

Editorial

Conflict areas around the Mediterranean region and the potential immigration impact on health and wellbeing

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Mediterranean regions are amongst the most attractive areas of the world, and they are concentrated around the Mediterranean Sea, hence its name The Mediterranean Sea - an area of 970,000 sq miles representing 0.7% of the global ocean surface. The area covers some of the pearls of southern Europe that include the coast of Spain, South of France, Italy, a good part of the Balkans Peninsula, while continuing in the part of Western Asian coast of Turkey, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, and on the other side covering the Northern part of Africa [1]. However, the entire region, despite its natural beauty, is also facing various issues and major problems including global warming, access to drinkable water, employment, migration, terrorism, demographic changes and conflicts [2]. A long list of African countries is currently experiencing various forms of conflicts and terrorist insurgency. As consequence, the Mediterranean region and European Union countries are also experiencing a flux of people that under extreme pressure are fleeing from their own land as legal and illegal immigrants. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) data, only during 2023, about 270,700 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean and Northwest African countries (Figure 1). The number of immigrants resulted to increase to 69% compared to the same period of the last year report from the same agency [3].

On the other hand, the brutal and unprecedented attack by Russian forces to Ukraine over the last two years has provoked a large humanitarian disaster with direct, indirect but grave consequences to both human lives lost and the country's infrastructure destroyed. Around 5.9 million people have been displaced from Ukraine towards Europe according to data assembled

by UNHCR. This corresponds to around 14% of the total Ukrainian population [4,5].

A similar and unexpected horrible situation is also happening in the Gaza strip. The persistent tension fueled by historical events, geopolitical intricacies and longstanding grievances reached new heights. An armed conflict between Israel and Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups has been taking place chiefly in and around the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023, with clashes also taking place in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and on the Israel-Lebanon border. The Gaza health ministry reported that a total of 21,978 Palestinians have been killed and 56,697 have been wounded in Israeli strikes in Gaza from the war beginning [6]. As a result of a heavy Israel air and ground military offensive campaign in the northern Gaza, the local Gaza population has been forced to leave their homes. And with frequent military operation, many are those now fleeing towards areas they were told would be safer. As expected, Egypt could be one the main ports of entry for a large wave of war immigrants fleeing the conflict Gaza strip [7]. This war is also likely to complicate the suffering of millions of Syrians and with a negative impact to other neighbor countries. Almost the entire medical infrastructure is damaged. Meanwhile, all this irresponsibility and gravely inflamed situation is being affecting other neighboring countries, with hundreds of thousands of immigrants who, for endless reasons, are also fighting for survival and a better life, and are entering illegally, using any potential routes to Turkey, Greece, Italy, France or even Spain. According to the UNICEF report, only between January and June 2023, an estimated 129,495 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece, Italy,

Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, mainly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and North Africa. The above represented a significant increase in arrivals, estimated to beat 81% compared to the same period in 2022 [2,7].

In Table 1, we are providing the number of world immigrants entering some of the Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Italy, Greece, and elsewhere until 31 December 2023. Table 1 does not include migrants who moved to Europe from Ukraine (during the conflict over the last two years).

Irregular arrivals of migrants in Italy via the Mediterranean from North Africa amounted to almost 157,301 during 2023 year, almost 50% as many as in the same period of 2022 [3,4,8]. Based on the data, mortality is expected to be quite high (as ‘dead and missing’ is estimated to be at 1.53%). The table only presents the data for registered persons. A key question for any healthcare planner and policy maker would be

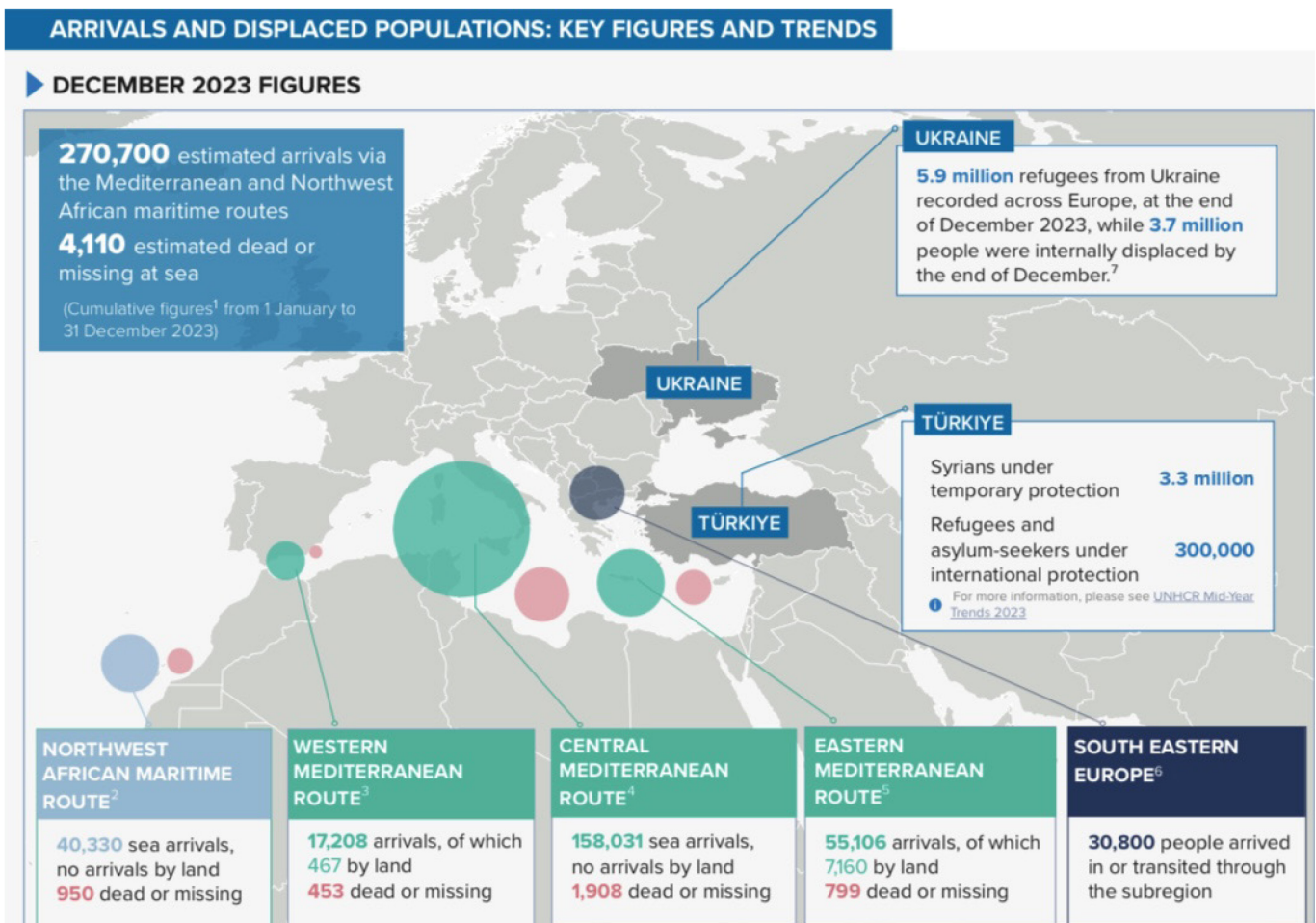
Table 1. Immigrants entering in the European Mediterranean countries during 2021-2023.

Year	Arrivals	Dead and missing (% in relation to arrivals)
2021	123,318	3,231 (2.6%)
2022	159,410	2,439 (1.5%)
2023	264,371	2,734 (1.0%)
Total	547,099	8,404 (1.54%)

to better understand the impact of immigrants on Mediterranean countries to specific healthcare services.

However every human being has the right to choose how to live their life, but their choice affects them individually, and in large numbers, the entire society collectively. Saying that, any uncontrolled movements of migrants and people between countries, especially from those arriving from conflict areas or war zones as well as developing world can have a direct and quantifiable impact on the healthcare system of hosting countries; that includes any increase in terms of a poorer health status of refugees, their lack of vaccination as

Figure 1. Immigrants and refugees’ arrivals through the Mediterranean and Northwest African countries (December 2023).



© UNHCR Situation: available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/105246>.

well as a higher prevalence of infectious diseases and mental health issues [9].

Developed countries in the Mediterranean region have been and continue to be under continuous pressure of immigrant waves from less developed and unsafe countries (including conflict areas or war zones). Immigrants generally originate from countries and regions where infectious diseases continue to pose a challenge at a national and regional communicable diseases control [10]. Some subpopulations of migrants arriving to Europe are generally healthier than the population of the country of settlement, but are considered at increased risk of key infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, HIV, and viral hepatitis, as well as under-immunization. Infection screening programs across Europe at times work in disease silos with a focus on individual diseases at the time of arrival [11].

When assessing refugees and health, the WHO is stating that: (i) Refugees and migrants often face worse health outcomes in countries of transit and destination due to barriers including language and cultural differences, institutional discrimination and restricted use of health services; (ii) Social, political and economic exclusion can result in poverty, homelessness and exploitation, which can create a higher risk for non-communicable diseases; and (iii) the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in certain populations, which may include refugees and migrants, particularly those in irregular situations [10].

The evidence suggests that hosting countries including health-care practitioners and policy makers would benefit from developing a framework of universal health care for migrants, which proactively offers early testing and vaccinations by delivering multi-disease testing and catch-up vaccination programs integrated within existing health systems [6]. Such interventions should be co-developed with migrant populations to overcome barriers they face in accessing services. Aligning policies with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control guidance for health care for migrants, community-based preventive health-care programs should be delivered as part of universal health care. However, effective implementation needs appropriate funding, and to be underpinned by high-quality evidence. While most of these changes cannot be totally avoided, many of the health risks related to immigrants' movements could be monitored.

In conclusion, the Mediterranean is a region of deep-rooted conflicts. In addition, this region is also facing other major issues including migration, terrorism, urbanization, development and demographic

changes. War refugees and asylum seekers can present with complex health needs. These may be influenced by experiences prior to leaving their home country, during transit or after arrival in the host country. Holistic and person-centered care is essential to support resilience and help them adapt to life in the new country. Healthcare leaders and policy makers need to address the complexity of the challenges mentioned above – these require a comprehensive and decisive approach.

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