

GLOBAL COMPACT ON MIGRATION YOUTH POLICY BRIEF

Middle East & North Africa



INTRODUCTION

The Migration Youth and Children Platform (MYCP) is the platform by youth, and for youth to impact the highest levels of international migration policy. MYCP is the United Nations Major Group for Children & Youth Migration Constituency. Together, MYCP aims to advance the engagement and meaningful participation of children and youth in policy spaces related to migration at the global, regional, and national levels.

In anticipation of the GCM Regional Reviews in 2023–2024, MYCP's MENA regional team determined a number of youth objectives and priorities, as they intersect with migration. MYCP then conducted a youth policy survey to consult with regional organizations and youth with the aim of gathering inputs. This policy brief has therefore collated the diverse views and extensive experience of both the MYCP team (composed of regional youth) and MYCP's constituency from the Middle East and North Africa.

The MENA region is both a producer and receiver of refugees and migrant workers – the region hosts just under 14% of the global migrant workforce. An estimated 1 in 6 individuals residing in West Asia (Middle East) are migrants.¹ Furthermore, as of 2022, the region hosts some 2.4 million refugees, 12.6 million internally displaced people,² 251,800 asylum seekers, and 370,300 stateless persons.³ Youth in the region tend to migrate more than their older counterparts, and they tend to be hosted within the region, with the exception of those that target Europe and North America for employment and education. This is attributed to the wide berth between what is available to youth, especially in rural areas, and their future aspirations.⁴ Recent reports have warned that migration out of the region has become increasingly feminized, particularly among young women, leading to an effect of gendered brain drain.⁵

This report was authored by Shaddin Almasri, MYCP Labour & Human Trafficking Specialist, and edited by Aryan Sanghrajka, Global Focal Point & GCM Lead. We would like to thank all of the MYCP partners, constituency members, and grassroots youth who were part of the consultation process and provided their policy solutions to some of the most pressing migration challenges across the region. As well as MYCP MENA Focal Point, Khadija Amahal, and all other MYCP Coordination Team Members for their input and expertise.

[1] Migration Data Portal (2023).

<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/migration-data-western-asia>

[2] This figure is now likely far higher due to recent mass internal displacement in Sudan and Palestine in 2023–2024, however comprehensive regional figures are not yet available.

[3] UNHCR (2022). <https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-22/middle-east-and-north-africa#:~:text=The%20Middle%20East%20and%20North,uncertain%20funding%20situation%20in%202022>.

[4] Wenger and Abulfotuh (2019).

<https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/0346189b-db0f-4f56-9cfb-9cb57733be4c/content>

[5] Atlantic Council (2023).

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/theres-a-gendered-brain-drain-in-mena-its-because-women-are-unrecognized-and-underestimated/>

KEY YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Forced Migration

Warring parties should immediately cease the practice of forcible transfer of persons to carry out violence and ethnic cleansing. Simultaneously, government actors should cease forcible returns of refugees.

2. Trafficking in Persons

Regional governments must support and implement safe migration pathways within and outside the region, especially on the MENA-Europe migration corridors to protect the safety of children & youth in transit.

3. Gender

Migration services must include support for acquiring income-generating opportunities, subsidized provision of care services, as well as increased availability of dedicated SGBV caseworkers, MHPSS workers and women's shelters.

4. Economic Opportunities

Regional governments and international financial institutions should invest in improving broad social protection for youth from the region and for migrants alike.

YOUTH PRIORITY 1: FORCED MIGRATION

As of 2022, the MENA region is the world's highest producer of refugees. Historically, the MENA has hosted intra-regional refugees, largely stemming from war, conflict and occupation.⁶

The past year has only increased the relevance of this challenge and brought this to the fore. Occupation and forced displacement of Palestine and Palestinians has been ongoing for 76 years, with Gaza particularly under siege for the past 17 years. Recent developments have caused rapid deterioration of already-challenging conditions in Gaza. Gaza has endured decades of bombing campaigns, as recently as 2021, where water supply infrastructure for 20% of residents were destroyed. As of 30 January 2024, satellite data demonstrates that between 50-61% of buildings are now damaged or destroyed.⁷ The majority of homes, civilian infrastructure, and healthcare facilities have therefore been destroyed by IDF bombardments. Israel's aerial bombardment and land invasion of Gaza has also caused the forcible displacement of some 1.7 million civilians, half of which are children.⁸ These displacements continue to be forced by the IDF, who limit safe zones in Gaza that are in turn bombed. This has constituted forcible transfer,⁹ with several reports affirming genocidal intent.^{10 11} These claims have been further corroborated by a case against Israel brought to the International Court of Justice by South Africa, citing an application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. While they imposed provisional measures to reduce civilian harm in their initial hearing, the ICJ amended their ruling and have called for an immediate halt to Israel's military offensive 'in conformity with its obligations under the Genocide Convention.'¹²

Simultaneously, takeover of several major states in Sudan, including Khartoum, Darfur and Kordofan, by the Dagalo-led Rapid Support Forces, has also caused mass internal displacement amounting to 5.4 million people.¹³ This has also triggered concerns of genocide due to attacks that are conducted along ethnic lines in Darfur.¹⁴ Displaced Sudanese civilians report mass violence and SGBV, with fighters occupying the homes they were displaced from. In both instances, ongoing attacks, military occupation and high civilian casualties have made it unsafe to return.

[6] IOM (2022) <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-139-r-region-on-the-move-mena.pdf>

[7] BBC (2024). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68006607>

[8] UNICEF (n.d.) <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/children-gaza-need-lifesaving-support#:~:text=All%20of%20Gaza's%20children%20have,%2C%20food%2C%20fuel%20and%20medicine.>

[9] UN Human Rights Council Resolutions (2024). <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/human-rights-council-adopts-resolutions-text-calling-immediate-ceasefire-gaza-urging-states-prevent-continued-forcible-transfer-palestinians-within-or-gaza-and-calling-states-cease-sale-or-transfer-arms-israel>

[10] The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention has issued 8 warnings for genocide in Gaza, with the first on 13 October 2023. On 8 April 2024, the Lemkin Institute also issued an active genocide warning in the West Bank. <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/active-genocide-alert>

[11] Francesca Albanese, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, released the report 'Anatomy of a Genocide' on 26 March 2024 at the fifty-fifth session of the Human Rights Council. The report also states that the bombardment of Gaza constitutes genocide.

<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/anatomy-of-a-genocide-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-palestinian-territory-occupied-since-1967-to-human-rights-council-advance-unedited-version-a-hrc-55/>

Simultaneously, Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and beyond are under increasing threat of forced return. Systematic forced returns in Lebanon have commenced in the last several months following years of spontaneous deportations, including of unaccompanied children. Not long after, eight EU countries also began discussions on declaring parts of Syria as 'safe' with the aim of facilitating returns.¹⁵ Bombardment however continues to take place: in 2023, Idlib and Aleppo both underwent bombing by the Assad regime. In Sweida, anti-government protests have resurged in open defiance of state repression. As of March 2024, 115,000 Syrians remain forcibly disappeared in Syria.¹⁶ Conditions in Syria are therefore unsafe for return: recent reports by the UN OHCHR detail that Syrian returnees have been subjected to gross violations of human rights including arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, sexual and gender-based violence, enforced disappearance and abduction.¹⁷

RECOMMENDATION: WARRING PARTIES SHOULD IMMEDIATELY CEASE THE PRACTICE OF FORCIBLE TRANSFER OF PERSONS TO CARRY OUT VIOLENCE AND ETHNIC CLEANSING. SIMULTANEOUSLY, GOVERNMENT ACTORS SHOULD CEASE FORCIBLE RETURNS OF REFUGEES.

Refugees should neither be subject to forced returns nor forced displacement. Regional actors, including governments and international entities, should ensure that no one is forcibly displaced in conflict. Those that are forced to seek refuge should also not be forced to return to unsafe conditions. Returns must be safe, dignified, and entirely voluntary to ensure the protection of all vulnerable persons and especially for (un)accompanied children.

The Migration Youth and Children Platform (MYCP) calls for an **immediate, permanent ceasefire**, and an **end to the occupation and genocide in Gaza**.



[12] ICJ Order 24 May 2024 – Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip. Para. 50. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240524-ord-01-00-en.pdf>

[13] UNHCR (2024). <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/sudan-situation#:~:text=The%20conflict%20that%20broke%20out,people%20into%20five%20neighbouring%20countries.>

[14] Lemkin Institute (2023). <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/active-genocide-alert>

[15] InfoMigrants. (2024). <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/57279/cyprus-and-seven-other-eu-states-call-for-more-returns-of-syrian-refugees>

[16] Mustafa, W. A. (2024). <https://timep.org/2024/03/14/cruelty-torture-and-disappearance-in-assads-syria-thirteen-years-and-counting/#:~:text=A%20staggering%20155%2C000%20individuals%20were,loved%20ones%20without%20any%20answers.>

[17] OHCHR (2024). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/syrian-returnees-subjected-gross-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-un>

YOUTH PRIORITY 2: TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Challenges linked to trafficking in persons exist across the region. However the pervasiveness of the type and modality of trafficking widely differ and are mainly distinguished by migrant labor hiring practices, and by geography and geographical proximity to Europe. In the latter case, trafficking has been erroneously conflated or coupled with smuggling in policy discussions and in popular media, often with the intent of justifying increasingly criminalized responses.¹⁸ For this purpose, this section combines both terms.

Labour Migration

Widely known as the kafala system, eight countries in the MENA region rely solely on some form of sponsorship to facilitate migration.¹⁹ This regime awards full control of migrant entry and exit to individual employers, awarding individuals disproportionate authority over the movements of their migrant employees. Hiring practices under this regime have been compared to practices of trafficking. In 2023, the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports for both Egypt and Lebanon ranked them at a Tier 2 'Watchlist' for risk of trafficking. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the practice of trafficking is often initiated at the sending country and particularly through employment offices that export workers with false expectations, often based on dubious contracts. Youth are especially at risk of accepting dubious contracts with the aim of securing residence abroad. Other practices that are widespread, although often illegal, include the employer's withholding of migrant identity documents upon arrival in the host country.²⁰

Onward Migration

Increasing media attention on attempts to thwart trafficking and smuggling from North Africa have shed light on the extreme measures by which governments are willing to hinder migration to Europe. A recent investigation by Lighthouse Reports reveals that the Tunisian National Guard, funded by European Union mobility partnerships, has been systematically abandoning migrants in desert regions nearing the Libyan border. This act has led to the deaths of migrants, where at least 27 people were found dead in the desert between the Tunisian and Libyan border in August 2023.²¹ Such approaches have only exacerbated challenging conditions for migrants in the region: an estimated half of migrant deaths in 2023 were in MENA.

[18] Mixed Migration Centre (2021). https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/181_MMC_Key_Messages_Smuggling_and_Mixed_Migration.pdf

[19] Many other state migration regimes also feature some forms of sponsorship, particularly to facilitate labor migration.

[20] Almasri, S. (2022). <https://publications.iom.int/books/impacts-covid-19-migration-and-migrants-gender-perspective>

[21] Aljazeera. (2023). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/9/at-least-27-people-found-dead-in-desert-after-expulsion-from-tunisia-libya>

This is a continuation of an increasing trend that has been cemented into practice through the recent EU Pact on Asylum and Migration that has prioritized international cooperation as a modality of stemming migration towards European shores. Securitized mobility partnerships such as the 2017 agreement between Italy and Libya have also infamously funded the Libyan coastguard, that has been key to supporting violent and often deadly pushbacks of migrant boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea.²² Increased challenges in arriving to European shores through safe pathways have increased reliance on smugglers and traffickers however, through which migrants undertake dangerous and often violent journeys.

RECOMMENDATION: REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS MUST SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENT SAFE MIGRATION PATHWAYS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE REGION, ESPECIALLY ON THE MENA-EUROPE MIGRATION CORRIDORS TO PROTECT THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN & YOUTH IN TRANSIT.

Currently, legal migration pathways across the MENA region fail to protect migrants and migrant workers. Youth and particularly those seeking opportunities abroad are at high risk of undertaking dangerous journeys to migrate. Yet mobility partnerships have only increased securitized approaches, placing migrants at further risk. Further migrant policymaking must improve migrant agency in the course of seeking residence or asylum elsewhere, along with the provision of safe migration pathways.



[22] Doctors without Borders (2022). <https://www.msf.org/italy-libya-agreement-five-years-eu-sponsored-abuse-libya-and-central-mediterranean>

YOUTH PRIORITY 3: GENDER

Women constitute less than half of migrants to the MENA region; an estimated 38.7%.²³ Part of a broader trend of migration feminization, women migrants are especially key to the care and domestic work sector: women make up 6 out of 10 migrants to West Asia (Middle East), compared to just 1 in 10 men.²⁴ However, as this sector is excluded from the labor code in several countries in the MENA region, domestic work is regulated by a parallel set of instructions. These are often woefully inadequate and have little possibility of being enforced. Furthermore, women migrants, including refugees, are disproportionately subject to gender-based violence in migration journeys. Lacking protection and care services on migratory routes, migrant women and girls are often left with little opportunity for protective services and legal recourse. This has been especially visible in cases of forced displacement and forcible transfer from and within Palestine, Syria, Sudan and Iraq, where women face a lack of access to maternal and reproductive health services, basic sanitation, alongside an increase in gender-based violence.²⁵

Global crises thus carry gendered impacts on people on the move. The Covid-19 pandemic especially worsened such disproportionate impacts, as border closures completely halted mobility and migration procedures. Furthermore, due to these restrictions, women have been especially susceptible, or indeed coerced into, to accepting risky economic opportunities or work situations due to care responsibilities in countries of origin.²⁶ This was particularly visible in the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, when stay-at-home orders significantly increased care loads in homes globally and particularly in the region, for local citizens and migrants alike. One rapid care analysis in Jordan reported that 95% of Jordanian and Syrian refugee women faced increased care loads during the Covid-19 lockdowns.²⁷ This would have increased an already-disproportionate care load, as women in the region report spending up 4.7 times more unpaid care work, and up to ten times more time on unpaid care.^{28 29} This notably transferred upon domestic workers in the region, who were at further risk of exploitation with increased domestic and international mobility restrictions.³⁰

Simultaneously, women are also more highly susceptible to immobility, as is often the case for those that are more vulnerable. Migration decisions are mostly undertaken by men, and the decisions on where to go are often impacted by income status: those that

[23] <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/region-move-regional-mobility-report-middle-east-and-north-africa-2021-2022>

[24] Almasri, S. (2022). <https://publications.iom.int/books/impacts-covid-19-migration-and-migrants-gender-perspective>

[25] Wilson Center (2024). <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/microsite/8/node/119623>

[26] MYCP Youth Policies Survey 2024: Input from UN-WFP.

[27] Abdo and Almasri. (2020). <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/decade-hope-not-austerity-middle-east-and-north-africa>

[28] <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/the-role-of-the-care-economy-in-promoting-gender-equality>

[29] Arabarometer 2023. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2023/03/confounding-and-confirming-expectations-on-the-care-economy-in-mena/#:~:text=Women%20in%20MENA%20spend%20up,care%20work%20in%20the%20region.>

[30] Almasri (2022). <https://publications.iom.int/books/impacts-covid-19-migration-and-migrants-gender-perspective>

have less income often migrate internally or to neighboring countries across short distances, and are also more likely to undertake seasonal and temporary migration. In instances where only one household member may migrate, women often stay behind and carry on their role as caretakers.³¹ This leaves women with additional care responsibilities, particularly in rural areas where families may be reliant on subsistence or low-income commercial farming. Such tasks are normally incorporated under care work wherein women may take on additional responsibilities before migration for adaptation purposes. For instance, a study conducted in Egypt showed that, prior to moving and in the face of livelihoods threatened by poor harvests, women helped their husbands with agricultural work because it was too expensive to hire labor support.³² This suggests that there is a reliance on women members of the household as a source of unpaid labor in times of economic hardship, and particularly as a form of adaptation prior to taking decisions to migrate.

RECOMMENDATION: MIGRATION SERVICES MUST INCLUDE SUPPORT FOR ACQUIRING INCOME-GENERATING OPPORTUNITIES, SUBSIDIZED PROVISION OF CARE SERVICES, AS WELL AS INCREASED AVAILABILITY OF DEDICATED SGBV CASEWORKERS, MHPSS WORKERS AND WOMEN’S SHELTERS.

Women and girls are subject to risks both when on the move and when staying behind. Special consideration must be given to risks that women and girls may be prone to in both conditions, including but not limited to gender-based violence, exploitation, and increased care work. Yet migration services in the region tend to serve those on the move and fail to target those that are sedentary. Response programs must therefore consider and alleviate the particular burdens that women and girls face both when migrating and staying behind and must consider a range of needs including pressing protection concerns but also livelihoods and family care. Gender-transformative programming needs to assure that women and girls on the move and those that stay behind are both included.



[31] MYCP Youth Policies Survey 2024: Input from Arab Youth Platform for Sustainable Development.

[32] Wodon et. al (2014). https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/10.1596/978-0-8213-9971-2_ch1

YOUTH PRIORITY 3: ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

According to the Arabarometer and Afrobarometer reports, many youths in the region desire to emigrate, primarily intra-regionally with some aspirations for Europe or North America. For instance, according to the 2022 Arabarometer, half of youth in Sudan, Tunisia and Jordan report their desire to emigrate abroad.³³ At the core of this desire to emigrate lies the increasing rate of youth unemployment, compounded with economic decline and increased poverty across the region. IMF-backed austerity measures and social protection rollbacks, particularly prior to and since the Covid-19 pandemic, have only worsened inequalities in the region, where economic rent has been overwhelmingly concentrated with its richest. According to a 2020 Oxfam report, wealth of billionaires in the MENA region increased by at least USD 9.8bn between March and 16 August 2020 while the economy at large contracted due to pandemic-related closures and supply-chain disruptions.³⁴

Rising inequalities, increased informality and the declining social protection nets have reduced the decent work options available for regional youth and migrants. While the region boasts a highly educated youth, with strengths both in the physical and social sciences, regional labor markets have limited capacity to meaningfully absorb them into decent jobs.³⁵ Simultaneously, migrants in the region have been largely relegated to sectors and occupations that offer minimum wage salaries. Some states in the region also offer differentiated minimum wages for migrant workers by sector, or by nationality, legalizing even lower salaries than the general minimum wage.³⁶

RECOMMENDATION: REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS SHOULD INVEST IN IMPROVING BROAD SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR YOUTH FROM THE REGION AND FOR MIGRANTS ALIKE.

Currently, social safety nets are limited and are at risk of contraction, leaving migrants and youth at risk of exploitation at the workplace. To counter this, centralized social safety mechanisms must be prioritized to empower vulnerable members of the workforce and ensure that migrant workers and youth can make informed decisions regarding work and migration, along with remedial capacities in the face of employer exploitation.

[33] The National (2022). <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/2022/07/21/nearly-half-of-jordanian-sudanese-and-tunisians-want-to-emigrate/>

[34] Abdo and Almasri (2020). <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/for-a-decade-of-hope-not-austerity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-towards-621041/>

[35] This is in part due to government spending on debt servicing. See Abdo and Almasri (2020).

[36] ILO (2019). <https://www.ilo.org/publications/minimum-wages-and-wage-protection-arab-states-ensuring-just-system-national>

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Our recommendations are on behalf of the entire youth constituency, and are a direct call to Member States in the region, following our consultation process. For further information, or for approval on this document's use, please email migrationgfp@unmgcy.org. MYCP is the global youth constituency for all persons 30 and under, representing youth in international migration policy processes.

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