

MPC - MIGRATION POLICY CENTRE

Tariq al-Euroba *Displacement Trends* *of Syrian Asylum Seekers to the EU*

Luigi Achilli

MPC Research Report 2016/01

In collaboration with

INTERS  **S**
HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION

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Research Report
MPC RR 2016/01

Tariq al-Euroba: Displacement Trends
of Syrian Asylum Seekers to the EU

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The Migration Policy Centre (MPC)

Mission statement

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society.

Rationale

Migration represents both an opportunity and a challenge. While well-managed migration may foster progress and welfare in origin- as well as destination countries, its mismanagement may put social cohesion, security and national sovereignty at risk. Sound policy-making on migration and related matters must be based on knowledge, but the construction of knowledge must in turn address policy priorities. Because migration is rapidly evolving, knowledge thereof needs to be constantly updated. Given that migration links each individual country with the rest of the world, its study requires innovative cooperation between scholars around the world.

The MPC conducts field as well as archival research, both of which are scientifically robust and policy-relevant, not only at European level, but also globally, targeting policy-makers as well as politicians. This research provides tools for addressing migration challenges, by: 1) producing policy-oriented research on aspects of migration, asylum and mobility in Europe and in countries located along migration routes to Europe, that are regarded as priorities; 2) bridging research with action by providing policy-makers and other stakeholders with results required by evidence-based policy-making, as well as necessary methodologies that address migration governance needs; 3) pooling scholars, experts, policy makers, and influential thinkers in order to identify problems, research their causes and consequences, and devise policy solutions.

The MPC's research includes a core programme and several projects, most of them co-financed by the European Union.

Results of the above activities are made available for public consultation through the website of the project: www.migrationpolicycentre.eu

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INTERSOS

Mission statement

INTERSOS mission is to help persons, families and communities in the areas most affected by crisis all over the world, offering protection and solidarity to the civilian populations in life threatening situations, in situations of famine, and suffering from extreme poverty, natural disaster or the destructive effects of human actions.

Rationale

Established in 1992, INTERSOS is a not for profit humanitarian aid organization that believes in and works towards a world of equality, justice, peace and solidarity. It believes that every individual has a responsibility to unconditionally support people to live in dignity and safety, alleviating suffering and meeting their needs.

INTERSOS aims at supporting the most vulnerable with a particular focus on people displaced because of conflicts, extreme poverty and natural disasters. Through its work, INTERSOS also intends to lay the ground for steps towards recovery and development, and it is committed to promote the concept of global responsibility by mobilizing society towards solidarity and impartiality, based on the fundamental rights of every human being.

INTERSOS helps alleviate suffering by providing support during humanitarian emergencies. It does this by reacting to prevent more disastrous effects of the crisis; by assisting people forced to flee their own homes; by supporting them through their return and reintegration; by rehabilitating social structures and facilities; by fighting discrimination and helping to resume talks.

INTERSOS believes in the centrality of the protection, conceived as the respect of the rights of any individual, in the spirit of the International Humanitarian Law, the Refugees' Rights and the Human Rights Laws. For this reason INTERSOS approach is holistic: protection values are included in the entire relief programming, while promoting at the same time actions of active protection in response to the identified humanitarian needs (Health and Nutrition, Food Assistance/Food Security, WASH, Shelter, NFIs, etc.).

In field of migration, INTERSOS is already active in Italy, as well as in Yemen and Somalia, and it is committed to this thematic both operationally and politically. All migration projects have an advocacy component and build on the model of mobile, flexible and small projects that can react to new needs, absolutely avoiding any notion of substitution of the state authorities from their responsibilities and duties.

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Abstract

This research report seeks to shed more light on the current flow of Syrian asylum seekers to Europe. Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, it is estimated that millions of people have fled their homes. As of October 2015, 700,000 of them have declared asylum in the European Union. Although most European states that are receiving Syrian refugees have signed and ratified the 1951 Convention, it is a challenge to guarantee refugees' basic rights: given the lack of money, the lack of an infrastructure to manage large and sudden influxes; and, above all, unclear political strategies. The flawed response is also generated by a failure to understand the factors that are leading Syrian families to make such a dangerous journey to Europe, factors that push them to waste all their savings and jump on boats leading them to unknown lands. Indeed, despite the high political and humanitarian interest around growing global migration levels, there are very few systems in place to monitor the migration flows, especially in the Middle East and towards Europe. Our knowledge of irregular migration is often plagued with fragmented perspectives on the socio-cultural dynamics of the journey, the smuggler-traveller relationship and their community dimensions. Moreover, there is no exhaustive data collection to support humanitarian organization programmes in terms of easing the movement of refugees, safely and with dignity. The lack of systematic investigation of migration in Europe and in the Middle East generates fears and misconceptions among the population at large; while, in order to respond effectively to the emergency, more evidence-based knowledge is urgently needed to share as widely as possible. The present report aims at filling this information gap through systematic and participatory data collection exercises. It reports data and information from Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon about push and pull factors, protection risks and threats, and the availability of information before and during their journey across the Balkans.

Key words: Syrian refugees, Europe, irregular migration, humanitarian organizations, Middle East, Balkans

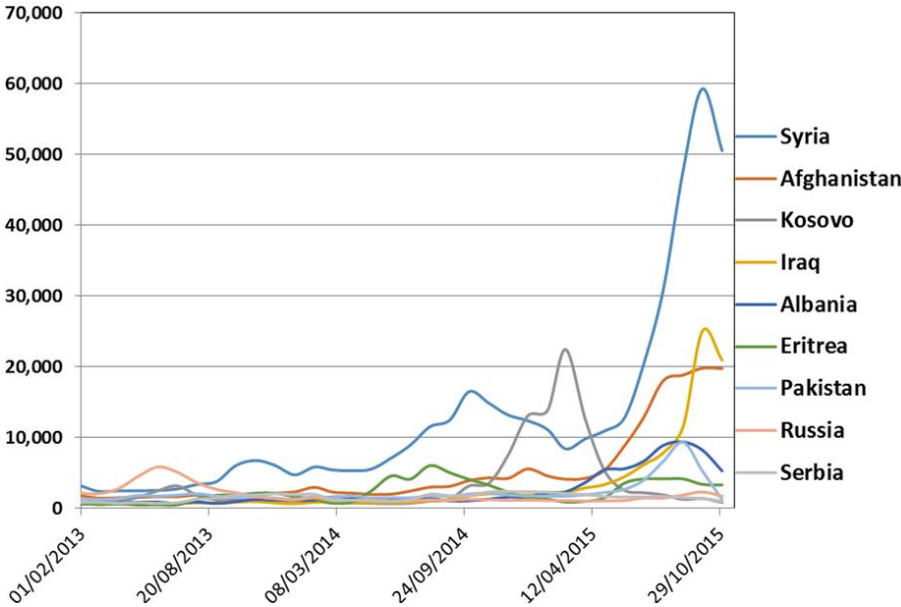
1. Introduction

The context

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, it is estimated that millions of people have fled their homes. Deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure; the killing and maiming of civilians; armed attacks on schools and hospitals; a complete lack of access to the most basic services, including food and water, have forced millions of Syrians to seek refuge outside their country of origin. A bleak scenario plays out against the backdrop of a Europe allegedly crumbling under the sheer weight of refugees. The Syrian exodus has generated a real state of emergency in Europe during the last few weeks, with public opinion confused and terrified by pathetic photos of corpses lying on the shores and aggressive strangers trying to push through Europe’s security walls. At the time of writing, Hungary has declared a state of emergency, leaving thousands of asylum seekers (most of them Syrians) stranded on its border with Serbia.¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reiterated its call for a robust and coherent European response to the current refugee crisis, but expressed deep disappointment that European Union member states have failed to reach agreement over a wider relocation plan of up to 120,000 people.

With the general hysteria about the risks posed by Syrian refugees, public opinion has forgotten that only 700,000 of them declared asylum in the European Union from the beginning of the crisis to October 2015 (UNHCR 2015; see figure 1). On the other hand, according to UNHCR, there are over 7.5 million internally displaced (IDPs) and almost 4.5 million have fled to Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan (UNHCR 2015).

Figure 1. Asylum Applicants in the EU28 by nationality – Top 10 countries 2010-2015 (monthly flows)



Source: Fargues 2015.

¹ In the current report, Syrians travelling to the EU are often referred to as both “refugees” and “asylum seekers”. Each term, of course, has a distinct meaning that carries different international obligations and consequences. The use of the two terms in the document is explained by the ambiguous situation of Syrians. The vast majority of Syrians who left Syria after the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 and who entered Jordan and Lebanon were registered with UNHCR in the respective countries. However, since their status has not yet been definitively determined in Europe, these people are still asylum seekers while journeying to Europe.

However, the available services within the hosting communities have grown thinner and the hosting communities have raised serious concerns over the availability of already limited resources: Jordan is concerned about the chronic lack of safe drinkable water, for instance. As a response to this prolonged crisis, neighbouring countries have adopted harsher policies towards refugees, by periodically closing their borders; limiting access to employment, as well as to health and educational facilities. In the meantime, international donors are running out of funds and humanitarian agencies – such as World Food Programme (WFP) – have dramatically decreased their assistance to Syrians, so as to further fuel their search for better living conditions. This situation has been a significant push factor for many refugee families, who have decided to move to other countries, where reception policies are more encouraging and asylum seekers regulations more generous.

Although most European states that are receiving Syrian refugees have signed and ratified the 1951 Convention, it is a challenge to guarantee refugees' basic rights: given the lack of money, the lack of an infrastructure to manage large and sudden influxes; and, above all, unclear political strategies. Therefore, it was not surprising to watch refugees being beaten, attacked with tear gas and water cannons, and denied entry or legal stay. European states are failing to protect asylum seekers and failing to respond humanly and promptly to a massive humanitarian and political crisis.

The flawed response is, in part, generated by a failure to understand the factors that are leading Syrian families to make such a dangerous journey to Europe, factors that push them to waste all their savings and jump on boats leading them to unknown lands. Indeed, despite the high political and humanitarian interest around growing global migration levels, there are very few systems in place to monitor the migration flows, especially in the Middle East and towards Europe. The humanitarian community generally does not believe that information about migration flows is collected consistently and, above all, in a participatory manner. As a result, our knowledge of irregular migration is often plagued with fragmented perspectives on the socio-cultural dynamics of the journey, the smuggler-traveller relationship and their community dimensions. Moreover, there is no exhaustive data collection to support humanitarian organization programmes in terms of easing the movement of refugees, safely and with dignity.

The lack of systematic investigation of migration in Europe and in the Middle East generates fears and misconceptions among the population at large; while, in order to respond effectively to the emergency, more evidence-based knowledge is urgently needed to share as widely as possible.

The study

The present report aims at filling this information gap through systematic and participatory data collection exercises. These will shed more light on the dynamics that lead refugees to travel towards Europe. This research study is part of an ongoing research project, which is the result of a joint collaboration of INTERSOS and the Migration Policy Centre (MPC), part of the larger Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. The combination of work done by the lead MPC researcher, Dr Luigi Achilli, and the assistance provided by INTERSOS focal points and INTERSOS field staff has resulted in a fine-grained analysis.² This study will provide the reader with a nuanced understanding of the most important aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis.

This paper reports data and information from Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon about push and pull factors, protection risks and threats, and the availability of information before and during their journey across the Balkans. The whole analysis revolves around two overarching questions: why did unexpectedly surprisingly high number of Syrian refugees leave for Europe over the summer and fall of 2015? And what types of risks and challenges does this journey pose for them? To address these issues, the analysis will make the journey, focusing on refugees' departure, journey to Europe, and arrival.

² Special acknowledgment to Monica Matarazzo for her complete support of this study and assistance on the report.

Field research for this report was carried out in Jordan and Lebanon as well as along the Balkan route: i.e. Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia. As such, research at departure points is largely about Syrian refugees who live or lived for a certain period of time in Jordan and Lebanon. Refugees in Syria or in other countries of first asylum (Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt) will appear more for the purposes of comparison. That will help the reader get a better grasp of the specificity of the Jordanian and Lebanese contexts as well as appreciating shared features. The interviews of refugees, aid personnel, scholars and others on which this study is based were, where possible, planned in advance and based on a schedule of questions covering key thematic areas of interest. Obviously, the research objectives were flexible as the availability of individuals and key informants has at times been hampered by security issues as well as by their willingness to discuss potentially controversial issues. Single interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were adapted to the specific context and requirements of the research. Gender, age and diversity issues were taken into consideration by deploying gender-based teams in the field. In so doing, refugees were approached in full respect of their dignity and safety. Questions were tailored to be culturally appropriate and so do no harm, while still ensuring that adequate information was gathered. Finally, while open and semi-structured interviews and field notes remained the most important part of the research, the author devoted some time to participant observation: travelling with refugees and becoming part of their experience.³

2. The departure

2.1 Countries of first asylum: A deteriorating situation

The condition of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon has got radically worse with the protraction of the Syrian crisis. All those interviewed confirmed how their situation has become unbearable at different levels – from their incapacity to find steady employment to the lack of proper health coverage, to the daily discriminations endured from local authorities and host-communities. A bleak scenario is today playing out against the ongoing Syrian crisis.

Restrictions on freedom of movement

The Government of Jordan and Lebanon are not signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention related to the status of refugees or its 1967 Protocol. Both countries deal with refugees within certain margins of discretion. A large majority of refugees interviewed lamented the systematic restriction on their movement following the recent approval of a number of regulations by the host countries.

The Jordanian authorities have, since 2014, progressively restrained Syrian refugees' freedom of movement in urban areas. Refugees used to be able to register with UNHCR no matter the status of their documentation. Since 14 July 2014, the government has instructed UNHCR to stop issuing Asylum Seeker Certificates (ASCs) to Syrian refugees that have left the camps without proper "bail out" documentation.⁴ The ASC is indispensable for obtaining Ministry of Interior (MoI) Service Cards for refugee access to public health care and education services in host communities. The new policy has consequently affected many Syrian households. Furthermore, cards need to be renewed on a yearly basis. The cost for renewing a MOI card is 50 JOD for each card, which makes it extremely costly for large households. Refugees without a valid MOI card face deportation to camps; humanitarian

³ As this is not a representative sample of Syrian seeking asylum, no final conclusions should be drawn regarding the nature of refugees' irregular migration to Europe. In addition, a number of issues – such as the sensitivity of certain information and the limited time for fieldwork – may have ultimately affected the data collection. However, though findings cannot be generalised, the present report provides an important insight into the current displacement trends of Syrian migrants to the EU.

⁴ The "bail out" is the legal process by which the Jordanian authorities grant Syrian refugees the permission to leave camps and holding facilities.

organizations have also reported several cases of *refoulement* back to Syria in violation of international obligations (SNAP 2014).

In Lebanon, new residence renewal procedures have come into force since January 2015. These have introduced financial and bureaucratic obstacles to the renewal procedure and they have restricted the number of refugees with valid residence permits. The Lebanese government requires refugees to provide additional documentation, which is expensive and difficult to get. These include a housing pledge by the landlord/landowner that demonstrates his/her entitlement to lease the property to the Syrian tenant. The sponsorship system exacerbates refugees' vulnerability to exploitation and make them overly dependent on humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, also those refugees interviewed in Lebanon reported the cost for the renewal of their residency visas (USD 200) as a great obstacle. Those Syrian nationals found by the authorities without proper documentation are required to leave the country. According to trusted sources, the Government of Lebanon has not systematically enforced deportation up to the present time. These new regulations, however, effectively opened the way to legal sanctions against the refugees, including indictment and imprisonment.

A similar situation seems to exist in Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. The Government of Egypt, for example, used to exempt Syrians from entry visas to its territory. However, entry requirements changed in July 2013 when the government required the procurement of a visa prior to arrival along with security clearance for security reasons. The same happened in Iraq where the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) drastically limited Syrians' freedom of movement across the areas where the vast majority of them (97 percent) reside – namely Erbil, Suleimaniah and Duhok. Security considerations seems to have conditioned Turkey's decision to introduce stricter border control procedures to restrict the flows of Syrian refugees over the past few years.⁵

Limited access to services

All Syrian refugees interviewed in Jordan and Lebanon reported the challenges of accessing basic services as fundamental factors in their determination to leave for Europe. The main problems were healthcare and education. The delivery of these services is the direct expression of the strain placed by refugees on host-countries and their freedom of movement.

In Jordan, for example, public hospitals – subsidized by the UN – were open to Syrian refugees for the first three years after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. However, free healthcare provided to Syrians have overburdened the country's capacity to maintain this service. Since July 2014, primary health care services are available to all registered Syrians at subsidized prices only upon the presentation of a Health Certificate. The certificate, however, is costly and covers only a limited range of health issues. As Mohammed⁶ – a refugees in his mid-thirties – explained, “if my daughter needed a surgical operation as happened three years ago [she has a heart issue], we would not be able to do anything for her as now we have to pay for this type of intervention. This is why I want to go to Europe; I simply cannot afford to stay in Jordan any longer”. Furthermore, restrictions on freedom of movement directly infringes upon these services. In both Lebanon and Jordan, valid residence permits are indispensable for obtaining access to public health care services in host communities. Recent studies in Lebanon, for example, report how a lack of proper health coverage is one of the greatest challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status (see, for example: NRC-IRC 2015).

Another common problem amongst Syrians seems to be access to education. Many of the interviewed refugees complained that quality of education in both Jordan and Lebanon was either very low or inaccessible. A number of issues create barriers to refugees' enrolment and attendance in the education system. These barriers range from financial constraints and restrictions on movement to structural weaknesses in the Lebanese and Jordanian education systems. Syrians need respectively the

⁵ See <http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/migrant-crisis/> [Accessed 4 December 2015].

⁶ Throughout the report, the author has used fictitious names to protect the anonymity of the informants.

MoI card in Jordan and the Residence Visa in Lebanon to access education services. As the procedures to renew residency permits and regularizing their status are increasingly cumbersome and expensive, many refugees – especially in Lebanon – have not valid documentation and cannot access free education (NRC 2015; see also Amnesty International 2015). For example, UNHCR estimates that 420,000 Syrians in Lebanon between six and fourteen years of age are in need of education services. Most importantly, however, growing numbers of Syrian refugees have attempted to enter the already saturated Lebanese and Jordanian education systems. In both countries, schools are overloaded. The vast majority of schools in high-density refugee areas have added extra sessions and cut class hours to absorb the large number of Syrian pupils in classrooms. This has inevitably led to a decline in the quality of educational services.

Limited access to livelihoods

Virtually all refugees interviewed in Jordan and Lebanon concurred that they intended to leave the host country because of the limited or zero access to adequate livelihoods. This is hardly surprising. Over the past years, Syrian refugees relied on money lent from their families and friends and those earned working in Jordan's informal economy. Today, refugees have largely run out of these resources.

The Lebanese Government has traditionally shown great tolerance toward the infringement of the norms regulating working entitlement. In 1993, Lebanon and Syria signed a bilateral agreement that granted freedom to stay, work, and practice economic activity for nationals of both countries. Nonetheless, under new regulations in Lebanon, refugees must sign a pledge not to work when renewing their residency status.

All this seems to replicate a scenario already seen with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt.⁷ In these countries, principally due to prohibitive costs and administrative obstacles, work permits for Syrians are not being issued. In Jordan, non-Jordanians with legal residency and valid passports can obtain work permits only if the prospective employer pays a fee and shows that the job requires experience or skills not to be found among the Jordanian population. A recent UNHCR survey reports that only 1% of visited refugee households had a member with a valid work permit in Jordan. Furthermore, according to the interviewed refugees, the Jordanian government has ceased to demonstrate any leniency towards those who are working in the black market (UNHCR, 2014: 28). As a result, interviewed refugees claimed to work mostly illegally and occasionally, on an average of five days a month: a level of employment that is insufficient for household expenditures. Therefore, many refugees are today fearful of being detained or deported because of lapsed residency visas and because of their involvement in illegal labour.

Refugee families have coped with the *status quo* by liquidating the few assets that they were able to bring along with them, relying on humanitarian assistance and working, mostly illegally. However, these work and humanitarian “opportunities” decreased steadily through 2014 and almost disappeared toward the end of 2014. People have sold their personal assets in the context of their protracted displacement in Jordan; they have witnessed the drastic reduction of assistance within the progressive shrinking of the humanitarian space (Achilli 2015a); and their already meagre chances of securing a decent job have been curtailed even further by the restrictions imposed on their freedom of movement by the Jordanian authorities.

Child labour, early marriage, restriction of movement, domestic violence as a consequence of increased stress, and high levels of debt are all on the rise. Overall, vulnerability is increasing, and to survive refugees often resort to negative coping mechanisms. An ILO study reports, for example, that

⁷ See <http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/migrant-crisis/> [Accessed 4 December 2015].

close to half of the Syrian refugees families have one working child (ILO 2014).⁸ A previous UNWOMEN assessment reveals that 47% of households' paid employment came from children (UNWOMEN 2013: 3). Syrian families have also been readier to give their children up to early marriage, a practice often resorted to by some parts of the Syrian community to ensure a better financial situation and a safer space for their daughters.⁹

The pledge not to work and the limitations on obtaining working permits render Syrians dependent on humanitarian assistance or debt. Syrians have relied almost entirely on humanitarian aid from UNHCR and other NGOs. However, funding shortfalls have negatively affected humanitarian aid inflow in the past two years. In Lebanon, for example, humanitarian assistance is now estimated to barely cover 10% of registered refugees (Thibos 2014). In particular, what seemed to have pushed refugees to the edge, to the point of claiming to be willing to leave at any cost – even in Syria – are the recent cuts to the already meagre assistance provided by the WFP. In Lebanon, the WFP cut the value of its assistance by 50% in July 2015, providing only USD13.50 per person per month (WFP 2015a). In Jordan, as of September 2015, over half of urban refugees who had been receiving some food aid from the WFP lost their benefits.¹⁰ The remaining half has received only JOD 10 (USD 14), instead of the planned JOD 20 (USD 28), due to the ongoing funding crisis. Interviewed refugees in Jordan looked at the imminent suspension of the WFP assistance in urban areas as a reason for leaving the country (see for example, for Lebanon, REACH 2014). Also in Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt, the WFP recently announced its decision to reduce by almost half the monthly voucher value to the vast majority of assisted refugees (WFP 2015b).

Relationship with the host communities

Growing levels of discrimination and racism – especially against the younger generations – are an important factor behind many refugees' determination to leave the host-countries. Assessment findings suggest that in governorates accommodating large Syrian refugee populations, relations between Syrian refugee and host communities are strained and tend to deteriorate over time. None of the countries of first asylum have so far witnessed radical violence against Syrian refugees, but tensions between the local communities and Syrian refugees risk spiralling out of control.

In Jordan, the massive influx of Syrians has generally been accompanied by demonstrations of solidarity, hospitality and tolerance towards the refugees. Family ties as well as linguistic and cultural relations between Syrians refugees and members of Jordanian host communities have facilitated the reception of Syrians in the Kingdom. However, the protracted nature of the Syrian crisis and its negative impact, real or perceived, on the living conditions of Jordanians has meant that Jordanians, who, at first, welcomed refugees, have become hostile. The belief that refugees are thriving on scarce local resources is widespread amongst increasingly resentful host communities. There is also the widespread belief among the less advantaged Jordanians that Syrian refugees prosper thanks to a generous international community that is fulfilling the needs of the latter while leaving the former stranded and without resources. There is also the pervasive and strong idea that Syrian refugee communities are fertile grounds for the proliferation of IS and Al Nusra Front militants.

Likewise, Lebanese politicians and the media constantly reiterate the belief that Syrians constitute a security threat. This public and media discourse has led to increased attacks on Syrians in Lebanon. In a recent survey, 43% of Syrian refugees reported incidents with authorities or civilians: raids and

⁸ Also, note that many studies have shown how child labour amongst Syrian refugees is a widespread phenomenon, which is not perceived by local communities as being inherently negative. See, for example, Un ponte per... 2012.

⁹ Note that Syrian refugees have also developed some positive coping strategies. One example is the relevance of community support as one of the main sources of income for many households. See CARE 2013.

¹⁰ The WFP has recently reinstated food assistance until January 2016 to those refugees who have been without since September 2015. See more Jordan Times 2015.

searches, harassment, insults, detention, beating, and extortion (Thibos 2014). Many refugees interviewed admitted their unwillingness to approach local authorities. Take Sarah, a woman in her early forties and a mother of four. The woman was living in a small Lebanese city near the road leading to the Masnaa crossing in the Bekaa Valley. Over the course of an interview, she complained about the harsh treatment that she and her oldest son had to undergo at the hands of the local communities. Pointing at a plasterboard covering a broken window in the sitting room of her dilapidated shelter, she said: “you see that window, there is no need to fix it up. We did it but they [the host-communities] broke it again. They don’t want us here anymore. My son is insulted and harassed every day in the street. They call him ‘Syrian dog’. And there is not much that he can do about it. If he approaches the authorities to complain, he will be the one detained because he is Syrian”.¹¹

2.2. Refugees’ perspectives: leave or not to leave? this is not a dilemma

The vast majority of our informants expressed a desire to leave Jordan and Lebanon. Many of them saw migration to Europe as a way of escaping from their hardships in these host countries. However, do Syrian refugees perceive migration to the wealthier EU member states as the only solution to their predicament?

If most want to leave, the destination is open to debate. Not all wanted to go to Europe; many showed a determination to return to Syria – despite the evident risks that a journey to that war-ravaged country would entail. Our informants concurred that the journey to Europe was expensive, dangerous, and the majority feared cultural estrangement once there: be their final destination Sweden, Germany or another European country. They saw these problems on the media, heard about them from those who had made it to Europe and extrapolated from those who vanished *en route*. However, while the dangers, costs, and cultural estrangement held some back, many others left or intend to do so. What ultimately triggered the decision to leave for Europe were a number of interrelated factors generally linked to the socio-economic status, age, and the social network of the interviewed person. However, other factors also emerged into the picture: ideology, expectations, and political considerations amongst others.

Refugees living in big urban centres such as Amman and Beirut were generally keen to embark on an irregular journey to Europe. These were mostly medium-high skilled workers from Syrian urban areas. They believed they had the sufficient cultural capital for a westernized style of life and some fluency in English. Many amongst their relatives and friends were already living in Europe – generally in Sweden and Germany. Mahmood and his wife represent the category. They are from a well-off neighbourhood in Damascus; they are in their thirties and have two children. Mahmood was an engineer in Syria; his wife, Suhad, owned and worked in a pharmacist near their house. They left Syria in 2013 after a mortar shells hit and destroyed both their house and pharmacy. They headed towards Jordan. Jordanian authorities intercepted Mahmood and his family at the border, and took them to the Za’atari Camp. They spent only three hours there, for registration, and left soon after to Amman where Suhad’s brother moved a year earlier. “It is impossible to find a decent job in Jordan”, Mahmood noted and continued: “the Jordanian government asked me to provide proper documentation as an engineer but there is not any available since in Syria these papers got lost during the war. [...] We filed a request for resettlement with UNHCR when we moved to Jordan – our daughter is very sick – but we never heard back from them. I cannot wait anymore. Next week I will leave for Europe and I will ask for family reunification. My wife would like me to go to Sweden where her brother just moved. But I think I will go to Germany, my friends told me that life there is very good”.

¹¹ However, not all interviewed refugees have had similar experiences. Stronger family and tribal connections between refugees and host communities in border towns have mitigated the mounting intolerance against Syrians. Most refugees interviewed in the Jordanian northern governorates of Irbid and Ajloun did not report any hostility from the host communities. If episodes of discrimination and racism occurred, those were limited to mainly young people.

Syrian refugees coming from rural areas generally showed a quite different attitude. Many were farmers and farm-workers from around Homs and Daraa with no or very little knowledge of English; they were often poor. The refugees' decision to leave for Europe cannot be understood without an appropriate recognition of the complex demands of earning a living in a precarious economic context. Yet socio-economic status affected the decision to leave in a complex manner. It was not only a lack of means that set Syrians on a journey to Europe: these refugees may have been poorer than their counterparts in Amman, yet they still had something left in Syria: their lands, on which they could have survived if they had returned to Syria. Furthermore, they often argued that they did not want to go to Europe because they would never be able to integrate in a culture so different from theirs. As a Syrian man in his late sixties put it: "I felt lost when I first fled Syria to come to Lebanon. I don't want to feel lost twice". He was living in one of the several Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) spread over Lebanese territory. The man argued that there was no future in Lebanon. He considered returning to Syria where life was cheaper and where he owned a house. He excluded categorically the possibility of moving to Europe: he was too old and too different – he claimed – to get used to Europe. Furthermore, he did not want his daughters to live what he perceived to be the 'immoral' lifestyle of European countries.

Refugee social networks were a resource at different levels. Many knew what to do and where to go because they relied on the expertise of their relatives and friends who had already made it. If they had not enough money to afford to pay the smugglers, they could borrow money from their relatives and friends. The networks fuelled their expectations. Many refugees told me how their relatives and friends encouraged them to come to Europe. In a field visit to an ITS in the Beqaa Valley a refugee woman in her thirties, for example, told us how she knew how good Sweden was. Her friends – who had just moved there – had informed her about that. She claimed that she was aware of the risks of cultural estrangement in Europe; yet this was gradually becoming a minor issue in countries like Germany and Sweden: "my friends in Sweden told me that schools and public places are increasingly becoming accessible to pious-minded Muslims".

However, if social networks triggered mobility, they could at times also restrain the same. If some moved out, others remained. This happened especially when the prospective migrant was unwilling and/or unable to face a journey – for example, in the case of elderly people. The emigration process specifically benefits the refugee population in host-countries as remittances from their kin and friends in Europe have become a mainstay of the refugee economy. Rami, a man in his late 50s, who lived in Amman, was a case in point. He was from Homs where he had worked as a university professor of philosophy. Rami left the country with his wife after the regime militias occupied their house. He claimed that their situation in Jordan had substantially deteriorated since the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011. Yet, the couple feared the dangers of an irregular journey to Europe and the fact of being illegal there. Rami, however, could stay in Jordan as he relied on the remittances sent periodically by his younger brother who had begun to work in Sweden.

The desire to move, however, cannot simply be reduced to mere self-interest or a cost-benefit analysis. While refugees certainly desired to leave their host-countries, they should not be cast as free-roaming individuals seeking to escape as soon as possible in order to pursue better economic conditions in Europe. We met an old woman who lost three children in Syria. She called them *shuhada* (martyrs): "they are martyrs of the revolution", the woman claimed, "they fought against Bashar and died for *urriye* freedom". She said this while flipping through the pictures on her mobile: some showing her children carrying machine guns, others portraying them laid out in the coffin just before burial. She told us how she had no doubt about returning to Syria: "I am not leaving [for Europe]. Where do you want me to go?! I am too old to leave. But even if I were younger I would never do that, I would never leave my country. I am ashamed of all these *shabab* (young men) who leave for Europe. They should stay in Syria and fight for freedom, as my children did".

2.3 Departure arrangements

Refugees have ideally two options to reach Europe: one is legal, through resettlement programmes, family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programmes, private sponsorships, etc. The other option is the illegal one: an exhausting and perilous journey that takes them across two continents and several countries. The former would be by far the safest and quickest route. Yet, the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to EU member states remains for the very large majority of them a chimera.

With few notable exceptions, all interviewed refugees who applied for resettlement had their application either rejected or left pending for an indefinite lapse of time. Sharif, for example, concurred that European countries do not leave refugees with any other option than to take the illegal route to Europe. The man, the father of two, lived in a popular quarter of Amman. As Sharif's stay in the Kingdom was no longer sustainable, he applied for asylum in Sweden. His application was rejected. He applied again, and then again. He did it three times. Sharif claimed that every attempt turned out to be unsuccessful. When we met him in Amman, the man was still determined to leave for Europe; only, he had renounced to go through formal resettlement schemes. Venting his bitterness against EU embassies, he burst out: "I spent three years waiting for an answer. Nothing came. I lost money and wasted precious time filing resettlement application forms for European embassies... Time that I could have used better if I made up my mind earlier". Shrugging his shoulders, he then added: "I will be flying to Turkey next week. From there, I will go to Greece [through illegal channels]. They [European embassies] are encouraging us to go; they need the smugglers to do their job."

Irregular channels are expensive. Refugee families have coped with the cost of the journey by liquidating the few assets that they were able to bring along with them and getting into debt. This entails considerable protection risks: as young adult males leave for Europe, families lose an economic lifeline with already stranded households.

On the other hand, the past months have witnessed a dramatic abatement of travel costs and journey time, which has made the whole project feasible for an increasing number of refugees. Interviews with asylum seekers and facilitators confirmed that the price an individual willing to travel from the Middle East to Germany needs to pay dropped from 8000 USD to 2000/2500 USD. When Mahmood – a boy in his late teens – joined his cousin in Sweden in September, 2015, a year after his departure, he paid around 3500 USD, approximately a third of what his cousin paid. There are several reasons for this fall in costs. The opening of new pathways to Europe is one of them. The Turkish-Greek corridor has today become the refugees' preferred alternative to the dangerous and more expensive Libyan route. Studies have, indeed, demonstrated how the riskier the route, the more expensive the price migrants have to pay for the crossing (for example: European Commission 2015). Furthermore, transit countries along the Western Balkan route have recently opened their borders to the refugee flow. This has made smugglers' services useless over a large part of the journey and, ultimately, led to a substantial reduction in costs as refugees can now purchase regular plane, boat, bus and train tickets.

If leaving takes place predominantly along irregular routes, the nature of the journey inevitably affects the composition of the migrant population. Not all refugees can afford an exhausting and dangerous journey to Europe. As such, Syrians travelling to the EU are predominantly young males. Unaccompanied elderly people, children, and women do not generally embark on such a journey. According to a recent report, "around half of this group reported to be unmarried, while the rest have family elsewhere, whom they hope will join them at a later date. Meanwhile, families represented only around a quarter of those arriving, mainly due to the high cost and difficulty of the journey" (REACH 2015). This is confirmed by the refugees' themselves who seem to have quite a good understanding of the risks and dangers associated with the journey, a second hand knowledge obtained by their social-network in Europe and the news that they watch in TV. According to Saleh, for example, the real risk is the sea journey between Turkey and Greece. When we met him in Lebanon, in October, Saleh – a

father of two in his mid-thirties – was living in the Beqaa Valley and planning to travel to Europe alone, leaving his family behind: “I think about leaving every hour; there is not nothing here. But my family needs to stay here, it is too dangerous for my children: you travel with 10/15 metres rubber dinghy that take up to 50 people, far beyond its standard capacity”. Another man in Jordan, during a focus group in a refugee centre in Amman, echoed Saleh’s words: “This is no child journey, it is too dangerous to embark on, the sea can be rough, many people die, we see that on the news”. Most of men we interviewed confirmed their intention to leave alone. Their plan was to arrive at destination, apply for asylum, and once the refugee status is obtained, filing a request for family reunification.

However, even though travelling remains an issue that predominantly regards young males, the composition of the Syrian flow is far more heterogeneous than that of other migrant groups – e.g. Afghans and Pakistanis (*ibid.*). Most importantly, we should entertain the possibility that the protraction of the Syrian crisis is altering the composition of the migrant population. The cost, length, and dangers of the journey has considerably decreased since the Balkan route became the most popular pathway to Europe allowing entire households to travel together. Smugglers also apply lower fares in the winter season in order to attract customers potentially discouraged by the rough winter seas between Turkey and Greece.

Finally, young men’s migration may have paved the way for further irregular migratory waves. Over the course of our fieldwork, we met families that followed in the footsteps of their young male relatives. Acting as veritable trail-blazers, the latter monitor constantly the movement of their families and give them useful advice on the duration of the journey, contacts, and the permeability of the borders. This is the story of Ahmad. The man was in his late teens when he left Syria for Sweden in 2012. It took this adolescent and his sixteen-year brother around four months to reach their destination. We met Ahmad in Turkey where he flew from Sweden to see his mother, sisters, and bride who were about to embark on a smuggler’s boat to Greece. He spent the few days prior their departure with them, instructing his family on the different legs of the journey. When his family finally departed, Mohammed tracked on the smugglers’ GPS his family’s journey to Greece. He left Turkey only when he received confirmation from his bride that they had reached Greek shores.

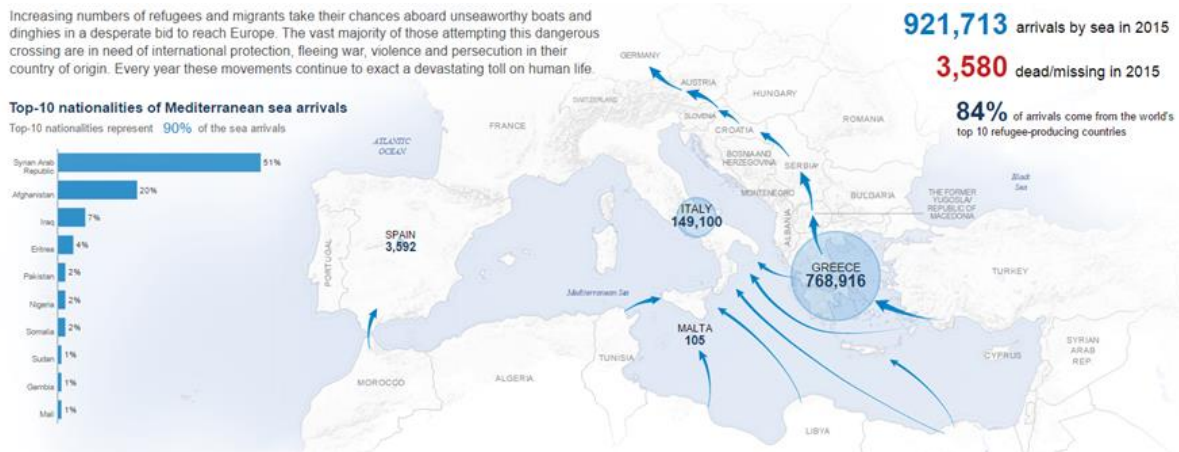
3. On the move

3.1 The journey

Most Syrian asylum seekers come to Europe down two major routes. The central route – which is based out of Libya and travels across to the Italian and Maltese coasts – has registered a peak of arrival of migrants and refugees over the last fifteen years. However, the traffic along this corridor has decreased significantly over the past twelve months (see figure 2).

The second pathway is the eastern Mediterranean route through Turkey and Greece; this has become the most popular route for refugees and other Asian labour migrants and refugees wishing to access Europe via the Balkans. Already in the second quarter of 2015, the EU agency Frontex reported how the number of irregular migrants – mostly Syrians, Afghans, and Pakistanis – detected on the Western Balkan route reached unprecedented levels: “a record number of 68,178 illegal border-crossings were reported from the EU’s external borders with Turkey, which represents an increase of over 380% compared with the previous quarter and more than 670% in relation to the same period of 2014” (FRONTEX 2014).

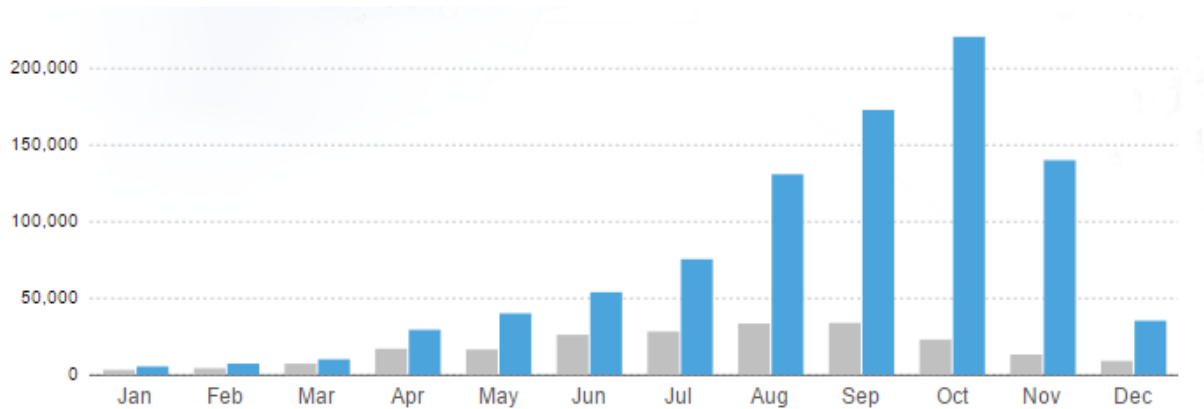
Figure 2. Mediterranean sea arrivals and top-10 nationalities, 2015 (as of December 2015)



Source: UNHCR 2015.

If we have a closer look to this route, we will see that the intensification of irregular migration is linked in part to the escalation of the Syrian conflict and the recrudescence of political instability in the area that has raised the number of Syrian IDPs and refugees dramatically during 2014 and the early months of 2015 (see figure 3). However, this trend is not only related to political instability and warfare. Radical changes in transit countries' border controls have played a major role in the dramatic increase of arrivals in Europe. Over the course of our research, we have witnessed a loosening of border controls along a major stretch of the Western Balkan route. While this has certainly saved countless lives by facilitating refugees' flow to Europe, the drastic reduction of journey-time and travel-costs that this has entailed is likely to have had a catalysing effect on migration.

Figure 3. Comparison of monthly Mediterranean sea arrivals 2014-2015



Source: UNHCR 2015.

All refugees interviewed in the study had travelled to Turkey or expressed the intention of doing so. Turkey has become a gathering point for Syrian refugees travelling from Syria and its neighbouring countries to Europe. While the country is an obligatory step for the majority of refugees, displacement patterns to Turkey largely depends on the possession of valid documentation.

Syrians with a valid passport travel regularly to Turkey either by plane from Amman, Beirut, or Erbil or by boat from Tripoli in Lebanon. Flying to Istanbul, Izmir or other urban centres in Turkey is by far the fastest and safest solution (see figure 5). According to our informants, most of refugees living in the host-countries do this. The flight is relatively cheap, approximately 250 euros. Most Syrian refugees do not need a visa to flight to Turkey. My informants pointed out how even those among them who have lost or never had the passport can easily obtain one from the Syrian embassies in Amman and Beirut. "A year ago, this was almost impossible", a young man from Damascus, living

in Amman, told us: “now, however, things have become much easier. It is only 200JOD if you want to renew the passport; and 400JOD to have a new one issued”.

On the other hand, the large majority of Syrian IDPs, Palestinian refugees from Syria, and those without a valid passport embark on a longer and more dangerous journey that expose them to greater risks and higher costs. These people have no other option than to cross the border into Turkey illegally. Many of them take the inland route – via the Syrian-Turkish border near the village of Khirbat al-Joz in the northern Syrian governorate of Idleb; others are smuggled by boat from the Syrian coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus. Both routes are extremely dangerous and expensive as asylum seekers need to travel across areas controlled by armed groups.¹² Studies and personal accounts reported many stories of exploitation and bribery. Several refugees claimed that, despite possessing valid documentation, they needed to pay high bribes when crossing the numerous roadblocks across Syrian territory.

Once in Turkey, refugees depart on board wooden and fibreglass boats, rubber dinghies, fishing boats, and big cargo ships. At the time of our research, the vast majority of those interviewed indicated that they had reached Greece from the isolated areas near the Turkish port of Izmir and Bodrum. Here, smugglers arrange transportation, for around 1200 USD per person to Lesbos or the numerous Greek islands near the border with Syria. The proximity of the departure point with the Greek islands often mean a one-hour journey with a ten-metre rubber dinghy. Time and price, however, are likely to change according to a number of factors that range from the type of boat and number of people aboard to the weather condition and the relationship with the smugglers. As a refugee put it, “you can pay from 1000 USD to 5000 USD depending on whether you take an overcrowded rubber dinghy or an offshore boat”. In this context, finding the smugglers seems be the least of refugees’ problems. When Noor and her husband left Lebanon for Turkey, they did not have any prior knowledge of what they would find, who they would speak to, and what the exact route was. “It was very easy”, Noor told us when we met her in Srebrenica nearby the Serbia-Croatia border: “you just fly to Istanbul or any other Turkish city and then you go in certain neighbourhoods, everybody knows where. As soon as you step in the place, you will be approached by someone who knows that you are Syrian and what you are looking for. And you will find your smuggler or, in the worst case scenario, someone who knows the smuggler. There are places like that everywhere in Turkey.” Many other refugees reported how smugglers themselves advertised their services via internet and social media such as Facebook.

¹² For a recent study of smuggling and trafficking networks in Syria, see ICMPD *forthcoming*.

Figure 4. Rubber dinghies used by refugees to cross from Turkey to Lesbos (Greece)



Lesbos (Greece), November 2015

Source: Luigi Achilli.

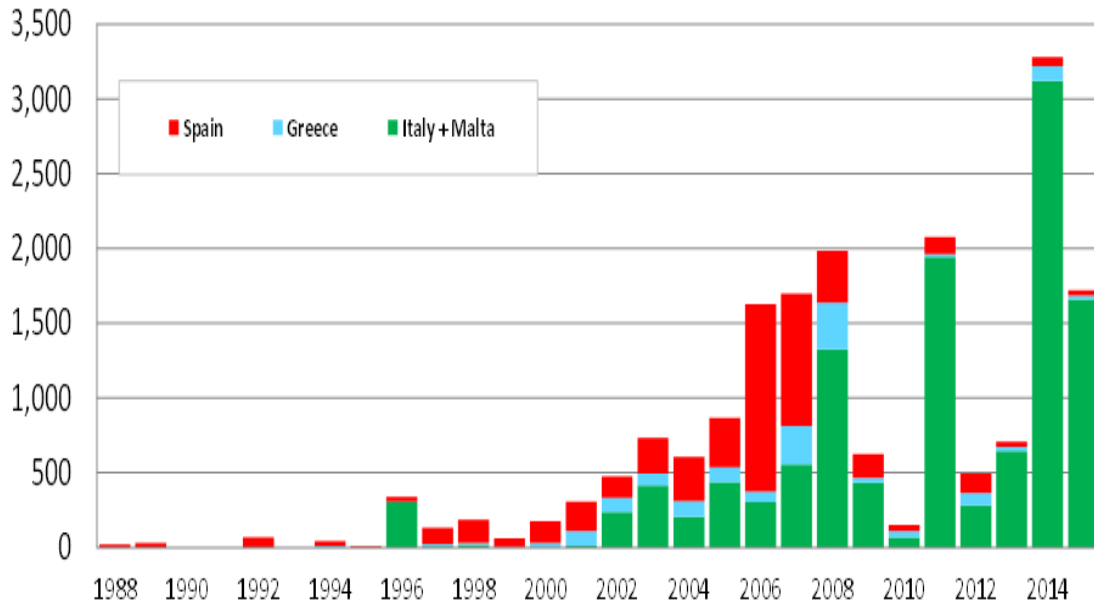
The vast majority of Syrians going to Europe rely on smuggling services almost exclusively for crossing the Turkish-Greek border. The past year saw, indeed, two diverging trends. On the one hand, the protraction of the Syrian conflict has increasingly made migration a costly and dangerous affair for refugees in Syria. On the other, transit countries' policy *vis-à-vis* refugees and migrants seem to have veered toward a facilitation of irregular migration. As the western Balkan corridor opened up to irregular migration, the refugee flow across Europe was boosted dramatically. What made this overture possibly was the decision of transit countries such as Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia to issue temporary transit papers for asylum seekers and migrants crossing their territories. These permits are valid for a period of time that ranges from a few days to several months, depending on the issuing country and the migrant population. During this time, refugees are entitled to travel and to use public transportation.

The knowledge of this change spread rapidly through the refugee population – mostly through word of mouth and social media. Refugees rushed to seize the opportunity, fearing that the favourable situation might change. According to Noor: “we decided to leave as soon as our relatives and friends informed us on how easy was for them to go to Germany. We did as they said. We paid smugglers only for the crossing to Greece. They took us to a small island. Once we were there, we just waited to be intercepted by local authorities that took us for a few days to a refugee camp. Here, they took our fingerprints and personal details. After the registration, they gave us a travel permit and told us that we were free to continue our journey to Europe. The same happened in Macedonia and Greece. This because these countries don't want refugees to stay in their country, and know very well that if they kick us back, they will probably have to deal with us again next year”.

It is hard to say what has decided this change. It is likely to be a combination of factors. Transit countries such as Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia may have realised that it was more convenient to channel refugees and migrants across their territories rather than leaving them stranded at the borders or having them roaming undocumented. If mobility and passages increased, so had the opportunities for these countries to control this irregular flow of people. Furthermore, social and media pressures have certainly played a role in the relaxing border controls across the Balkans and in the EU. Many commentators conceded as much when the photograph of a drowned toddler on a Turkish beach softened European views on the refugee crisis in the fall of 2015. Indeed, this sudden shift in transit

countries' attitudes toward irregular migration would not be possible without European countries opening doors to asylum seekers. Last but not least, these countries may have found in the massive flow of people to Europe a valuable opportunity. As of October 2015, refugees and migrants had to purchase a train ticket from the southern to the northern borders of Macedonia for the cost of approximately 25 euros: four times more than a Macedonian citizen did.

Figure 5. Dead and missing persons on maritime routes of irregular migration to the EU 1988-2015 (as of 19 April 2015)



Source: Fargues and Di Bartolomeo 2015.

3.2 Refugee narratives

The following excerpt is taken from an account made and recorded by Ghazi – a young man in his early twenties who left Damascus at the outbreak of the conflict.¹³ Ghazi fled from Lebanon to Germany in early September 2015. It took him fewer than two weeks to reach his final destination. Before succeeding to move to Germany, he lived in Qabb Elias, a small city in the Beqaa Valley, where he volunteered for an NGO that assisted Syrian refugees. These type of stories are very important among refugees, who generally triangulate those with other accounts to acquire a better understanding of the journey and its challenges. In the story, Ghazi seeks to rehearse every single step of the journey:

All the Syrian refugees have first to go to Turkey. You can reach Turkey by plane from Rafik Hariri airport in Beirut to Istanbul airport, Izmir airport or Adana airport, or you can get to Turkey by land through Syria. Personally I took a plane from Rafik Hariri Beirut airport to Adana airport. I booked the ticket three weeks prior for 180\$ then I took an internal flight from Adana to Istanbul for 60\$. Once you get to Istanbul or Izmir, it is easy to find smugglers to help you reach Greece. All you have to do is search Facebook by typing: ‘ways to move to Europe or Germany’ or whatever destination you choose, and you will find plenty of pages that can provide you with a large number of smugglers’ contacts. Personally, I took a smuggler contact number from a friend who had already approached the same smuggler and who had succeeded arriving in Germany. When I first called him from Lebanon and told him that I would be in Turkey by the following

¹³ The author is thankful to Nicolas Karam, INTERSOS Information management officer in Lebanon-Beqaa Valley, for having recorded and collected the following account.

week, he told me that we would not negotiate over the phone, but to give him a call once I got to Turkey to talk about the procedure and the cost. When I arrived in Izmir I called him and we [Ghazi and his travel companions] met in a hotel, he told us that a trip to Greece would be organized the following day for 1200\$ per person and that the price was not negotiable. He met us the next day at 3:00pm and accompanied us to buy floating vests. Note that the police are not interfering or investigating any refugee, there is some kind of negligence towards the refugees that are trying to travel illegally through Turkey. The smuggler took us to buy floating vests and food. I believe that the person who was leading us was only an intermediary between the refugees and the smugglers; and that we were not in direct contact with the real smugglers.¹⁴

At 5:00 pm approximately the intermediary rented us a taxi toward a gathering point where there was several buses to transport us discreetly to a second gathering point on the shore, it took us approximately two hours to get there, it was in the middle of nowhere, it was an empty area. When we arrived at the shore one of the smugglers' intermediaries provided us with a dingy with a small engine that could carry approximately 50 individuals and he pointed to the island that was visible to us. He informed us that he had already bribed the coast guard and all we had to do was moving toward the island. The dingy was controlled by one of the refugees and this is where refugees are left on their own. Those journeys are towards three islands, either Mitilini Island or Chios Island, or Samos Island. These islands are widely known for smuggling refugees. In our case, we moved discreetly to Mitilini Island using the dingy; we were approximately 50 individuals. It took us 2 hours 15 minutes to get to the island.

We had heard stories from other refugees that some refugees were identified by the police in the sea. In those cases, different scenarios can materialize. If you are captured by the Turkish police, you are taken back to Turkey and then delivered to the Syrian police.¹⁵ Alternatively, if the Greek coast guards catch you, they will take you back to the Turkish water and then forced to go back to Turkey on your own. Finally, if you are captured by the Greek coast guards, you are taken to one of the island mentioned above so you can join other refugees.

When we arrived at Mitilini Island the locals welcomed us with the presence of the Greek police, then we were guided to a gathering point. The interesting thing is that most of the refugees are not Syrians, you can find Refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. When we arrived at the gathering point, an employee from the Greek government stamped our passport and gave us a paper that allows us to stay in Greece for a maximum of three months, it allows us to move freely within Greece, but after this period we must leave Greece. Note that there is no way to lose our way since we always find refugees on the streets heading the same way to leave Greece. After obtaining this paper, we moved to a ship booking office nearby where we manage to book a trip to Athens. Some refugees took a plane to Athens. We bought tickets to Athens for 60 Euros per person; it took approximately twelve hours by boat to reach our destination. When we reached the ship yard we did what all the refugees were doing, we took a bus to Ammonia square and then we took a bus toward the border of Macedonia for 70 Euros.

It took us seven hours to get to the border where we were given a number for each bus in order to divide us into groups. We got out of the bus and the police showed us the path that we should follow. We walked approximately 500 meters where we found people from UNHCR facilitating and organizing the groups on the border, they were distributing food and clothes. Then, each group was accompanied by UNHCR people and the police of Greece and Macedonia through the path. We kept on walking until we reached a train station with the presence of the Macedonian police

¹⁴ It is reasonable to assume that the intermediary was a smuggler. Recent studies have demonstrated how smuggling networks are flexible structure whose roles – organizers, passeurs, look-outs, intermediaries, etc – are not integrated into rigid hierarchies and bound by long-term agreements. See, for example, Achilli 2015b.

¹⁵ Human rights groups have repeatedly documented Turkey's violation of the *non-refoulement* principle, see Guardian 2015.

and people from UNHCR. They put us on special trains heading to the Macedonia-Serbia borders, but we had to pay first 25 Euros per ticket. Note that the police were helping us in order get rid of the refugees because they do not want us to stay in their country.

When we got to the borders of Serbia, we also found the Macedonian police and UNHCR facilitated our transit, they distributed food and clothes and, once again, they showed us the direction to continue our journey. After walking approximately 500 meters, we saw police from Serbia that helped us continue our path to reach a checkpoint where they searched our bags and then they guided us once again on the path to reach the first city in Serbia [Presevo]. We reached a meeting point where we took a bus to Belgrade for 60 Euros per individual. When we reached the bus station in Belgrade, we took a bus to Argos. Note that the Serbian police booked us the bus tickets to Argos for 16 euros and note that at this point no one checks our passports and identification papers since they are aware that you are just passing through their country.

When we reached Argos, we were left at a railway near the Hungarian borders – keep in mind that during the trip our only concern was the dingy and Hungary, because we heard that in Hungary the government is more strict than other countries. At the railway, we walked for 4 km to get to the Hungarian borders where we met a police officer that informed us that they were facilitating our transit at the borders and that was true. At the end of the railway, we found journalist and UNHCR people along with the Hungarian police distributing food and clothes and facilitating the transit of the refugees. We waited our turn to jump on a bus, which took us to a train station where we moved to the Austrian border for free. Note that the transit was smooth since UNHCR people were present, stories had been circulating that at the Hungarian border the police were strict so the refugees had to sneak discreetly until they attained a gas station to avoid the Hungarian police; here, they would find taxi drivers that smuggled them to Budapest, charging 200 Euros each. Some refugees were captured in Hungary and forcibly fingerprinted. This is something that refugees fear the most since they do not want to be forced to apply for asylum in countries that give them very few benefits.¹⁶

However, as I said, we were lucky that UNHCR people were present. So, entering Hungary for us was easy. When we arrived at the Hungarian-Austrian border, we found that the Hungarian police was waiting for us, facilitating our passing. We walked for approximately two kms to attain another meeting point where we were provided with food and clothes. We waited for a while for the bus then we were moved to Salzburg where they [local authorities] provided for us with accommodation for one night. The second day, they took us to the train station where we were transported to Munich. Note that all these trips and the night accommodation were provided to us for free. When we reached Munich, some of us stayed in Munich, others moved to other cities. Personally, I moved to another city in Germany.

¹⁶ It should be noted that refugees are not necessarily looking for economic “benefits”. The destination is chosen according to a number of factors that ranges from social networks to the availability of services and support in the host-country.

Figure 6. Illegal border crossing (Macedonia-Serbia)



Llojan-Miratovac (Macedonia-Serbia), October 2015

Source: Luigi Achilli.

Figure 7. Syrian refugees in Serbia near the border with Croatia



Sid (Serbia), October 2015

Source: INTERSOS.

3.3 Syrian refugees and the humanitarian response

Limited knowledge

Verbal accounts like the one above make up a large part of Syrian knowledge of the route. The accuracy of these stories and the attention to minute details by their narrators reflect the enormous importance that this oral knowledge has for people. They provided much of the information needed by migrants and refugees about the route, the dangers, and the opportunities that they will face on their way to Europe. In this sense, it would be wrong to impute a lack of knowledge to refugees.

Figure 8. Hungary has constructed razor-wire fences along its borders with Serbia and Croatia to prevent the entry of irregular migrants and asylum seekers



Horgos II, October 2015

Source: INTERSOS.

Nonetheless, the stories that circulate among the Syrian community are success stories of those who made to Europe. They tell of women and men who successfully reached their destination, and of people who, in the end, managed to overcome all the perils that they faced in the route. While there is no doubt that stories like these do exist and that they make a strong point convincing an increasing number of people to embark on a dangerous journey, they only offer one part of a much more complex story. What people hear much less or, perhaps, prefer not to hear are the stories of people who failed, those who returned, and those who perished. In other words, Ghazi's narration is both remarkably thorough and overly optimistic.

It is hardly surprising, thus, that most refugees who we interviewed along the Western Balkan route admitted that they did not expect the journey to be such a shattering and dangerous experience. Furthermore, relying on information from others making the same journey, Syrians generally mistrust any other source of information. This creates obvious problems. For example, in a recent study on the current displacement trends of Syrian migrants to the EU, REACH reports how this over reliance on word of mouth causes "thousands to travel at once, for example during the night of 17 September when more than 5,000 people crossed the border between Serbia and Croatia through fields on either side of the Sid-Tovarnik crossing, despite reports of landmines" (REACH 2015).

The circulation of stories across social media and networks allows refugees to cope with the lack of a first-hand knowledge. Situations that would normally expose people to exploitation are bypassed or avoided by relying on the advice and stories of those who have preceded them. The sea-journey between Turkey and Greece is a case in point. The vast majority of Syrians is aware that the small stretch of sea that separates the two states is the most dangerous leg of the trip. Picking the right smuggler may be fortuitous and migrants are certainly at the mercy of the smugglers during the

journey to Europe. Yet, successfully smuggled migrants operate as pull factors, redirecting the prospective clients toward the best service deliverers.

However, knowledge of the route remains limited, and few refugees have a full awareness of the risks entailed in the sea passage. Humanitarian workers providing medical care for asylum seekers landing on Greek shores reported several cases of dehydration, shock, and pneumonia from the sea journey. Many refugees interviewed upon their arrival in Greece admitted that they were not expecting such a dreadful and life-risk experience. This is what happened, for example, to Abu Omar, a man in his fifties from Homs in Syria whom we met in the transit camp of Gevgelija, a town located in the southeast of the Republic of Macedonia along the country's border with Greece: "I left Beirut with my family [wife and three children] two weeks ago. [...] My brother is in Holland, I decided to join him. [...] I knew what the journey to Europe entailed. I knew that the sea was the most dangerous part. I didn't care, though. I used to think 'even if I die in the sea, I would not care – it is still better than living in hell [in Lebanon]' But now that I did it [the sea-crossing], I would not do it again. You are in the middle of nowhere, squeezed in a rubber coffin with other people in your same situation; people that – like you – don't see anything, don't know if and when exactly you will arrive. It is only fifty minutes, but it feels like an eternity. It was hell!" Several refugees have confirmed that this was the worst part of the journey. To their voices, we need to add the silence of those whom for wretched boats and rough seas did not make it as far as Greece.

Coordinating the Humanitarian Response

The very journey that leads to Europe requires a special expertise, adequate social connections, means of transport, and a clear knowledge of the route that is difficult to obtain from oral accounts and/or Facebook groups alone. This includes legal regulations on migration; the consequences of illegal entry in a European country; procedure for family reunification, etc. The increased self-confidence of refugees has exposed them to a number of unexpected problems and issues. The proliferation of stories and rumours on the relaxation of border controls in the transit countries has also contributed to trigger a mass effect that raised the number of migrants fleeing to Europe substantially. This has had serious negative repercussions on humanitarian coordination.

A common refrain among many humanitarian operators met along the route was the lack of coordination among local as well as international organizations such as UNHCR. NGO staff, civil society, and volunteers working on the "migrant crisis" in transit countries such as Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia often lamented the duplication of efforts, the lack of technical skills and tools for coordination, and the poor knowledge of the developing situation. Over the course of an informal chat with a humanitarian worker of an INGO in Greece, working on the reception of refugees and migrants coming to Turkey by sea, the man depicted a quite bleak scenario: "we are supposed to help locals to deal with large masses of refugees and migrants landing daily on their shores. But, in truth, what we [humanitarian organizations] really do is rather add to villagers' chaos as much as the refugees". The volunteers working at the Serbian-Croatian border near the town of Šid complained about the lack of supervision: "we are doing our best here, but it's a mess here. We often don't know what to do or how to do it properly, and we don't have anybody offering supervision. We need to learn by doing!" The need for a robust institutional response is especially visible in Lesvos where virtually all humanitarian workers and volunteers interviewed lamented the absence of trained professionals, technology and hardware, and even the lack of effective cooperation among humanitarian organizations.

Figure 9. Refugees waiting to cross the border between Serbia and Croatia**Sid (Serbia), October 2015**

Source: INTERSOS.

To understand the root causes behind this lack of organization, we need to take into consideration the combination of the sheer number of asylum seekers moving along the Balkan corridor as well as the nature of knowledge transmitted through their accounts and stories.

The velocity and immediacy of sharing: this is the nature of refugee stories. Their circulation usually allows refugees to keep up – at least in part – with the fast changing scenarios of border controls and to learn about the opening of new routes. Emergency assistance provided by highly structured humanitarian organizations seems, on the other hand, to travel at a different speed. They are often slower to adapt to the sudden and rapid changes in refugees trajectories, and even slower to set up an effective coordination system. In this context, sudden border closures and conflicting information have resulted in significant confusion not only among the Syrian community but also, and especially, in the planning and coordination of the humanitarian response. This was, for example, particularly evident when refugees and migrants crammed themselves together at a closed crossing point near the Serbian town of Horgos, after Hungary's decision to close its entire border with Serbia on September 15, 2015. First came the shock and confusion of the sudden sealing of the border, then people responded to the situation. It took only few days for refugees and migrants to open up a new route via the Serbia-Croatian border and to reorganize a steady stream of people into northern Europe. It took weeks for the humanitarian community to adapt to the new scenario.

In this regard, civil-society volunteers were particularly relevant. They shared a *modus operandi* very similar to that of the refugees themselves: they use Facebook and other social media to coordinate themselves and divulgate information. A myriad of independent online fundraising efforts sprang up, and calls to give or sign petitions mushroomed on Twitter and Facebook. These groups lacked the technical competences and resources of other more structured organizations. However, civil society volunteers displayed a great capacity for responding to the crisis with immediacy and effectiveness that organizations with solid structures and rigid hierarchies seemed to lack.

4. Conclusion: The end of the journey or the beginning of new problems?

A combination of pull and push factors has considerably raised the number of Syrian refugees reaching Europe over the past year. Those who left were persuaded that crossing the short, yet dangerous, stretch of sea between Turkey and Greece would have signified the end of their quandary. This kind of representation is also shared by much of the media and public opinion across the world: spotlights often turn on the sea crossing on the Turkish-Greek border. A closer scrutiny of Syrians' trajectories, however, problematizes common assumptions about the refugees' journey to Europe and the call for the need to focus on the last step of that journey: the arrival.

To begin with, reaching their destination in Europe has not meant the end of problems for large numbers of asylum seekers. Their fine understanding of the journey often accompanies a poor knowledge of its ending. Of course, refugees may also chose their destination accurately. Aware of the Dublin Agreement that stipulates that the country of first contact is responsible for processing asylum requests, Syrians carefully avoid being finger-printed by local authorities in countries with poor protection and response capacity, and move forward. The country that refugees finally reach depends on a number of factors such as social networks and personal expectations. Germany and Sweden seem to be the most popular destination, due to the level of assistance and presence of services and support. Furthermore, the establishment of social networks in these countries has, in itself, become a pull factor for future migrants.

However, if migrants and refugees are conscious of the normative that define the Dublin Agreement, their knowledge of EU reception systems remains quite limited. Encouraged by the stories of their friends and relatives, refugees nurture high hopes for what they will find in Europe. In many cases, these expectations are dashed. This is the story of Suhad, a young woman from Damascus. When we first met her in Turkey, the woman expressed her desire to settle down in Holland. She did not want to go by boat. She saw no other option but to buy a fake passport for 1000USD. Upon her arrival in Holland, we heard back from Suhad: she was thrilled by the idea of beginning a new life. She had a clear plan in mind: she would spend a few days in one of the refugee camps set for Syrians in Holland; then, move outside, settle down, and pursue a career as an architect. Two months after, Suhad – still in the camp and with no job prospects – told us that was considering leaving Holland and going back to Syria.

Second, the migrant refugee is not necessarily the weakest party: the journey to Europe may entail considerable protection risks for those who stay since family members left behind may not be able to depend on the meagre resources left behind anymore. This is the story of Umm Mahmood whom we met in the Lebanese town of Majdel Anjar near the borders with Syria. The woman lived with her son – a young man in his late twenties – in a rented house, waiting for the day they could reunite with the rest of their family. Umm Mahmood's husband and daughter in law were thousands of miles away in a Swedish refugee centre. When they fled to Sweden, they thought that after a few months they would be reunited. A year had passed when we spoke. Umm Mahmood and her family left Syria in 2013 following the chemical attack that occurred in August 2013 in the suburbs around Damascus. They found refuge in Lebanon. After a year, the family began thinking about leaving: "life in Lebanon is not viable anymore for Syrian refugees", Umm Mahmood explained to us. Her son and the husband originally planned to make the trip together, and then apply for family reunification. However, when the son reported some problems with his passport, the husband decided to leave with his daughter in law. The choice of leaving with his son's wife was also explained by the pregnancy of the latter, which in their minds would have helped to speed up the procedures for obtaining asylum. Over nearly a month, the couple journeyed from Lebanon through Turkey and seven European countries. It cost them 8000 USD, or all the assets that they had not already liquidated. Stranded and without any resources, Umm Mahmood and his daughter relied on humanitarian assistance and loans, waiting for a family reunification that has not as yet turned up.

It is worth remarking that this part of the study was carried out prior to November's terrorist attacks in Paris. Since then Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia have begun filtering refugees and migrants leaving

many stranded just as winter is approaching. In this challenging context, it is very difficult to provide Syrian refugees with durable and sustainable solutions. It is also extremely difficult to discuss risks and threats linked to a journey to a third country. However, during their research it emerged that humanitarian organizations, as well as policy makers can do more to inform and support Syrian refugees who decide to embark on this risky journey. It also emerged that consistent evidence about their intentions and reasons for staying and/or leaving can guide programming and advocacy actions in a more meaningful way. Against this background, MPC and INTERSOS are committed to continuing research and supporting the establishment of a regular coordination mechanism. These might better protect those in this current migrant crisis through specific protection programmes, as well as regular analyses and assessments.

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