflects a hierarchical relationship that positions MENA countries as subordinate to the EU, undermining the joint ownership and mutual partnership that the ENP claims to promote.

The EU furthermore presents itself as a normative actor through the ENP’s promotion of normative values like democracy, liberty, and human rights (Del Sarto 2016, 215). However, it is evident that the EU does not take a strong stance on neighbouring countries’ requirements to uphold such values (Del Sarto 2021, 31). Instead, the export of such standards is rather to benefit European interests: maintain stability; safeguard Europe’s own security; and foster a business environment that benefits European interests (Del Sarto 2021, 31). In this context, the ENP functions less as a mutual partnership and more as a framework through which the EU holds the power to selectively take a strong stance or show leniency, based on its own interests, resulting in an inconsistent implementation that allows the EU to extract disproportionate benefits.

Since its launch in 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has faced persistent criticism from regional experts for its top-down orientation (Besliu, 2023). Designed to promote European values such as democracy, the rule of law, and a free market economy, the ENP has often lacked meaningful consultation with MENA partner countries and failed to take their local contexts and perspectives into account. Despite undergoing multiple revisions over the

years, the policy has largely struggled to resonate with regional audiences and build genuine partnerships (Besliu, 2023). Two decades on, the results remain limited. The region has seen little improvement and is arguably more fragmented today than at the ENP's inception. Countries that experienced popular uprisings remain in varying states of instability, while the ongoing war in Syria continues to threaten the fragile security of neighbouring states like Lebanon and Jordan. These developments have further highlighted the shortcomings of the ENP's approach and raised questions about its effectiveness as a tool for fostering long-term stability and cooperation in the EU's southern neighbourhood (Besliu, 2023).

The ENP and Migration

What was once envisioned as a cooperative effort to build a shared “southern neighbourhood” through economic development and political alignment has now become a short-sighted, transactional relationship that favours the EU's immediate priorities, particularly in managing migration, over the long-term needs of its southern partners. This shift is reflected in the EU's recent agreements with North African countries, which mark a clear turn in its foreign policy from broader regional integration toward a more security- and interest-focused agenda (Pavia et al., 2024).

Since 2013, the EU's approach toward its southern neighbours has undergone a significant transformation. Initially framed through the lens of political and civil society reform, following the EU's own liberal-democratic “code-book” aimed at fostering economic growth that ultimately served European interests, this strategy has increasingly given way to a securitised agenda centred on migration control. Rather than maintaining a regional framework based on unified, albeit unequal partnerships, the EU has shifted toward bilateral agreements that reflect its own immediate security concerns.

This strategic realignment intensified after the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, when migration and counterterrorism rose to the top of the EU's foreign policy agenda. In response, the EU began channelling support primarily into reinforcing national security sectors, while avoiding more substantive reforms that might challenge entrenched power structures in partner countries. Meanwhile, southern governments have strategically leveraged the fallout of the uprisings, particularly the challenges of irregular migration and terrorism, as bargaining tools to gain concessions from the EU. The result is a reactive and transactional policy approach that prioritizes short-term European interests, especially migration management, at the expense of long-term development and democratic transformation in the region (Pavia et.al, 2024, 38).

Conclusion

This institutionalised framework of the ENP was examined to understand how power relations and policy operate in the so-called Mediterranean. First, we argue that, simply by being designated as the EU's neighbours, MENA countries are positioned on the periphery of a European "empire," with Europe assuming the role of neighbourhood leader. Second, the policies and framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy create a problematic conflation of the concept of a "European Neighbourhood," centring Europe and reinforcing a top-down, Eurocentric approach to economic and political relations, as clearly reflected in the implementation of the ENP in areas of economic, security, and migration. As Del Sarto notes, the European Neighbourhood Policy has led to a reshaping of spatial relations in the EU's border management, frequently characterised as a neocolonial process through which the European centre organises, controls, and dominates its surrounding regions (Del Sarto 2021, 29). This analysis demonstrates how the ENP does not merely manage relationships but actively reproduces hierarchies and dependencies rooted in colonial logics.

The ENP overlooks the region's long history of transnational networks, grassroots movements, and alternative visions of community and belonging that challenge Eurocentric hierarchical structures. These dynamics reveal the potential for reimagining Mediterranean relations beyond a 'securitised' and 'Eurocentric' model. Our analysis contends that recognising and engaging with these existing forms of solidarity and resistance is essential for building a more equitable, democratic, and postcolonial Mediterranean future, one where the Mediterranean is seen not as a space to be managed through a colonial relationship but where space coexist beyond the assimilative frameworks imposed by European border regimes.

Migration Management

Martín Rodríguez, María (Leiden University) and
Isabella Lombardi (University of Edinburgh)

The Mediterranean has, over recent years, become a place of controlled exclusion. Firmly grounded in the construction of external threats to the EU's stability, policies of contention and managing migration 'flows' have consistently attempted to shift the burden beyond Europe's borders. The term 'externalisation' best explains the EU's efforts to prioritise controlling migration from a distance by relying on partnerships that tie the Southern Mediterranean neighbours to conducting Search and Rescue (SAR), detention, and containment, in an attempt to avoid triggering EU laws (Reviglio 2019, 22), highlighting the neocolonial and hegemonic features of ENP.

What seems striking is the attempt by the EU to balance between an approach which is 'open to partnerships' alongside ever-hardening external borders. The Mediterranean offers the EU a place for the development of cultural exchange and equal-level economic cooperation, fostering unity and openness. However, its policies towards Northern African countries promote a very clear differentiation of what is North and South, and who belongs where. Securitising the approaches to controlling migration flows into the EU reproduces neocolonial practices, which reside in the asymmetric power dynamics defining how the African partners should work towards the benefit of the EU states and relieving their crises through non-departure (P. Hansen & S. Jonsson, 263). Despite ideas of equal partnerships of mutual benefit, the EU's strategy has specific profiles of who is invited and who is excluded (P. Hansen & S. Jonsson, 263). Even when humanitarian concerns have remained at the forefront of these policies, they have been made compatible with restriction, selection, and exclusion, subjecting migrants to certain categories, rights, and outcomes, including forced returns to their countries of origin (Cuttita 2017, 784). By employing these categorisations, framing practices continue to reproduce neocolonial ideologies onto the perceptions of migrants as "racialized other-life to be killed, animalized, or saved" (Bilgiç 2018, 543), which only serves for the creation of a tenuous climate at the policy level, dictating and influencing the positionality of the Commission and the Member States.

With the newest updates to the EU's migration policy in 2024, the European Council has made an illiberal turn. The priority balance has tilted in favour of security concerns and sovereignty protection, whilst humanitarianism has taken a step backwards (Gambazza 2024, 290). This reflects a 'geopolitization' of the issue at the EU level, where migration is framed as a threat and the focus is placed on illegality, crime, and instability, whilst partnerships are conceived as a strategy which serves to avoid its instrumentalization (Wolff 2024, 117). The ideas of human rights defence that the EU has long claimed to stand for seem to be crumbling with these new policy developments, and the depoliticisation of

migration risks a complete overlooking of the so-called 'EU values' in following the anti-globalisation policies pushed by the far-right lobbies.

The Central Mediterranean route, and the countries legally responsible for its safety, offer an important means of illustrating these behaviours, reproductions, and power dynamics. As the deadliest migration channel, it remains one of the entry points for irregular migrants crossing into the EU from or through Libya or Tunisia. Analysing migration management policies and patterns in Italy and Malta exemplify how European countries have been securitising migration influx and disregarding human rights legal frameworks when it comes to the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Italy, due to its geographical location and proximity to North Africa, has become a key entry point for migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean, particularly via the island of Lampedusa, in Sicily. Since the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, which tightened borders in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans, the Central Mediterranean route has experienced a surge in crossings, with Tunisia recently surpassing Libya as the primary departure point (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024). In 2023, over 62% of the 150,000 migrants crossing this route departed from Tunisia (InfoMigrants, 2023). Similarly, Malta, as an island located at the heart of the Mediterranean, has been a transitional or stopping point for people on the move throughout history, and has recently become home to more than 11,000 refugees and 2,000 asylum seekers, predominantly from Bangladesh, Libya, Syria, Sudan and Ukraine (World Health Organization, 2024).

Reactive and fragmented policies have long marked Italy's migration management. Its approach is characterised by chronic underestimation of legal entry needs, repeated amnesties for undocumented migrants, and reliance on emergency decrees (Hermanin, 2022). These structural shortcomings, along with bureaucratic barriers to legal status and employment, have contributed to irregularity and exploitation. This includes the phenomenon of illegal gangmaster trade (*caporalato*), a growing trade which has involved hundreds of thousands of irregular and unemployed migrants, who are recruited by intermediaries (*caporali*), often connected with criminal organisations, to work underpaid and in extremely severe conditions in agriculture, construction or other sectors (Integral Human Development, 2021). The impact of this on migrant communities has been compounded by isolation and discrimination, particularly after the rise of the far-right in 2018, as well as a lack of integration services, especially in the South, and for women with children in particular, which has added additional barriers for victims to recover and return to a normal life (Integral Human Development, 2021).

Such challenges only increased after Operation Sophia was shut down in March 2020 by the European Council Decision (CFSP) 2019/1595. From 2016 to 2017, Operation Sophia (EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA), led by the Italian government, was responsible for SAR actions at sea and for bringing migrants to Sicily's main ports: Augusta, Pozallo, Catania and Messina (Barigazzi, 2020). These ports had large enough reception centres to absorb the influx of migrants.

However, the operation was closed and replaced by EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, now led by the Libyan government, with a completely different purpose, mainly focused on enforcing the UN arms embargo on Libya (Barigazzi, 2020). The operation was closed down at the request of the Italian government, under the justification that it was functioning as a pull factor for migration (Barigazzi, 2020). The end of the operation resulted in a change in the ports migrants arrive at in Italy: the majority now arrive at Lampedusa, a very small island with no reception infrastructure to properly absorb the incoming migrants (Barigazzi, 2020). Despite these new challenges, the creation of specialised court sections for immigration and the abolition of one degree of judicial appeal to speed up proceedings were seen as a progressive measure towards safeguarding migrants' human rights. Thus far, even though courts have overturned close to one-third of the administrative decisions of rejection, asylum proceedings have overwhelmed the judicial system (Hermanin, 2022), which perpetuates the uncertainty and inhuman conditions migrants face when arriving in Italy.

Correspondingly, Malta's approach to migration management reflects the country's strategic location and limited capacity as a small island state. It has actively sought EU assistance and advocated for equitable burden-sharing among member states, particularly in response to the challenges posed by the Dublin Regulation (Pace, 2021). Malta has promoted stronger border controls and FRONTEX operations, while deploying a "small state vulnerability" diplomatic stance to influence EU negotiations and policies (Pace, 2021). Malta's SAR stretches from 56 kilometres outside Tunisia's coast in the west to Crete in the East, an area of 264,000 square kilometres (larger than that of the UK and almost as large as that of Italy's). Malta is legally responsible for the coordination of rescue efforts within its territory but refuses to allow all migrants rescued to be disembarked in its ports, in clear violation of the Dublin Regulation (Pace, 2021). Since 2017, several NGOs operating within the SAR have seen their rescue vessels impounded and ports closed to them in an attempt to stop them from continuing their operations (Gauci, J.P., Cassar, C.M., Fremeaux, 2022). These practices raise serious legal and humanitarian concerns, including violations of the principle of non-refoulement, delayed disembarkations, and automatic detention upon arrival (Gauci, J.P., Cassar, C.M., Fremeaux, 2022). Although some reforms were introduced post-2015, asylum seekers may still be detained under national security, public order, or public health justifications. Despite these issues, the country offers several legal statuses beyond international protection, such as 'Temporary Humanitarian Protection New,' specifically for rejected asylum seekers with strong integration records. However, this status is not enshrined in law, raising concerns over transparency and consistency (Gauci, J.P., Cassar, C.M., Fremeaux, 2022).

In summary, Malta and Italy's migration management is marked by a complex interplay of legal obligations, national constraints, and selective efforts toward integration and humanitarianism. Both countries continue to navigate these tensions within an overarching securitised framework that prioritises border security over migration safety, reflecting broader European trends in migration governance.

Migrant Experience

Olivia Miles (University of Edinburgh) and
Zozan Yasar (University of Edinburgh)

Following on from the discussion concerning selective efforts in the current Mediterranean state management of migration, this section aims to analyse how migrants face racialisation processes and develop subjectivities in response to current migration dynamics in Europe. State-level migration policy has a direct effect on people's lived experiences at the ground level, and these experiences can vary significantly depending on the enforcement of said policy. In this context, two important countries located in the Mediterranean region – Turkey and Malta – will be considered as case studies. Both function as transit and destination countries for refugees and migrants, and offer the opportunity for a comparative analysis with the differing political and social dynamics in the construction of racialisation practices.

Defining Experiences of Racism

The concept of race emerged with the pseudo-scientific racial doctrines developed in the 19th century. These doctrines, which form the basis of classical racism, established a hierarchy of racial superiority and inferiority by classifying human communities according to their phenotypic characteristics. In this context, these doctrines, which provide a scientific basis for racism, open up a legitimate space for inequality between people and become tools for the economic exploitation of central countries over peripheral countries (Stolcke, 1995, cited in Wren, 2001: 143).

Ethnicity, language, belief, gender, and sexual orientation are additional distinctions alongside race which have ensured the continuity of the construction of the 'other' in societies. Within the wider classification of xenophobia, individuals are transformed into a tool that prevents different societies from living together by 'othering' them. Etienne Balibar conceptualised the continuation of racism through these new constructions as "raceless racism," Martin Barker as "new racism," and Frantz Fanon as "cultural racism" (Çoban Keneş, 2013: 29, 30). The main factor that provides the dynamism of cultural racism became visible with the discrimination experienced by migrant worker communities going to the European continent (Balibar, 2000: 30).

The immigrant population in Europe has increased significantly, especially after the racialisation of the September 11 attacks. The "war on terror" discourse has not only legitimised security policies; it has also paved the way for the spread of cultural racism and anti-immigrant attitudes. With the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Eastern/Muslim immigrants were coded as potential threats in Western public opinion, which led to the hardening of race-based immigration regimes and the deepening of cultural racism in Europe. The 2008 Economic Crisis, the Arab Spring and ongoing regional conflicts have further

reinforced this process by increasing migration movements to Europe. In this context, immigrants, who have become the targets of cultural racism, have become the centre of discriminatory discourses built on identity. Populist far-right and anti-immigrant parties, which have been on the rise especially since the early 2000s, have become one of the most effective bases of cultural racism. The consequences of this increase in recent years are clearly prevalent in both case study nations.

Case Study 1: Turkey

With the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey became the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world. According to the data of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were approximately 3.2 million registered refugees in Türkiye as of the end of 2024. While the vast majority are Syrians, approximately 222,000 people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and other countries live in Turkey under international protection (UNHCR, 2025).

In the case of Syrian refugees living in Turkey, their migration experiences have often been constructed through the discourse of “temporality.” Official policies have caused this group to be considered a temporary population that is open to return and not permanent. Syrian (mainly), Afghan, and Iraqi refugees have been subjected to an increasing racialisation process in society over time, along with concerns such as economic crises, unemployment, and security (Yıldız & Uzgoren, 2016). During this process, immigrants have often been represented as “threats” or “burdens” in the public eye and have been criminalised, especially through the media and politics (Aykaç, 2021).

Turkey functions as both a transit route and a destination in the phenomenon of migration. This situation creates a unique context where regional conflicts and global migration dynamics intersect. Being strategically located between Europe and Asia has made Turkey directly affected by geopolitical tensions. This dual role of Turkey complicates radicalisation narratives within the framework of the nation-state, while revealing a multi-layered discourse in which migrant identities are constantly being redefined. These developments can be addressed within the discourse of Turkish nationalism (Cevik 2025), as this discourse shapes the processes of racialisation of migrants by influencing Turkey’s desire for integration into the European Union through both local and transnational factors.

The description of immigrants arriving in Turkey from Syria as “Syrian” is quite striking. The term “Syrian,” which expresses a bond of citizenship with the country of origin, has been criticised by members of society who assume themselves to be “autochthonous” as a fixed identity identifier, like a race. Although immigrant communities coming from Syria have different ethnic group distributions, the term “Syrian” contains both the pejorative meaning brought about by refugee conditions and the enemy metaphor attributed to the Arab identity, which is not credible in Türkiye’s nationalist historical memory.

Therefore, while identity as “Syrian” creates a set of negative perceptions in the dominant society through racialisation, it also becomes an ontological burden for immigrants.

In the research titled “Syrian Immigrants in Türkiye on the 10th Anniversary of Syrian Immigration,” conducted by the Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), to reflect the dominant society’s perspective on Syrian immigrants, the question “What kind of people do you think Syrians are?” was asked of the participants. 55.5 percent of the participants answered the question with the opinion that Syrian immigrants are not “hard-working,” and over 70 percent answered the question with the opinion that they are not “clean, reliable and polite” (SODEV, 2021: 14–17). Although the hygiene conditions of immigrants are a result of their housing opportunities and their success is affected by quality education and language barriers, stigmatisations such as “dirty,” “lazy,” and “problematic” are accepted as a natural result of having a racialised “Syrian” identity, and they are subjected to these stereotypes.

In June 2024, allegations that a Syrian man sexually abused a seven-year-old girl in Kayseri spread rapidly on social media, leading to widespread riots. This incident exemplified the racialisation of Syrian refugees as “criminals” and “threats.” Homes, businesses, and vehicles belonging to migrants were vandalised, and the incidents spread to several cities, including Istanbul, Hatay, Adana, Urfa, Bursa, Gaziantep, Konya, Izmir, and Antalya. More than 120 people were injured, one young Syrian was killed, and 474 people were detained (Al Jazeera).

The racialisation of migrants is not limited to the Syrians, however. In March 2024, false claims circulated on social media that African students at Karabük University were spreading HIV and HPV¹. This is an example of the racialisation of African immigrants as “disease carriers.” The Karabük Provincial Health Directorate denied these claims, but the incident increased discrimination and hate speech against African students. Human Rights Watch documented in 2024 that Syrian and Afghan refugees in Türkiye were forced to sign “voluntary return” documents through physical violence and threats. These practices are a structural example of the racialisation of refugees as “unwanted” and “temporary” (Human Rights Watch).

Case Study 2: Malta

Malta, a small but centrally located island in the Mediterranean, has become a vital location for refugees and migrants in a similar way to Turkey, functioning as both a stop off point and final destination for people seeking shelter and protection overseas. As a member of the United Nations, Malta’s smaller size does not exempt it from international legal obligations to protect human rights and provide asylum to people fleeing from persecution or conflict zones. As mentioned previously, Malta is home to more than 11,000 refugees and 2,000 asylum-seekers from a variety of countries including, but not limited to:

¹ Sönmez, Elanur, and Özge Deniz. “Intersecting Ideologies of Nation, Race, and Gender on Turkish Social Media: Discourses on #karabüküniversitesi (#karabukuniversity).”, March 2025.

Bangladesh, Libya, Syria, Sudan and Ukraine (WHO, 2024). These people seek equal protection and accommodation from the Maltese government, but the evidence suggests varying levels of support received by migrants depending on their country of origin after arriving on the island's shores.

Ukrainian refugees have received disproportionately high levels of support in comparison to refugees arriving from other countries, particularly those who arrive on small boats when fleeing conflict zones in North Africa such as Libya and Sudan. This is particularly evident in the significant increase in new initiatives and policies since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. For example, the Maltese government has provided temporary emergency protection for non-EU citizens to over 2000 people since the emergence of the Ukraine– Russia conflict (WHO 2024). A number of measures have been set up to support refugees substantially upon arrival such as sexual health services and free vaccinations. However, these provisions have only been put in place since the Ukrainian conflict emerged. This raises issues of preferential treatment towards refugees based on race considering the Libyan civil war began in 2014 and Syria's began in 2011. Evidently, the Ukrainian refugee crisis has surmounted the ones in Libya and Syria in terms of the Maltese government's policy prioritisation.

Focusing specifically on Libyan refugees, Amnesty International released a public statement with reference to the treatment of Libyan refugees: "While fully aware of the suffering of refugees and migrants in Libya, since 2016 EU institutions and member states have unashamedly prioritised the reduction of the number of people arriving to Europe over the protection of their human rights" (Amnesty International, 2022). A major example of this exclusionary sentiment involves the El Hiblu case in 2019, in which a Maltese ship attempted to return asylum seekers to Libya, in violation with international law which prohibits the forced return of people to an active conflict zone. Three teenagers involved in organising the transport were arrested on charges of terrorism once they arrived on the shores of Malta (Amnesty International, 2025). As this demonstrates, the government is willing to circumvent international law in order to deter migrants, and human rights protections are currently insufficient in terms of asylum seekers and refugees to ensure safe treatment even after a life-threatening transit journey. Arrest upon arrival acts as an explicit deterrent to other Libyan citizens who also wish to flee, and the hostile environment which is created benefits the Maltese government by appearing nationalistic towards the conservative population and appears to minimise the state's responsibility to protect asylum seekers and migrants. The necessary future action involves reorganising these priorities to align more closely with international law concerning the protection of human rights.

Additionally, because Ukrainian refugees do not technically register as 'people arriving in Europe' due to their prior existence within the continent, the influx of Ukrainian refugees does not negatively affect European migration statistics. There is a stark contrast between appearance versus reality, the Maltese government intends to be perceived as an entirely peaceful country, without the prevalence of internal divisions based on race or culture, however, the reality conflates this

with a significant increase in xenophobia towards migrants in Malta.

Aside from the lack of support from the state, the inherent exclusionary nature of Maltese society towards Libyan communities is explicit and provides another source of disenfranchisement for asylum seekers and refugees in Malta from the south Mediterranean region. This has organised itself in a number of ways, including refugees participating in self-censorship in public and there are certain areas in towns and cities which are socially forbidden to those of Libyan heritage (Gandolfo 2022). A segregation of society has evolved which creates an environment of animosity for natives and migrants alike.

From the position of Maltese natives, scandal and sensationalist media has encouraged xenophobic sentiments. The predominant example of this concerns the Malta identity card scandal which emerged in 2023 and remains ongoing. There are examples of corruption in the granting of ID cards to foreigners in exchange for financial bribes (Borack, 2024). This event among others have functioned to justify prejudice against migrants and refugees, as evidence to justify the rise in hostility in recent years towards refugees. An increased effort from the Maltese government to encourage cultural cooperation as opposed to division must be endorsed to prevent further social division and potential conflict.

The Maltese government worked quickly to introduce accommodating policy for Ukrainian refugees in response to national conflict, and perhaps they need to recognise the inequalities in treatment for refugees with nationalities outside of Europe. More pressure must be placed on the Maltese government to re-organise their refugee accommodation processes to treat all asylum seekers and refugees with the same dignity and respect they deserve.

Ultimately, the Maltese government appears to have engaged in the philosophy that neglect and deterrent methods towards migrants from outside of Europe functions as the preferential means of action as opposed to accommodation measures required by international law, which would also benefit social cohesion and prevent racial conflict and xenophobia.

Concluding Remarks

The recent rise in the support of nationalism and fascism in Europe has manifested into government immigration policies across Europe. The protection of national borders has become an issue of top priority; however, this does not negate European nations obligation of adherence to International laws of protection to asylum seekers and refugees. There are a number of ways in which national and international bodies can be involved proactively in endorsing and supporting enhanced levels of human rights protections for refugees once they have migrated to a different country. More must be done to support migrants' access to the application for asylum, enhanced promotion of social cohesion, and their opportunities for growth. Outlined below are some examples which could be adopted by government or international bodies to enhance the rights of migrants after they have physically migrated.

Conclusion

Dr. Richard McNeil-Willson (University of Edinburgh)

This collaborative report has brought together contemporary research and expertise to demonstrate the multilayered history of the Mediterranean region as an area of cultural, economic and migratory exchange, the colonial inequalities perpetuated in the region, the increasingly politicised and reactionary approaches to migration, and the violence experienced by migrants and minorities as a result of such migration management. It demonstrates not just a hardening of political approaches and attitudes towards migration and the construction of increasingly lethal borders, but the continuation of a problematic dynamic between Northern and Southern Europe that continues to prioritise short-term political benefit for some European powers at the cost of long-term instability across the whole region. The report points towards an urgent need for reconsidering both how the Mediterranean and migration is understood, framed and engaged with, in an EU and European context.

The history of the Mediterranean offers some means for reconceptualising and responding to this dynamic of inequality. The rich shared pre-colonial past and the fluctuation in the closeness of the relationship between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean offer glimpses of how the region acted as a site for the interchange of ideas and cultures for millennia. The relatively recent development of a colonial dynamic, with European powers seeking to control, suppress and extract resources from the South, has resulted in several detrimental long-term impacts: the Middle East and North Africa region has faced instability, settler colonialism and cycles of violence; with growing instability has come growing migration, as peoples have been refugeed, displaced or otherwise forced to seek sanctuary elsewhere; and the site of the Mediterranean, once an active stage for mutual exchange, has become a hostile borderland, as North and South have bifurcated. Addressing the growth and violence of migration across the Mediterranean and into Europe therefore requires not just new practices of migration, but revising our contemporary understanding of what the Mediterranean is. Rather than seeking to manage the Mediterranean as a securitised hinterland, Europe should support those that offer cross-regional and grassroots responses to the tragedy of modern migration routes, ensuring that it once more becomes a space of circulation, cohabitation, and shared becoming.

Contemporary approaches of inequality towards migration and the Southern Mediterranean region are grounded in the long colonial legacy of Europe. The Framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy has acted to embed securitised practices of border management, subsuming and displacing genuine economic and political development in the Southern Mediterranean through EU incentives to manage migration. This has embedded repressive practices

against both migrants and wider populations in the Global South, with Europe seeking to prioritise the security of authoritarian governments and apartheid regimes over democratic flourishing. This represents a neocolonial process, actively reproducing hierarchies and dependencies rooted in colonial logics. Alternative models of coexistence, rather than management, offer the means for plotting a course helps to address this imbalance, offering a conceptualisation of security firmly rooted within human rights and equality. But this involves the drastic repositioning of European approaches to migration outside of existing assimilationist models of border security, which have increasingly been mainstreamed in European politics.

The current management of migration embeds practices of inequality and violence, with migrants themselves facing the sharp end of Fortress Europe. This is demonstrated in the central Mediterranean route – the deadliest migration route and that runs through Malta and Italy. Experiences from the policy and practice of these countries shows how this overarching securitised framework, that prioritises border security over migration safety, plays out on a localised level. The increase of bureaucratic barriers to migrant rights around accessing state support and labour markets have, furthermore, contributed to the proliferation of criminal gangs that exploit irregular migration. Such an approach, coupled with a set of coercive return mechanisms, greatly increases the lethality of migrant routes, and centres violence at the heart of the migrant experience – at all stages of migration. The anchoring of an approach to migration within humanitarian values and human rights law, as well as the implementation and support of localised and migrant-inclusive initiatives, such as citizen forums or assemblies would, alternatively, act to give greater political agency to migrants and local communities, whilst challenging the on-going removal of legal safeguards.

This study demonstrates that the migrant experience in the Mediterranean must be centralised within future responses to migration. One challenge to this is the legitimisation of anti-migrant tropes, which link cross-border travel with the spread of disease, by politicians across the political spectrum. These have acted to target and racialise both migrants and other cultural and religious minorities, contributing towards a wider hostile environment in Europe. The mainstreaming of far- and radical-right language by European politicians across the political spectrum, has greatly boosted anti-migration policy and practice. For migrants, this has led to the deliberate degradation of migrant processing, and allowed for the manipulation of vulnerable people, continuing a cycle of exploitation. For wider European society, such mainstreaming of anti-migrant language and policy engenders further polarisation and societal fracturing, imperilling not just the most vulnerable within society but the very human rights framework so often cited as underpinning post-War European democracy.

Several key suggestions are put forward throughout this report. The safeguarding and centring of human rights norms within migration policy must be asserted, as part of a robust response to growing anti-migration

language, not just from the far right but across the political spectrum. This is more than an issue of credibility to European migration policy, representing a key means of challenging the growing polarisation that has fractured European politics and security in recent years. The violence that is being created and replicated by current border policies must also be recognised and responded to by European states. Policies which deliberately attempt to degrade migrant processing and support systems do not prevent migration, but instead create patterns of exploitation and criminality, and create greater danger and lethality for migrant communities. At the heart of this problem lies the long shadow of colonialism. Accepting and responding to the historical responsibilities and continued inequalities created by this will create greater security across the region, and empower local groups who seek the freedoms propounded by Europe across the Mediterranean. The region has long been a site that has facilitated development, growth and exchange across cultures and communities, and the diminution of this to one of securitisation and migration management comes at a great loss to peoples throughout the Mediterranean. Through the support of localised, grassroots and rights-based approaches and movements, this report finds the means for providing security for those across the region.

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