

# Humanitarian access & conditions along the eastern Mediterranean mixed migration route

## OVERVIEW

People on the move arriving in Greece through the eastern Mediterranean mixed migration route face significant protection risks, including exploitation, travel through militarised regions, and pushback from authorities. Despite these risks, people on the move looking for better living conditions continue to arrive in the country. Although Greece is not the main destination for some, others arriving in the country get trapped in human trafficking networks. Most of them require humanitarian assistance upon arrival (IOM accessed 25/03/2024; Lighthouse Reports 01/12/2023; UNODC accessed 22/05/2024).

International and national NGOs addressing the humanitarian and protection needs of undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Greece usually encounter constraints in the form of a complex regulatory system as well as administrative and bureaucratic hurdles. The Government has also used criminal investigations to intimidate organisations and journalists investigating abuses against people in mixed movements in the country (UN HRC 02/03/2023; OHCHR 31/03/2021; HRW 16/03/2023; FRA 21/01/2021).

Many asylum seekers and migrants need humanitarian aid and assistance. A considerable number endure prolonged periods in reception facilities, such as closed controlled access centres (CCACs), with limited healthcare access and inadequate infrastructure. Some asylum seekers and migrants face arbitrary detention in pre-removal detention centres (PRDCs). There, they face restricted access to legal counselling and medical assistance, aggravating health risks and likely affecting their psychological wellbeing (UNHCR 23/06/2023; TNH 04/12/2023; CBC 20/11/2022; BVMN 24/01/2024; MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023).

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

### Aim

This report aims to provide an overview of the protection and humanitarian needs and challenges along the mixed migration route in Greece. It also aims to provide an overview of the barriers hindering humanitarian access and response to the mixed migration crisis in the country.

**The first section** of the report provides a background of the mixed migration crisis in Greece, mainly focusing on how it has evolved and providing a profile of the people in mixed movements.

**The second section** examines the operational context of mixed migration in Greece, characterised by regulatory scrutiny, negative public perceptions, and, at times, criminalisation of humanitarian workers and journalists reporting on the topic. This section also gives an overview of the state of reception and detention facilities in Greece.

**The third section** examines the protection concerns that asylum seekers and undocumented migrants face in Greece, often linked to access challenges, including limited or lack of access to legal support and interpreters. It also highlights issues such as the inadmissibility and exclusion of asylum seekers from international protection. Likewise, the section drives attention to the problem of pushback from authorities, including drift-backs and instances of physical violence and xenophobia, resulting in fear of forced return among asylum seekers and undocumented migrants.

**The fourth section** provides an overview of the humanitarian conditions and needs along the mixed migration route in Greece, focusing on critical areas such as search-and-rescue operations and people's needs upon arrival, including health, water, sanitation, livelihoods, and food security.

### Methodology

The report mainly relies on a secondary data review of publicly available news articles, briefs, datasets, and analyses from humanitarian and development organisations and media outlets. To complement this review and validate collected information, ACAPS also conducted three key informant interviews with humanitarian workers in Greece.

## Limitations

The information landscape in Greece concerning mixed migration is notably constrained and sensitive. It is difficult to accurately determine the exact number of individuals facing pushback from authorities given the absence of an independent monitoring mechanism. Legal, administrative, and bureaucratic barriers restrict reporting on the topic. Significant portions of the information provided by organisations on conditions in reception and detention facilities, as well as on state violence along the migration route, heavily rely on testimonies and other anecdotal information. This affects both the reliability of information and the availability of up-to-date data.

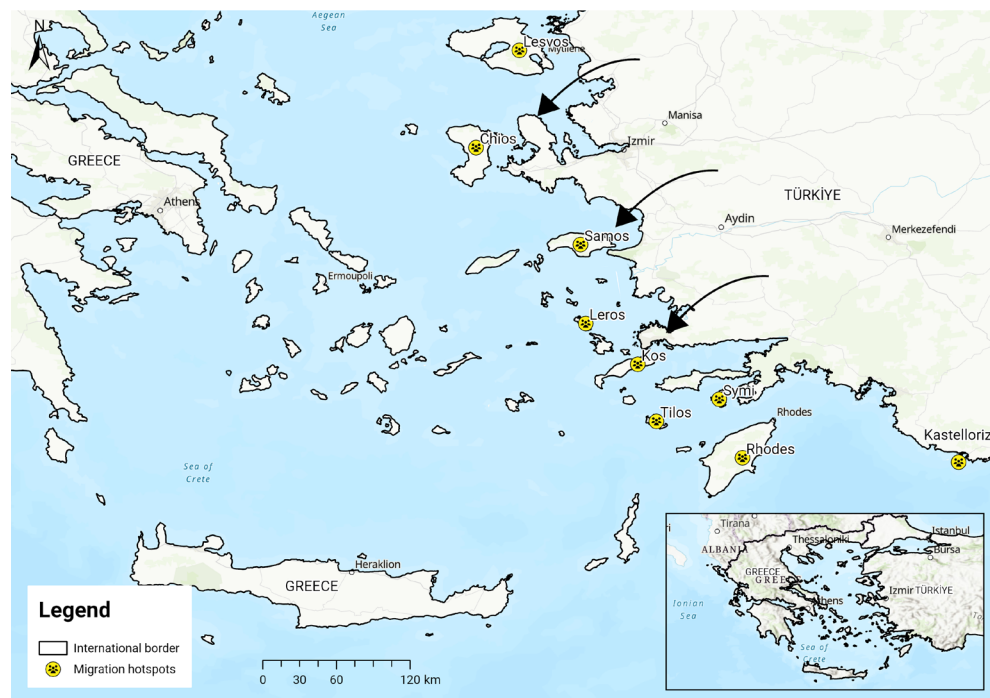
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## CRISIS BACKGROUND

### Mixed migration route

Figure 1. East Mediterranean route between Greece and Türkiye



Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (accessed 21/05/2024)

Mixed migration refers to the movement of people who use the same routes and means of transportation but for different reasons, usually in groups and in an irregular manner, without permission to enter or stay in the country. The people on the move could include asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants leaving their country of origin for economic, social, environmental, and security reasons or as victims of human trafficking (IOM accessed 22/05/2024; EC accessed 22/05/2024; UNODC accessed 22/05/2024; EC accessed 27/05/2024).

The eastern Mediterranean mixed migration route is a major pathway to Europe mainly through Greece after crossing Türkiye. The majority of people travelling along this route are fleeing conflict, discrimination, and dire economic conditions in their countries of origin.

They mainly come from East Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (IOM accessed 25/03/2024; UNHCR 23/06/2023). By May 2024, over 1.3 million refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in an irregular status had arrived in Greece since 2014 through land and sea borders (UNHCR accessed 21/05/2024).

### Mixed migration flows along the eastern Mediterranean route

From 2015 to the beginning of 2016, Greece experienced a significant number (nearly one million) of arrivals of people fleeing the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, which intensified during that period (UNHCR 31/12/2016; HRW 18/06/2015; Time 23/12/2015).

To combat the high number of arrivals in Europe, in March 2016, the EU signed an agreement with Türkiye to halt irregular migration and restrict movement along the eastern Mediterranean migration route (UNHCR 16/03/2016; CSS 11/02/2024; IRC accessed 06/06/2022).

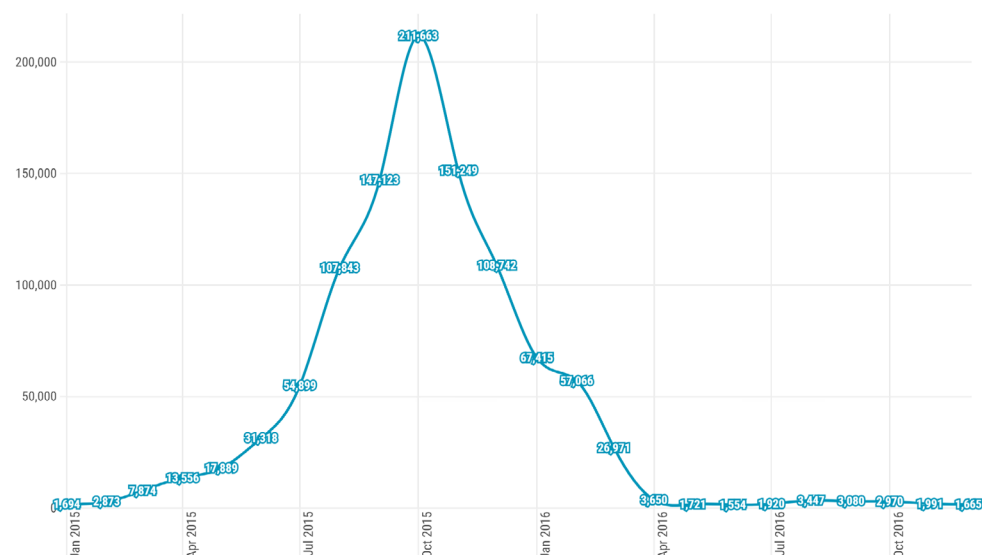
#### EU-Türkiye migration deal

The deal refers to a statement of cooperation for a five-year pact between the European Council and Türkiye signed on 18 March 2016. The agreement allocated EUR 6 billion for Türkiye to improve humanitarian conditions for refugees and granted Turkish nationals visa-free travel to Europe. In return, Türkiye had to stop people from irregularly crossing the country to the Greek islands. Those who arrived in Greece would be sent to Türkiye if deemed inadmissible. For each Syrian returned from Greece, the EU also accepted one Syrian refugee waiting inside Türkiye (European Parliament 20/05/2024; IRC 18/03/2022).

In 2020, the European Council mobilised EUR 535 million to extend the deal and then in 2021 authorised an additional EUR 3 billion for 2021–2023. By the end of 2023, the EU had disbursed more than EUR 5.3 billion (Le Monde 25/04/2024; EC 29/11/2023; EU accessed 21/03/2024). (USD 1 = EUR 1.08 based on the 1 June 2024 exchange rate)

The deal resulted in significantly reducing arrivals to Greece, but by March 2020, there were only 2,140 returnees from Greece to Türkiye (UNHCR 01/04/202; IRC 18/03/2022). The low number before 2020 was initially a result of Greek courts acknowledging that Türkiye was not a safe country for returns. In 2021, Greek authorities officially declared Türkiye a safe country for return. Until 2020, another major reason for the low number was Türkiye's refusal of returnees from Greece, confining displaced individuals to Greek territory (European Parliament 20/05/2024; IRC 18/03/2022).

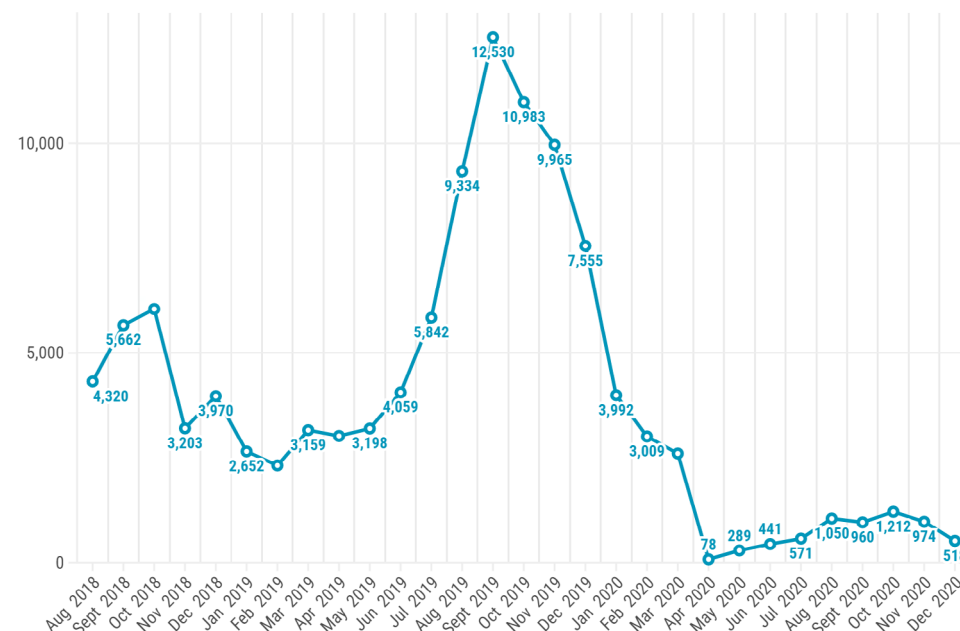
Since the agreement with Türkiye, arrivals have persisted but at a notably reduced rate, as shown in Figure 2, with arrivals peaking at 212,168 in October 2015 and dropping to only 3,934 in April 2016, after the deal went into effect (UNHCR 16/03/2016; CSS 11/02/2024; AIDA/ECRE accessed 06/06/2024; IRC 18/03/2022).



Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (accessed 21/05/2024)

At the beginning of 2019, the number of arrivals in Greece increased compared to the same period in the years before the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the majority fleeing intensifying conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Syria (IOM 07/02/2020). Following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, global movement restrictions, such as curfews, travel restrictions, and border closures, reduced mixed migration flows via the eastern Mediterranean route (MDP accessed 06/06/2024). In Greece, arrivals went down from around 74,600 in 2019 to almost 15,700 in 2020. In 2021, arrivals further decreased to around 9,200, as shown in Figure 3 (UNHCR accessed 21/05/2024).

Figure 3. Number of arrivals in Greece before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

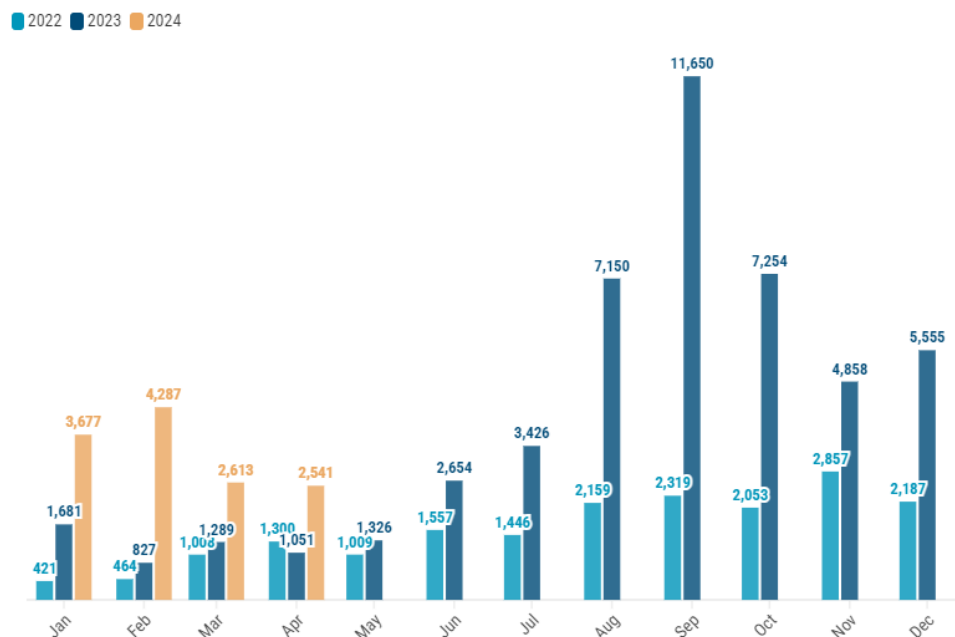


Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (accessed 21/05/2024)

In 2022, the number of arrivals started to pick up again, mainly as a result of intensified conflict and violence in Syria and Afghanistan, as well as the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria. Increased economic deterioration and discrimination against asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Türkiye also contributed to the notable rise in arrivals in Greece (ICMPD 06/02/2023; UNHCR accessed 21/05/2024; IOM 16/05/2024).

As shown in Figure 4, around 48,720 people arrived in Greece in 2023. This was a significant surge compared to 18,780 in 2022, marking a 260% increase. In the first four months of 2024, around 13,100 people arrived in Greece, also a significant surge compared to the 4,848 in the first four months of 2023, representing a 270% increase (UNHCR accessed 21/05/2024).

Figure 4. Number of arrivals in Greece by month in 2022, 2023, and 2024



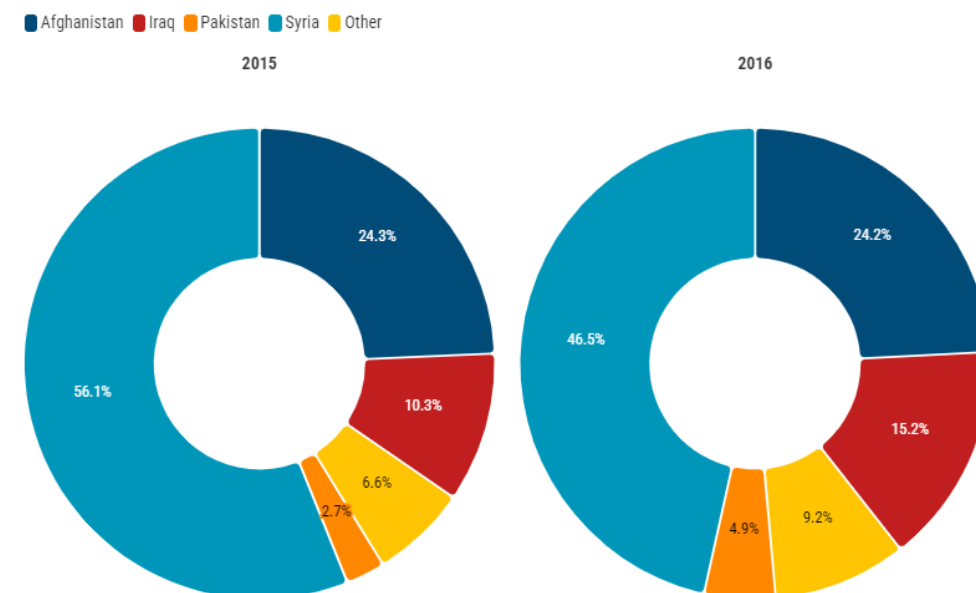
Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (accessed 21/05/2024)

For the rest of 2024, the number of arrivals is expected to keep increasing as a result of the conflicts in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria that intensified early in the year (ICMPD 14/04/2024).

### People travelling along the eastern Mediterranean mixed migration route to Greece

Prior to 2015, the vast majority of refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants arriving in Greece were men, accounting for three-fourths of all arrivals (UNFPA 20/01/2026). This changed during the spike in mixed migration flows from 2015–2016, with the significant increase in the arrival of people from countries facing conflict and violence. Arrivals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria comprised over 90% of all arrivals in 2015 and 85% in 2016 (IOM 01/01/2016 and 01/01/2017).

Figure 5. Arrivals in Greece by country of origin, 2015 and 2016

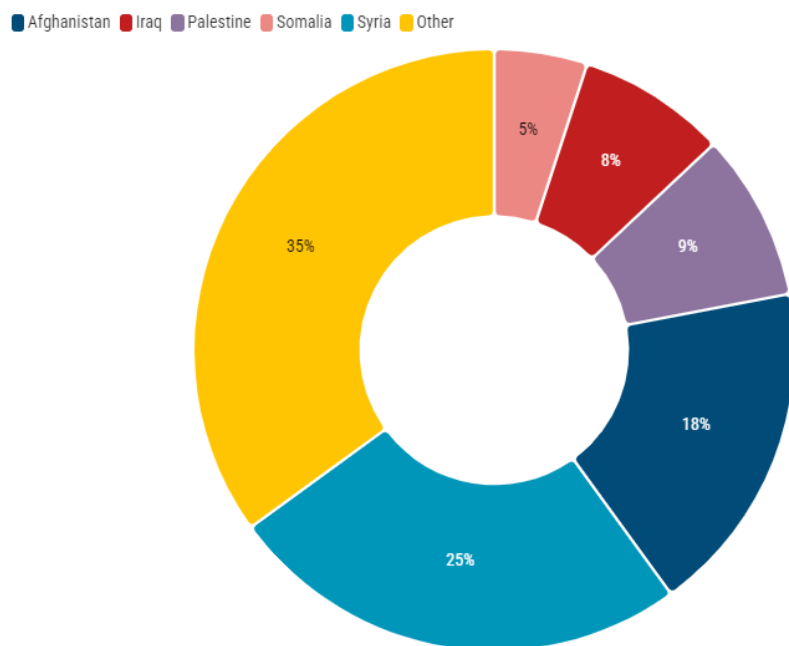


Sources: ACAPS using data from IOM (01/01/2016 and 01/01/2017)

In the second half of 2015, women and children started comprising more than half of the arrivals and, by early 2016, more than two-thirds, with children accounting for more than one-third of all arrivals (UNICEF 02/02/2016; UNFPA 20/01/2016; UNICEF/REACH 01/06/2017; UNICEF 23/09/2015). Many were seeking to join their male family members who had arrived earlier in 2015 (HPN 15/09/2016). Unaccompanied children were estimated to make up about 10% of all arrivals, mostly boys ages 15–17 (UNICEF/REACH 01/06/2017).

In 2023, arrivals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria were less than during the previous years. Regardless, Syria and Afghanistan were still the two major countries of origin, with people from these countries respectively comprising 25% and 18% of arrivals. Arrivals from Palestine made up around 9% (IOM 04/04/2024). Around 85% of all arrivals in 2023 were by sea, with women accounting for 18% and children 23% (UNHCR 19/01/2024).

Figure 6. Arrivals in Greece by country of origin, 2023



Source: ACAPS using data from IOM (04/04/2024)

According to an IOM survey conducted in 2023, around 65% of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants left their country of origin because of war and conflict, while 30% left as a result of violence, including ethnic persecution, domestic violence, and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Around 13% left for economic reasons and 11% because of limited access to basic services.

In the survey, people arriving from Türkiye reported difficult economic conditions and the impact of the earthquakes as their main reasons for moving again from Türkiye to Greece. Around 29% of all new arrivals intended to stay in Greece, 21% mentioned Germany as their final destination, and 28% wanted to reach another European country (IOM 16/05/2024).

## Dead and missing migrants

Drowning has emerged as the leading cause of death on the eastern Mediterranean route, a fact that can also be explained by the dangerous journey, pushback from authorities, and limited rescue operations (IOM 27/07/2023). Specific information on associated incidents is fragmented and scattered across different countries' databases. The exact number of deaths on this route is also hard to determine (Lighthouse Reports 01/12/2023; IOM accessed 25/03/2024; MSF 20/02/2024).

The eastern Mediterranean mixed migration route poses significant dangers for people using it to reach Europe. From 2014 until March 2024, IOM documented approximately 2,500 dead or missing people along the route that crosses Türkiye to Europe mainly through Greece. Around 2,400 of these people died from drowning (IOM accessed 29/03/2024; Solomon 09/03/2023). These numbers are underestimates, as many deaths and disappearances go unreported, especially for shipwrecks with no survivors (IOM accessed 29/03/2024; IOM accessed 25/03/2024; Lighthouse Reports 01/12/2023).

## OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

### Reception system

In 2021, the Greek authorities, with funding from the EU, started establishing CCACs in the five hotspots of Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos, and Samos Islands. The CCACs function as both reception and identification centres and controlled structures for temporary accommodation. The CCACs were intended to replace the makeshift tent cities that emerged following the high number of asylum seekers arriving in the Greek islands in 2015. The Kos, Leros, and Samos CCACs were inaugurated in 2021 and the Lesvos and Chios CCACs in 2022. On the mainland, reception facilities comprise reception and identification centres and controlled structures for temporary accommodation (EC 06/02/2023; AJ 11/05/2023; YMA accessed 01/04/2024). Arrivals whom the Greek authorities deem inadmissible as asylum seekers but who cannot be returned are geographically restricted to the hotspot islands (AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024).

### Hotspot approach

In 2015, Greece and the EU adopted the hotspot approach for containing mixed migration in Greece. Five hotspots were established on Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos, and Samos Islands. People arriving by sea after March 2016 were held in these hotspot islands until their asylum application was processed (AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024; UN HRC 02/03/2023; AJ 11/05/2023; YMA accessed 01/04/2024).

As a result of this approach, reception camps proliferated in the hotspots. Many of these camps exceeded their intended capacity, leading to overflow into makeshift tents in surrounding olive groves. These reception camps faced challenges in providing basic services, such as electricity and water (InfoMigrants 16/05/2023; The Guardian 09/02/2020; UNHCR accessed 08/04/2024; Mantanika and Arapoglou 04/10/2022).

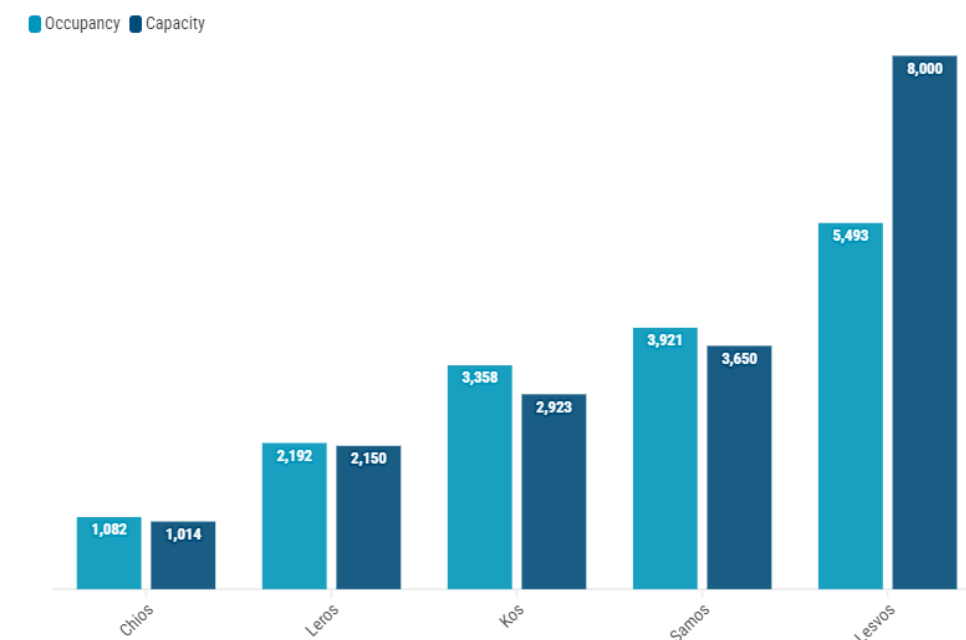
Prior to September 2020, the Moria refugee camp in Lesvos was the largest in Greece, managed by the Greek state but predominantly funded by the EU. Originally designed for 3,100 individuals, the camp housed over 20,000 people that year (InfoMigrants 16/05/2023; The Guardian 09/02/2020; UNHCR accessed 08/04/2024).

In September 2020, a fire broke out at the Moria Camp, rendering approximately 11,000 individuals homeless. This incident served as a catalyst for relocating new arrivals away from temporary tent cities or camps (InfoMigrants 16/05/2023; The Guardian 09/02/2020; UNHCR accessed 08/04/2024). The first CCAC opened in September 2021 with EU funding (AI et al. 08/09/2021).

While CCACs offer improved living conditions compared to the previously overcrowded and unsanitary camps, people in mixed movement face heightened surveillance and movement restrictions in the centres, with NGOs comparing the living conditions to those in prisons (IRC 20/09/2022; CBC 20/11/2022).

The CCACs are characterised by overcrowding and limited access to essential services, including health assistance (TNH 04/12/2023; Fenixaid 19/09/2023; UN HRC 02/03/2023). The surge in arrivals via sea and land in 2023 has contributed to this overcrowding, aggravating the strain on already insufficient services. In September 2023, the Greek authorities changed the official capacity of certain CCACs without publicly explaining the measures taken to increase the services available (GCR 14/12/2023; RSA 31/01/2024).

Figure 7. CCAC occupancy in January 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from YMA (02/01/2024)

Until registration, asylum seekers and migrants are restricted from leaving the facilities, even for medical treatment or mental health support (MSF 20/02/2024; UN HRC 02/03/2023; MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023). Even after registration, the remote location of and heavy surveillance at CCACs result in de facto detention conditions (TNH 04/12/2023; Fenixaid 19/09/2023; UN HRC 02/03/2023).



Between 13–19 May 2024, 8,863 undocumented migrants and asylum seekers lived in the hotspot islands, with 7,840 accommodated in CCACs and 377 in other facilities. An estimated 646 individuals were self-accommodated. The majority of those living in the CCACs during that period were from Afghanistan (46%) and Syria (27%), with men comprising 53%, women 19%, and children 28% of the total (UNHCR 22/05/2024; UN HRC 02/03/2023; BVMN 24/01/2024).

### Pre-removal detention centres

PRDCs are facilities where the authorities detain individuals awaiting return or who have exhausted asylum procedures. These individuals are commonly third country nationals violating migration regulations, such as by overstaying permits or breaking geographical restrictions (in relation to the obligation to remain in one of the hotspot Aegean islands). Asylum seekers may also face detention if the authorities consider them a threat to public order or national security or for trying to escape return. In March 2023, Greece had six PRDCs on the mainland: Amygdaleza, Corinth, Fylakio, Paranesti, Petrou Ralli, and Xanthi (BVMN 24/01/2024; MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; GDP accessed 01/04/2024; AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024; Oxfam 16/11/2021).

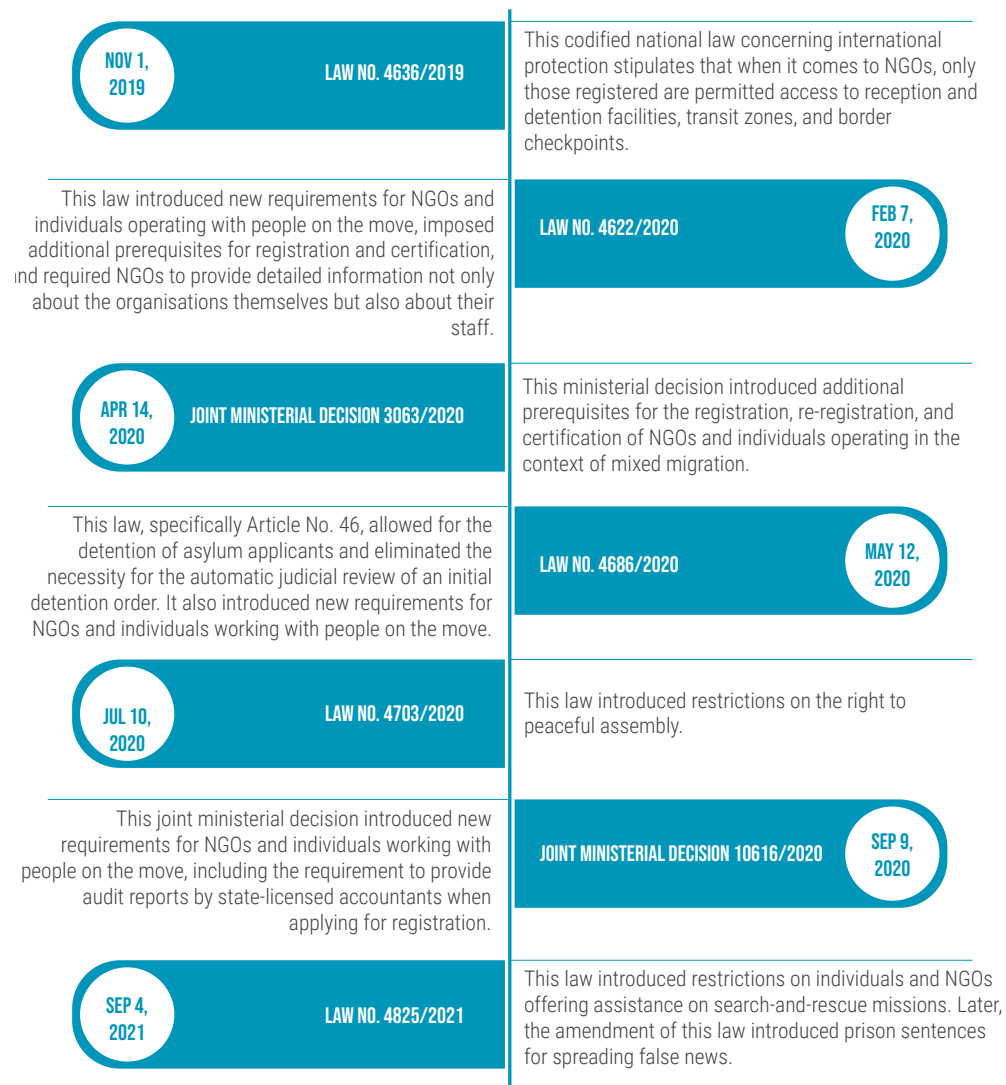
In Greece, asylum seekers can face detention of up to 18 months during the asylum process, with an additional 18 months before removal from the country should their asylum application fail. Testimonies by detainees note arbitrary detention practices concerning both the reason for and the duration of detention. Some NGOs note that since 2020, following amendments to some immigration and asylum laws, such as Law No. 4686/2020, the use of detention for people on the move has become systematic and ingrained in Greek legislation. According to these organisations, the authorities are no longer detaining third country nationals subject to return procedures as an exception but as a norm unless deemed to not be a risk (MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; LCL 04/09/2023; Oxfam 16/11/2021; UN HRC 02/03/2023; KII 04/04/2024 a). Greek authorities are also systematically detaining asylum seekers on a vaguely defined grounds of threat to public order or national security (MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; RSA/Pro Asyl 09/06/2024; KII 04/04/2024 a).

### Regulatory environment

Administrative hurdles targeting humanitarian workers and civil society members assisting people on the move impede the delivery of humanitarian assistance and obstruct access to those in need in Greece (MSF 20/02/2024). Between 2019–2021, along with the arrival of a new centre-right government, Greece adopted an overly burdensome and ambiguous series of legislations, tightening regulations for NGOs and civil society (UN HRC 02/03/2023; EDJNet 27/12/2019; TNH 04/11/2019).

These legislations have posed procedural and substantive challenges regarding freedom of association and the protection of civil society, notably for individuals and organisations working on asylum and migration issues (UN HRC 02/03/2023; MSF 20/02/2024; FRA 21/01/2021).

Figure 8. Timeline of main legislation concerning mixed migration in Greece between 2019–2021



Source: ACAPS using data from UN HRC (02/03/2023)



## Administrative constraints

One of the main obstacles for NGOs operating in Greece is the stringent registration criteria, which demand extensive details not only about the nature of organisations but also about their members, employees, and associates. These registration rules, coupled with the broad discretion of authorities for rejecting NGO registrations, further restrict civil society activities and increase government scrutiny over NGOs involved in assisting asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in an irregular status. The Ministry of Migration and Asylum can reject NGO registrations based on unclear, arbitrary, and ambiguous reasons, prompting worries about the potential misuse of the registration process (UN HRC 02/03/2023; FRA 21/01/2021; KII 26/03/2024).

The demanding administrative processes also warrant high costs and burdens, disproportionately affecting smaller and newer NGOs. The complex and expensive registration and certification procedures hinder various NGOs from participating in asylum, migration, and social integration efforts. Limited-resource organisations with high volunteer turnover, such as small or newly operating organisations, find it challenging to comply with these requirements, such as the requirement to have an external financial audit service and provide extensive documentation on staff and beneficiaries. This has led to some organisations and individuals halting their operations or foregoing registration. Unregistered NGOs in Greece face substantial obstacles, notably on islands where lack of registration limits access to camps (UN HRC 02/03/2023; CoE 02/07/2020; European Parliament 17/11/2021; KII 28/03/2024; KII 04/04/2024 a).

## Public perception impact

The increase in mixed migration flows to Greece from 2015–2016 also coincided with the economic crisis that started in 2008. The mixed migration crisis added a strain on an already deteriorating economy and reduced the Government's capacity to respond. The perception of migrants and asylum seekers as both a threat and a burden increased for fear that they will aggravate unemployment, increase insecurity, and affect cultural identity. This has contributed to the spread of anti-migrant sentiment among the wider Greek population (Amores et al. 19/12/2020; MiC et al. 18/04/2019; ODI 16/05/2023).

Coincidentally, the public has increasingly perceived people working on issues related to mixed migration in Greece negatively, with the term 'NGO' often being stigmatised. At times, traditional and social media brand those reporting on mixed migration-related issues, such as pushbacks, as traitors or accuse them of serving foreign interests (UN HRC 02/03/2023).

Because of this sentiment, migration policies and practices are contentious topics for the Greek Government, leading some officials to use provocative rhetoric and smear campaigns against journalists and human rights defenders covering migration topics. This is creating a challenging working environment for organisations assisting undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (UN HRC 02/03/2023).

People working in the mixed migration response sometimes find themselves having to obscure the fact that they work for NGOs when interacting with the public to avoid backlash and the denial of services, such as when they are in the process of apartment hunting. For some, the smear campaign and intimidation have created an environment so suffocating that it has led them to move out of Greece (KII 28/03/2024; KII 04/04/2024 a; UN HRC 02/03/2023).

## Criminalisation of humanitarian assistance

Litigation and prosecution are concerns for human rights and humanitarian organisations working in Greece, who could face legal challenges for aiding people on the move (UN HRC 02/03/2023; KII 04/04/2024 a). Organisations and individuals are only allowed to provide search-and-rescue assistance if called upon by the port authorities and have to follow their orders and instructions, otherwise they face fines and criminal charges. The fines range from EUR 3,000–6,000 (USD 3241–6482 based on the 1 June 2024 exchange rate) for organisations and EUR 500–1,000 (USD 540–1080 as of 06/06/2024) for individuals, and repeated violations may incur a 100% penalty increase. People involved in rescue operations without being called upon by the port authority also risk imprisonment of up to one or, in the case of an accident, three years (UN HRC 02/03/2023).

In 2023, several humanitarians faced charges in relation to their work assisting migrants and asylum seekers in 2018. The workers were originally accused of espionage, forming a criminal organisation, money laundering, and trafficking. Three of these humanitarian workers were arrested in August 2018 and spent more than three months in pre-trial detention. In 2024, the courts acquitted the workers of the espionage charges, but the charges of forming a criminal organisation has yet to be tried at criminal courts (AA 31/01/2024; DW 01/09/2023). In April 2024, a Greek court dropped criminal charges against another 35 international aid workers accused of espionage and facilitating illegal entry of migrants into Greece (Reuters 30/04/2024; The Guardian 01/05/2024).

The criminalisation of humanitarian work has led to the closure and suspension of the activities of multiple organisations responding to the needs of people in mixed movements in the Greek islands. Many humanitarian workers, human rights defenders, and NGOs have scaled back their operations or reduced their visibility out of fear of penalties; in some cases, volunteers have ceased operations entirely (UN HRC 02/03/2023; CoE 02/07/2020; MSF 02/11/2023; ECRE 02/06/2023).

Human rights and humanitarian organisations criticise the criminalisation of humanitarian work and accuse the Greek authorities of misusing the legal system to harass humanitarian work and deter rescue efforts (HRW 11/11/2021; Reuters 13/01/2023; NYT 13/01/2023).

### Information landscape and reporting constraints

Journalists covering migration and asylum topics in Greece face significant challenges, including state violence, government interference in media affairs, and inadequate legal safeguards. Limited media diversity and surveillance scandals worsen the situation. Accessing information on mixed migration-related issues remains difficult given the Government's security-focused approach (HRW 16/03/2023; UN HRC 02/03/2023).

Greece ranks 107th out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index issued by Reporters Without Borders, right behind Senegal, Qatar, and Thailand (RSF accessed 01/04/2024). Journalists have reported facing police coercion, such as the confiscation of their equipment and being forced to delete photos, especially when they attempt to report on protests or migration issues (HRW 05/05/2023; Politico 03/05/2023).

Strategic litigation by authorities targets journalists covering migration issues, highlighting a broader pattern of targeting journalists for their reporting activities (HRW 16/03/2023; UN HRC 02/03/2023). It is commonplace for individuals and entities to use abusive litigation to silence their critics through the Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation (RSF accessed 01/04/2024; HRW 05/05/2023; Politico 03/05/2023).

The National Intelligence Service in Greece has also been implicated in surveillance activities targeting journalists, politicians, and human rights defenders. The lack of government transparency regarding the extent of this surveillance raises concerns beyond those directly targeted. Surveillance incidents have sparked fears among individuals and organisations assisting people on the move regarding privacy, digital security, and potential interference with their work given the sensitive nature of the data some might handle. Others find themselves operating under a cloud of suspicion, affecting their work methods and communication practices (AI 26/01/2023; HRW 07/11/2022; Politico 28/02/2023; KII 04/04/2024 a).

Access to detention and reception facilities in Greece, including CCACs and PRDCs, is highly constrained. The number of NGOs allowed to access these centres is very limited, and access requires official authorisation. Few registered NGOs can operate in these facilities, and visits are often prearranged. The directors of the facilities may establish specific terms and conditions for each visit, including its timing (UN HRC 02/03/2023; CoE 02/07/2020; European Parliament 17/11/2021; KII 28/03/2024). The challenges in getting access also create pressure on organisations operating in these centres to maintain close and positive relations with authorities and officials, leading them to avoid giving overly critical assessments of reception and detention facilities to ensure continued access (KII 04/04/2024 a; KII 04/04/2024 b).

## PROTECTION CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

### Access to legal support

NGOs report restrictions in accessing lawyers and interpreter service gaps at CCACs, leading to delayed and limited legal support for asylum seekers. According to several NGOs, the reception and identification service at some CCACs unlawfully restricts lawyers' access. According to documents reviewed by news outlets, EU representatives overseeing CCAC operations between March 2022 and February 2023 raised concerns about a significant gap in interpreter services that caused delays in all procedures, from initial registration to asylum interview (ECRE 26/01/2024; AJ 11/05/2023). The insufficient support results in complex and exclusionary procedures for asylum seekers, leading to the widespread rejection of applications (MSF 20/02/2024; RI 24/11/2020; UN HRC 02/03/2023).

Upon arrival at CCACs and other reception centres, individuals are held for up to 25 days for registration, during which time civil society organisations have limited access to them. Legal representation is unavailable until the first registration interview with authorities. Access to legal counselling in PRDCs in Greece is severely restricted. Functional free legal aid is limited for asylum seekers to contest detention rulings. Detainees often lack awareness of the grounds for their detention, with reports revealing that a considerable number of signed documents are in languages they do not understand. One NGO assessment discovered that approximately 40% of respondents in various PRDCs were detained without understanding the cause, and 33% signed documents in a language they did not understand. Accessing legal services is also particularly challenging for detainees in facilities that do not allow them to have mobile phones (MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; Medical Justice 04/10/2023; BVMN 11/04/2023; KII 04/04/2024 a).

### Inadmissibility of asylum seekers

In June 2021, the joint ministerial decision of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Migration and Asylum in Greece designated Türkiye as a safe third country for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria. This allowed Greece to deem asylum applications from nationals of these countries as inadmissible based on their nationality rather than their individual circumstances or the risks they face in their country of origin (MSF 20/02/2024; AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024; RI 08/03/2022). This has led to the rejection of a big portion of asylum seeker applications from people from these countries. For example, between 7 June and 31 December 2021, 47% of the applications from people from those five countries were found inadmissible (IRC 18/03/2023). It is important to note that people from those five countries comprised the vast majority of arrivals in Greece since 2015 (IOM 01/01/2016 and 01/01/2017).

Asylum seekers deemed inadmissible based on the safe third country concept undergo fast-track procedures to be sent to Türkiye under the EU-Türkiye migration deal. The asylum application of these nationalities can be processed in Greece only if Türkiye is proven unsafe for them. In March 2020, the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic and, later, Türkiye's demands for Greece to cease pushbacks and revoke its decision designating Türkiye as a safe third country for people coming from the above-mentioned five countries halted returns under the EU-Türkiye joint declaration (MSF 20/02/2024; AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024; RI 08/03/2022).

Despite the return suspension, asylum authorities in Greece have continued applying the safe third country concept. Given the lack of prospect for readmission to Türkiye since 2020, those deemed inadmissible face legal limbo, limiting their access to dignified living standards and basic needs in Greece, including healthcare, food assistance, and accommodations (MSF 20/02/2024; AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024; RI 08/03/2022).

## Access to fair asylum procedures

Many asylum seekers often face challenges in proving their stated nationality because of their statelessness, including Kurdish people and Palestinians from Syria or Eritreans in Ethiopia. Some of them lack identification documents, which they could have lost during the journey (Fenixaid 01/04/2024; Leivaditi et al. 31/01/2020).

Caseworkers may rely on a nationality assessment to assign an estimated nationality for the asylum seekers. This assessment is based on a set of questions that, in some cases, fails to consider the complexity of individual situations, including language and cultural differences. Some asylum seekers might not comprehend their country of origin from a Western lens, leading to inaccurate and unfair assessments. This complicates the asylum claim, especially for applicants assigned the estimated nationality of a country considered safer than their stated nationality, hurting their chances of obtaining asylum. Some feel pressured to accept the wrong estimated nationality out of fear that their application will be rejected if they challenge the caseworker during the registration interview. Inaccurate nationality assessments are extremely difficult to challenge in practice, complicating asylum claims and raising the burden of proof for a fair outcome (Fenixaid 01/04/2024; AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024).

This seems to be an issue particularly for Eritrean nationals identified as Ethiopians, Afghans recorded as Iranians, and Sudanese people as South Sudanese. Wrong identification can lead to the denial of refugee status should the chosen nationality be deemed a safer place of origin (EU News 08/04/2024). The number of people whom this practice affects is hard to determine, as empirical research on the topic is scant. As per various NGOs, the practice seems systematic (Manzotti 26/04/2023; RSA 26/01/2021).

## Pushback

As a measure to reduce and deter arrivals, the Greek authorities use a range of pushback tactics to expel or prevent individuals from entering the country either for migration or to seek international protection (FA 20/01/2022; MSF 01/11/2023). Consequently, pushbacks result in migrants and individuals seeking international protection being sent back to their region of origin, left at sea (drift-backs), or returned to the location from which they attempted to cross the borders. Intercepted migrants and asylum seekers frequently endure physical and verbal violence from authorities before being pushed back at sea (FA 20/01/2022; MSF 01/11/2023). These actions are often indiscriminate and sometimes involve collaboration from third countries or non-state parties, such as private companies and multilateral organisations (MSF 02/11/2023; OHCHR 12/05/2021; Solomon 03/03/2023; ECRE 08/09/2023).

### Pushbacks

In the context of mixed migration, and according to the definition provided by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants at the UN OHCHR, pushbacks are the "various measures taken by states which result in migrants, including asylum-seekers, being summarily forced back to the country from where they attempted to cross or have crossed an international border without access to international protection or asylum procedures or denied of any individual assessment on their protection needs which may lead to a violation of the principle of non-refoulement" (OHCHR 12/05/2021; European Parliament 27/10/2022).

The exact number of individuals facing pushback from the Greek authorities cannot be accurately determined given the absence of an independent monitoring mechanism. Based on numerous reports, the numbers seem to be in the tens of thousands annually (MSF 02/11/2023; Daily Sabah 02/01/2024; ECRE 09/09/2022; FA 20/01/2024).

## Drift-backs

At sea, to sea currents that push them back to Turkish waters. Uniformed officers or unidentified individuals wearing masks typically carry out these actions (MSF 09/08/2022 and 02/11/2023; FA 20/01/2024; NYT 19/05/2023).

Investigations by Forensic Architecture found evidence for 2,010 drift-backs in the Aegean Sea between February 2020 and February 2023, affecting 55,445 individuals. 32 cases documented the Hellenic Coast Guard forcibly throwing individuals into the sea without providing any flotation devices. The data that Forensic Architecture used was sourced from

the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) through freedom of information requests, in conjunction with information from the Turkish Coast Guard and data and images from journalistic inquiries conducted by international media outlets (FA 20/01/2024).

FRONTEX, which has a search-and-rescue obligation, but which mainly functions as a search-and-surveillance organisation, was involved in some of these drift-backs, according to both the Forensic Architecture investigation and a joint investigation by Lighthouse Reports, Der Spiegel, SRF Rundschau, Republik, and Le Monde. According to the Forensic Architecture investigation, the German NATO warship FGS Berlin was present at the scene in three documented cases (FA 20/01/2024; The Guardian 28/04/2022; Spiegel 27/04/2022; European Ombudsman 07/03/2024; UN HRC 02/03/2023).

Some individuals recount being chased and captured by groups of masked individuals upon arrival at the Greek islands, where they endured physical and verbal violence before being forcibly taken out to sea on vessels, transferred to life rafts, and left to drift back on the current to Turkish waters (MSF 02/11/2023; FA 20/01/2024; PACE 21/06/2022).

### Fear of forced returns

After crossing through land or upon reaching land from sea, some migrants and asylum seekers feel compelled to hide out of fear of being forcibly returned. Many endure days of hiding without access to food, water, or shelter, exposed to harsh weather conditions and treacherous terrain. Reports from Lesbos and Samos Islands detail migrants and asylum seekers being forced into hiding in mountainous areas, often scaling slippery cliffs to evade detection by unidentified masked individuals or uniformed officers (MSF 02/11/2023; MSF 20/02/2024; IOM 10/01/2017).

### Physical violence and xenophobia

There have been media and NGO reports in the past few years of organised violence against migrants and asylum seekers, with some incidents involving civilian self-proclaimed militias in border areas with Türkiye patrolling the borders and committing violence against people on the move (UNHCR 25/08/2023; RVRN 06/04/2023).

The targeting of migrants intensified after the Evros wildfires of August 2023, with allegations blaming migrants for the fires spreading widely (The Guardian 23/11/2023 and 01/09/2023; IFRC 04/08/2023).

In August 2023, following the spread of wildfires, a video on social media depicted organised violence against a group of people on the move, whom vigilantes cramped into a van and detained. The Greek authorities arrested two suspects in the case, but many NGOs say that this incident of organised violence is not a one-off (El País 24/08/2023; Le Monde 25/08/2023).

Testimonies by mixed migrants reveal instances of Greek state violence that include physical and verbal abuse and inhumane treatment. These practices involve beatings, including slapping, kicking, and punching, often accompanied by intimidation tactics, verbal harassment, and humiliation. Forced strip searches and intrusive body searches are also reported (MSF 09/08/2022, 02/11/2023, and 20/02/2024; Reuters 02/11/2023).

### Property confiscation

Migrants and asylum seekers have reported incidents of their belongings being confiscated along the mixed migration route. An investigation conducted by El País and Solomon, drawing on sources that included employees and institutions associated with the Greek asylum system, uncovered that Greek security forces confiscated more than EUR 2 million (USD 2.15 million based on the 1 June 2024 exchange rate) from migrants and asylum seekers between 2017–2022 during pushback operations. This figure is likely an underestimate as a result of underreporting (ECRE 02/06/2023; Solomon 09/03/2023; MSF 02/11/2023).

## HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS

### Search-and-rescue operations

The boats that people use to cross the Aegean Sea from Türkiye to Greece include rubber rafts and fishing vessels, which are not designed for deep waters and are prone to mechanical failures, running out of fuel, or capsizing (BBC 13/08/2023; UN 10/06/2022; CBS 30/06/2023).

Boats in distress could languish at sea for days without assistance, especially with the constraints that the Greek authorities imposed in 2021 on organisations and individuals, which criminalise search-and-rescue operations if conducted without previous authorisation from port authorities. NGOs report instances of Greek authorities deliberately not assisting the distressed calls of people stranded at sea as part of the pushbacks, aggravating the dangers people face in crossing the Mediterranean (NYT 01/07/2023; BBC 13/08/2023; EuroMed Rights 27/09/2022; UN HRC 02/03/2023; FA 20/01/2024).

Migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea face significant risks, including drowning, exposure to extreme cold, and succumbing to exhaustion. The journey can last for days aboard dangerously overcrowded boats carrying hundreds of migrants, often equipped with limited flotation devices (IOM accessed 25/03/2024; Lighthouse Reports 01/12/2023; BBC 13/08/2023).

### Health needs

Upon arrival, many migrants and asylum seekers are found in a state of emotional distress, exhausted, and physically injured, with signs of dehydration, hypoglycaemia, heat exhaustion, and cold-related ailments, such as frostbite and hypothermia. The conditions of people on the move upon arrival highlight their health needs, particularly for groups with specific vulnerabilities, such as pregnant women, newborns, unaccompanied minors, and older people. This underscores the need for humanitarian assistance (MSF 20/02/2024 and 02/11/2023).

The inadequacy of healthcare provision for people in mixed movements generates further health needs, especially at reception and detention facilities. Some camps have lacked a state-appointed doctor for years, relying solely on ad hoc volunteer doctors from local hospitals (MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; MSF 20/02/2024; AJ 11/05/2023).

Access to medical services for individuals with non-communicable and communicable diseases is frequently delayed until they are officially registered as asylum seekers, a process that can take several weeks. Consequently, the health conditions of many worsen while awaiting registration (MSF 20/02/2024).

The past experiences of asylum seekers in their countries of origin and during their journey to Greece often involve profound suffering, marked by humiliation and dehumanisation, causing trauma. Many endure violence such as torture, sexual violence, and the loss of loved ones. Even so, at CCACs, access to crucial medical and psychological services is limited, further deepening people's vulnerability and aggravating existing traumas (MSF 02/11/2023; InfoMigrants 08/12/2022).

Vulnerability assessments for new arrivals are often inadequate, especially for people with less evident needs, such as those who need mental health assistance or survivors of sexual gender-based violence and torture. Pregnant women, minors, and those with specific medical needs are often left without the required care and legal rights they deserve (MSF 20/02/2024; RSA 31/01/2024).

NGOs also report a shortage of translators and medical staff in PRDCs, including doctors, nurses, and psychologists. Medical translation services are rarely available for detainees, affecting healthcare access and leading to dismissiveness. NGOs have reported instances of self-harm, such as detainees stabbing or severely beating themselves to obtain medical attention (AIDA/ECRE accessed 08/06/2024; MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023). The harsh conditions in PRDCs significantly affect detainees' psychological wellbeing (MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; CoE 09/04/2020).

### WASH needs

CCACs frequently experience water cuts and shortages. Limited water sources restrict the supply of drinking and cooking water, as well as access to showers and toilets, raising significant hygiene and health concerns (MSF 20/02/2024; Medium 20/05/2022; AJ 11/05/2023).

Since the onset of summer 2023, especially between July and September 2023, overcrowding and poor infrastructure compounded by water cuts have led to the alarming spread of scabies and other contagious skin conditions in CCACs. According to NGOs and residents, the situation has worsened with the rising population (TNH 04/12/2023; AJ 11/05/2023; MSF 20/02/2024; UNHCR accessed 21/05/2024).

The testimonies of detainees collected by NGOs reveal excessively high numbers of people sharing toilets in PRDCs. For example, in the Xanthi PRDC, around 50 people share one toilet; in Corinth, 48 people also share one toilet. Limited healthcare access, compounded by poor hygiene conditions, leads to deteriorating health conditions among detainees. Breathing problems and skin conditions, particularly after cold winters, are commonly reported (MIT/Border Criminologies 22/02/2023; CoE 09/04/2020).

## Livelihoods and food security needs

Many asylum seekers in CCACs, upon receiving international protection or in the process of appealing a negative decision, lack the means to sustain themselves outside the reception centres. Those who obtain refugee status immediately lose cash assistance and must depart the reception centre within 30 days as per legislation. While they should receive support for community integration and social benefits, bureaucratic barriers, such as difficulties in obtaining residence permits and social security numbers, hinder their access to assistance, especially within the 30-day window (RLS 15/06/2023; LNOB 21/05/2023; KII 26/03/2024).

Asylum seekers often lack the financial means to purchase food, leading them to rely on regular aid distributions and relief supplies. A number of NGOs have accused CCAC authorities of restricting food assistance and health services for those with positive asylum decisions or in the appeal process, creating a food insecurity situation and affecting the basic and indispensable human rights of asylum seekers and migrants (LNOB 21/05/2023; OHCHR 03/07/2023; MSF 20/02/2024; Fenixaid/Samos Volunteers 12/12/2023).