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# Iraq: A Country of Emigration and Immigration

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# Funding: Conflict Transitions into Development

- Decades of war
- Internal conflict
- ISIS insurgency
- Internal displacement
- Climate change
- Budget issues: Government budget and overreliance on oil
- Humanitarian donors have largely de-prioritised Iraq as the humanitarian response to the 2014 (ISIS) conflict transitions into development-oriented approaches

([\*Country Guidance\*](#): *Iraq Common analysis and guidance note* November 2024. The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA))

# Displaced Population

- IDPs: 1,098,913
- Total number of people protected/assisted by UNHCR: 1,425,296
- 73% of refugees under UNHCR's mandate originate from just five countries including Syria
- As of 10 January 2025: 327,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, 90% of whom are Syrian and live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I).

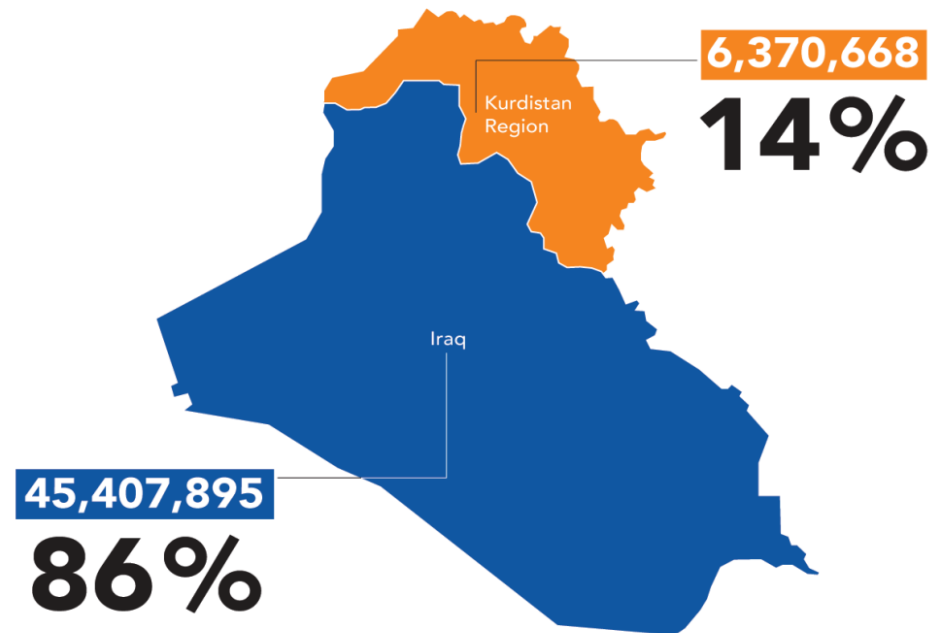
# Other Groups of Refugees

- Over 40.000 refugees come from Iran, Palestine and Türkiye (UNHCR Iraq, 2022a)
- Most Iranian refugees currently in Iraq fled in the late 1970s / early 1980s; Turks fled late 1980s / early 1990s
- By 2022, approximately 12,000 Turkish refugees living in *Maxmûr* camp are known for their loyalty to the 'Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, EU list of terrorist organisations, Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/2056 of 26 July 2024)
- Their lives are extremely precarious, not least because both Iran and Türkiye frequently launch targeted attacks (Gritten, 2002; Rudaw, 2023).
- There are almost 8,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq. In 2017, the Iraqi government abolished the Saddam Hussein era Law 202, which stated that Palestinians were entitled to the same treatment as Iraqi nationals, because the current government is wary of hosting refugee populations whose prospects of returning home soon are remote and it also sees Palestinians as allies of the previous regime (Zeed, 2020).



## Kurdistan Region Population

2024

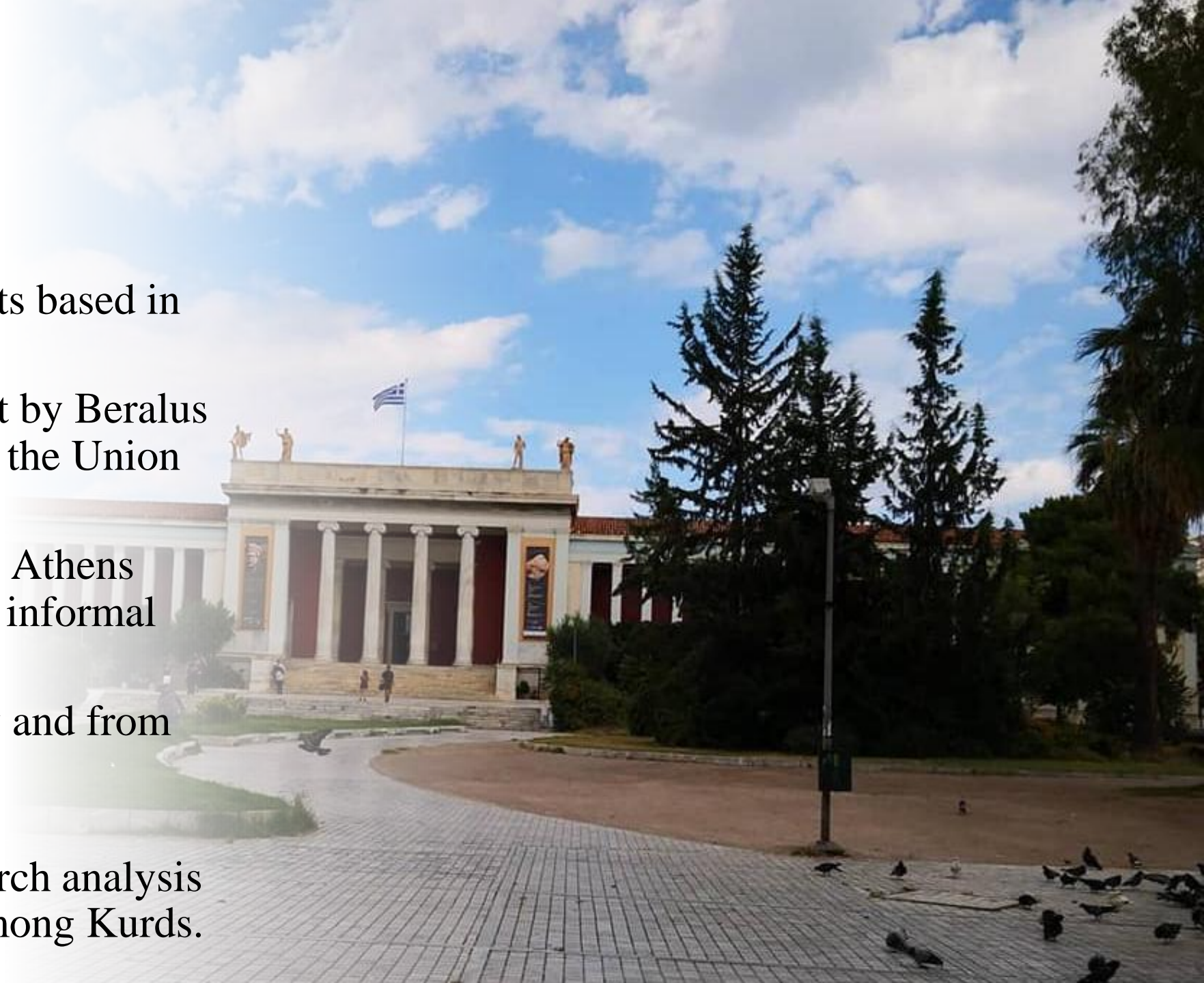


Below 15 Years Old	36.1%
Between 15-64	60.2%
Above 64 Years Old	3.7%



# Research - Fieldwork

- In-depth interviews with:
  - (1) Kurdish potential migrants based in the KRI,
  - (2) Kurdish migrants brought by Beralus to the external borders of the Union (11)
  - (3) Transit migrants based in Athens (Greece 18) and Dunkirk informal camp (France 27)
  - (4) Returnees from Germany and from the UK (9)
- The qualitative method is complemented by desk research analysis of migration phenomenon among Kurds.





# Iraq: Push Factors

- In a state of **repeated conflict, instability and widespread corruption**, Iraq has not only hosted refugees, but it has also produced them
- Iraq has **limited resources**, so resources are scarce for forcibly displaced populations (NRC, 2023)
- Iraq has long been a country of origin of refugees and migrants
- Well over a quarter of Iraq's young people are **unemployed**. Two-thirds of the population are under the age of 24, trapped in a **system of *wasta***, and 'held captive by power dynamics that undermine the entire country's potential for progress' (Travers, 2023)



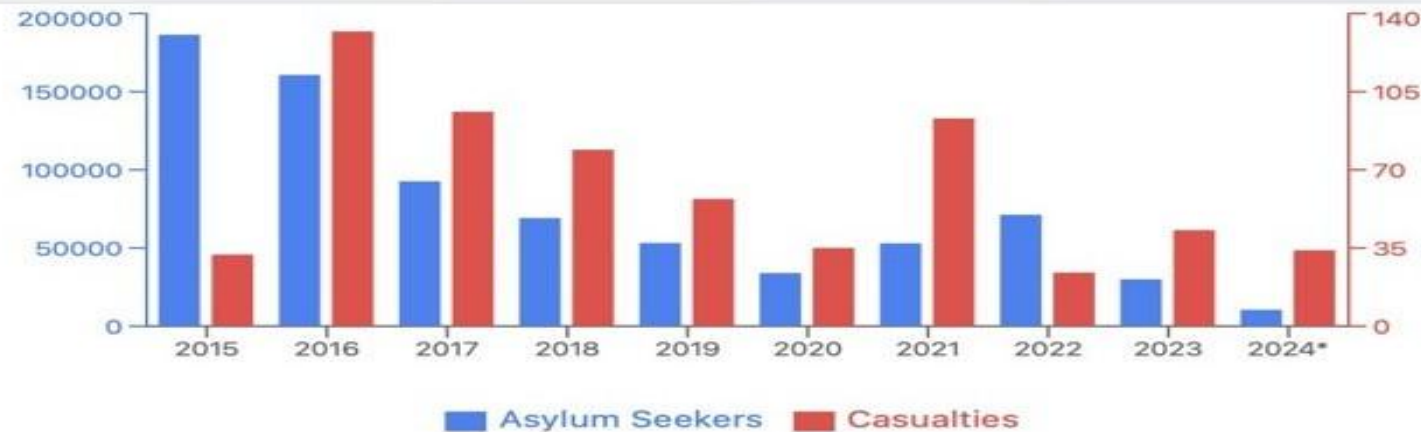
# Iraqi Irregular Migration to Europe (2015-mid 2024)

**70-80% of migrants are Kurds**

Total Asylum Seekers  
**750,498**

Total Casualties  
**625**

- 591 people lost their lives between 2015 and mid-2023
- 343 confirmed deaths and 248 missing persons

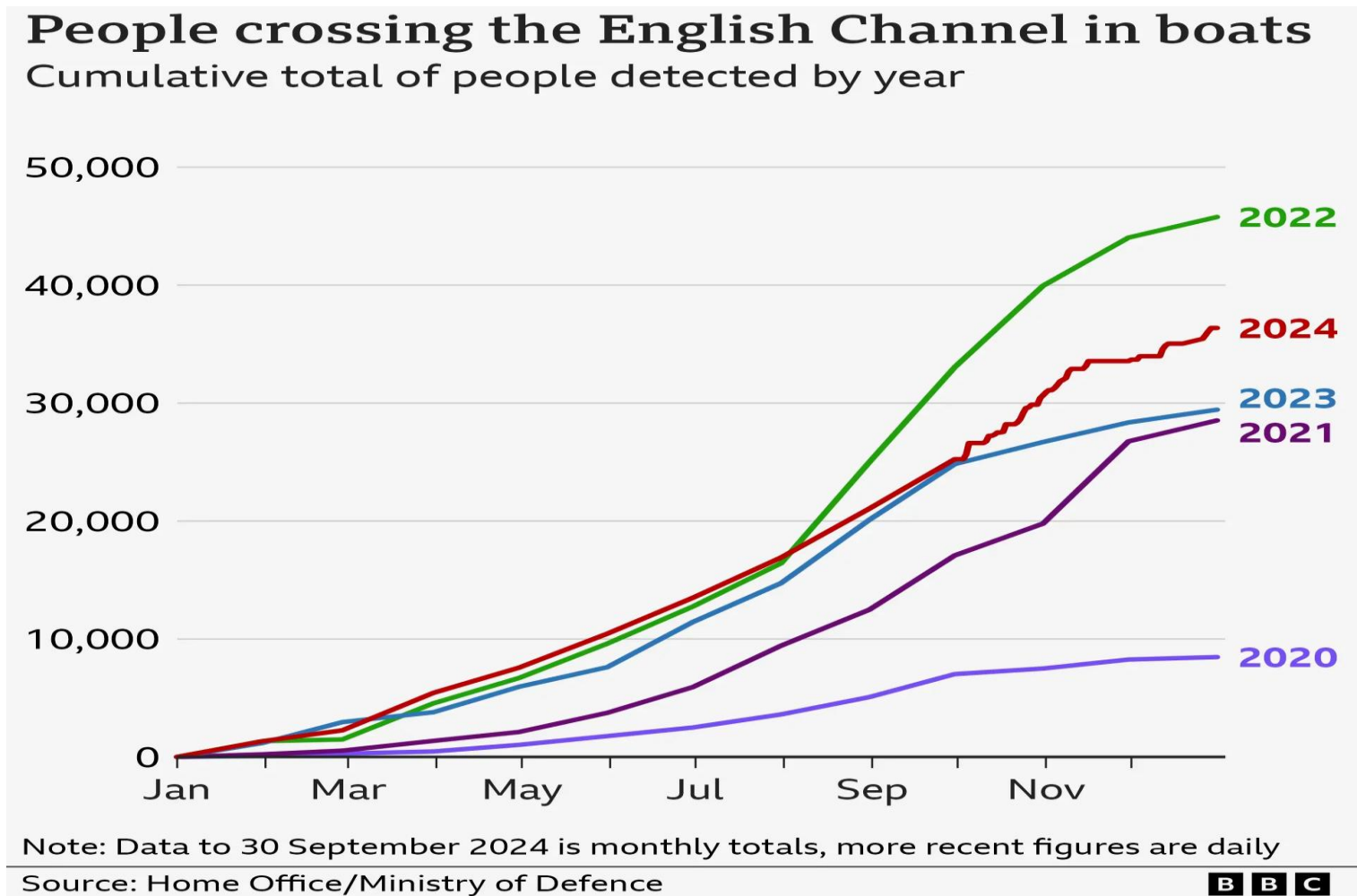


\* 2024 data represents the first half of the year

Source: Lookta Foundation for Migration Affairs - @KurdistanWatch

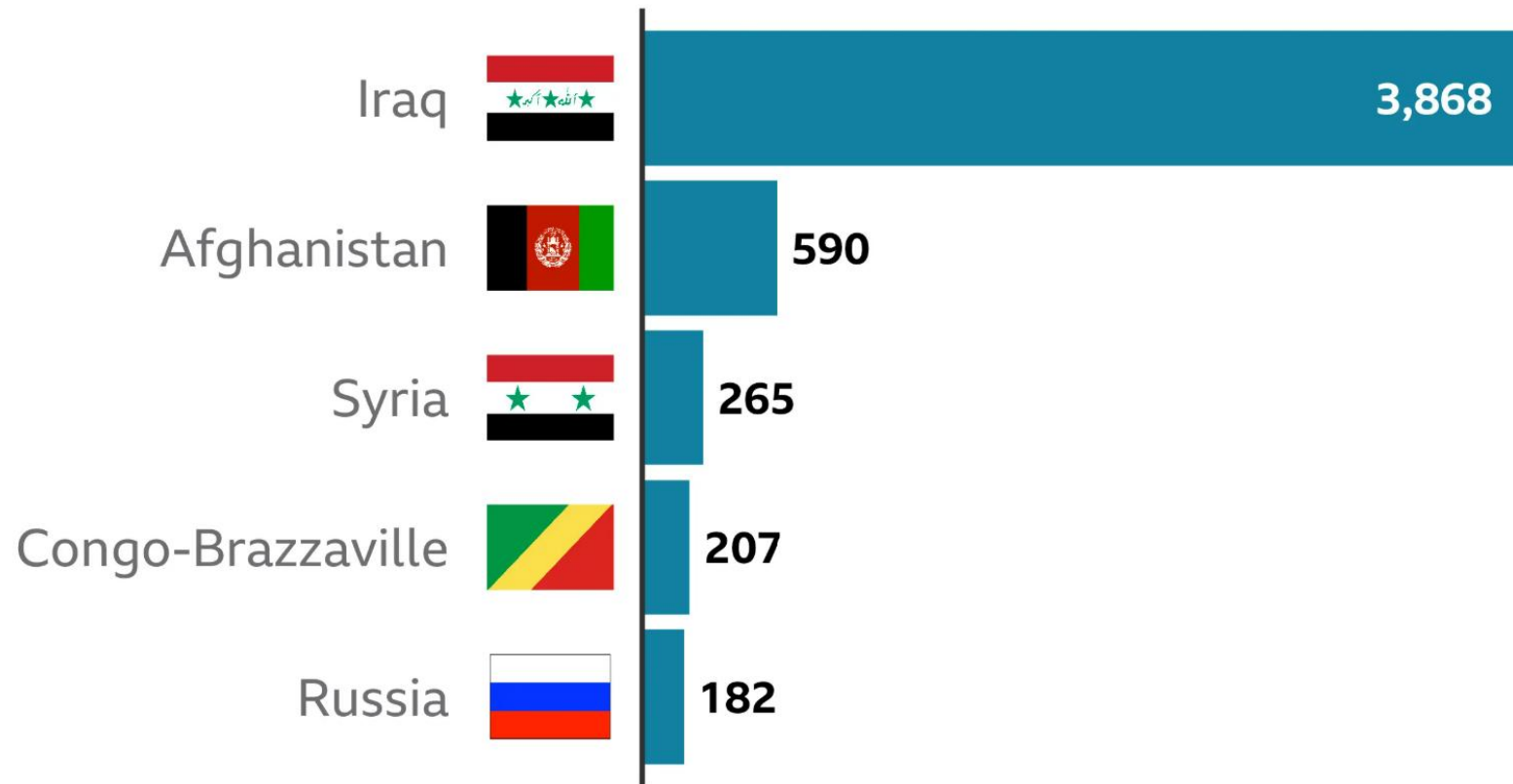


# The Channel: French-UK Border



# Belarus-Poland Border

Number of illegal crossings on the EU's eastern land borders by nationality, January to October 2021



Source: Frontex

# Greece

- Between January 2023 and March 2024, **Iraqi nationals lodged around 32 000 applications** for international protection in the EU+
- The 10th largest group of applicants in the EU+.
- The main receiving countries for Iraqis were Germany, followed by Greece.
- At the end of March 2024, nearly 20 000 Iraqi cases were pending a decision at first instance.







- “I have been in Greece for over two years, the life is so difficult. I cannot stay here because my asylum application has been rejected and cannot move towards Italy, Germany and France because I do not have money. I do not want to go back to Kurdistan because I feel ashamed. So, I am stuck in limbo”
- “Stuckness”, “shame”, social stigma”, “money”, “poor living conditions”, “lack for residency” are some of the terms consistently were used by the interviewees



# Findings

- People migrated for better life opportunities and to secure a more promising future for themselves and their families.
- Many young university graduates aimed to find good jobs so that they could send remittances to their families in the country of origin, thus substantially improving their families' circumstances.
- While wealthier young persons were more likely to migrate using regular channels and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.



# Findings

- High unemployment, political instability, and corruption have been the main drivers of migration towards Europe.
- Transit countries such Greece and France are used **a stop gap** by migrants to reach their preferred destinations of Germany and the UK.
- Many regret instantly but feel shame to return home. 'stuck in limbo'
- Lack of alternative routes (such as legal pathways)



# Findings

- There are serious concerns about the irregular migration of youth for both sending and receiving countries, including loss of life on dangerous routes and the risk of brain drain in the country of origin.
- However, if the migration of youth is managed effectively, it can create significant economic opportunities for both sets of countries. Economic incentives have motivated many young and educated individuals to migrate, and many have chosen to move to Europe as a close destination for most Middle Eastern countries.
- Most migrants are highly educated workers, for whom an investment which develops their skills would cost less; its effect on the labour market is therefore more positive compared to less educated migrants.