

Policy brief

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Gendered mobility dynamics and human security risks in irregular maritime migration from Lebanon

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Executive summary

Irregular maritime migration from Lebanon has risen dramatically over the last three years, driven by compounded political, socio-economic, and security crises. Despite increased international and domestic attention, the phenomenon remains under-studied, with critical knowledge gaps around the demographics, motivations, and human security outcomes of those attempting sea crossings from Lebanon to Europe.

Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians are the primary communities on the move attempting sea crossings to Europe. While young and middle-aged men are more likely to travel by sea, women and children also attempt this route, and face distinct gendered risks, including sexual violence and harassment. Gendered social norms also shape migration decisions: men often see migration as a means to support their family's economic needs, whereas women tend to prioritise safety concerns for their families.

Lebanon's legal and policy frameworks governing maritime migration remain fragmented. In this vacuum, the Lebanese army has assumed a central role in managing migration control, supported by

internationally funded security assistance programmes that have strengthened militarised border control capacity, often at the expense of other domestic security partners. These donor-driven security interventions are largely gender-blind, lacking robust monitoring, evaluation, or accountability protocols to assess their (gendered) impact. By placing the military at the heart of migration management, donors risk militarisation of what is, at its core, a humanitarian issue. This securitised response reflects broader European approaches to Mediterranean migration since 2015, where departures have been framed as a 'crisis' and potentially a 'hybrid threat' to stability. Meanwhile, humanitarian interventions aimed at dissuading departures from Lebanon are largely piecemeal and fail to address the structural drivers causing people to risk sea crossings.

Context

Lebanon's economic collapse in late 2019 triggered a prolonged, multi-dimensional crisis that has crippled state service provision capacity and driven much of the population into poverty. Already vulnerable populations—including impoverished Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian refugees, and

migrant domestic workers —now struggle to meet even their basic needs. The regional security environment further deteriorated following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, escalating cross-border conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and further destabilising Lebanon. Israeli airstrikes across Lebanon have created further insecurity and displaced 1.3 million people by November 2024.¹

This volatile domestic and regional security environment, an important push factor driving irregular maritime migration from Lebanon, remains fragile.² In Syria, for example, the post-Assad transition is embryonic in its promise of domestic stability. Similarly, ceasefire agreements in Lebanon and Gaza are precarious and time limited. Within this increasingly uncertain context, irregular sea crossing from Lebanon's shores has emerged as a growing migratory pathway to Europe.

Accurately assessing the scale, and also the detail - including gender dynamics - of irregular maritime migration from Lebanon is challenging due to the clandestine nature of travel and the absence of clear datasets. However, available figures indicate a sharp increase in sea crossings between 2019 and 2023, temporarily interrupted by Israeli military engagement along the coast in 2024. In 2019, approximately 200 individuals attempted crossings;³ by 2023, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded 5,221, with 3,267 more recorded in the first six months of 2024.⁴ Cyprus has become the primary destination for boats from Lebanon, prompting the Cypriot state last year to request EU support in addressing what it characterised as a 'migration crisis'.⁵ In May 2024, the EU responded with a €1 billion aid package for Lebanon supporting

basic service provision (including education, protection and health services) to vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians. Within this package, €200 million was earmarked for the Lebanese army to strengthen 'border and migration management, including combating human trafficking and smuggling'.⁶ This dual strategy, which embeds securitised approaches within humanitarian frameworks, reflects broader mediterranean migration governance trends which increasingly include a military and security dimension.

Lebanon lacks an overarching legal or policy framework, legal category, or dedicated institutional mechanism for maritime migration. Instead, it is partially covered as an element of the recently approved maritime border policy,⁷ falling under three domestic security agencies: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the General Security (GS), and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) (the national police). With European funding linked to border management reinforcing a securitised approach, the role of the LAF is emphasized over and above other agencies.

Methodology

This research draws on data collected in the first half of 2024, including 23 interviews and one written response to interview questions. Interviews were conducted by Siren Associates, a Lebanon-based research organisation, in Beirut, northern Lebanon, and online, and all quotes in this policy brief come from these interviews. Respondents were from two overarching categories: international stakeholders, including diplomatic missions in Beirut and

1 UNOCHA (2024), "Lebanon: Flash Update #41 - Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon" (November 4, 2024). Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/lebanon-flash-update-41-escalation-hostilities-lebanon-4-november-2024>.

2 We adopt the IOM's definition of irregular migration: "Movement of persons to a new place of residence or transit that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries"; and their definition of migrant: "An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons." from IOM (2019), International Migration Law No. 34 - Glossary on Migration. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration>.

3 Diab, J.L. and Jouhari, I., *Conflict, Crisis, and Migration: Maritime Irregular Migration from Lebanon Since 2019* (Madrid: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom).

4 International Organization for Migration (2024), Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2024, 17 October. Available at: <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-2024>.

5 Infomigrants (2024), 'Cyprus calls on EU, Lebanon to help combat migration crisis', *InfoMigrants*, 8 April. Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/56303/cyprus-calls-on-eu-lebanon-to-help-combat-migration-crisis>.

6 European Commission (2024), 'President Von Der Leyen reaffirms EU's strong support for Lebanon and its people and announces a €1 billion package of EU funding', *European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)*, 2 May. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/president-von-der-leyen-reaffirms-eus-strong-support-lebanon-and-its-people-and-announces-eu1-2024-05-02_en.

7 Helou, A. (2024), 'Lebanon launches first maritime strategy, including focus on maritime border security', *Breaking Defense*, 31 May. Available at: <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/05/lebanon-launches-first-maritime-strategy-including-focus-on-maritime-border-security>.

multilateral agencies; and domestic stakeholders, which included representatives of security agencies, lawyers, academics and local civil society.

Due to the current political sensitivity surrounding the issue of maritime migration, many bilateral and multilateral agencies declined participation in interviews. As such, while the sample is limited in size and does not purport to cover all actors working in the migration governance space in Lebanon, it provides a snapshot of key issues. Similarly, it was difficult and sensitive to interview migrants or potential migrants in Lebanon, including women and girls, given the clandestine nature of their journeys. However, interview respondents were selected for their proximity to (potential) migrants and their knowledge of maritime migration. A desk-based review of the Lebanese legal framework was carried out in parallel to primary data collection. Interviews explored the stakeholders' knowledge and perspectives on maritime migration from Lebanon and their understanding of the approach and effects of current international security assistance focusing on maritime borders.

Key findings

1. Irregular migration is diversifying, with Lebanese citizens joining Syrian and Palestinian refugees taking maritime routes.

Lebanon's deepening crisis has pushed many different communities in Lebanon to a point of hopelessness and desperation. Potential migrants shared with NGO workers interviewed for this research that they're 'already dead and might as well die trying to leave,' sentiments that manifested throughout Siren's research, and in other work on drivers of irregular migration in Lebanon.

Regular migration routes through air travel are financially and administratively out of reach for many of those not able to meet the onerous administrative demands of many foreign immigration and visa processes. Regular land routes via Syria and onwards to destination countries also bring a number of logistical challenges and security risks. Similarly, irregular land migration via unofficial border crossings is challenging, making sea migration an increasingly popular

means of travel for those who feel they have no other options.

Although Syrians comprise most of the individuals attempting to leave on boats, Lebanese nationals have shown a notable increase in participation since the onset of the financial crisis in 2019, with numbers steadily rising through 2023, driven primarily by worsening local socio-economic and security conditions. Palestinians represent a smaller proportion of boat migrants. There are estimated to be 250,000 migrant domestic workers (MDW) in Lebanon, of which 99% are women,⁸ significant proportions of whom live in precarious conditions. Generally, although many strongly wish to leave Lebanon, MDWs do not attempt to leave irregularly. Lacking the required resources or connections, MDWs who do wish to leave the country appear to be trapped, facing increasingly desperate conditions. Strong community cohesion appears to act as a deterrent against individual desires to leave on boats, with MDW community members appearing to have successfully warned each other about the dangers of land and sea migration, including the threat of sexual assault and trafficking by smugglers.

2. Gender dynamics shape migration decisions and risks.

No comprehensive gender-disaggregated dataset exists; instead, insights are compiled from interviews, which indicate that boat migrants are predominantly male, though women and children remain significant in number. Most migrants are middle-aged men, believing themselves better equipped to endure the journey. Aid workers, however, also report cases of young single men traveling alone out of desperate fatalism, convinced that their death would go unmourned. Interviews with local organisations suggest no uniform pattern in migration decision-making—some migrants travel alone to maximise success, while others bring their families when opportunities arise.

Gendered dynamics influence decisions to migrate by boat, with men generally more insistent on leaving and sometimes pressing reluctant women (who are often focused on weighing the risks) to join. Interviewees noted that women who

8 UN Women, International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), & Arab Institute for Women (AiW) (2021), *Migrant Workers' Rights and Women's Rights – Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Gender Perspective*. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2021/06/Women-Migrant-Domestic-Workers-in-Lebanon-A-Gender-Perspective-en.pdf>.

do not want to travel on boats, particularly those who have lived through trauma or the death of a child, are more focused on the risks to their children. On the other hand, the picture is complex, and desperation can force the decision; an interview respondent spoke with a woman who had tried to leave by boat twice, losing her son in the process, but was determined to attempt the journey again due to insecurity and hardship she faced in Tripoli, Lebanon.

Men, often seen as the primary providers in the family, seem to be more desperate to find a solution and more focused on economic opportunities outside Lebanon. This may reflect their gendered role as heads of households, where the responsibility for financial stability weighs heavily. An NGO working with potential Lebanese migrants in psychosocial support sessions designed to ‘prevent’ irregular migration noted that, although they were attempting to prevent irregular migration, it was difficult to argue with migrants who could not find work despite desperately searching for employment. There is minimal state provision of basic services, which exacerbates this sense of desperation. While women tend to be more receptive to engaging with psychosocial support, men often focus on immediate survival needs; in some cases, husbands exert significant control over their wives, and force them to leave by boat, with some cases of abuse. There have been some cases where women resisted leaving with their children despite the pressure from their husbands.

Young men face their own set of challenges in Lebanon and are increasingly pessimistic about employment opportunities, many of which do not pay enough to meet basic needs. One NGO worker noted that teenage boys felt that, even if they are educated, much is determined by network connections. In some families, financial constraints lead to sending only a child under 18 to Europe, believing children are more likely to receive documents and then secure family reunification. This decision is shaped, in part, by European asylum and reunification policies, which may inadvertently increase risks to children. In most cases, but not exclusively, it is male children who are sent.

Interviews highlight strong awareness amongst potential female migrants of the gender-specific risks that they face. This includes sexual violence from smugglers or other travellers, a risk emphasised for women travelling without male relatives. In an attempt to protect women and children, interviews revealed they would be sometimes locked in cabins during the journey for safety. Yet this protective measure has had tragic consequences, as women were often the first to drown in the event that the boat sank. Women experiencing intersectional vulnerabilities, such as Syrian refugees or MDWs, are especially aware of the gendered risks they may face.

3. Legal gaps and a framework criminalising migrant smuggling undermines effective governance and creates operational uncertainty for security agencies.

Lebanon’s domestic legal and policy framework on maritime migration is fragmented, inconsistent, and misaligned with international norms, creating operational challenges and confusion. This legal vacuum raises critical questions about the legitimacy of programmes seeking to expand maritime border management.

In 2005, Lebanon ratified the Palermo Protocol, which supplements the UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime (UNCAT) and includes the Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (the ‘Smuggling Protocol’). As the primary legal international instrument regulating migrant smuggling, the Smuggling Protocol requires states to enact domestic legislative measures that criminalise migrant smuggling.⁹ Lebanese law stipulates that ratified international treaties take precedence over domestic laws, meaning that in cases of conflict, treaty obligations should prevail.¹⁰

Lebanon has not enacted specific legislation to criminalise modern migrant smuggling, further leaving law enforcement and the judiciary without a clear legal basis for prosecution.¹¹ This gap is particularly evident in cases of irregular maritime migration, which is not explicitly mentioned in Lebanese criminal law, unlike irregular entry by land, which is covered—albeit weakly—under

9 Article 6 of the Smuggling Protocol. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/smuggling-migrants/SoM_Protocol_English.pdf.

10 Republic of Lebanon, *Article 2 of the Lebanese Code of Civil Procedure*.

11 Several laws tangentially touch on this issue, including Law No. 0 (1962, amended 2000) regulating entry, residency, and exit into Lebanon, Decision No. 2115/1923 on smuggling passengers onto boats, and Law No. 164/2011 on the prohibition of human trafficking.

existing domestic statutes. Judges interpret cases inconsistently: some classify migrant smuggling as a minor offence under entry and exit laws, while others categorise it as human trafficking, a felony, particularly in cases involving fatalities at sea. Some legal watchdogs claim several Lebanese judges are actually unaware of the Palermo Protocol and the UNCAT.¹² Intercepted migrants are generally not prosecuted in Lebanon, although one lawyer highlighted that migrants may still face fines for attempting to illegally exit the country. The lack of clear legal standards contributes to confusion across the judicial and security sectors, further complicating enforcement and accountability.

Lebanon also lacks a comprehensive maritime migration strategy and consensus on a refugee policy. Although an Integrated Maritime Strategy, approved in May 2024, was developed under an EU-funded Integrated Border Management project,¹³ interviews indicate the policy was not a response to increased boat crossing and is not a substitute for a domestic policy on maritime migration.

4. Militarised border control prioritises state security over human security.

International support to Lebanese state agencies on maritime migration has primarily taken the form of security assistance or reform interventions aimed at enhancing border control. Within this framework, maritime migration is routinely grouped with so-called ‘hybrid threats’ – such as drug smuggling, human trafficking and terrorism.¹⁴ This narrative ignores irregular migration dynamics, representing migration as a ‘threat’ to the state rather than focusing on the lived realities and human security of the individuals attempting to leave Lebanon.

This securitised lens is reflected in the sparse and fragmented data on irregular migration. The focus is almost exclusively on nationality, sidelining other vital demographic and humanising information. As one Lebanese migration expert observed, ‘everything absent from the narrative is a conscious political decision’. This depersonalisation

limits protection efforts, removing gender, disability, or other individual characteristics, preventing access to adequate protection and sustainable solutions.

Building on the militarised framing of maritime migration as a ‘threat’, international partners, who have a vested interest in Lebanese border control, overwhelmingly prioritise the LAF as lead counterpart. Interviews indicate this focus sidelines other domestic security institutions, which lack the resources to fulfil their mandates in maritime migration in a complementary manner. The LAF, in turn, is expected to lead on maritime migration without the structure of broader state policy guidance or a functioning legal framework on refugee and irregular migration.

Internationally funded security interventions largely fail to collect robust gender-disaggregated monitoring and evaluation data. Without systematic monitoring, it is impossible to assess how these border security measures impact women, children, and other vulnerable groups. Similarly, Lebanon’s broader security sector does not possess structured civilian oversight mechanisms, which adds a further layer of accountability challenges, limiting data available to assess the human security outcomes of interventions. Coordination efforts, such as the Border Control Committee (BCC) chaired by the LAF, while viewed positively by foreign stakeholders as a technical cooperation mechanism, are not a replacement for higher-level governance and cannot be expected to shape migration policy. Moreover, the BCC is not designed to hold responsibility for the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of all internationally funded border activity.

The absence of systematic monitoring of internationally-funded border interventions also limits the ability to assess shifting migration dynamics for better programme design. Interviewees noted the decline in experienced boat operators, many now detained or abroad, resulting in migrants being asked to pilot vessels with only audio instructions and voice notes. Multiple interviewees also noted that there has been shift to smaller boats – whether that is due to an increase in the use of

12 Interviews with lawyers and NGO workers in March and April 2024, across Lebanon.

13 ICMPD has been implementing the EU-funded project “Strengthening Capability for Integrated Border Management in Lebanon” (EU IBM Lebanon) since 2012. See, for example, the third iteration: <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/strengthening-capability-for-integrated-border-management-in-lebanon-eu-ibm-lebanon-phase-iii>.

14 Kinacioglu, M. (2023), ‘Militarized governance of migration in the Mediterranean’, *International Affairs*, 99(6), 2423–2441. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad193>.

radars which detect larger boats, the confiscation of larger boats, or a lack of capable operators, is unclear. Nor is it clear whether smaller boats are more dangerous due to capsizing risks, or, in event of capsizing, marginally safer for women and children who are no longer locked in below-deck cabins. What is clear is that there is no systemic investigation into the knock-on impacts of increased maritime policing into the safety of the men, women, boys, and girls who take these routes. International security programmes bolstering military-led border control efforts without a parallel effort to strengthen international and domestic monitoring and accountability mechanisms fail to make people's experiences of security central.

5. A fragmented governance approach undermines inclusive and effective security interventions

In the absence of holistic, state-led solutions for those desperate enough to attempt a sea crossing, interviews reveal that interventions targeting potential migrants are a novel and growing area of international funding. After interception at sea, non-state actors, like UNHCR, IOM, and local NGOs, provide humanitarian support to disembarking migrants, either alerted by family members or through informal arrangements with the LAF, GS, or, if intercepted in North Lebanon, the ISF. Amid chronic underfunding of state-provisioned legal counsel, lawyers from local NGOs often provide pro bono representation for intercepted migrants despite difficulties in applying the country's fragmented legal framework (see Finding 3).

In the absence of material support for the most vulnerable, civil society organisations provide mental health counselling support to individuals 'at risk' of irregular migration, in an attempt to 'prevent' first-time and repeat attempts. While NGO workers view counselling as particularly helpful for the women they work with, these efforts remain localised. Thus, even as international actors invest in bolstering Lebanon's maritime security capabilities—including detection and interception—these security interventions remain disconnected to the holistic work engaging populations 'at risk' of irregular migration. Interviews revealed no systematic engagement with these actors in consultation, design, or implementation of such security programmes. This disconnect limits the effectiveness of migration governance, as those working directly with affected communities are excluded from decision-making processes. A deterrence-focused, security-first approach to

migration governance that fails to understand push-factors raises critical questions about whose security this security assistance financing is intended to serve.

This lack of coordination also results in a critical data gap. While civil society actors gather nuanced insights, seeking to understand specific vulnerabilities of women, men, and other marginalised groups, donor-funded security interventions largely fail to investigate gendered experiences. This exclusion reflects the way international actors engage in Lebanon: embassy staff noted internal silos between diplomatic colleagues working on security and those working on protection, development, or humanitarian affairs; a reflection of the broader disconnect on the ground. The siloing of civil society perspectives from internationally supported maritime security interventions further reinforces the militarisation of migration and promotes an exclusionary vision of security. This reflects a deeper contradiction; as one migration expert reflected 'Europeans also don't know what they want: they don't want migrants but also don't want them to die.'

Policy implications and considerations

Reform Lebanon's legal framework on maritime migration to support a coherent, rights-based approach to management.

Without comprehensive legal reforms, Lebanon's maritime migration governance remains disjointed and inconsistent, fostering legal uncertainty and an overreliance on security-led responses. A clear legislative framework is needed to align domestic law with Lebanon's international commitments, ensuring that migrant smuggling is explicitly defined, consistently prosecuted, and appropriately sanctioned, while safeguarding the rights of migrants and asylum seekers under international law.

Strengthen accountability and monitoring of internationally funded border assistance, ensuring disaggregation by gender and other social markers.

Internationally funded maritime migration security programmes must integrate independent monitoring mechanisms that ensure increased transparency and accountability. There is a critical absence of available systematic monitoring and evaluation on maritime border control activity, particularly regarding how these programmes impact migrants or the

sustainability of the Lebanese security sector. In addition, there is no unified dataset that accurately captures the scale and demographics of maritime migration – data sets are incomplete, inconsistent, and fragmented across stakeholders. The absence of this data in the public domain allows for continued emphasis on deterrence while neglecting human rights obligations as well as sustainability and localisation commitments. Reliable and coherent data is needed to empower evidence-based policymaking for holistic maritime migration governance.

Expand stakeholder participation in security programmes to ensure that broader government and civil society are included in the design.

Current maritime migration governance in Lebanon is heavily securitised, with security agencies such as the LAF playing a dominant role in policy implementation. However, the exclusion of civil society, humanitarian actors, and migrant advocacy groups has resulted in policies that do not adequately engage with the broader political, economic and social conditions that are critical to understanding irregular migration. Additionally, a more inclusive approach, bringing together diverse stakeholders, is necessary to ensure that internationally funded security interventions do not come at the expense of fundamental rights.

About the author

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