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“How to Manage the Refugee Crisis”

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Report:

“Border Enforcement and Refugees in Europe”

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POLICY BRIEF

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In this study, we analyse data for the last ten years from Frontex, IOM and UNHCR to study the effects of border enforcement policies at the external EU borders on the size and composition of undocumented migration flows.

Key results:

- 1) Unprecedented number of immigrants and asylum seekers arrived in Europe in recent years.
 - a) Between January 2009 and February 2019: 3,5 million undocumented migration attempts detected at the European Union external borders, over 5,5 million asylum applications filed in EU28 countries, and 25,7 thousand recorded migrant deaths at the European borders.
 - b) Large variation over time in route of entry into the EU of undocumented immigrants. Main routes of entry are: Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans.
 - c) Large variation in source countries and clear mix of refugees and non-refugees countries. Top 15 nationalities (2009-2015): Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Albania, Eritrea, Kosovo, Somalia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Tunisia, Palestine, Algeria, Iran, Morocco.
- 2) Evidence of political cycle in the enforcement at the external EU borders
 - a) The intensity of enforcement operations is influenced by political factors at both the EU and national level. Evidence that enforcement increases on routes that are closer to countries currently holding the EU presidency or with upcoming national elections.
- 3) Illegal crossings decrease on routes with stronger enforcement – although it is not clear what share of the flows is simply diverted towards alternative routes.
 - a) The effect is sizeable although not large. According to our estimates, doubling the average yearly enforcement on a route, would have led to a reduction in migrant flows of 15-30 percent on the same route (relative to the 2009-2015 mean).

- b) The effect is driven by enforcement on land routes. On sea routes, we can rule out any “attraction” effect of Search and Rescue operations: sea operations do not lead to more migrant crossings.
 - c) Refugees (defined as immigrants coming from countries in conflict) reduce less their attempts to illegally cross the external EU borders in response to an increase in enforcement than economic migrants (defined as immigrants coming from countries that are not experiencing major violence).
- 4) Mixed effects of outsourcing border controls to transit countries (Turkey and Libya)
- a) The analysis of the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal reveals a sharp drop in crossings through the Eastern Mediterranean route (i.e. from Turkey to Greece) but also an increase of crossings through the alternative Central Mediterranean route (i.e. from Tunisia or Libya to Italy and Malta).
 - i) The “diversion effect” is immediate, partially offsetting the effectiveness of the deal.
 - ii) Migrants from Middle Eastern and Asian countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan) who predominantly used the Eastern Mediterranean route until 2016 are diverted towards the Central Mediterranean route. Migrants from African countries are instead not affected, continuing to use the Central Mediterranean route as main access to the EU.
 - b) The evidence on ongoing collaboration between the Italian government and the Libyan authorities (starting with the Italy-Libya “Memorandum of Understanding” of February 2017) does not show an equally sharp reduction in illegal crossings. The data show, however, an increase in migrants’ risk of death, especially in recent months.

Summary of the report

1. Introduction

Unprecedented numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers arrived in Europe in recent years. In particular, between January 2009 and February 2019, we count over 5,5 million asylum applications filed in EU28 countries. These figures are large for European standards, although one has to bear in mind that transit countries – typically developing or middle income countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, etc.) – had to bear the brunt of the refugee crisis. Nevertheless, the size of the flows combined with its unfortunate timing (immediately after the Great Recession), a certain degree of lack of coordination among EU members and widespread mismanagement (both actual and political) of the whole situation brought the refugee crisis to the very centre of the political debate in Europe. Discontent and fear about the arrival of refugees in Europe fed into a growing dissatisfaction with immigration policies in Europe, feeding into the rising wave of populist, nationalist and nativist movements. Its political repercussions are still to be understood, as made evident in the latest round of European elections.

In the peak of the refugee crisis, a growing emphasis has been placed on border enforcement and possible interventions to reduce and arrest the inflows of migrants. Border enforcement is an area of public policy that absorbs vast financial resources: according to an estimate of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), EUR 17 billion were spent in Europe on enforcement policies between 2014-2016. Very little research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of border enforcement policies and to understand all their potential effects.

2. Our report

In our report we study, for the first time, the effects of border enforcement policies at the external EU borders on undocumented flows. In particular, we analyse records on detected border crossings and enforcement operations coordinated by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency that is responsible for the effectiveness of border controls at the external EU/Schengen borders.

Our report starts with descriptive evidence on crossings, routes, deaths at the borders, country or origin of the migrants' flows and discusses how all these variables have changed over time during the last ten years. We then develop an econometric analysis that focuses on three main aspects:

1. Evidence of political cycle in enforcement.
2. The effect of enforcement on undocumented flows of migrants (2009-2015).
3. Outsourcing border controls to transit countries (Turkey and Libya): deterrence and diversion effects.

3. Descriptive evidence

Between January 2009 and February 2019, there have been 3.5 million undocumented migration attempts detected at European Union external borders, over 5.5 million asylum applications filed in EU28 countries, and 25.7 thousand recorded migrant deaths at the European borders (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1 - Illegal border crossings and migrants' deaths at the European borders, Jan 2009- Feb 2019

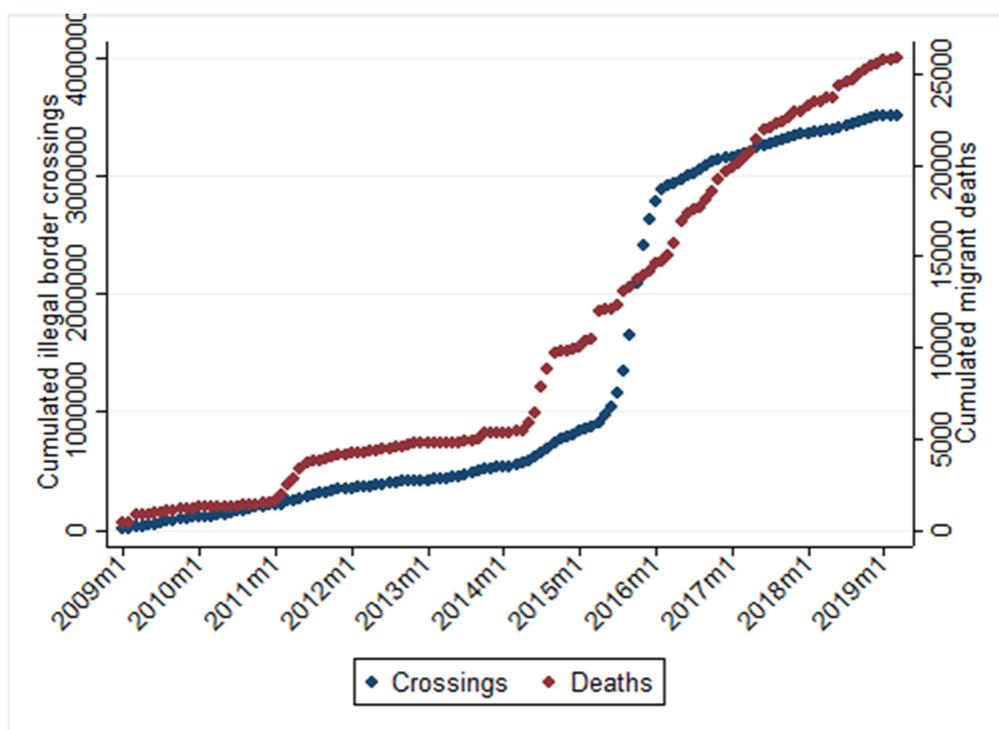
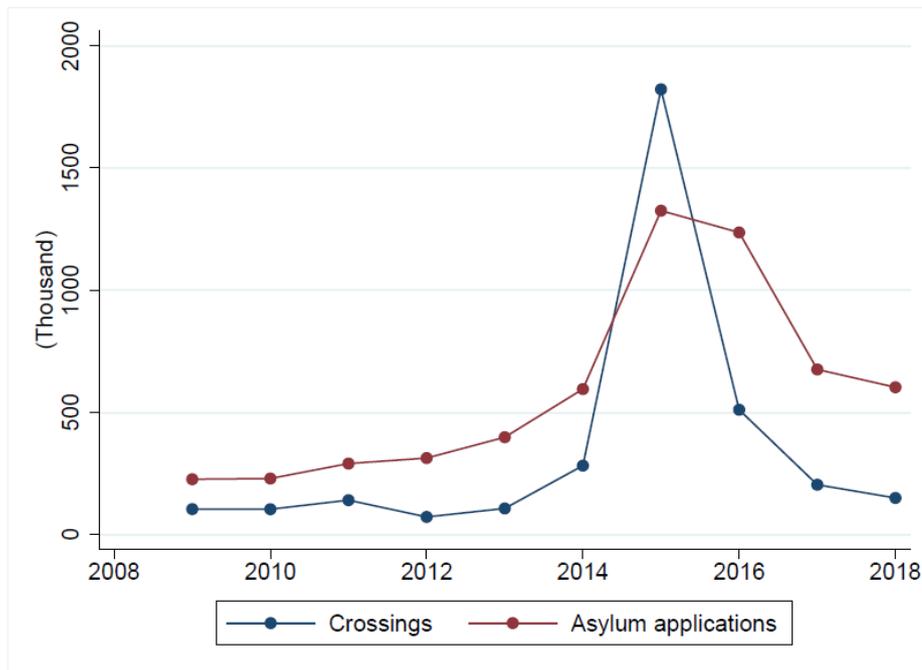
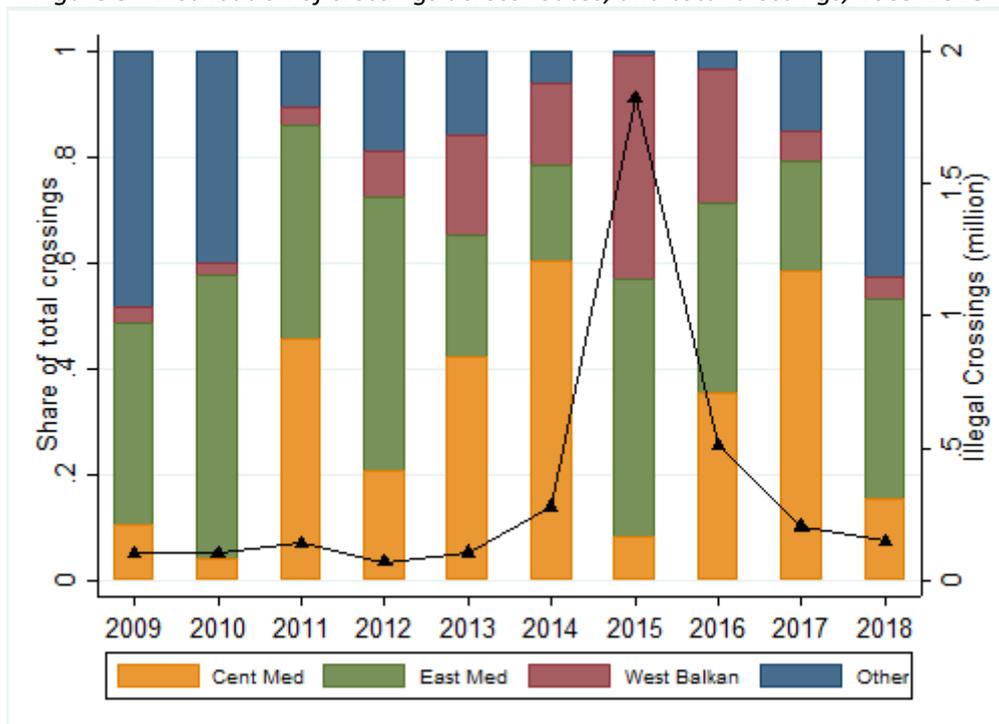


Figure 2 - First time asylum applications and illegal crossing



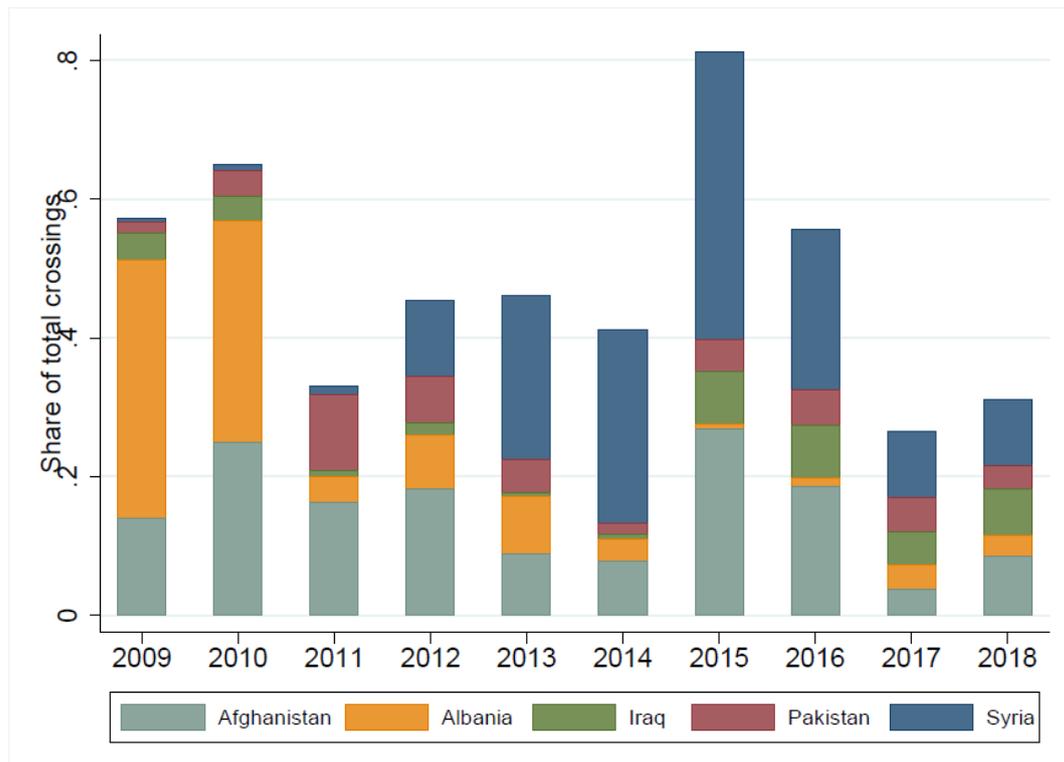
Frontex identifies nine illegal migration routes into Europe: Central Mediterranean, Circular (Albania to Greece), Eastern Borders, Eastern Mediterranean (sea and land), Western African, Western Mediterranean (sea and land), Western Balkan.

Figure 3 - Distribution of crossings across routes, and total crossings, 2009-2018



The relative importance of each route on total undocumented immigration flows in Europe depends largely on what are the main countries of origin of migrants, but also on the conditions in transit countries, and possibly on the amount of border enforcement deployed at the European borders (which is the focus of our report). As a result, there are significant changes in the importance of each route over time (see Figure 3).

Figure 4 - Main countries of origin



We also observe a substantial variation in source countries over time (Figure 4) and a clear mix of refugees and non-refugees countries. Between 2009 and 2015, the top 15 nationalities were: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Albania, Eritrea, Kosovo, Somalia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Tunisia, Palestine, Algeria, Iran, Morocco.

4. Econometric Analysis

4.1. Enforcement policies and political cycle

We study all the joint operations that FRONTEX – the European agency responsible for the effectiveness of border controls at the external EU/Schengen borders – has conducted between 2009 and 2015 on land and sea borders.

We find that the intensity of enforcement operations is influenced by political factors at both the EU and national level. In particular, we provide evidence that enforcement is increased on routes that are closer to countries that currently hold the EU presidency and/or have upcoming national elections. The effect of national elections is stronger in countries that have a larger share of euro-sceptics. These findings can be rationalized with countries that hold the EU presidency (or have incoming national elections) being more able to influence the enforcement decision process in their own favour, shifting resources towards routes that are more relevant for them. At the same time, it may be in the interest of the European Union to avoid that a “refugees/migrants shock” (i.e. a sudden increase in arrivals) hits a EU member country while it is holding the presidency or has an incoming national election.

4.2. Border enforcement and undocumented migrant flows

We study whether changes in border enforcement – i.e. an increase in the personnel, equipment and resources deployed along a specific border segment or sea area – has an effect on total crossings. While an increase in border enforcement on a land route may deter potential migrants from attempting to cross, due to the increased risk of detection, a policy concern is that the increased patrolling of sea areas may instead act as a “pull factor” for migrants.

We find:

- Enforcement leads to a reduction in illegal crossings. The effect is sizeable although not large. According to our estimates, doubling the yearly enforcement effort that was implemented between 2009-2015, one would have obtained a reduction in migrant flows 15-30 percent (with respect to their mean).
- These negative effects primarily happen on land routes.
- As far as sea routes are concerned, our results allow us to rule out any “attraction effect” (i.e. more sea operations leading to more crossings). On the other hand, we cannot conclusively establish whether sea operations produce a deterrence effect or no effect at all.
- Citizens coming from countries that are experiencing major conflict, violence and terror are less responsive than other migrants to changes in enforcement. This finding

suggests that enforcement fails to discourage individuals who have an extreme push factor justifying their migration decisions.

4.3. Outsourcing border controls to transit countries: deterrence and diversion effects

4.3.1. The deterrence and diversion effects of the EU-Turkey deal

We then take advantage of a “natural experiment” to study how migration flows react to border policies in the short run. On 18 March 2016, following months of intense migratory pressure on the Eastern Mediterranean route, the European Union and Turkey adopted the EU-Turkey Statement, commonly referred to as the “EU-Turkey deal”, designed with the purpose of deterring asylum seekers and other migrants from arriving to Europe.

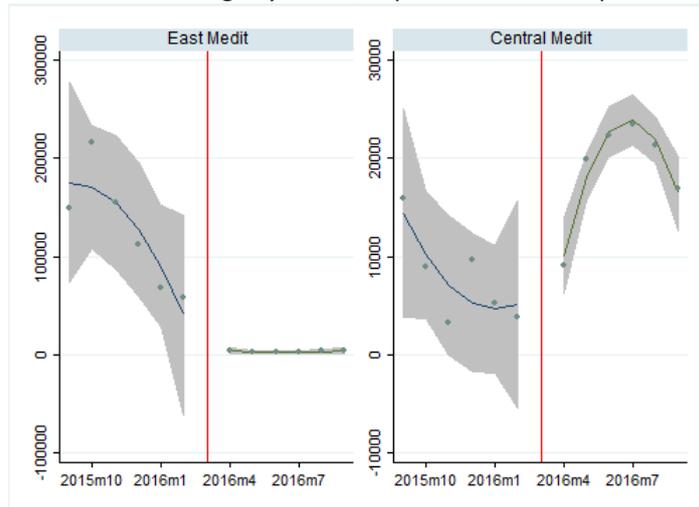
The EU-Turkey deal brought to a sudden stop the substantial migration flows along the East Mediterranean route. We can exploit this sudden stop as a “natural experiment”. Under the assumption that in the very short run the “push factors” influencing emigration from source countries do not change, a comparison of migration flows on alternative routes immediately before and immediately after the EU-Turkey deal would be informative about the “diversion effect” it triggered.

We focus on a six months window around March 2016, and we show that:

- The EU-Turkey deal sealed almost completely the East Mediterranean route, leading to an immediate and sharp drop in crossings (see figure 5).
- Immediately after the deal, overall crossings on the Central Mediterranean route increased (see figure 5).
- This diversion effect on the Central Mediterranean route is sizeable, although substantially smaller than the deterrence effect on the East Mediterranean route.
- Not all countries were equally affected by the deal. Migrants from countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, for whom the east Mediterranean route is the closest, will be more affected than those from Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia, who use predominantly the Central Mediterranean route.

- Consistently with these differences, crossings on the Central Mediterranean route increased significantly for countries more most affected by the deal, and did not significantly change for the other countries.

Figure 5 - Total crossings by route, September 2015-September 2016

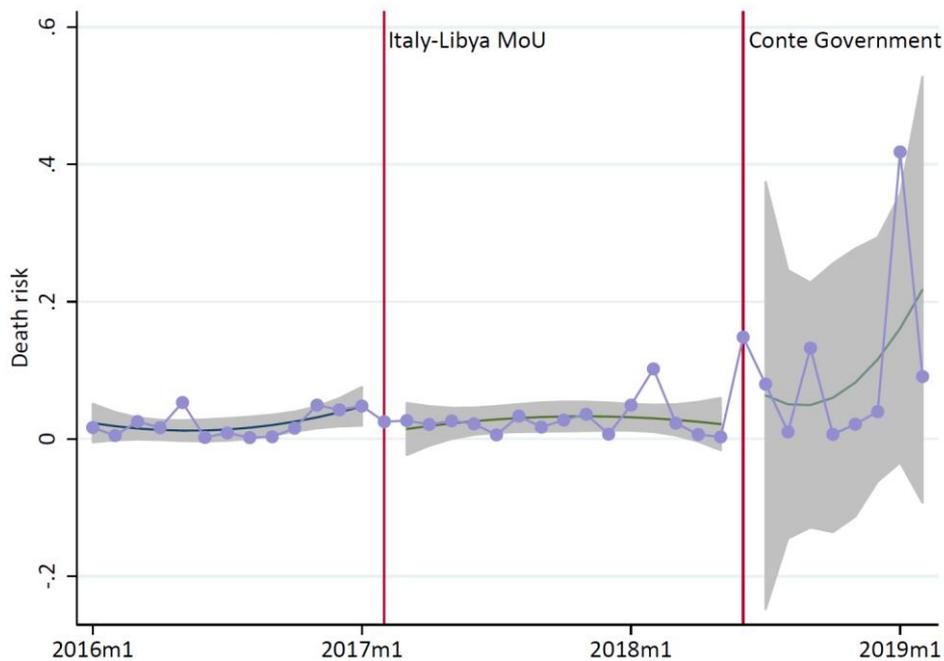


4.3.2. The Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding (February 2017)

Finally, we focus on the efforts of the Italian government to establish a collaboration with the Libyan authorities (i.e. the Italy-Libya “Memorandum of Understanding” of February 2017) in order to stem unauthorized flows through the Central Mediterranean route. Our analysis shows:

- We do not see any sharp reduction in illegal crossings after the memorandum was signed, suggesting a limited effectiveness of the agreement.
- The number of undocumented migrants detected on the Central Mediterranean route keep declining following a pre-existent downward trend that dates back to 2016.
- The number of deaths along the Central Mediterranean (which is the deadliest route to Europe) follows a similar downward trend, although an increase in the death risk is visible after the appointment of the current government in June 2018 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Death risk on the Central Mediterranean route (2016-2019)



5. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Refugees or economic migrants?

Our results show that citizens who have a stronger case to claim asylum in Europe tend to be less responsive to border enforcement policies. This should not be read, however, as border enforcement policies being able to effectively discriminate between refugees and economic migrants. As proven by the tragic numbers of deaths recorded at the external EU border in the past few years, individuals who have no possibility to remain in their countries of origin will respond to stricter enforcement by paying a higher cost for their migration, with often lethal consequences.

Border enforcement is not the way of distinguishing individuals who deserve humanitarian protection from those who are seeking better economic opportunities. This screening process should take place before these perilous journeys start, offering asylum seekers a fair chance of being re-settled to a safe country without risking their lives.

Outsourcing border enforcement?

The substantial diversion effect that we uncover – even in the short run – after the closure of the Eastern Mediterranean Route due to the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal suggests that the

outsourcing external border controls may be only partially effective in stemming the flows. The effectiveness of such an intervention on one route seems to critically depend on similar interventions on alternative routes. In the absence of a coordinated effort on multiple routes, indeed, in the medium-long run one can expect migrants (and smugglers) to readjust their route of entry into Europe.

This limited effectiveness should be weighed against two important costs of these outsourcing policies. First, the humanitarian cost of preventing legitimate asylum seekers from seeking and obtaining refugee status in a safe country by stopping them in transit countries that do not generally offer a clear path to asylum. Second, the financial and political cost of striking expensive deals with governments typically characterized by weak (or very weak) records when it comes to democratic practices and violations of human rights.