



# **ICMPD Migration Outlook South and West Asia 2023**

**Four migration issues to look out for in 2023**  
Origins, key events and priorities for Europe

# Four migration issues to look out for in 2023

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## 1. Dialogues - both multilateral and bilateral - need to deliver a balanced approach to migration management.

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Given the constrained legal channels for mobility and insufficient information thereof, migrants in the region often make choices in the context of distress, on basis of biased information and in light of limited alternatives available. 2022 saw promising signs for the facilitation of more legal pathways with the announcement of EU Member States' intentions to work towards openings for skilled mobility to the EU in the framework of Talent Partnerships and bilateral agreements. ICMPD is supporting the European Commission in its preparations of these opportunities (Bangladesh and Pakistan). However, given the current discourse within Member States - on helping countries bolster border protection, address gaps in return, improve readmission, and prevention of irregular migration – it remains to be seen if 2023 will live up to the expectations towards more legal channels or becomes another year of disappointment for the countries of the Silk Routes region. *Successful dialogue and engagement – between countries of origin and destination as well as along transit routes – is needed to rely on the delivery of a balanced approach: on both legal mobility and return and reintegration.*

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## 2. Climate change related disasters are likely in 2023 and may manifest in further displacement.

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Climate change related disasters (extreme temperatures, large scale flooding, monsoons at different times of the year) are highly likely for the region in 2023. Inefficient agricultural practices, high costs of energy, and low harvests are expected to fuel displacement in the region even further, both as a means of survival and adaptation. 2023 will see an intense debate on climate induced migration in the region as well as on suitable coping strategies to deal with the situation. Better responses will depend on the development of adequate policies but also on awareness and support of the whole international community.

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## 3. Urgent delivery on commitments related to resettlement pathways.

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Resettlement pathways for Afghan nationals (and to a lesser extent Rohingyas) have been constrained by multiple challenges also in 2022, including restricted mobility within and across Afghan borders, increased crackdowns in Pakistan, low acceptance rates by US, Canadian, and Europeans, setting aside the long delays and high bureaucratic burdens and lack of travel documents. The additional isolation



of Iran and Afghanistan through international sanctions has brought these schemes to a halt. The Voluntary Support Mechanism (signed in 2022) - by 21 European countries - spread hopes to provide a concrete response by supporting the relocation of asylum seekers and refugees. However, to date, implementation and transfers have been limited and EU Member States appear reluctant to meet the targets initially set. *A resumption of these commitments in 2023 – despite of all political challenges – will be necessary to prevent an additional rise in desperate and hazardous attempts – by land or sea - to reach safety.*

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#### **4. Trickle-down effect of Russia-Ukraine conflict on region: exacerbation of underlying challenges.**

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Currently, an early end to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine seems unlikely. However, the long-term indirect consequences of the war were already evident in 2022: fluctuating energy and food prices, geopolitical brinkmanship, inflation, increased debt, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and weakening of key sectors (such as tourism). *If the conflict persists throughout 2023, and sanctions take hold (in the case of Russia and Iran), host governments like Pakistan will increasingly lose on the capacity to support local communities and refugee populations. Subsidies to fuel and foreign investment are expected to dry up, and debts will become more and more unsustainable. International support will be crucial in order to meet this challenge. In terms of migration from and within the region, governments in the region will need to further develop policies that help cut the high costs of migration and expand legal pathways, including drawing bilateral and multilateral agreements with destination countries, strengthen remittance infrastructure, and offer information and training programmes to help potential migrants make better decisions on migrating.*

## Introduction

For most in South and West Asia<sup>1</sup>, the end of 2022 marked another tumultuous year marred by repression, violence, political unrest, unprecedented climate induced sudden onset disasters, economic, political, and social disruption, as well as further marginalisation (of women and minorities). The region is perhaps the best example of the ‘poly-crisis’ world we live in. Each has exposed millions – within their countries and the region itself – to vulnerabilities such as abject poverty/hunger, homelessness, death, destruction, and imprisonment. The implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were equally catastrophic for the region: direct and indirect.<sup>2</sup> Following record droughts, flooding, and heatwaves, in 2022, the conflict further aggravated long-term challenges such as restricted agricultural and fertiliser production, created by energy supply volatility, resulting in surging fuel and energy prices, restricted food commodities, and depreciating local currencies. Taken collectively, these developments had impact on regular and irregular migration patterns within the region and beyond. Thus, the 2023 Regional Migration Outlook argues that the inflated living costs due to shortages in food and energy supplies; high levels of displacement within communities and the region due to the effects of climate change; and the limited progress to develop inclusive mobility pathways, have further contributed to instability or sustained humanitarian crises. Consequently, mobility and migration have once again been used as an adaptation measure. The Outlook – as in later years – relies on ICMPD’s local presence and expertise, as well as desk research from public sources, where available<sup>3</sup>.

The report proceeds as follows. First, it provides an analysis of selected current and emerging drivers of migration from the region’s key “hotspots”: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. In the next chapter, **Section 3**, highlights some of the 2022 trends - within the region - on migration as it relates to: 1. Labour migration; 2. Remittance flows; 3. Climate induced displacement; 4. Refugees and asylum, 5. Irregular migration flows and returns. **Section 4**, provides a snapshot of migration policy developments that are relevant within the region and how they might affect the migration context in 2023. Finally, the report concludes by summarising key findings and highlighting possible scenarios for policymakers to plan for in 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> The region of South and West Asia is also referred to as the Silk Routes region

<sup>2</sup> As the war broke out, thousands of students from India, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Nepal were stranded and in need of rescue. India alone evacuated over 15,000 Indian students and 147 citizens from 18 countries, through Operation Ganga. The impacts of the Ukraine/Russia conflict, to Europe, on displacement are covered within the ICMPD Regional Outlook for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to highlight at the outset that at this stage in the year, accurate and timely data for 2022 is often unavailable or incomplete. Thus, we sometimes rely on forecasts or older more reliable datasets, as well as on qualitative information. Where only partial data is available, this is noted.

## Focus regions

### Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan - under the de facto rule of the Taliban - has steadily deteriorated (in spite of Taliban public promises to restore peace and prosperity). Women and girls, former politicians (recent assassination of Ms. Nabizada – activist and former politician), ethnic minorities, ex-judges, journalists, and human rights defenders continue to face threats to their safety tantamount to persecution. Men (and their families) who served as soldiers of the former Afghan National Defence Security Force (ANDSF) continue to be hunted by the Taliban, forcing many to flee and live under untenable conditions. Trapped they are left with little choice but to sustain their families by serving as private mercenaries in Russia's war against the Ukraine, reports suggest.

The numbers are staggering: the UN estimates that 97% of the Afghan population is at risk of poverty, and that six times as many households depended on humanitarian assistance in 2022 than in 2021, with as many as 6 million “knocking on famine's door”. A historically cold winter and poor harvest season reminds us that Afghanistan remains one of the most adversely affected countries, but also least prepared, against climate shocks and related environmental threats in the world. The 2022 earthquakes (and landslides) in Paktika and Khost provinces impacted over 360,000 people and destroyed more than 10,000 homes. Furthermore, security incidents have been on the rise since mid-2022 involving terrorist attacks by ISIS and TTP, not only in Kabul but also outside the capital in border regions with Pakistan.

Opportunities for resettlement remain the only viable legal mobility channel for most Afghans. Over the course of 2022, ICMPD's Migrant Resource Centre received an overwhelming majority of inquiries related to humanitarian admission and resettlement (including evacuation schemes) of Afghans at risk by the United States (through Special Immigration Visa – SIV - and humanitarian parole: P1 and P2) as well as European Member States<sup>4</sup>.

While the US and the EU's relocation schemes and humanitarian projects face implementation challenges, many Afghans either are not in possession of the necessary travel documentation (due to the limited capacities of the Afghan de facto authorities to issue passports) or do not qualify for resettlement nor evacuation. As a result, many are—gradually and increasingly—falling victim to misinformation campaigns and social media marketing by smuggling networks. From May to December 2022, ICMPD recorded multiple migration related trends, among which one of the most prominent was the false promises of visa issuance (mostly to the EU Member State territories) to vulnerable and desperate Afghans.

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<sup>4</sup> Inquiries related the EU humanitarian admission and resettlement programs constitute, on average, 60% MRC Afghanistan's engagement with clients from the country, region, and on the move. In February 2023, Denmark's Refugee Appeals Board announced in a statement that it will grant asylum to all women and girls from Afghanistan “solely based on their gender.” The appeals board cited “worsening conditions for women and girls in Afghanistan” as the basis for its decision. Likewise, Sweden had announced in December that all women and girls from Afghanistan would be granted refugee status and a three-year residence permit.

## Pakistan

An uptick in terrorist attacks in Pakistan (particularly by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan – TTP an alliance network of terrorist groups opposed to the Pakistani state), soaring prices of food<sup>5</sup> and energy (petrol/liquefied natural gas – LNG/coal), currency depreciation, water scarcity, and a political turmoil, has turned 2022 into another year of instability, inflated food prices, and harsh economic realities (imposed by the IMF) for the country and its citizens. 750,000 young Pakistanis moved out of the country in 2022, including some 92,000 professionals: more than three times as many as the 225,000 that departed in 2021. This news briefly brought the issue of emigration, particularly by young, educated people, back to the forefront. Young people are emigrating in large numbers for lack of opportunities and environmental factors (water scarcity). According to one news report in in December, a sample survey found that 62 per cent of 15- to 24-year-olds wish to leave the country and settle abroad.

Additionally, as of 2022, the country hosts over 3 million Afghan citizens including Afghan refugees, Afghan citizenship card holders and undocumented Afghans. Given the current situation, and in the absence of inclusive legal pathways for Afghans in Pakistan, the ‘politicization’ of Afghan refugee management is a likely scenario if TTP terrorism persists. This is likely to increase primary and secondary movements from the country, that will have to largely rely on irregular *operandi*. The launch of a comprehensive dialogue between the EU and Pakistan that will encompass legal pathways for migration and intensify preparations for the launch of a Talent Partnership for qualified Pakistani nationals does offer a hope.

## Bangladesh

Climate mobility is a growing issue for Bangladesh. In 2022, climate-flood and environment-related disruptions displaced 7.1 million people. Bangladesh’s coastal regions are particularly vulnerable, including due to the gradual increase in soil salinity corroding agricultural land, thus diminishing livelihoods and affecting decisions to move. Moreover, the country’s north-western regions have been suffering from a severe scarcity of drinkable water due to the presence of iron and arsenic in the groundwater, carrying implications for regional development. Bangladesh also hosts over 1.2 million Rohingya refugees on its territory, housed in densely populated camps in Cox’s Bazar. An uncertain future, coupled with squalid conditions, and the fear of getting deported, have prompted the Rohingya to undertake increasingly hazardous journeys (via the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea) to south-east Asia. The impact of the Ukraine conflict has led to significant shortages in foreign currency reserve, increases in the price of wheat and fuel, all of which affects Bangladesh’s status as a net importer. For the general public, many of whom are only just recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis has resulted in fuel and power insecurity. Increased drivers of migration, within the country, is

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<sup>5</sup> Prices of almost everything in the local economy have been effectively dollarized. Even if a commodity or product is produced locally, the cost of fuel and energy needed to process, transport, and distribute it is still at the mercy of the USD-PKR exchange rate and fluctuations in the price of oil, which are not adequately compensated, if at all, by wage rises.

expected to prompt those with the means to seek alternative livelihoods and situations beyond Bangladesh, by legal or irregular means.

### **Iraq**

The formation of a new coalition government in Iraq, last October may have temporarily eased the political tensions that had led to repeated unrest and clashes between protesters and security forces in the first half of 2022. Thus, the migratory movements outside of the country, and particularly towards Europe, for protection needs has decreased since 2017<sup>6</sup>, whilst an increase in return migration has been observed, bringing return and reintegration to the fore of public discussions. However, the long standing factors influencing migration and displacement remain: oil price dependency, political division, sectarianism and internal instability.

Large parts of the Iraqi population find themselves without prospects for a better future and their situation has been further compounded by recent global events: the COVID-19 pandemic and Ukraine-Russia conflict. Lacking capacity to provide sufficient opportunities for large parts of the population, Iraq's capacities for reabsorption is further hampered by the approximately 1.5 million foreign workers (mainly from Bangladesh), almost 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and almost 5 million IDP returnees. Moreover, it is host to more than 260,000 Syrian refugees. A combination of climate-related and man-made factors leads to an increase in internal displacement of whole communities and add to the push factors for irregular migration. The government is yet to develop a concerted and holistic response to this evolving problem.

Significant parts of the territory of Iraq are affected by climate change and suffer from desertification, deforestation, water scarcity, high salinity and poor water quality, sand and dust storms, and droughts exacerbated by insufficient and diminishing rainfall. Water flows from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which provide up to 98% of Iraq's surface water, have steadily declined in the past half a century, resulting in a decrease of 30% since the 1980s. The use of groundwater, which represents an alternative source of water supply, is hindered by limited extraction infrastructure on the one hand, and a decline in its availability due to increasing salinization, on the other hand.

### **Islamic Republic of Iran**

Following years of global sanctions, and inflows of Afghan refugees, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its citizens finds themselves at a pivotal moment in time. The pressures of a global pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict only serve to complicate a future outlook. Because of geopolitical tensions, the prices of crude oil and food commodities have risen sharply fuelling inflation, and obliging President Raisi's government to retain subsidies on energy for its citizens, and fast-track Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's plans to facilitate government backed privatization, in the hope of abating the negative effects of a historically low rial, liquidity issues, and subsequently, concerns over the future of Iran.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2022, EU Member States recorded a total of 25,906 asylum applications submitted by Iraqi nationals. That was 46.5% less than in 2017 (48,390 applications) and 79.5% less than during the peak of the refugee crisis in 2016 (126,320 applications).



Water shortages, rising wheat prices, and efforts to return Iranian society to a stricter compliance of the veiling of women, triggered a wave of unrest and protests nationwide beginning at the end of 2021 - and gradually growing over the course of 2022 after the death of Mahsa Amini in support of wider freedoms – the public outcry drew harsh and immediate reactions by Iran’s security forces across the country resulting in the loss of life and imprisonment of Iranians.

Recent academic studies by local universities has linked the current economic situation to a growing desire for outward mobility, with many Iranians reportedly considering the European Union, Britain, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia, as possible destinations. According to local estimates, since 1979, some eight million people, roughly 10 percent of the population, have left Iran, including an estimated 4.2 million highly educated and highly skilled. At present, it is reported that 30,000 general practitioners and senior nurses are awaiting the “good professional standing” certificates that developed countries require from those wishing to immigrate from countries such as Iran. Germany itself has recorded more than 5400 asylum applications from Iranian nationals in 2022 (more than double its 2021 recorded figures). Conversely, Iran remains a country of transit and destination for Afghan refugees (with their numbers reaching up to 5 million in 2022), immigrants from Iraq (the Kurdish and Shite regions), students from Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Nigeria.

As 2023 begins, a great deal uncertainty remains for the whole region on the extent outward mobility will be affected by insecurity, instability, and climate change disasters. Aggravated by low economic forecasts and national elections imminent, the risk of government inaction (or politicisation of migration) is high. Climate and environmental change is transforming migration within the South and West Asia. Storms, drought, and other rapid- and slow-onset events can prompt internal and international migration, affect migrants ‘en route’, and prevent others from leaving home. As climate change becomes more extreme, these impacts will become more pronounced. Furthermore, the impact of gradual global isolation on Afghanistan and Iran will have on refugee populations and displacement is a worry. Left unaddressed, sustained forced returns, including reports of children being abused across the Iranian-Afghan border; the plethora of human smuggling networks carrying thousands of people daily between Iran-Pakistan; and the potential for tightening of support by host communities for continued inclusion/integration programs of Afghans in the absence of sanctions relief is inevitable. In case of Bangladesh, as many workers in GCC countries are losing jobs due to strict compliance (for instance language skills) of new rules, many Bangladeshi workers are forced to migrate to third countries through middlemen via Libya as well as other new routes.



## Migration trends in the region

While the previous section highlighted “hotspots” of the region and the plausible drivers of mobility, for next year, the next section aims to offer a retrospective highlighting specific migration trends witnessed over the course of 2022. In particular, this will cover significant migration trends within five sub-headings: 1. Labour Migration 2. Remittance flows; 3. Climate induced displacement; 4. Refugees and Asylum; and 5. Irregular migration flows.

### Labour Migration

Mobility for the purposes of employment is often associated to migration from South and West Asia and 2022 was no different. Migrants from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh continued to provide vital contributions to economic sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work; jobs that are typically found in abundance within the neighbouring Middle East and further afar be it East Asia, Africa, or to a lesser extent, within the European Union. Remittances from these countries offer a lifeline to a number of communities and households within the region (see below). However, given that much of the work is characterised as low paid, migrant workers also faced continued challenges: taking on excessive debt, maltreatment/unsafe standards, or running the risk of unpaid wages and exploitation.

Following historical returns during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2022 saw an increase in outward labour mobility from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan<sup>7</sup>. The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training in Bangladesh estimates that more than 1.1 million Bangladeshis registered with BMET left the country for employment abroad. This represented an increase of 80% in comparison to 2021<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, according to its Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE), more than 750,000 Pakistanis emigrated for employment overseas during the first ten months of 2022 (reverting to pre-COVID 19 levels and higher than the decade long average half a million). In 2022, as per available data, 2.1 million Indians emigrated for employment globally, among which 0.27 million were for the purposes of overseas employment to 18 countries that need Emigration Clearance Required – ECR – certificates prior to departure (which mainly encompasses GCC, West and South East Asian countries)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the number of ECR certificates issued by Indian authorities have been dropping since its height in 2014 with migrant workers gradually shifting their attention - over recent years - to new labour markets within the EU, Japan, and UK.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the figures mentioned here refer to those who have registered or recorded their travels for employment (typically for low-paid jobs). Given the policies and legislation in place within South and West Asia, this typically refers to employment that requires pre-departure clearance. Typically, for the region, there are no specific measurements for capturing all migration for employment or work purposes.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on emigration flows over the past two years, thus comparisons to preceding years are bound to show upticks.

<sup>9</sup> An emigration clearance or permit is required from the Indian government for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers with an education below the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, as well as some professionals such as nurses, to emigrate for work in 18 countries. This permission (referred to as ECR) is not required for educated Indians above class 10, unless their occupation has been notified by the Protector of emigrants.

### **Rising number of overseas Indian students**

Indian students going abroad for higher education recorded a six-year high in 2022 at 750,365 (444,553 students going abroad in 2021). Student mobility is rapidly emerging as a means for outward emigration from India, offering opportunities in education and post-graduation stay. However, there have also been reports of clandestine agents misusing student channels presenting insincere applications with the intention of irregular stay upon arrival, or transiting onwards.

With large working force populations, low participation rates within the country, and insufficient job opportunities, Indians and their neighbours, continue to seek greener pastures abroad, and as Gulf states lose their appeal, new destinations are emerging, given their rapidly aging populations and anticipated labour shortages. As a result, countries within the Silk Routes region have been actively seeking employment channels for their citizens. Either through the negotiation and signing of Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements – MMPA (e.g. India-Germany, and signed intents with India-Austria, India-Cyprus, India-Finland) or through Dialogues (e.g. EU-Pakistan and Greece-Bangladesh, Romania-Bangladesh, EU-Bangladesh) that foresee intensifying preparations for the launch of Talent Partnerships for qualified nationals.

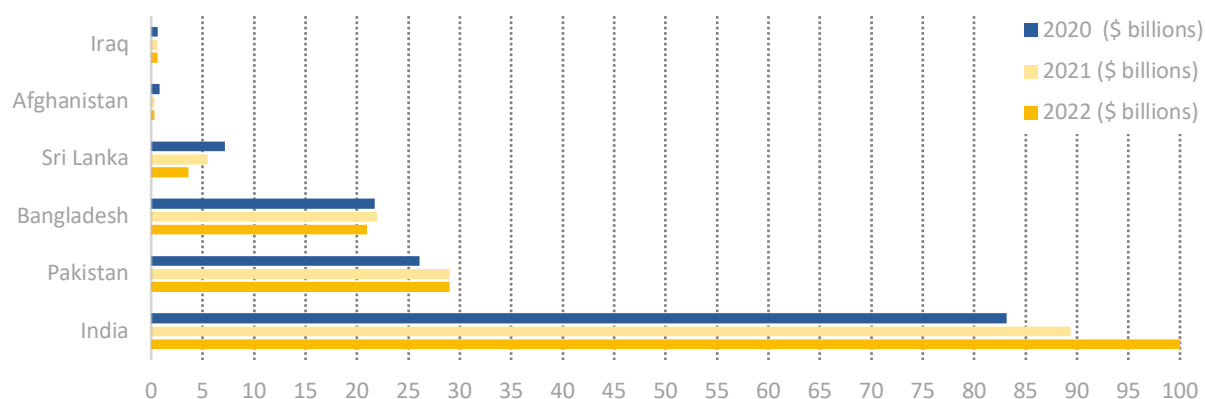
### **Remittances**

Given the turmoil, remittances to the Silk Routes offers a “lifeboat” but also a means for sustained empowerment/development and reintegration. According to the World Bank, the money received plays a crucial role in hedging losses incurred due to the rise of food costs, need for medical help, but also accounts for a majority of resource flows to the region helping pay for education and sustain livelihoods (as a share of GDP, remittances in 2022 will represent 8% in Pakistan and 4–5% in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) well beyond Overseas Development Aid (ODA). Sending remittances allows migrants to establish and/or contribute to economic opportunities within their social networks, which they can then benefit from upon return economically. Finally, those that remit regularly (weekly/monthly) back within the region were more likely to report better economic reintegration upon return, than those that did not.

Total remittances estimate for 2022 - within the broader region –increased by 3.5 percent reaching a total of USD\$ 163 billion. This total rise is largely due to India’s milestone performance (India’s remittances alone is expected to reach US\$ 100 billion in 2022), masking the individual declines experienced in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The joint effects of domestic economic crises (exchange rate depreciations), rising costs of living within destination economies (rising energy prices, inflation), and the re-emergence of informal money transfer channels (migrants’

penchant to transfer through informal channels at times of crisis thereby minimising costs)<sup>10</sup> impacted the overall volume of money sent to families back home.

**Figure 1: Inward Remittance Flows as of December 2022**



Source: World Bank

Linked to the total inflows is the cost of transferring remittances, via formal channels, from destination countries to the region. Depending on the country of origin and destination, this remains above the SDG target of 3 percent: although the cost of remitting \$200 from Germany to Afghanistan declined from \$11.8 to \$9.88, (16 percent) in 2022, it still represents 10% of the overall cost. Similarly, according to World Bank data, the average transaction cost for remittance transfers to Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka ranges from 4-5%. Moreover, the discrepancy between official and unofficial exchange rates in Pakistan and Bangladesh adds an additional layer of complexity, offering 7% to 10% more in local currency (than official routes). These transactional costs pose a problem, both at an individual and macro-economic level, especially within a region where nations are heavily dependent on remittances from millions of migrants working across the globe (especially Middle East). The money through formal channels is expected to be crucial for replenishing exchange reserves and financing external deficits.

### Climate Induced Displacement

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report on the impacts, adaptability and vulnerability (2022) states that climate change will be a defining driver of change for human society and mobility for the 21st century and will impact international protection. The continuation of climate change creates a number of challenges for international protection, even in scenarios in which human societies are taking proactive measure to limit or mitigate its effects. Countries and communities residing along

<sup>10</sup> The decrease in remittance flows in 2022, in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, and use of informal channels is partially also explained by the limitations placed upon transfer modalities such as delisting of money transfer entities, including closure of partner overseas banks.

the Ganges river basin remain one of the most vulnerable regions of the world: with more than half of all South Asians already affected by at least one climate-related disaster in the last two decades. Extreme weather – including heatwaves and flooding – appears to be the new normal for South Asia with many of the countries within the region (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran) enduring one or both in 2022. Nonetheless, for now, displacement induced by climate change remains within the boundaries of the countries and region within. It is found that in Bangladesh the disaster numbers, number of affected people and economic loss increases with time in an alarming rate.

At the Climate Change Conference in Egypt (COP 27) in November 2022, Afghanistan ranked sixth on the list of most Affected countries by the climate change, with the capital city of Kabul being the fifth most polluted city in the world. Across the country, 30 provinces (out of 34) faced extreme low water quality and an unseasonably cold winter. At the time of writing, Afghanistan is currently in the grips of its worst winter in more than a decade. Temperatures recently plunged to below minus-34 degrees Celsius (minus-29.2 degrees Fahrenheit). Officials in the de facto Taliban government said the cold has been lethal, leading to more than 160 deaths over the span of about two weeks, and killing more than 70,000 livestock.

An early, and prolonged, heatwave in India and Pakistan contributed to subsequent flooding in wide swathes of Pakistan as well as parts of India and Bangladesh. India recorded its hottest March on record, since 1901, and temperatures peaked at close to 50 degrees in the Pakistan city of Nawabshah. The heatwave was one of the longest for decades and it was followed by a late, and incessant, monsoon, which would go on to cause widespread flooding in Pakistan. By mid-January 2023, as many as 4 million children are still living near contaminated and stagnant flood waters, risking their survival and wellbeing. Flooding and landslides caused by heavy rains and glacial lake outbursts since mid-June 2022 has affected an estimated 33 million people in Pakistan, resulting in the deaths of at least 1,265 individuals. 20.6 million require humanitarian assistance, and 205,000 remain displaced in January 2023 across Balochistan and Sindh as of early 2023, many without access to appropriate winter clothing, heating supplies, or household items and often residing in host communities or in temporary displacement areas, including along roadways or open spaces without access to basic services, such as safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities raising the risk of spread of diseases.

As of October 2022, 2.3 million homes were recorded damaged or destroyed due to the floods, resulting in flood-related damages to agriculture and livelihoods. Thus, exacerbating food security concerns and raising the number of Pakistanis facing extreme levels of food insecurity to 8.6 million people according to the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Flooding and subsequent internal displacement has exposed 13.5 million people to heightened protection risks, as vulnerable populations experience physical danger and unsafe shelter conditions. It is estimated that flood damages will exceed US\$14.9 billion, economic losses over US\$15.2 billion and reconstruction needs over US\$16 billion.

## Refugees and Asylum

The largest proportion of refugee and asylum applications in 2022, remained intra-regional (Afghan nationals being the primary nationality). Given the significant aforementioned migration drivers, a primary trend for 2022 was the approximately 900,000 additional displaced since 2021, bringing totals to 3.5 million Afghans internally, while 2.1 million Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers have been registered by UNHCR in neighbouring countries, particularly in Pakistan and Iran (though such numbers vary and were reportedly as high as 5 million in Iran alone, if those informally present are taken into account). The majority of these refugees fled Afghanistan over the years, including from as early as 1979.

Schemes announced shortly after the Taliban takeover have had limited impact on the high demand for resettlement. The US has received and resettled over 90,000 Afghans (mostly through Special Immigrant Visas - SIVs), which continues to represent one of the largest operations of its kind, according to the US Department of State officials. This figure includes Afghans families and individuals airlifted from Kabul International Airport (HKIA) immediately after the fall of Kabul and those who were temporarily based in neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, Tajikistan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Georgia and Macedonia. However, according to US officials, there are still over 50,000 pending cases. While protection risks continue to aggravate in Afghanistan, Afghans continue to live in a state of legal limbo as pathways for international protection remain limited.

Rising tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan may lead to the harassment of Afghan refugee populations in Pakistan and the subsequent delay of international resettlement schemes (run out of Pakistan). Emboldened by the Taliban victory in Kabul, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP (the anti-Pakistan militant group based within the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan) has intensified its terrorist activities against Pakistan. In the past year alone, scores of Pakistani security personnel and civilians have lost their lives in these attacks. Taliban's failure to decisively act on formal complaints lodged – by the Pakistani authorities - against key members of TTP within its borders, is feeding a growing sense that Afghans (within Pakistan) are part of the problem. As casualties continue to mount, Pakistan and Iran have begun to tighten their approaches towards hosting Afghans (insisting that Afghans - who have overstayed - to return home to renew visas; shortening the stay of undocumented Afghans; implementing stricter controls thereby complicating and delaying access to resettlement programs).

### **Crackdown on migrants - including Afghans - living without documentation in Pakistan**

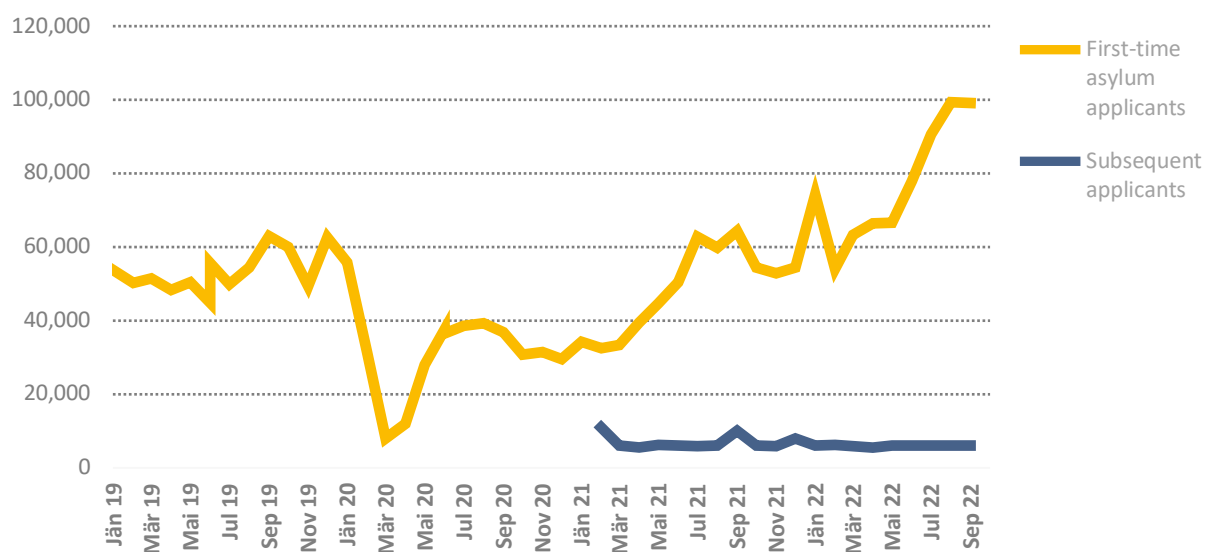
Since November 2022, authorities in Pakistan have begun a crackdown on migrants - including Afghans - living without documentation in Pakistan. The government declared foreigners living without documentation could either choose to exit Pakistan or extend their visas without having to pay a penalty until 31 December 2022. It was announced that failure to do so post the deadline will result in foreigners being sentenced up to three years in prison under the Foreigners' Act 1946.

Afghans in Pakistan, including those awaiting resettlement to Canada, are increasingly concerned about the rise in arrest and detention of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers. In November 2022, around 1,500 Afghans were arrested in Sindh province, which has recorded the highest number of arrests thus far.

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, about 250,000 – 400,000 Afghans have arrived in Pakistan bringing the total number of registered Afghans over the past decades to over 1.3 million (carrying Proof of Registration – PoR – cards). Additionally, over 878,000 undocumented Afghans reside in Pakistan crossing over through Border Check Points (BCP) in Torkham (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Chaman (Balochistan). Given the sanctions facing Iran, and isolation of the Taliban lead Afghan government, Pakistan remains the most viable option for resettlement of Afghans and point of entry for the international donor community.

A portion of those seeking refuge and asylum, within the region, reach the shores of the EU (see illustration above). The multiple crises also affect people movements as well as the capacity of countries to deal with increased migration flows. In 2022, EU member states recorded a 64% increase in detections of irregular border crossings and a 46% increase in asylum applications. There is little to suggest a trend reversal in 2023. Up to, and including December 2022, almost 966,000 first time asylum applications were submitted (compared to 537,000 in 2021) within the EU.

**Figure 2: First-time and subsequent asylum applicants in the EU, January 2019 – October 2022**



Source: Eurostat

Of the 99,000 received in October, up 10% compared with September 2022, Afghan nationals represented the second largest group (13,695), followed by Indian (4,030), Bangladeshi (3,460), Pakistani (2,955), and Iraqi (2,870) nationals.

Though these trends remain consistent with 2021 flows, the exponential increase in the number of Indian first asylum applicants, from 3600 in 2021 to 19,740 in 2022 (data until October 2022), has raised enquiries.

Since the beginning of 2022, Germany has been reporting the highest number of first-time asylum applicants (24,910), accounting for 25% of the total in the EU. Germany was followed by Austria (17,745; 18%), France (13,680; 14%), Spain (10,905; 11%), and Italy (8,385; 8%). These five countries together accounted for 76% of all first-time asylum applicants in the EU.

In the EU, refugees and migrants from Silk Routes countries mainly arrived by travelling visa-free to and through the Western Balkans countries, or by passing through the Silk Routes countries irregularly before embarking on one of the Mediterranean routes. For instance, maritime sub-routes, including the corridors from Türkiye to Cyprus or Italy, recorded noticeable increases. Further, some of the migrant workers from Pakistan and Bangladesh already residing in MENA countries or the Gulf decided to move on to Libya or Tunisia to depart via the Central Mediterranean routes.

### **Irregular Migration & Returns**

Absent a realistic and effective resettlement solution, of the 300,000 plus irregular entries into the EU, Afghans accounted for approximately half of those from the Silk Routes region (64,259)<sup>11</sup>. Irregular arrivals in the EU increased by 77% from the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2022 (compared with 2021). In 2022, the number of first arrivals from Türkiye to the EU reached over 32,200, most of which entered the EU through Italy (15,491) or Greece (14,660) and to a lesser extent via Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania. However, over 17,200 additional arrivals, primarily Congolese, Nigerian and Syrian entered Cyprus through the island's Green Line. In the same period, Türkiye reported entry prevention to more than 278,000 irregular migrants at its borders.

Similarly, the **Central Mediterranean route** saw an increase of irregular arrivals of 54%. Predominantly departing from Libya and Tunisia, Italy registered 98,906 arrivals composed of citizens from Egypt, Tunisia, Bangladesh (14,381), Syria, Afghanistan (7,162), Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Pakistan (3,109) and Iran (2,308). In Malta, half of the arrivals were nationals from Bangladesh (229 of the 438 in total).

The biggest increase last year was seen on the overland Western Balkans route, at least partly because countries like Serbia and Bosnia grant visa-free entry to nationals of African and Asian countries. Many

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<sup>11</sup> FRAN and JORA data, as of 2 December 2022. The data presented refer to detections of illegal border crossing rather than the number of persons, as the same person may cross the external border several times.



of these migrants were then smuggled across borders into the EU. Illegal border crossings along the **Western Balkan route** to the EU increased by 153% (to about 140,000) in comparison with the year before, and were about twelve times more than the official figures for 2019. Syrian (over 68,000) Afghan (over 22,000), Turkish (over 8,000) and Tunisian nationals (over 6,600) accounted for about 75% of this recent migratory surge, making it the most active route towards the EU in 2022. Migrants already in the Western Balkans, newcomers arriving to the Western Balkans from Greece or Bulgaria, as well as those having made use of visa-free travel (e.g. Indian nationals), moved onwards to the EU, notably via Hungary (and to a lesser extent via Croatia and Romania). As per FRONTEX data for 2022, between January- November 2022, a total of 6543 border crossing detections were made of Indian citizens. Indian nationals did not require a visa to enter Serbia throughout 2022 and used the country as a stepping stone for onward attempts to enter the EU without the necessary permits. Consequently, 98% of all detections of Indian nationals were recorded along the Western Balkans Route (6,374 detections).

Given the impact displacement and refugee flows within the region's host countries, it is not surprising to read reports of returns from Pakistan and Iran to Afghanistan have resumed after being suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic (formally and informally) nor the extent to which in 2022 citizens continued to repatriate due to the after-shocks of COVID-19 in many destination economies (GCC, South East Asia, and to a lesser extent Europe and North America).

In 2022, the government of Türkiye has deported over 55,000 Afghans from across the country. Similarly, reports highlight that the government of Iran has deported thousands of Afghans through Islam Qala (Herat province) and Milak (Nimroz province) border crossing points (BCPs) to Afghanistan. The Afghan de facto authority's Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation reported that the Iranian government deported over 50,000 Afghans between August and September 2022, at a daily rate of 3,000 deportees.

According to data provided to ICMPD, in 2022, a total of 51,870 Pakistani citizens were deported home from a number of countries. 46,193 of these were deported by air and 5677 were deported via land border crossing points. The highest number of Pakistanis, 16,937, were deported from Saudi Arabia, followed by Turkey (12,677) and 7,592 migrants by the UAE. Deportation of Pakistanis from European countries stood at 1,724 - with the highest number (475) being deported from Greece followed by the UK (393).

Throughout 2021 and 2022, as a result of the politicisation of migration by Belarus, at the EU's eastern border, 4,000 Iraqis from Belarus - and the neighbouring EU countries mainly Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland – were returned.

Collectively these returns place immense pressure on governments to prepare local level authorities in support of providing reintegration to their citizens into the economy.

## Migration policy developments

The realities within Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, India, Iraq, and Pakistan have left little opportunity for policy or programming development. The migration drivers and devastating trends observed above within each of the countries, has left governments under immense pressure to manage the now, rather than strategise for the future. Nonetheless, the following section will highlight recent migration related political/policy developments within the region that remain relevant for the migration situation in 2022 or that could have an impact on migration management within the region in 2023.

### **Afghanistan**

Due to ongoing ban on women's education and access to work space, international engagement (including the work of civil society and non-governmental actors) has been limited to "Life Saving" operations.

The EU held a series of pledging exercises in 2022 with EU Member States on the resettlement of Afghans. The result was an announcement in June that Member States agreed to resettle 20,000 refugees in 2022 (in addition to admitting 40,000 Afghans at risk between 2021-22). Furthermore, unofficial reports indicate that in December 2022 an additional 29,000 (16,000 resettlement and 13,000 humanitarian admission) pledges for Ukrainians, Afghans and others were agreed to for 2023. The Team Europe Initiative for Afghanistan was scheduled to commence work in January 2023; however, the collaboration has been paused as a result of the de facto authorities' recent announcement banning Afghan women's access to higher education and employment with non-governmental organisations.

Inquiries related the EU humanitarian admission and resettlement programs constitute, on average, 60% of the Migrant Resource centre staff's virtual engagement with clients from the country, region, and on the move. However, actual resettlement (to date) has been rather limited: 41,000 from August 2021 -December 2022.

### **Bangladesh**

Heightened global commodity prices and widened balance-of-payment deficit depleted have led to a substantial decline in Bangladesh's foreign reserves. To arrest the drop in remittances, the government has offered incentives to migrants by withdrawing the interest ceiling on nonresident foreign currency deposits, the ceiling on internet banking transfers, and removing proof of source of income requirements for remittances. Additionally, Bangladesh offers a 2.5% cash incentive and a separate price for remittances that is higher than its interbank exchange rate. Sri Lanka offered to pay an additional 8 rupees per dollar for remittances converted in December of last year. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment also declared that it would assess and set a minimum wage for every country that Bangladeshi migrant workers emigrate to, in order to ensure that the migrant workforce is treated fairly.

In 2022, Bangladeshis were the third most common nationality (14.9 percent) of sea arrivals in Italy, via Libya. In November 2022, Bangladesh engaged in talks with Libya on tackling irregular migration by instead facilitating the movement of Bangladeshi doctors, nurses, technicians, and agro-entrepreneurs to Libya. A MoU has been signed between Greece and Bangladesh on migration mobility. The following month, Bangladesh entered into talks with Italy to promote safe migration. Similarly, Bangladesh signed an agreement with Russia to send skilled labourers to work in the shipbuilding industry. The EU and Bangladesh are also in discussion on launching a Talent Partnership programme to create regular pathways for Bangladeshi migrant workers.

A reintegration policy is also in place for finalization focusing primarily on private sector engagement and a whole of Government approach. Together with MRCs in the country, ICMPD strives to strengthen capacities of available reintegration structures, as well as business training and mentorship for returnees. Consequently, support for the public-private sector partnership platform on reintegration is set-up and preparation for the reintegration policy is foreseen.

### **India**

Absent the possibility of dual nationality, the number of Indians relinquished their Indian citizenship has been increasing annually. In 2022, more than 225,000 Indians gave up their Indian citizenship. Since 2011, this represents close to 1.6 million citizens across 135 countries. The Ministry of External Affairs 2022 Report estimates that there are 31 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) living around the world.

The 2021 draft Emigration Bill – expected to replace the existing Emigration Act of 1983 – remained under review in 2022 with the Ministry of External Affairs (following the feedback the government received from the public in 2021). In its last iteration, it foresees the creation of a Central Emigration Management Authority under MEA, as well as a Bureau of Emigration Policy and Planning and a Bureau of Emigration Administration to handle day-to-day administrative operations and oversee welfare of Indian citizens living and working abroad.

India is expected to launch biometric data stored e-passports for all citizens, reducing the risk of duplication/tampering of the passport, currently used as a ‘modus operandi’ by human traffickers and smuggling networks, and offering new avenues for nationality verification (biometric data).

The Government of India has successfully developed Migration and Mobility Partnerships for its citizens to boost overseas migration that focuses on youth/student/research exchange, pilot young professionals’ schemes, and to foster closer cooperation funneling skilled migration to Europe: e.g. India-UK Memorandum of Understanding, India-Germany Migration

and Mobility Agreement, and joint declarations of intent to complete negotiations with Finland, Austria, and Cyprus.

India's emphasis on migration and mobility for 2023 are worth keeping in focus adjacent other key developments: assumption of the G20 Presidency, a strong focus on improving vocational education<sup>12</sup>, developing technological infrastructure for seamless integration of school, skill and higher education<sup>13</sup>, harmonisation of skills assessment frameworks, internationalising education, and improving mobility of skilled workers.

### **Iran**

In August 2022, President Ebrahim Raisi, is reported to have ordered the strict enforcement of the country's decade's old hijab and chastity law. The resulting protests across the country, and the detention of tens of thousands of citizens (including the death of Mahsa Amini), brought forward underlying grievances of the general public linked to soaring prices of basic food items and high unemployment. In early 2023, the hijab law in Iran has been put under review by the Attorney General and the Guidance Patrol/Morality Police disbanded. Face recognition technology seems to be in use to levy fines and make arrests.

The Iranian parliament has been debating the establishment of a National Migration Organisation (NMO) that is expected to replace the Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrants (within the Ministry of Interior).

On 13th November, the "General Bill" for the formation of NMO was approved with 141 votes in favor and 91 votes against it. Its aim would be to better identify (issuance of a card for all foreign nationals) and coordinate the presence (and deportation) of foreign nationals in the country, given the size and the length of the population living in Iran (Afghans would need to register and declare their work and those employing Afghans without proper documentation would be fined).

### **Iraq**

Following the establishment of a new Iraqi government in the fall of 2022, on the mandate to jump-start political reform, the parliament has announced that it will form a constitutional revision committee. The amendment of the country's constitution remains pivotal to the country's stability. If this latest initiative to revise the country's constitution is to be successful, an inclusive process, the legitimate provision of rights and freedoms for all (representative of the interests of all), and a lasting federal design that accounts for the Kurdistan region government, will be vital.

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<sup>12</sup> Aiming to vocationally empower at least 50% of its youth by 2025 and develop a National Credit Framework to facilitate a seamless movement across school, skills, and higher education.

<sup>13</sup> Some of these include a national level Student Registry, Academic Bank of Credit and Skill India Digital portal.

Through a whole-of-government approach (WGA) to migration management (facilitated by ICMPD over the course of 2022) Iraq has established a Supreme Committee on Migration on 22 January 2023. The Committee will be chaired by the Minister of Migration and Displaced (with other relevant ministries on board) and is seen as a positive step towards inculcating a coordinated approach to migration issues under one high-level national body.

Moreover, the GoI has expressed a strong interest towards developing solutions towards the sustainable reintegration of Iraqi returnees. As a direct result of the recent engagement with the GoI, a Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq has been developed alongside an accompanying Action Plan.<sup>14</sup> It represents a result of joint efforts of the Iraqi governmental entities, in consultation with non-governmental actors and service providers working on reintegration, supported by ICMPD, and builds upon relevant programmatic documents dedicated to steering sustainable reintegration efforts in Iraq forward. The Vision aims at providing a flexible system of support services and referrals to sustainable reintegration solutions, enabling the Iraqi returnees to achieve their personal, social, and professional goals, and contribute to the development of their homeland. Based on the direction of the GoI, ICMPD is to support with the implementation of the priority areas of the Vision through ongoing/upcoming projects based on short-medium-long term goals that the GoI considers important.

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan has prepared a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) with the support of the UN, WB, ADB and EU in which the revival of livelihoods and agriculture, rebuilding of private housing and the reconstruction of public infrastructure, including roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals have been identified as core priorities.

An International Conference on Climate Resilient Pakistan was held in Geneva on 9th January 2023 to raise funds for the reconstruction of infrastructure damaged by the floods. The Conference was chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif with the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres as co-chair. Of the \$9.7 billion pledged at the conference, \$ 8.7 billion in pledges are in the form of project loans to be dispersed over a three-year period.

The National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis, developed with technical assistance of ICMPD through EU funding, is now with the Prime Minister's Office for submission to the cabinet for approval. The Policy will be Pakistan's first labour migration policy and a milestone in approaching emigration and labour migration through a broader geographical focus (beyond GCC countries) and more comprehensive thematic policy interventions, including return migration.

<sup>14</sup> The Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq was developed under the auspices of a Danish funded (and ICMPD implemented) project, Capacity building for long-term reintegration of returnees in Iraq (2021-2023).

### Regional consultations

Several Silk Routes countries participate in regional consultative processes such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, the Bali Process and its recent 8th Ministerial Conference and the Colombo Process. Most notably, the Silk Routes countries participate in the Budapest Process with its focus on the Silk Routes Partnership for Migration, bridging European and Asia partners on several migration related topics. The topic of return and reintegration has been prioritised by Budapest Process partner countries since 2017, and engagement and expertise in the area of return and reintegration increased exponentially since then. At a thematic meeting in June 2022, Budapest Process partner countries agreed to jointly develop a roadmap for the Budapest Process to meaningfully support the Silk Routes countries – Bangladesh (observer country), Iraq and Pakistan – with inclusive, rights-based and sustainable returns and reintegration. The actions listed in the roadmap are specific, achievable and are structured per country in order to take into account the context, current activities as well as potential future actions under various projects. The roadmap is thus a guiding document for all BP partners, which provides measurable actions to be taken forward, including support on operational and policy development for improving reintegration of returnees. There are several ongoing projects in region that support countries in ensuring that their overall development planning includes provision of holistic support to returning migrants, as increased alignment enables better contribution to the sustainable reintegration of returning migrants within their communities and societies.

At the same time, the Budapest Process continues its focus on legal migration and mobility, in particular through skills partnerships with Silk Routes countries. A recent BP report provides an overview of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems in five countries that are part of the Budapest Process (as observers or participating states): Austria, Bangladesh, Germany, Italy and Pakistan, with a view to identify and overcome challenges in skills partnerships.

### Conclusions

This report highlights the main migration “hotspots”, trends and policy developments within the Silk Routes region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan) for 2022. At the same time, it aims to specify potential areas of development and challenges, for the region and the international community, for the coming year. Climate induced displacement, violence and terrorism, deteriorating economic conditions, and a limited implementation of resettlement channels, will continue to drive mobility within (and beyond) the South and West Asia region. As a result, inward remittances continued to hit record highs for the region and outward labour flows surpassed pre-COVID 19 levels. However, politics and world affairs (such as the Ukraine-Russia conflict, Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and sanctions on Iran) have further aggravated the region. The subsequent rise in costs of living, energy

supply shortages, and the fear of push back from the host countries has left Rohingya and Afghan refugee communities with a sense of despair. Leadership within the Silk Routes countries are getting push back from their electorate on the need to control new waves of refugees, whilst deepening debt limits to sustain subsidies on essential goods (fuel and grain). Harsher rules for refugees and migrants is expected to continue within host countries in the region. Sudden-onset events including major storms and floods have resulted in millions being involuntarily displaced, and vulnerable populations facing starvation across Pakistan, Iraq, and Bangladesh. Many Afghans wondered if the promised resettlement schemes – announced by the West – would ever bear fruition. Mobility may be an effective strategy, but often only for those who have the financial means to move often using any means possible and under distressing conditions.

Following a lull over the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the region's major labour sending countries (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) saw outward labour migration flows surpassing pre-COVID 19 levels, as well as the emergence of new destinations, resulting in the inward remittances hitting record highs in 2022. The bilateral and multi-lateral agreements signed (and those currently under negotiation) either by India or its neighbours Bangladesh and Pakistan hold promise - if implementation is carried out carefully and meticulously in a balanced manner.