



Elusive justice, perennial transit: the Eastern mediterranean migration corridor returns to public attention

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Abstract: The upcoming EU Pact on Migration and Asylum reinforces the structural conditions generating permanent transit, embedding the externalisation of border control into the Union's legal and operational fabric and narrowing migrants' pathways to protection.

Since the 1990s, and again from 2014 onwards, the Eastern Mediterranean has constituted a [significant access route](#) for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants moving toward Europe from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. More recently, this route has returned to public attention in the most tragic of circumstances, following the Cutro shipwreck in 2023 and the Farmakonisi island shipwreck in 2024. As broadly defined by [Semerci & Yilmaz-Elmas](#), the Eastern Mediterranean route encompasses the migratory pathways leading to Greece, Cyprus, and Italy by both land and sea, primarily through Turkish territory. With the [EU-Turkey Statement](#) of March 2016, the European Union effectively delegated control over a substantial portion of its external borders to Turkey. Nevertheless, irregular border crossings along this route continued unabated, involving — insofar as Italy is concerned — sea transit from Turkey and

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Greece via the Adriatic and [Calabrian coast routes](#), as well as overland movement [through the Balkans](#).

As the second anniversary of the Pylos shipwreck approaches (14 June), justice for the hundreds of victims and survivors remains conspicuously absent. In June 2023, the fishing vessel *Adriana* sank in waters near Pylos, Greece, in what stands as one of the deadliest maritime disasters involving migrants in the history of the Mediterranean. The vessel, with a stated capacity of approximately 400 persons, is [estimated](#) to have been carrying between 400 and 750 migrants—predominantly nationals of Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, with a further contingent from Afghanistan—and authorities formally acknowledged that over 500 individuals were 'presumed dead'. To date, accountability remains elusive.

Regarding the [Cutro shipwreck](#), the first hearing of the criminal trial was scheduled for 14 January 2026 in Crotona, Italy. The proceedings were announced through a [joint statement](#) issued by a coalition of maritime search and rescue (SAR) organisations—namely Emergency, Louise Michel, Mediterraneo Saving Humans, Sea-Watch, SOS Humanity, and SOS Méditerranée—which had joined the proceedings as a civil party and subsequently became formal parties to the trial. The coalition has for some time been pursuing truth and accountability with respect to the chain of events, decisions, and omissions that precipitated one of the most tragic shipwrecks in recent Italian history: the sinking that occurred off the coast of Steccato di Cutro on the night of 25-26 February 2023, in which at least 94 people lost their lives and an undetermined number remain missing. Of all those on board, only 80 individuals survived. Six officers from the Coast Guard and the *Guardia di Finanza* are standing [trial](#) on charges of negligent shipwreck and multiple counts of manslaughter.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how the Eastern Mediterranean route has re-emerged as a critical corridor for asylum seekers and migrants moving from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa toward Europe. Arrivals in Italy have [increased significantly](#): between January and December 2025, 66,316 individuals reached Italian shores by sea, disembarking at ports across the country, of whom 57,508 (87 percent) received information on asylum procedures from UNHCR staff and partner organisations following disembarkation.

The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, far from resolving the phenomenon, served primarily to accelerate the externalisation of EU border control, while simultaneously raising substantial concerns regarding Turkey's status as a safe third country—particularly in light of its geographical limitation on the recognition of full refugee status under the 1951 [Geneva Convention](#). Within this framework, Greece and Italy function predominantly as transit territories rather than destination countries, their port and airport infrastructures operating as liminal zones in which access rights are simultaneously curtailed and, paradoxically, enabled. Greece occupies a paradigmatic position within this system: all asylum applications lodged on the islands are processed under border procedures by default, and the comparatively rapid issuance of travel documents to recognised refugees collectively produces a [structural onward-movement](#) effect, inducing further displacement toward other EU member states — Italy being the most proximate.

This onward-movement dynamic manifests in two principal forms. On the one hand, it is visible in the [management of reception camps](#) for asylum seekers awaiting the outcome of their applications. Deliberately rendered invisible, these facilities function as temporary holding structures designed to minimise the duration of migrants' presence on national territory. On the other hand, and in a complementary fashion, the absence of housing and labour integration policies reflects a deliberate effort to [discourage prolonged settlement](#) by withholding the conditions necessary to enable it. Within this context, the availability of data on individuals entering Greece, combined with a marked absence of data on those departing, strongly suggests that induced transit is systematically occurring. Migrants—both regular and irregular—exit the country by land, by sea, and through formal infrastructures: ports and airports that, in this process, are effectively transformed into migration infrastructures and shifted borders.

Over the past decade, migratory routes have been increasingly shaped by overlapping organisational structures that simultaneously regulate and produce mobility by defining the conditions of access, transitability, and permanence, as highlighted by [Hirsch & Bell](#), [Marconi](#), and [Düvell](#). Mobility studies have long recognised that such structures are never neutral. Building on the foundational contributions of [Star](#) and [Hannam, Sheller & Urry](#), [Collins](#) and [van Heur](#) have theorised infrastructures as selective channels that simultaneously ease access for certain actors while erecting barriers for others, always embedding particular power relations within the built environment. This perspective has been further developed by [Lin, Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh](#) through the concept of 'migration infrastructures': the ensemble of physical structures, technologies, institutions, and actors that shape mobility by structuring the conditions under which movement becomes possible. Within this framework, migrants frequently find themselves in a condition of permanent transit — a suspended and indefinite mode of existence characterised by repeated displacement, prolonged waiting, and adaptive strategies across shifting contexts, as addressed by [Hirsch & Bell](#), [Marconi](#), and [Düvell](#).

As the tragic events discussed at the outset of this contribution have confirmed, this perennial condition of transit perpetually replicates itself in varying forms, shaped by the specific territories asylum seekers are compelled to cross in pursuit of improved living conditions—often culminating in the irreversible failure of their migratory project, of which the Eastern Mediterranean route remains among the most vivid and emblematic examples.

As migration policies continue to harden, the gap between legal obligations and political practice widens dangerously. The right to seek asylum, the principle of non-refoulement, and the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment constitute unconditional norms and treaty obligations binding upon all EU member states under the 1951 [Refugee Convention](#), the European Convention on Human Rights ([ECHR](#)), and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights ([CFR](#)). These protections admit no derogation on grounds of extemporary migration management priorities.