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Revolving Doors: How Externalization Policies Block Refugees and Deflect Other Migrants across Migration Routes

ALICE MESNARD , FILIP SAVATIC , JEAN-NOËL SENNE 
AND HÉLÈNE THIOUET 

Migrant destination states of the Global North generally seek to stem irregular migration while remaining committed to refugee rights. To do so, these states have increasingly sought to externalize migration control, implicating migrant origin and transit states in managing the movement of persons across borders. But do externalization policies actually have an impact on unauthorized migration flows? If yes, do those impacts vary across different migrant categories given that both asylum seekers and other migrants can cross borders without prior authorization? We argue that these policies do have an impact on unauthorized migration flows and that those impacts are distinct for refugees and other migrants. Using data on “irregular/illegal border crossings” collected by Frontex, the Border and Coast Guard Agency of the European Union (EU), we first find that the geographical trajectories of refugees and other migrants who cross EU borders without authorization are distinct. Using a novel method to estimate whether individuals are likely to obtain asylum in 31 European destination states, we find that “likely refugees” tend to be concentrated on a single, primary migratory route while “likely irregular migrants” may be dispersed across multiple routes. Through an event study analysis of the impact of the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement, a paradigmatic example of externalization, we show that the policy primarily blocked likely refugees while deflecting likely irregular migrants to alternative routes. Our findings ultimately highlight how externalization policies may fail to prevent unauthorized entries of irregular migrants while endangering refugee protection.

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Introduction

What are the effects of public policies on migration flows? This question has generated substantial scholarly and policy attention, often focusing on how to prevent so-called irregular or illegal migration. Scholars and policymakers have notably taken stock of the ineffectiveness of policies that seek to limit or prevent “unwanted” migration (Cornelius 2001, 2005; Cornelius, Martin, and Hollifield 1994; Czaika and de Haas 2013; Helbling and Leblang 2019). We hone in here on the “externalization” of migration management, which ostensibly seeks to stop unauthorized migrants en route to their desired destinations while respecting legal obligations towards refugees and asylum seekers. Since the 1980s, migrant destination states of the Global North have increasingly sought to relocate migration control to countries of origin or transit located along migration routes. They have done so even when mass movements across borders have been primarily driven by humanitarian and political crises: the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war affecting Europe, and widespread violence in Venezuela and Central America affecting the United States, among other cases. Across contexts, this externalization has become a common form of migration policy that aims to ensure “remote control” over population movements (FitzGerald 2020). Nevertheless, questions remain regarding the impact and the effectiveness of these policies.

Through an examination of unauthorized migration flows to Europe, we unpack who is affected by externalization policies as well as where and how. We do so by disentangling discourses which confound the forced migration of individuals seeking asylum from violence and persecution and the migration of those fleeing economic, social, or environmental insecurity who are typically not recognized as refugees. In short, we answer the following specific questions: Do externalization policies impact unauthorized migration flows? If yes, do those impacts vary across different migrant categories given that both asylum seekers and other migrants cross borders without prior authorization?

We argue that the geographies and timing of so-called forced and voluntary migration flows are different. Although refugees and other migrants may share common characteristics and strategies, and use the same migration routes, violence and persecutions primarily push refugees out of their origin countries, while protection and asylum primarily pull them into destination states. These specific traits impact the conditions of their flight, the resources they have, and the migration routes they choose to traverse. They notably cross borders without prior authorization to seek refuge in neighboring states and beyond, and are thus frequently included in counts of “irregular migration.”

When externalization policies aim to block migration across a particular route to destination states, we argue that they may have distinct

impacts on different categories of migrants. Just like other border controls, externalization policies impose higher costs on travel but are rarely if ever able to stop migration entirely. Rather, there is evidence that they displace migrants to remote crossing places (Gathmann 2008). Therefore, we anticipate that, for numerous potential reasons discussed below, individuals fleeing violence and persecution (i.e., refugees) react differently to policies blocking specific migration routes in contrast to other migrants. In particular, we explore whether individuals likely to be recognized as refugees by destination states change their migratory trajectories to a lesser extent than other migrants following the implementation of policies that aim to stop border crossings on specific routes.

Specifically, we examine the impacts of the European Union (EU)–Turkey Statement of March 18, 2016, a paradigmatic externalization policy and one of the most prominent in terms of monetary and political costs.¹ This policy aimed to end the so-called European migration crisis of 2015 while upholding legal obligations towards refugees through three primary provisions: (1) the transfer of 6 billion euros to Turkey to support its humanitarian efforts for Syrian refugees,² (2) the promise of visa liberalization for Turkish nationals traveling to the Schengen Area, and (3) the establishment of a mechanism by which Syrians who cross into Greece from Turkey without prior authorization would be returned, while for each person returned, a Syrian refugee would be resettled from Turkey into Europe. In exchange, Turkey would stop individuals from leaving its territory without prior authorization. The policy thereby aimed to stop migration flows while ostensibly ensuring that Syrians fleeing violence were able to obtain humanitarian protection. The supposed success of this policy in stopping unauthorized migration flows has been highly contested; it thus serves as a prominent case for assessing the impacts of externalization policies on different categories of migrants as well as whether those effects reflect purported policy objectives.

To evaluate the validity of our argument, we conduct a multifaceted analysis of the impact of the EU–Turkey Statement across time, space, and categories of migrants. To begin, using a novel method we developed in parallel work (Savatic et al. 2024), we describe the spatial and categorical distribution of unauthorized migration flows to Europe over time. Our method divides data on “irregular/illegal border crossings” (IBCs)³ published by Frontex (2023), the Border and Coast Guard Agency of the EU, into individuals likely to obtain asylum in 31 European destination states⁴ (“likely refugees”) and those who would likely not be recognized as refugees in those states (“likely irregular migrants”). To do so, we rely on asylum data from Eurostat (2023) and calculate the annual weighted average first instance asylum acceptance rate by nationality of asylum seekers across all destinations. In particular, we examine the relationship between asylum acceptance rates and the concentration of IBCs by nationality on

their primary routes to Europe. We anticipate that nationalities more likely to obtain refugee status are concentrated on specific routes in contrast to nationals unlikely to obtain refugee status. This stems from our expectation that refugees are less sensitive to border policies, while other migrants might arbitrate between routes depending on border controls and how they affect the likelihood of successfully reaching a desired destination. This would mean that refugees are most likely found on the closest direct route to Europe and have a relatively limited presence on alternative routes.

In addition, we conduct event study analyses to assess the impact of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs. We evaluate whether the Statement reduced the aggregate number of IBCs recorded on the Eastern Mediterranean route (representing crossings from Turkey into Greece or Bulgaria) while leading to an increase in the number of IBCs on the Central Mediterranean route (the closest alternative route, representing crossings from Libya and Tunisia into Italy and Malta) and other alternative routes. By splitting the data on IBCs into our two categories, we examine whether the policy had distinct impacts on IBCs classified as likely refugees or likely irregular migrants. We anticipate that likely refugees were predominantly blocked by the policy, while likely irregular migrants were deflected across alternative routes, and that this stands behind any aggregate effects initially detected.

Altogether, in line with our expectations, we find that likely refugees tend to be concentrated on single migration routes to Europe. In contrast, likely irregular migrants are in certain cases persistently identified on multiple routes. This offers an initial indication that likely refugees may be less prone to adapting their migratory trajectories and may be adversely affected by policies blocking their primary route of travel. In turn, through our event study analyses, we show that externalization policies indeed have distinct impacts on likely refugees and likely irregular migrants, deflecting the latter to alternative routes while blocking the former. This is consistent with our expectation that likely irregular migrants have a greater capacity to adjust to the imposition by policies of new costs or constraints on travel via a particular route.

Given that the main countries of origin of refugees tend to be geographically closer to certain key migratory routes, and that individuals from countries of origin located close to routes are less likely to alter their migratory trajectories than those who are far away, we test the robustness of our results by isolating the potential confounding effect of the distance between origin countries and migratory routes. In particular, we find that the number of likely irregular migrants from distant countries of origin decline to a greater degree on the Eastern Mediterranean route and rise on the Central Mediterranean route following the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement, while likely refugees exhibit limited deflection regardless of proximity. This suggests that the costs on travel imposed by policies influence migratory trajectories in general and have distinct impacts with respect

to our two migrant categories. Moreover, this further indicates that likely refugees may have a relatively more limited capacity to adjust to policies blocking routes than likely irregular migrants.

Our findings offer important insights regarding the geography of migration flows and the impact of migration policies on those flows. We establish the sensitivity of border policies to space, time, and types of migrants. Through our analyses, we account for spatial deflection induced by externalization policies (migrants shifting from one route to another) along with status deflection (those likely to be refugees being blocked while those likely to be deemed “irregular” migrants shifting routes).⁵ We thus provide a unified framework to explore the geographical and political logic behind both types of deflection. We investigate this framework using as a natural experiment the effects of the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement on unauthorized border crossings to Europe and measuring how the policy shaped which categories of individuals traveled on which routes. We also build upon previous methodological and theoretical innovations when we question the politically constructed nature of statistical/legal categories in a quantitative analysis (Savatic et al. 2024). In all these ways, we contribute to understanding the effectiveness of migration policies in a novel way, as we measure the (un)intended consequences of externalization and highlight the contradictions between policies on paper and migration outcomes.

In terms of policy implications, our research raises concerns about externalization policies whose effects are both illegal and inconsistent with stated objectives. While blocking refugees is ostensibly not an objective of externalization policies as that would violate international and national asylum laws, the (irregular) migratory flows that these policies aim to stop tend to be diverted. In sum, refugees get “stuck in transit” (Brekke and Brochmann 2015) while other migrants seem to find ways to bypass blockades. This confirms existing criticisms that externalization policies are not only poorly adapted responses to migration flows but also contradict the legal obligations of destination states to provide humanitarian assistance, as well as the asylum policies European states implement domestically. As we show with respect to the EU–Turkey Statement, externalization policies may generally be ineffective at curbing inflows of likely irregular migrants while engendering the refoulement of likely refugees.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, we define externalization, discuss existing research regarding the effects of public policies on migration flows, and put forward our arguments regarding the differential effects of externalization on migrants (un)likely to obtain asylum. Second, we present our method to characterize likely refugees and likely irregular migrants and identify the relative concentration of each of the two groups on primary migration routes to Europe. Third, we zoom in on the effects of the EU–Turkey Statement and present our event study analyses.

Finally, we conclude with reflections on the implications of our arguments and findings.

Border policies and their differential (un)intended effects

Defining externalization policies and assessing their impacts

Studies of migration policies, their (un)intended effects, and their (in)efficacy are extensive (Bertoli, Brücker, and Moraga 2022; Czaika and de Haas 2013; Mayda 2010; OECD 2016; Ortega and Peri 2009) and have explored the (in)consistencies between policy declarations/rhetoric, policies on paper, implemented policies, and migration outcomes (Bonjour 2011). Here, we focus strictly on externalization policies and their impacts on migration flows. Quantitative examination of how these particular policies shape flows is, to our knowledge, circumscribed.⁶ Existing studies often focus on specific externalization policies or categories of policies and their general sociopolitical impacts (Andersson 2016; Cassarino 2014; Laube 2019; Ostrand and Statham 2021; Slagter 2019), or on particular countries of origin/transit which cooperate with destination states or the EU (Adepoju, Van Noorloos, and Zoomers 2010; Gazzotti 2022; Norman 2020; Reslow and Vink 2015; Stock, Üstübcü, and Schultz 2019; Wunderlich 2010).⁷ These studies, however, do not assess whether externalization impacts the size and direction of flows or has differential impacts on particular categories of migrants given the time and place of policy implementation. This is partly the case because externalization involves diffuse and/or opaque policy devices, as well as because there is debate over what exactly falls under this concept (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011; Carrera, Radescu, and Reslow 2015; Menjivar 2014).

For the purpose of our research, we define externalization as diplomatic cooperation between migrant destination states and origin/transit states which involves direct or indirect provisions for the management of migration. The explicit or implicit objective of the multifaceted policies that fall under this definition is to stop unauthorized migration prior to the arrival of individuals at the borders of destination states. Through externalization, destination states coopt or coerce origin/transit states into assisting with the control of migration in exchange for certain political or economic benefits such as visa liberalizations, development aid, trade agreements, or other linkages across policy domains (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Betts 2010; Carrera, Radescu, and Reslow 2015; Carrera et al. 2018; Jurje and Lavenex 2014; Zaun and Nantermoz 2023).

In parallel work (Mesnard et al. 2022), we have developed a dataset of externalization policies between 31 European destination states and origin/transit states across the world. We identify steady growth over time in the number of states involved with externalization, in the diversity of

the policy measures adopted, and in the involvement of the EU. While origin/transit states may use negotiations over externalization policies to leverage their economic or political resources (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021), externalization typically reflects asymmetric power relations (Gazzotti 2022; Oliveira Martins and Strange 2019). Actions taken by origin/transit states range from accepting their deported nationals or migrants from third countries (readmission agreements), to reinforcing border and population controls, to (ware)housing refugees and asylum seekers on their territories, etc. (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011; Carrera, Radescu, and Reslow 2015; Carrera, Vara and Strik 2019; Casarino, Gabrielli, and Perrin 2023; Menjivar 2014). Ultimately, the rise of externalization has been widely denounced by civil society organizations and other political actors. These critics argue that it undermines liberal democratic norms in destination states, enforces postcolonial domination over origin/transit countries, and leads to the violation of human rights, including the right to seek safety from persecution as well as other basic rights in countries of origin/transit (Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016; Jones, Lanneau, and Maccanico 2022; Oliveira Martins and Strange 2019).

Forced and irregular migrations: The differential effects of externalization policies

While externalization policies ostensibly intend to reduce “irregular” migration, public discourses (and sometimes scholarship) often fail to clarify what that means. On the one hand, it could refer to unauthorized flows across borders, including flows of asylum seekers as well as other categories of people on the move. On the other hand, it is often understood as synonymous with “illegal” migration, meaning movements in breach of administrative if not criminal law. However, it is crucial to emphasize that it is not illegal for individuals to cross the borders of state parties to the Refugee Convention of 1951 and Protocol of 1967 without prior authorization and request asylum.⁸ Recognizing that most unauthorized border crossings include individuals who may or may not be eligible for humanitarian protection, the term “mixed migration” has been developed, acknowledging that such flows are comprised of individuals with different motivations for leaving their homes and different statuses (Sharpe 2018; Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009). Accordingly, externalization policies that aim to stop border crossings irrespective of the mixed nature of migration flows run the risk of abnegating legal and moral responsibilities to protect refugees (Tantardini and Tolay 2020). Attempts to stop “irregular” or “illegal” border crossings must ensure individuals can request humanitarian protection. However, both the statistical labeling of border crossings as well as political discourses around them tend to emphasize the illegality of migration, thereby “criminalizing” it (Mitsilegas 2015), dismissing concerns regarding protection.⁹ Consider-

ing this context, an examination of the effects of externalization policies is essential.

Given the mixed nature of border crossings, we argue that externalization policies may have distinct effects on different categories of migrants. While we focus on policy impacts given migrant categories, we acknowledge that these categories are politically constructed and imposed *ex post* by destination states (Savatic et al. 2024; Zetter 2007). Individuals typically migrate for a number of reasons, all falling somewhere within a continuum of motivations and contingent upon a variety of push–pull factors related to both the abilities and aspirations of people on the move (Carling and Schewel 2018). Ideal-type “refugees” who only leave their homes because of violence and persecution and “economic migrants” who only seek employment opportunities hardly reflect migration experiences on the ground. We thus acknowledge that the refugee–migrant distinction exists along a spectrum of constraints and autonomy (Savatic et al. 2024), and that scholars have pointed out the problems of existing frameworks distinguishing refugees from other migrants (Fransen and de Haas 2022; Hamlin 2021).

Nevertheless, these categories are firmly embedded in legal systems across the Global North (Hamlin 2021; Savatic et al. 2024). Therefore, in our analyses, we use the categories of “refugee” and “irregular migrant” but adopt them in a probabilistic and pragmatic manner. Our categories are defined by state-based asylum policies which make some individuals more likely to obtain refugee status than others. We recognize that there are many intermediate situations whereby societal unrest, economic crises, or environmental catastrophes make migration necessary and akin to flight due to violence and persecutions. We also do not underestimate the agency of forced migrants even as they face extreme circumstances. At the same time, we argue that the immediacy and disruption caused by violence and persecution translate into adaptation capabilities (de Haas 2021). In other words, we argue that there is a parallel continuum between migration categories and migration capabilities. We anticipate that the adaptability of migrants along migration routes is related to their status translated by our probabilistic categories of “likely refugees” and “likely irregular migrants” described below.

Central to our reasoning are two notions: (1) the fact that externalization policies can impose higher costs on traveling via affected routes and (2) the fact that human and social capital as well as beliefs and aspirations can vary across migrant categories. Given their relative ineffectiveness mentioned above, policies may be secondary drivers of population movements, after economic and demographic factors (Massey et al. 1993). Nevertheless, border enforcement drives migrants to continuously adjust to spatial dynamics (detours, transit points, changeable networks, etc.) and frictions (waiting, detention, etc.) (Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018). Externalization policies which block certain routes constitute one element

of these dynamics. Given that such policies typically involve cooperation with one origin/transit state at a time, they do not systematically block migration across all possible routes. In these conditions, we emphasize the distinct effects these policies may have on individuals across space and time given the motivations behind their migrations.

Specifically, we anticipate that individuals less likely to obtain refugee status are more likely to deflect to alternative routes to reach their desired destination after a public policy blocks a particular migratory route. In contrast, those more likely to obtain refugee status are less likely to deflect and more likely to remain blocked, since they tend to choose the shortest route to their destination and may have a relatively limited ability to adjust their plans. Thus, we explore whether individuals unlikely to obtain refugee status respond to the adoption of new externalization policies by shifting migration pathways.

Finally, in line with existing research across disciplines (Bogue and Thompson 1949; Czaika and de Haas 2014; Ozden, Wagner, and Packard 2018), we anticipate that geographical distance—along with other demographic, social, cultural and economic factors—affects the impact of policies on migration flows. Greater distance generally decreases migration flows since it increases the financial and nonmonetary costs of travel. We expect that individuals traveling from countries of origin located far from a migration route affected by a policy will alter trajectories to a greater extent than those close to one. This reflects the fact that it is comparatively less costly for those from distant countries of origin to adjust their plans; alternative routes that are closer or only slightly farther than the entry point represented by the affected route all become more attractive options. However, we also anticipate that this is more likely to happen for likely irregular migrants who have a greater ability to adjust. Again, likely refugees, regardless of their initial location, may take the shortest route to destination states irrespective of the relative costs of traversing that route and the policies which might make travel more difficult. After considering the proximity of countries of origin to migratory routes, we can thus further evaluate the differential effects of externalization policies across categories of migrants.

The EU–Turkey Statement

To investigate the impacts of policies, we examine the EU–Turkey Statement, one of the most prominent and contested externalization instruments. The Statement was adopted after over 1 million individuals entered Europe by sea and on foot in 2015. The majority of those individuals crossed into Greece from Turkey and then continued to other EU member states (above all Germany) via the Western Balkans. After initial efforts at stemming migration from Turkey had mitigated results,¹⁰ the Statement appeared to be a breakthrough which would simultaneously incentivize

Turkey to stop individuals from leaving its territory and disincentivize individuals from attempting to reach Europe without prior authorization. However, the implementation of the agreement and its supposed effects have been contested (Gatti and Ott 2019; Tantardini and Tolay 2020; van Liempt et al. 2017). The degree to which it reduced migration from Turkey is unclear; many have argued that it has sequestered individuals in squalid conditions on Greek islands near the Turkish border and engendered significant human rights violations (Alpes, Tunaboğlu, and Liempt 2017; Dimitriadi 2016; Kaya 2020).

The Statement was made in the context of substantial media and public attention regarding “irregular” or “illegal” migration across the destination states of the Global North spanning several decades. In short, sudden surges in migration from the Global South to the Global North have been commonly framed as migration “crises” and become a central focus of public debates (Cantat, Pécouc, and Thiollet 2023; Reddy and Thiollet 2023; Savatic et al. 2024). Although both forced and irregular migrations represent a minority of flows globally as well as specifically towards Global North states (World Bank 2023), migration crises have had outsized political influence, shaping public perceptions about (irregular) migration, generating public anxieties, and bolstering nativist populism across advanced democracies (Davis and Deole 2017; Edo et al. 2019). As a result, irregular migrations and the policies designed to curb them, including externalization policies such as the EU–Turkey Statement, warrant closer examination.

Data and research design

To test the validity of our arguments, we deploy a multistep quantitative analysis relying on data provided by Frontex (2023) on IBCs and data provided by Eurostat (2023) on first instance asylum acceptances/rejections¹¹ by nationality across 31 European destination states. First, Frontex data on IBCs represent the number of times the borders of the EU or Schengen Area¹² have been crossed by persons without prior authorization. The data have been published monthly since January 2009 and indicate the nationality of each individual identified at a crossing. Data are also broken down into nine migratory “routes” into Europe. Table 1 delineates the routes defined by Frontex and the associated EU member states which are the entry points into Europe on each given route. It also indicates the type of borders (land or sea) as well as the states bordering the EU that are associated with each route.¹³ It is important to note that the data count “crossings” and not unique individuals, making it possible that the same person is identified multiple times. This is particularly of concern with regard to the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes, as many first passed the former before continuing through the latter. Each crossing represents an individual who has been detained or otherwise detected by the national authorities of

TABLE 1 Migration routes defined by Frontex

Route	EU/Schengen Area member states	Border type and neighboring states
Western African ^a	Spain	Sea borders of the Canary Islands
Western Mediterranean	Spain	Land border with Morocco; Sea Borders excluding the Canary Islands
Central Mediterranean	Italy; Malta	Sea borders
Eastern Mediterranean	Greece; Cyprus; Bulgaria	Sea borders; Land border with Turkey
Black Sea ^a	Bulgaria; Romania	Sea borders
Albania-Greece ^a	Greece	Land borders with Albania and North Macedonia
Western Balkans	Greece; Bulgaria; Romania; Hungary; Croatia	Land borders with Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina
Eastern Borders ^a	Romania; Hungary; Slovakia; Poland; Lithuania; Latvia; Estonia; Finland; Norway	Land borders with Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia
Northern Seas ^a	France; Netherlands; Belgium; Denmark; Germany; Norway; Sweden; Finland	Sea borders (Baltic Sea, North Sea)

NOTE: Data from Frontex (2023). ^aAggregated into “Minor Routes” in analyses, representing only 5.5 percent of all IBCs across 2009–2020.

member states. At the same time, it is likely that many border crossings are not detected. The data itself are compiled individually by member states, ostensibly using the same methodology predefined by Frontex,¹⁴ and subsequently sent to the agency for compilation and publication.

Overall, Frontex data can be criticized for inflating the number of crossings given the potential for the double-counting of individuals. It is also unclear how reliable the counts are and whether all national governments are identifying and calculating crossings in the same manner. Nevertheless, the data offer the only systematic information on the number and characteristics of individuals detected crossing the external borders of the EU without prior authorization. Moreover, as we discuss in other work (Savatic et al. 2024), the data have become an authoritative source on “irregular” or “illegal” migration to Europe, referenced by mainstream news media, international organizations, think tank researchers, and scholars. The data are also used by EU institutions to report to member states about their externalization policies (European Commission 2018). Yet, we have also shown that the labeling of this data is highly problematic given that

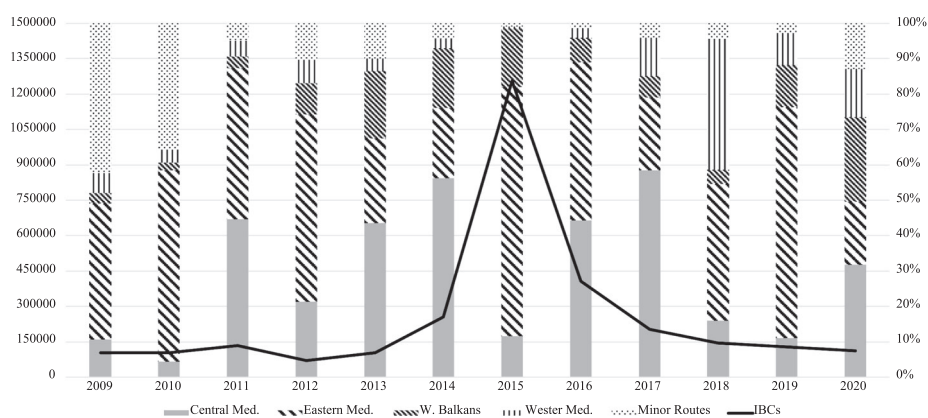
supposedly “illegal” migration consists of numerous individuals who would likely obtain refugee status in Europe.

Second, Eurostat data on first instance asylum acceptances are provided on an annual basis for each of the 31 destination states and also indicate the nationality of each individual who applied for asylum.¹⁵ We utilize first instance asylum decisions as this provides a conservative estimate of the number of individuals who would likely obtain asylum given the nationality that they hold. If we relied on final instance decisions, our estimates of individuals likely to obtain refugee status would be higher given that only asylum rejections are appealed and potentially reversed. In addition, the data indicate whether individuals were provided “Geneva Convention Status,” “Humanitarian status,” “Subsidiary protection status,” or “Temporary protection status” following their application; we consider all of these as an acceptance leading to the conferral of international protection.

As a first step, we developed a novel method to divide data on flows into those who would likely obtain asylum in destination states (“likely refugees”) and those who would likely not receive international protection (“likely irregular migrants”).¹⁶ In short, using Eurostat (2023) data we calculate the annual weighted average asylum acceptance rate by nationality across all 31 destination states. Our weights take into account the number of asylum adjudications made in each state given the nationality of applicants. The average represents an annual likelihood that individuals will obtain asylum in Europe given their nationality. For example, for Syrian nationals, the weighted average takes into account the annual acceptance rate in Germany (18.3–99.3 percent across 2009–2020) to a relatively greater extent given that that is the country where most Syrians applied for asylum each year (59.7 percent of all asylum decisions relating to Syrian nationals across 2009–2020).¹⁷ Given our weighted average acceptance rate, we are able to divide data on IBCs into likely refugees and likely irregular migrants in the aggregate, across time on an annual basis (2009–2020) and across space (the nine routes). We do so by using the annual weighted average acceptance rate for each nationality to split the IBCs of that nationality into our two categories.¹⁸

Using our method and variable regarding migrant categories, we conduct a multifaceted analysis of unauthorized flows to Europe and the impacts of the EU–Turkey Statement. We begin with a descriptive overview of IBCs from 2009 to 2020 and their division into likely refugees and likely irregular migrants. We specifically examine the degree to which both categories of migrants are concentrated on single primary routes to Europe. An analysis of concentration offers an initial indication as to the relative ability of refugees and other migrants to alter their migratory pathways.

In turn, we examine the effects of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs. Through our event study analysis, we identify aggregate effects on the primary route affected by the policy as well as deflection effects on the other

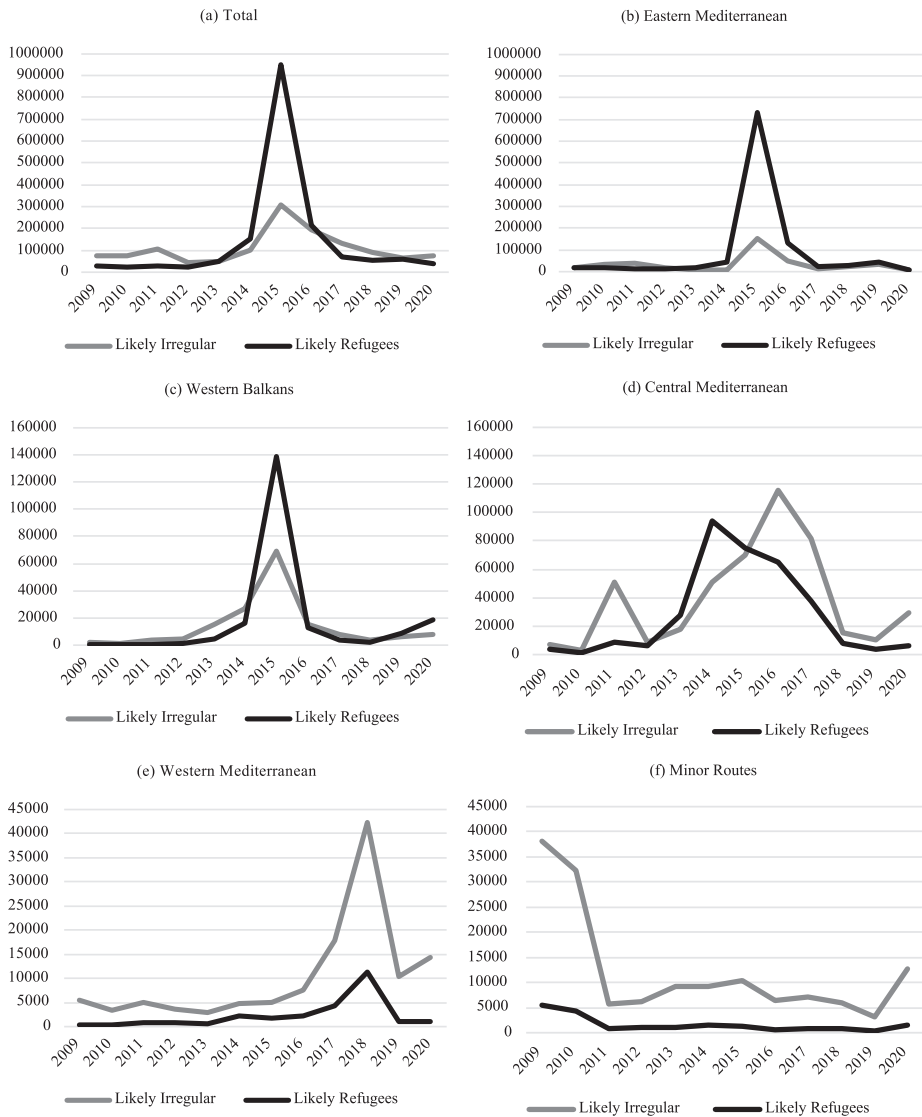
FIGURE 1 Total IBCs and share of IBCs identified across migration routes

NOTE: Data from Frontex (2023).

major alternative routes to Europe. Using our weighted average asylum acceptance rate variable, we estimate the differential effects of the policy on likely refugees and likely irregular migrants. Since a majority of IBCs (54.3 percent between March 2015 and March 2017) identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route are Syrian nationals, the proximity of Syria to Turkey may explain why it may be more costly for Syrians to deflect to alternative pathways to Europe while simultaneously being granted refugee status at a high rate. By estimating differential effects separately given whether countries of origin are located far/close to the route affected by the EU–Turkey Statement, we can evaluate whether our results are robust to this possible confounding factor. We also test the robustness of our results to the exclusion of Syrian nationals from the analysis.

Migration flows to Europe and sensitivity to status

We begin our analyses with a general description of IBCs and their division into likely refugees and likely irregular migrants. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate trends in the number of IBCs identified from 2009 to 2020, in aggregate and across routes, respectively. Figure 1 shows both the total number of IBCs detected on an annual basis (left axis) and the share of IBCs identified on each of the four main migratory routes (Western, Central, and Eastern Mediterranean, and Western Balkans) and the five “minor routes” together¹⁹ (right axis). The four main routes represent 94.5 percent of all identified IBCs throughout the time period and are therefore the focus of our analyses. The clear spike in crossings in 2015 corresponds to the crisis that year. The figure also reveals that the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes have persistently been the most traversed by individuals seeking to reach Europe,

FIGURE 2 Estimates of likely refugees and likely irregular migrants

NOTE: Authors' calculations using Frontex (2023) and Eurostat (2023) data.

while the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes accumulated the vast majority (86.9 percent) of crossings in 2015.

In turn, Figure 2 illustrates our estimate of likely refugees and likely irregular migrants in aggregate (panel a) and across the Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkans, Central Mediterranean, Western Mediterranean, and Minor Routes, (panels b–f, respectively). Note that the scales on the y-axes are significantly different for panels a and b (maximum 1 million IBCs), panels c and d (maximum 160 thousand IBCs), and panels e and

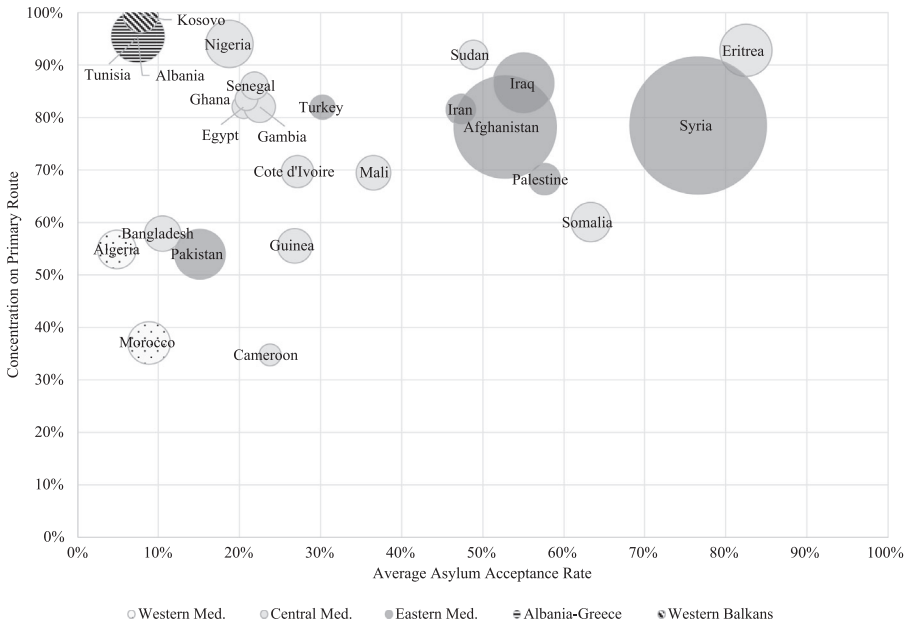
f (maximum 45 thousand IBCs), reflecting variable migratory pressures across routes. Altogether, the figure reveals substantial variation in the number of likely refugees and likely irregular migrants across both time and space. Large spikes on the Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkans, and Central Mediterranean routes primarily represent likely refugees. In contrast, few IBCs identified on the Western Mediterranean or other minor routes are estimated to be likely refugees. While the number of IBCs identified across the different routes varies by several orders of magnitude, sudden spikes in the number of IBCs across major routes primarily represent forced migrations by likely refugees. This may have implications with regard to the impacts of externalization policies, as we discuss below.

Overall, during peaks in flows, and most strikingly during the crisis of 2015, the vast majority of IBCs (75.5 percent) are estimated to be likely refugees. This is unsurprising given that these individuals are primarily Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, all of whom have been highly likely to obtain refugee status in Europe.²⁰ Spikes in flows also tend to affect specific migratory routes at specific times, namely the Central Mediterranean in 2014 and 2017, the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans in 2015, and the Western Mediterranean in 2018. Importantly, we find that, even excluding spikes in border crossings, there is persistently a substantial minority of individual IBCs who would likely obtain refugee status in Europe across time and routes. This indicates that all flows represent “mixed” migrations to a certain degree.

Having established the nature of migration flows to Europe, we identify to what extent nationalities (with their associated likelihood of obtaining asylum) are identified on multiple (or few) migration routes. For this analysis, we calculate the concentration across all nine routes and across the period 2009–2020 of IBCs associated with the top 25 nationalities identified during that time period.²¹ We then compare this concentration with the aggregate likelihood that certain nationals would obtain asylum in Europe, meaning the average of the annual weighted average asylum acceptance rate for the period 2009–2020.

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between geographical concentration and the average of the weighted average asylum acceptance rates. The *y*-axis represents the share of IBCs concentrated on the primary route to Europe for each nationality (typically the most direct path from an origin country to the nearest European border). A low percentage indicates a persistent dispersion of nationals across multiple routes, while a high percentage indicates a significant concentration of IBCs on a single primary route.²² For example, only 39 percent of IBCs identified as Moroccan nationals between 2009 and 2020 were identified on the Western Mediterranean route, indicating that many Moroccans took alternative pathways to Europe. In contrast, nearly 80 percent of Afghans were identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route. In turn, the *x*-axis represents the average of the annual weighted average asylum acceptance rate for the period

FIGURE 3 Concentration of IBCs by country of origin and average asylum acceptance rates (2009–2020)



NOTE: Authors' calculations using Frontex (2023) and Eurostat (2023) data.

2009–2020, while the size of the circles represents the total number of IBCs identified with the indicated nationality. Lastly, the shading of each circle represents the migration route where the indicated nationality is most commonly identified.²³

Altogether, the figure reveals that few nationalities are persistently dispersed across many routes, while the majority are highly concentrated on a primary one. Only Moroccan and Cameroonian nationals are identified on their primary route to Europe less than 50 percent of the time; most nationalities are identified on their primary route over 60 percent of the time. Nevertheless, Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, and other nationals who are primarily likely refugees tend to be highly concentrated while nationals who are less likely to obtain refugee status can be either highly concentrated (Albanians, Tunisians, etc.) or highly dispersed (Moroccans, Cameroonians, etc.). Importantly, these trends do not appear to be associated with specific routes; there are highly concentrated and highly dispersed nationalities identified primarily on both the Central Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean routes.

This initial result indicates that externalization policies which restrict migration on specific routes may have a greater relative effect on likely refugees. Indeed, in line with our expectations, individuals who are fleeing violence and persecution tend to travel on single primary routes that take them directly to Europe. In contrast, the fact that likely irregular mi-

grants may be present on multiple routes could reflect their greater relative ability and incentive to adjust to new realities across routes, including the adoption of new policies which increase the relative costs of travel. For instance, migration control agreements with certain origin/transit states, such as the EU–Turkey Statement, may have had a more significant impact on the ability of Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, among others, to cross borders and seek asylum in Europe as opposed to nationals more likely to be irregular migrants who may be more likely to alter their migratory trajectories. This raises the concern that externalization policies are hindering likely refugees from obtaining humanitarian protection.

Assessing the differential effects of externalization policies

Methods

Having established that nationalities associated with high asylum acceptance rates tend to be systematically concentrated on single migration routes to Europe, we turn to evaluating our expectations regarding the effects of externalization policies on migration flows. Specifically, we assess the impact of the EU–Turkey Statement on the number of IBCs identified across major migration routes to Europe, and whether that policy had a differential effect on individuals we estimate to be likely refugees or likely irregular migrants. Our analysis has three parts: First, we conduct an event study analysis to assess whether the EU–Turkey Statement had an impact on the aggregate number of IBCs identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route it aimed to control as well as the Central Mediterranean route (the main alternative). Second, we evaluate the potential heterogeneous effect of the EU–Turkey Statement on individual IBCs depending on their (estimated) likelihood of obtaining asylum. Finally, we evaluate the robustness of the initial results after splitting the sample by proximity of countries of origin to the entry points into Europe represented by major routes. This allows us to control for the effect of distance and to evaluate whether adaptability to newly imposed political costs ultimately stands behind the relative (im)mobility of likely refugees and likely irregular migrants.

To examine the changes in aggregate migration flows across different routes following the EU–Turkey Statement, we adopt an event study approach to estimate the effects of the policy on IBCs, specifying the two equations below. The first equation estimates the deterrence effect on the Eastern Mediterranean route, while the second equation estimates the deflection effects on alternative routes.

$$\begin{aligned}
 IBC_{rct} = & \sum_{j=-12}^{j=-1} \beta_j (Eastern * EUTurkey_j) + \sum_{j=1}^{j=12} \beta_j (Eastern * EUTurkey_j) \\
 & + (\phi_r * month) + (\theta_c * \lambda_t) + (\theta_c * \phi_r) + \varepsilon_{rct} ,
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 IBC_{rct} = & \sum_{j=-12}^{j=-1} \beta_j (Routes_{-Eastern} * EUTurkey_j) \\
 & + \sum_{j=1}^{j=12} \beta_j (Routes_{-Eastern} * EUTurkey_j) \\
 & + (\phi_r * month) + (\theta_c * \lambda_t) + (\theta_c * \phi_r) + \varepsilon_{rct} . \quad (2)
 \end{aligned}$$

Under these specifications, IBC_{rct} represents the number of irregular border crossings on migration route r from origin country c at time (month) t ; in the first equation, *Eastern* represents a dummy equal to one (zero) for the Eastern Mediterranean route (all other routes), while, in the second equation, $Routes_{-Eastern}$ represents a set of dummies equal to one (zero) for the Central Mediterranean, Western Mediterranean, and Western Balkans routes (the Eastern Mediterranean route); $EUTurkey_j$ represents an indicator for each month j before/after March 2016 ($j = 0$ when the EU–Turkey Statement is enacted in March 2016); β_j represents the parameters of interest that identify the effect of the EU–Turkey Statement on the selected route for each month j ; $\phi_r * month$ represents a set of route-month fixed effects that capture route-specific seasonalities in flows due to climatic and geographic constraints (i.e., sea roughness at specific times of the year); $\theta_c * \lambda_t$ represents a set of origin-time fixed effects that capture origin-specific time-variant push factors (i.e., political violence and economic downturns); $\theta_c * \phi_r$ represents a set of dyadic origin-route fixed effects that capture any time-invariant factor linking an origin country to a specific route (i.e., geographic and cultural distances); ε_{rct} represents the error term.

We restrict our analysis to 12 months before and after March 2016 in order to evaluate the immediate effects of the EU–Turkey Statement close to the time of policy implementation; confounding factors, including other policy measures, could play a steadily more significant role in influencing migration flows further away in time from policy adoption. We restrict our sample to the top 25 nationalities (representing 96.1 percent of all IBCs between 2009 and 2020) and to the four major migration routes (Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, and Western Balkans, representing 94.5 percent of all IBCs between 2009 and 2020). As Syrian IBCs represent 54.3 percent of IBCs on the Eastern Mediterranean route (their primary route of entry) from March 2015 to March 2017, we evaluate the robustness of all our analyses by excluding them from our sample.

Given that there are many nationalities which are not identified on several routes across many months, the data contain a large number of zeros. Moreover, IBCs represent count data with observations that are clearly not normally distributed. Therefore, we rely on Poisson pseudo maximum

likelihood (PPML) estimations. To ease the interpretation of our results, the estimated coefficients are converted to semielasticities. Standard errors are clustered at the origin-time level to account for joint decisions of choosing a migration route in a particular month by individuals of the same origin country. We present results that are unweighted as well as weighted by the number of IBCs coming from a given origin across routes, thereby assigning larger weights to more significant migratory corridors.

In turn, to assess the potential differential effects of the EU–Turkey Statement on likely refugees and likely irregular migrants, we estimate the change in the number of both categories of IBCs before and after March 2016 (capturing deterrence and deflection) using equations (3) and (4) specified below:²⁴

$$IBC_{rct} = \sum_{k=0}^{k=1} \beta_k (Eastern * EUTurkey_{post} * Likely_{ct} = k) + (\phi_r * month) + (\theta_c * \lambda_t) + (\theta_c * \phi_r) + \varepsilon_{rct} \quad (3)$$

$$IBC_{rct} = \sum_{k=0}^{k=1} \gamma_k (Routes_{-Eastern} * EUTurkey_{post} * Likely_{ct} = k) + (\phi_r * month) + (\theta_c * \lambda_t) + (\theta_c * \phi_r) + \varepsilon_{rct} \quad (4)$$

The terms in these equations are similar to the previous event study models, except they include an interaction term between a dummy variable, noted $EUTurkey_{post}$, equal to 1 (0) for the period after (before) the EU–Turkey Statement was implemented, and a dummy for the likelihood of obtaining asylum, noted $Likely_{ct}$ equal to 1 (0) when the acceptance rate is 75 percent or above (below), that is, “likely refugee” (“likely irregular”), given the country of origin c and time of crossing t . The 75 percent threshold refers to the rate at which certain public policies or policy proposals that have been adopted at the EU or member state level, such as the European Council Decision 2015/1523 of September 14, 2015, and the sixth report of the EU regarding relocation and resettlement in 2016, have considered individuals holding certain nationalities as likely refugees.²⁵ Therefore, in the first equation, the estimated parameter β_0 (β_1) captures the effect of the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement on the Eastern Mediterranean route for likely irregular migrants (likely refugees). Similarly, in the second equation, the estimated parameter γ_0 (γ_1) captures the deflection effect of the EU–Turkey Statement on the (main alternative) Central Mediterranean route for likely irregular migrants (likely refugees).

Finally, to investigate the potential heterogeneous impacts of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs coming from neighboring versus distant countries to a specific route (as well as to isolate the potential confounding effect of distance to migratory routes), we replicate the previous estimations on subsamples of origin countries split by proximity to the considered route

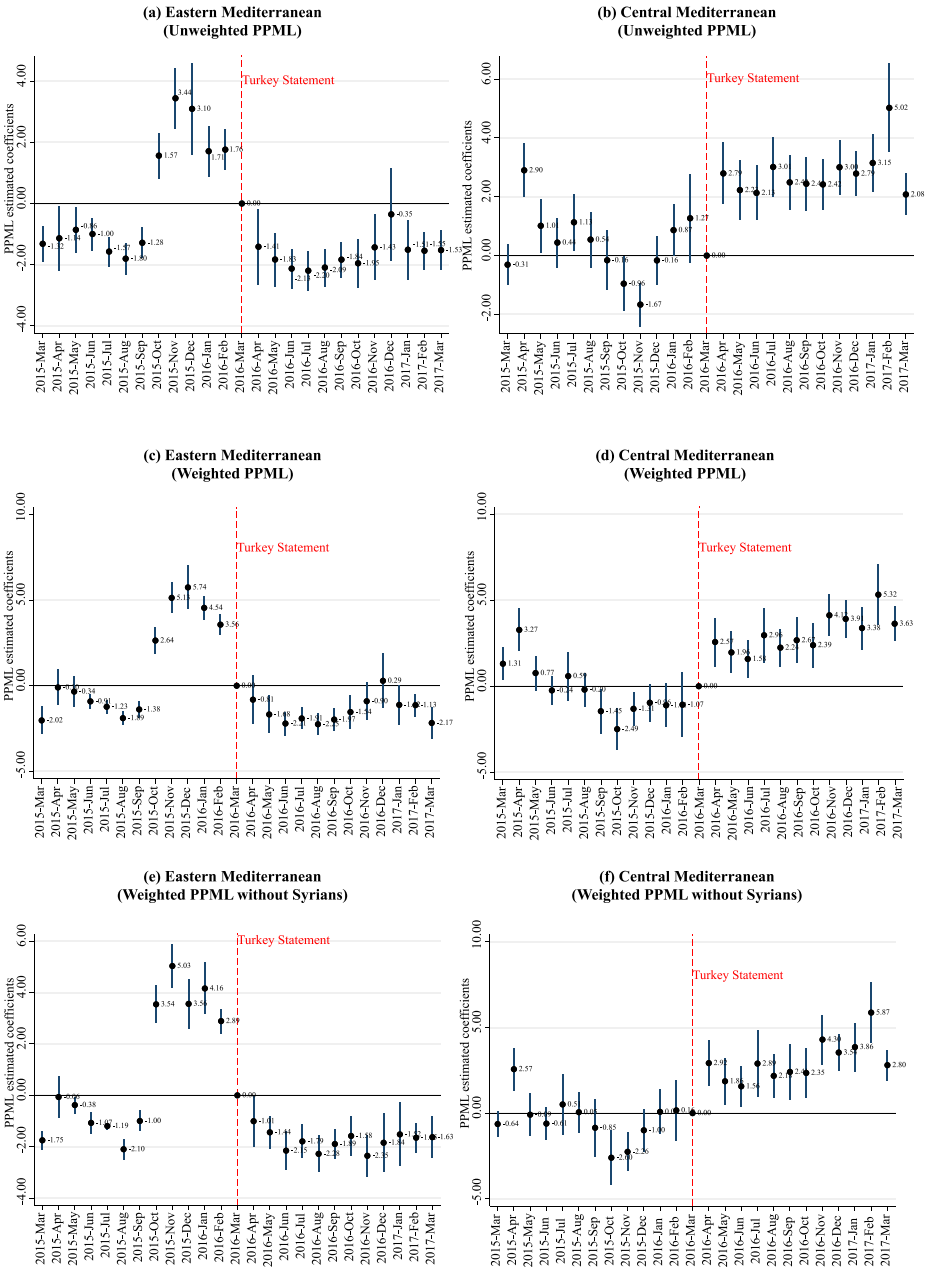
(Eastern or Central Mediterranean). We define proximity as encompassing countries bordering the entry point represented by a migration route as well as countries bordering that country in turn. Thus, for the Eastern Mediterranean route, Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian nationals are considered close to the route in our analysis, while the remaining 21 nationalities are considered far. For the Central Mediterranean route, Algerian, Tunisian, Nigerian, Sudanese, and Egyptian nationals are considered close to the route, while the other 16 nationalities are considered far. These additional estimations allow us to assess whether any differential effects of the EU–Turkey Statement on likely irregular migrants and likely refugees are confounded by the proximity between countries of origin and the major routes, as it may be relatively less costly for individuals from far countries of origin (that are simultaneously less likely to obtain asylum) to deflect to other routes.²⁶

Overall effects of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs

Our event study results are presented in Figure 4. We only present results regarding the Eastern Mediterranean route, which was directly targeted by the EU–Turkey Statement, and the Central Mediterranean route, which was the closest nearby alternative route to which individuals could shift their migration. The Western Mediterranean route is a relatively minor route (far from the Eastern Mediterranean route) and the Western Balkans route follows the Eastern Mediterranean route and was geographically not an option for individuals altering their trajectories. Panels a, c, and e present the results for the Eastern Mediterranean route and panels b, d, and f for the Central Mediterranean route. Panels a and b present unweighted results using the full sample (restricted to the top 25 nationalities and the four major routes), panels c and d present weighted results using the full sample, and panels e and f present weighted results excluding Syrian nationals. As indicated above, our point of reference for the analysis is March 2016 (the month the EU–Turkey Statement was adopted) and we then compare the number of IBCs identified on the indicated routes 12 months before and after that date (March 2015–March 2017). Each point represents the change in the number of IBCs identified on the indicated route relative to March 2016 with a 95 percent confidence interval, after controlling for all time varying confounding factors through the fixed effects included in our model specifications above.

Our results provide evidence that the EU–Turkey Statement had a deflecting effect on individuals seeking to reach Europe, as we expected. Following the adoption of the policy, the relative number of IBCs on the Eastern Mediterranean route sharply declined, while their relative number increased significantly on the Central Mediterranean route. Interestingly, on the Eastern Mediterranean route, when Syrian nationals are included,

FIGURE 4 Effect of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs across the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes



NOTE: Event study analysis covering a period 12 months before and 12 months after the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016. PPML estimated coefficients are reported. Error bars correspond to the 95 percent confidence interval (with clustered standard errors by origin time). Weights refer to the total number of IBCs across all routes in each period from a particular origin.

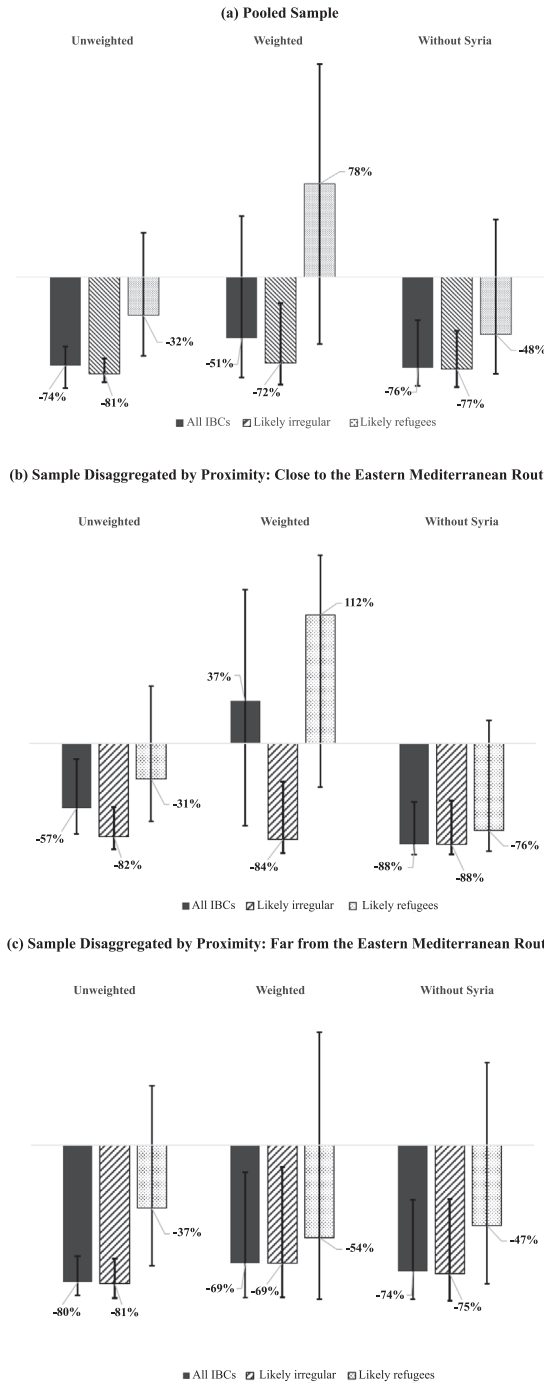
the initial effect of the policy loses magnitude and significance 6 months after the Statement (panels a and c). In contrast, when excluding Syrians from the analysis, the decline in the number of IBCs is quite stable and significant throughout the 12 months following the agreement (panel e). This provides an initial indication that the EU–Turkey Statement did not significantly impact the migration of Syrians (who, in contravention of the policy’s objectives, continued to cross into Greece) while leading other nationals to deflect to alternative routes. In tandem, the rise in the number of IBCs on the Central Mediterranean route is significant and robust to weighting and the in/exclusion of Syrians.

Differential effects

Our second set of results regarding the differential effects of the EU–Turkey Statement on likely refugees and likely irregular migrants are presented in Figures 5 and 6.²⁷ Figure 5 presents the results for the Eastern Mediterranean route and Figure 6 for the Central Mediterranean route. In each figure, panel a presents results on the full sample, panel b presents results on the subsample of IBCs from countries of origin located close to the affected routes, and panel c presents results on the subsample of IBCs from countries of origin located far from the affected routes. For each panel, three groups of three bars represent the results (1) without weights using data on all main nationalities of IBCs (top 25 nationalities and four primary routes), (2) with weights using data on all main nationalities, and (3) with weights but excluding Syrian nationals. Fully shaded bars represent the difference in the aggregate number of IBCs identified on the indicated route after the adoption of the EU–Turkey Statement. Lined bars represent the difference in the number of likely irregular migrants and dotted bars the difference in the number of likely refugees. The lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

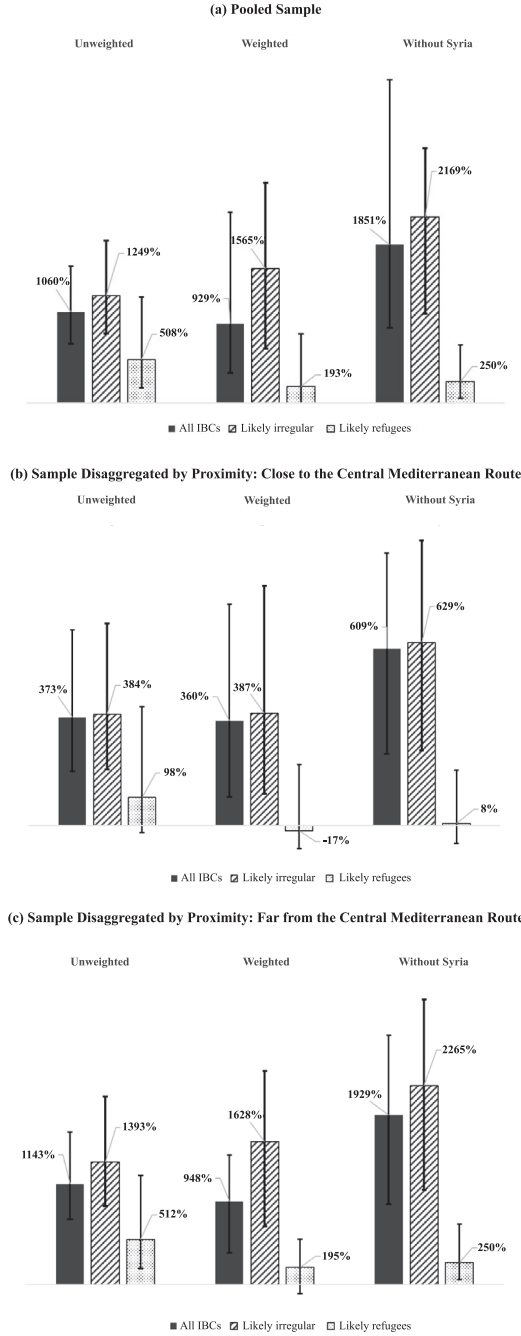
Our results show that policies which block certain migration routes will deflect likely irregular migrants to alternative routes while leaving likely refugees blocked (Figures 5a and 6a). The 12-month period following the adoption of the EU–Turkey Statement shows a substantial drop (of –81 percent, –72 percent, or –77 percent) in the number of likely irregular migrants identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route and a substantial increase (of 1249 percent, 1564 percent, or 2169 percent) in the number of likely irregular migrants identified on the Central Mediterranean route.²⁸ In contrast, the policy is not associated with a significant change in the number of likely refugees identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route nor with a robustly significant rise in the number of likely refugees identified on the Central Mediterranean route. Even if one considers the statistically significant rise in identified likely refugees on the Central Mediterranean route in the unweighted model as well as the model excluding Syrians (Figure 6a),

FIGURE 5 Effect of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs across the Eastern Mediterranean route



NOTE: Semielasticities (derived from PPML estimated coefficients) are reported. Error bars correspond to the 95 percent confidence interval (with clustered standard errors by origin time). Weights refer to the total number of IBCs across all routes in each period from a particular origin.

FIGURE 6 Effect of the EU–Turkey Statement on IBCs across the Central Mediterranean route



NOTE: Semielasticities (derived from PPML estimated coefficients) are reported. Error bars correspond to the 95 percent confidence interval (with clustered standard errors by origin time). Weights refer to the total number of IBCs across all routes in each period from a particular origin.

the effect is of a dramatically smaller magnitude (508 percent as opposed to 1249 percent for likely irregular migrants or 250 percent as opposed to 2169 percent for likely irregular migrants). The results thus indicate that likely irregular migrants were more likely to change their migratory trajectories following the adoption of the policy. Syrian likely refugees continued to cross the Eastern Mediterranean route despite limitations on their ability to seek asylum imposed by the policy, while other likely refugees were deflected to a limited extent.

Moreover, when we examine the differential effect of the EU–Turkey Statement after splitting the sample by proximity of countries of origin to the closest nearby route, our results are largely in line with our expectations. First, on the Eastern Mediterranean route, the decline in the aggregate number of IBCs from “far” countries of origin (Figure 5c) is greater than for “close” countries of origin (Figure 5b): –80 percent in contrast to –57 percent in the unweighted sample, –65 percent in contrast to +37 percent for the weighted sample, and –74 percent in contrast to –88 percent for the weighted sample excluding Syrian nationals. The increase in the estimated number of IBCs in the weighted sample indicates that Syrians (who represent an absolute majority of IBCs on this route in the studied time period) continued to traverse the Eastern Mediterranean route even after the policy was adopted. Non-Syrian likely refugees (possibly Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians) may have stopped their migration or deflected to alternative routes, possibly given their relative proximity as well as the fact that they were fleeing from protracted crises while Syrians were fleeing more acute violence.

In turn, on the Central Mediterranean route, the aggregate number of IBCs from “far” countries of origin (Figure 6c) rises dramatically more than those from “close” countries of origin (Figure 6b): 1143 percent in contrast to 373 percent in the unweighted sample, 948 percent in contrast to 360 percent for the weighted sample, and 1929 percent in contrast to 609 percent for the weighted sample excluding Syrian nationals. In other words, the rising cost of traversing the Eastern Mediterranean route after the EU–Turkey Statement led to a shift in migration towards the Central Mediterranean route. This shift was primarily driven by nationals of countries far from the Central Mediterranean route who may have had a greater ability to adjust to the changing relative costs of travel associated with these two main routes to Europe. The rise in likely irregular migrants from close countries of origin may represent a general opening of the route as migrant traffickers and smugglers (as well as other networks) adjusted in response to the new policy reality on the Eastern Mediterranean route. In addition, those close to the Central Mediterranean route who initially considered travel via the Eastern Mediterranean route may have changed their plans.

Even more notably, the aggregate changes are almost entirely driven by likely irregular migrants. On the Eastern Mediterranean route, the num-

ber of likely irregular migrants declines for both “close” and “far” countries of origin. There is no significant change in the number of likely refugees, however. As with our previous results, likely refugees represented by Syrian nationals may have continued to traverse the Eastern Mediterranean route, leading to a positive estimate in our weighted sample including Syrians (Figure 5b). The number of non-Syrian likely refugees may have declined, although these results are not statistically significant.

In contrast, on the Central Mediterranean route, the number of likely irregular migrants from “far” countries of origin (Figure 6c) rises dramatically and to a much larger extent than those from “close” countries of origin (Figure 6b): 1393 percent in contrast to 384 percent in the unweighted sample, 1628 percent in contrast to 387 percent in the weighted sample, and 2265 percent in contrast to 629 percent in the weighted sample excluding Syrians. As with the Eastern Mediterranean route, the number of likely refugees does not significantly change, regardless of the proximity of countries of origin. The significant rise in likely refugees from “far” countries of origin in the unweighted sample and weighted sample without Syrians (Figure 6c) indicate that non-Syrians (possibly Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians) may have deflected their migrations to some extent after the EU–Turkey Statement. However, these deflections are on a much smaller scale (512 percent or 250 percent, respectively) than those estimated for likely irregular migrants.

In sum, our results show that the EU–Turkey Statement was followed by a decrease in the aggregate number of IBCs on the Eastern Mediterranean route and an increase on the Central Mediterranean route. This aggregate effect represents a major deflection of likely irregular migrants and especially those originating from countries located “far” from the two major routes. Likely irregular migrants from “close” countries of origin also deflected but to a lesser extent. Non-Syrian likely refugees may have also changed their trajectories but to a substantially smaller extent. In general, however, the number of non-Syrian likely refugees, regardless of proximity to a route, does not significantly change. Syrian likely refugees are an exception; in contravention of the primary objective of the EU–Turkey Statement, and despite limitations on their ability to request asylum in Greece, Syrian nationals continued to traverse the Eastern Mediterranean route and exhibited no significant deflection to alternative routes.

Altogether, our results reveal a potentially greater relative ability of likely irregular migrants to adjust their migrations in response to public policies that aim to stop IBCs on specific routes. In the case of the EU–Turkey Statement, which sought to stop migration flows across the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey into Greece, we find that likely irregular migrants shifted to the Central Mediterranean route in response. In contrast, likely refugees, and notably Syrian nationals, continued to be identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route following the Statement, despite

the restrictions the policy placed on their ability to apply for asylum upon arrival in Greece. Moreover, our results which consider proximity to affected routes also reveal that likely irregular migrants, regardless of their country of origin, have a great relative ability to change their migration in response to policies which increase the costs of traversing certain routes relative to alternative (nearby) routes.

Various factors may be at play to explain the distinct impact of externalization policies on different categories of migrants. Border control and externalization in particular raise the informational or financial costs of migration, which have a differential impact on migrants with different socioeconomic characteristics. Likely refugees may have less time or other resources to prepare for migration, let alone to consider changes to the viability of traversing different migratory routes. They may also believe that they are unlikely to be pushed back or deported upon arrival to their desired destination and are, therefore, less likely to invest in identifying alternative migration routes. Given that externalization policies are ostensibly not meant to stop individuals from obtaining asylum, likely refugees might not reoptimize as quickly as other migrants in response to the implementation of such policies. Individuals fleeing violence and persecution may have less time to retrieve and verify information about public policies and alter their trajectories as they are embedded in complex, nonlinear, and multidimensional constraints (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al. 2023).²⁹ Moreover, at the onset of a crisis and exile, they may have fewer networks of co-nationals along alternative routes, reducing their ability to adapt and gather information.³⁰ In contrast, other migrants who have left their homes primarily in search for better economic opportunities may be relatively more capable of adapting their travel to alternative migratory pathways and may believe to a greater extent they need to do so to reach their desired destinations.

We do not formally test the relative validity behind these various reasons, yet they all point in the same direction: individuals likely to be considered refugees are relatively less likely to deflect to alternative migration routes in comparison with other migrants. These dynamics are made clear through our analyses of the effects of the EU–Turkey Statement. The policy deflected likely irregular migrants towards the Central Mediterranean route (a “spatial substitution” effect) while likely refugees (above all Syrians, which the policy was meant to deter from traversing into Greece “irregularly”) continued to cross at relatively the same rate or were blocked from pursuing their travel.

Conclusion

In 2015, the arrival of over a million individuals in Europe inspired significant public backlash. While destination states in the Global North have persistently claimed that they uphold their legal obligations towards refugees

in line with international and national laws, tough border policies, including externalization, were often presented as a response to public demand and the risks of irregular migration. The question of who is impacted by externalization policies, as well as where and how, is central to understanding the effectiveness and the meaning of this specific type of border control.

Here, our results show that, among people who cross borders without prior authorization, those who are likely to be recognized as refugees by the asylum policies of 31 European destination states are largely concentrated on a single, primary route to Europe, while those who are less likely to obtain protection are dispersed across multiple routes. Examining the effects of the EU–Turkey Statement, we find that the policy led to a significant deflection of likely irregular migrants from the Eastern Mediterranean route to the Central Mediterranean route, while likely refugees were either blocked or continued to traverse despite reduced possibilities for requesting asylum. Following the adoption of the policy, the aggregate number of IBCs identified on the Eastern Mediterranean route drops sharply, while the number on the Central Mediterranean route spikes. These shifts almost entirely reflect a deflection effect on likely irregular migrants; the number of likely refugees neither declines significantly on the Eastern Mediterranean route nor rises substantially on the Central Mediterranean route. The largest deflection is identified for likely irregular migrants from countries of origin located far from the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Mediterranean routes. This further supports our argument that likely irregular migrants have a greater ability to adjust to any costs on traveling via a certain route imposed by policies.

Overall, our findings indicate that externalization policies may be both illegal and inconsistent with the ostensible objectives of European states. In short, these policies undermine or violate the legal obligations of European states to ensure humanitarian protection as they block certain routes for both asylum seekers and other migrants. Moreover, while disproportionately blocking likely refugees from crossing borders to safety, other migrants are deflected to alternative routes.

In particular, our findings reveal that the EU–Turkey Statement could be considered a failed policy in multiple ways. Our results demonstrate that the policy did not deter Syrian nationals from continuing to cross into Greece, as principally intended. Further work is needed to evaluate the impacts of the EU–Turkey Statement on the risks taken by these particularly vulnerable individuals seeking asylum in Europe. Moreover, while the policy also aimed to block the movement of likely irregular migrants, we find that it primarily deflected such individuals to alternative routes. Instead of stopping irregular migration, the policy led likely irregular migrants to alter their migratory trajectories to Europe. This evidence complements the growing literature highlighting the perverse effects of reinforced restrictions on international migration, which increase risks, costs, and prices paid by

migrants who rely on human smugglers, fueling a booming illegal market (Auriol and Mesnard 2016).

On a theoretical and methodological level, we offer a novel take on debates around the effectiveness or failure of migration policies. We confirm the sensitivity of migration policies to categories of migrants and promote a critically informed quantitative analysis of statistical/legal categories. Our results offer robust measures of the (un)intended effects of externalization policies, highlighting the contradictions between stated policy objectives and migration flows across categories, space, and time. These policies stop individuals from seeking asylum and block them in countries where they may face human rights violations or increase the risks they take to cross borders. In this way, they constitute a form of “neo-refoulement” or the deliberate limitation of rights and protections for migrants and their effective refoulement disguised as an “unintended” effect of policy implementation (Hyndman and Mountz 2008). In the end, our study demonstrates the need for further evidence-based analyses of externalization policies and their effects, highlights the tensions between ostensible policy goals and the actual impacts of policy implementation, and supports calls for better migration policy design, including the opening of legal pathways for migration to Global North destination countries (Auriol, Mesnard, and Perrault 2023).

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Data Availability Statement

All data used for this research article are publicly available. For access to the replication dataset and code, please contact Jean-Noël Senne at jean-noel.senne@universite-paris-saclay.fr.

Notes

1 As of this writing, the Statement is available online here: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>.

2 The European Commission (2024) has indicated that the “full operational budget of the Facility €6 billion has been allocated and contracted, and more than €5.3 billion has been disbursed.”

3 In 2022, the data-set was relabeled from “irregular” to “illegal,” thus reinforcing the perception of the overall illegality of these unauthorized flows (Savatic et al. 2024).

4 The EU-27 as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

5 We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for suggesting the term deflection in both cases.

6 In one piece of ongoing unpublished research, Fasani and Frattini (2021) suggest that the EU-Turkey Statement may have had diversionary effects on IBCs detected on the Eastern Mediterranean route towards the Central Mediterranean route. In another work, Rodriguez Sanchez et al. (2023) show that different border policies affect migration flows in unique ways: European push-backs in the Central Mediterranean affected the scale of cross-border flows, but search-and-rescue operations did not.

7 In addition, see country case studies published by the EFFEXT project (accessible here: <https://www.cmi.no/projects/2473-effext>) on the effects of externalization in the Middle East and Africa, and by the MIGNEX project (accessible here: <https://www.mignex.org/>) on the articulation of migrants’ decision-making and migration policies.

8 See 189 UNTS 150 (Refugee Convention) and 606 UNTS 267 (Protocol).

9 For a discussion of concerns regarding “fake” asylum seekers, see Savatic et al. (2024).

10 The Statement followed an initial Joint Action Plan (as of this writing,

available online here: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_15_5860) adopted between the EU and Turkey on October 15, 2015, as well as the EU–Turkey Summit of November 29, 2015, both of which sought to reduce “irregular” migration from Turkey into Greece in light of the crisis.

11 For simplicity, we will only say acceptance moving forward.

12 For simplicity, we will only say EU moving forward, even though Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland are non-EU members of the Schengen Area.

13 In our analyses, we aggregate the identified IBCs from five minor routes (Western African, Black Sea, Albania–Greece, Eastern Borders, and Northern Seas) into a “Minor Routes” category as they collectively represent just 5.5 percent of all IBCs across the period 2009–2020.

14 The agency confirmed to us by email that it cannot guarantee that this indeed occurs.

15 The specific dataset is entitled “First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr-asydcfst].”

16 For details regarding our method, see Savatic et al. (2024).

17 Although asylum is not granted automatically on the basis of nationality, it is neither without legal grounds nor unrelated to actual practices to consider nationality in asylum adjudications. Further details are provided in Savatic et al. (2024). We also note that, in the Global North, including the 31 European destination states we consider here, national governments determine asylum policies. In the Global South, this responsibility is typically outsourced to UNHCR.

18 Of course, legal and policy arrangements do not strictly reflect why and how migration happens. In scholarly research, studies often rely on data published by the UNHCR or national governments, or data pertaining to countries of origin, to charac-

terize migrants as either forced or voluntary/economic, using, for example, changing levels of violence in origin countries as a means to tag nationals as refugees or migrants (Fasani and Frattini 2021; Franssen and de Haas 2022; Neumayer 2005). However, as we discuss in parallel work (Savatic et al. 2024), migration categories are social and political constructions and asylum policies implemented by destination states are, therefore, entirely what determines who “is” and “isn’t” a refugee.

19 The minor routes are Albania–Greece, Black Sea, Eastern Borders, Northern Seas, and Western African.

20 These three nationalities represent 51.2 percent of all IBCs between 2009 and 2020.

21 The top 25 nationalities represent 96.1 percent of all IBCs, and we only consider these nationalities in our analyses. Further details are available in online Appendix A.

22 Figure 3 presents aggregate concentrations across 2009–2020, flattening temporal variations. Concentrations calculated on an annual basis are presented in online Appendix A. Although there is some variation in concentration over time for most nationalities, fluctuations tend to be contingent on the number of IBCs being detected; when there are fewer IBCs of a particular nationality in a given year, there tends to be greater dispersal across multiple routes. We, therefore, only use the aggregation across 2009–2020 to evaluate the relative concentration of nationals on primary routes.

23 All the underlying values for the figure are provided in online Appendix A.

24 Our approach is inspired by Bertoli, Brücker, and Moraga (2022), who examine the factors influencing the country where

individuals apply for asylum across Europe. Although the parallel trend assumption for identifying difference-in-differences models is not met in the case of IBCs across routes before the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement, our analyses nevertheless offer significant descriptive insights into the differential impact of the policy.

25 Our results are robust to the use of alternative thresholds, including 60.6 percent, which corresponds to the third quartile of asylum acceptance rates over the period, as shown in online Appendix B.

26 In this vein, Friebe et al. (2024) demonstrate that the decline in the relative cost of crossing via the Central Mediterranean route following the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya led to a rise in migration flows through this route, considering the heterogeneous effect of distance between countries of origin and that route.

27 The statistical tables related to these results are provided in online Appendix B.

28 We note that the magnitude of the effects that we identify are exceptionally large. This reflects the relatively low number of IBCs on the Central Mediterranean route prior to the adoption of the EU–Turkey Statement followed by a sharp rise. This dynamic is visible in Figure 2.

29 Migrants, including people fleeing violence and persecution, rely on networks, personal resources, and (mis)information obtained from (un)trustworthy sources (Czaika, Bijak and Prike 2021; Epstein 2008; Holland and Peters 2020; Haug 2008).

30 We thank our anonymous reviewers for highlighting additional reasons that individuals fleeing violence and persecution may be less likely to adapt their migratory trajectories following the implementation of restrictive policies.

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