



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

SCARED

HOPEFUL

DETERMINED

**Interviews with refugees transiting
Serbia in early December 2015**





Please note that the pictures in this publication are illustrative only, representative of the situation of refugees and migrants in Serbia. In no case do they show the persons who were interviewed for this assessment.

Foreword

The refugee emergency on the West Balkans Route started unfolding in the spring of 2015, until by June an average of 500 refugees entered Serbia every day. Figures doubled every month until daily arrival figures reached an average of 8,000 in October, with occasional peaks of over 10,000 people. Only the deteriorating weather conditions in November reduced this incessant flow of desperate men, women and children again. By the end of the year, close to one million refugees and migrants had passed through Serbia and directly or indirectly benefited from the assistance and protection provided by authorities, civil society, UNHCR and partners

There is no comparable refugee movement in recent history. UNHCR was not as impressed by the numbers as much as by the speed of the movement. The UN Refugee Agency has vast experience in dealing with mass arrivals, even of hundreds of thousands of refugees in a short period of time. What made this crisis so different

was the fact that we had to take care of several thousand different persons every day. A constant stream of humanity passed through Serbia, determined to move on, not halting even for the most pressing medical needs.

It is one of the basic requirements of every humanitarian operation to profile the persons of concern, get to know their demographics, their background, reasons for flight, the trauma they experience and to identify persons with special needs.

The swift identification of persons with special needs followed by an adequate response is crucial to any humanitarian operation. But how do you assist persons whom you see only for a few hours before they move on? How do you detect any special needs beyond obvious physical handicaps among thousands of people whom you will be working with for a mere couple of hours? The UN refugee agency and partners had to

choose and create new innovative approaches, to detect and address all the most urgent protection and humanitarian needs.

Throughout the year, once the most pressing of these needs were addressed, UNHCR took care to find or create the right time, place and setting to engage refugees in participatory needs assessments. In early December 150 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq were interviewed more systematically. Findings corroborated those already collected from refugees since early summer: Refugees on the Western Balkans route have different causes for flight, different personal plight, needs, and aspirations, but the one thing they appear to have in common, as one of our courageous and hard-working field officers put it: They are scared, hopeful and determined, all at the same time.

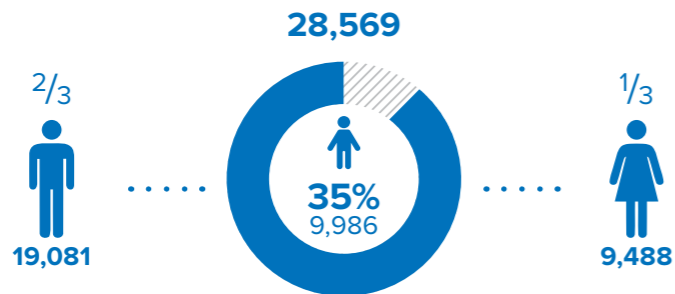
Hans Friedrich Schodder
UNHCR Representative in Serbia







STATISTICAL DATA



In the reporting period (2 - 10 December) 28,569 persons were in Serbia, which brings the average of daily transit rate to 3,178 individuals.

Of those, two thirds (19,081 individuals) were male and one third (9,488 individuals) were female, including 9,986 (or 35%) children under the age of 18.

Nearly all of the interviewed individuals claimed they had come straight from their country of origin. In some cases, however, interviewers suspected secondary movements for some Syrian refugees from Iraq and of Afghan refugees from Iran.



The education level of the respondents varied. Most said they had high school education but a few had only been to elementary school. At least one third want to start or complete their university education once they arrive at their final destination. Only one Afghan boy said he was illiterate and had never gone to school.

Job profiles of the respondents differed widely, including several interpreters, a taxi driver, a government employee, a sales manager, an expert of precious stones and a musician. Many of the younger men had never been employed due to the situation in their countries of origin.



METHODOLOGY



All over the world UNHCR conducts so called Participatory Assessment exercises during which refugees and other persons of concern are interviewed in order to assess their situation and their needs and listen to their concerns. The findings of these exercises inform UNHCR's planning for the following year.

In Serbia, the 2015 Participatory Assessments took place in the period from 2 to 10 December with refugees and migrants transiting Serbia on the so called Western Balkans route, entering the country from FYR Macedonia and exiting at the Croatian border.

Semi-structured interviews were led by UNHCR and partners in two locations, Krnjača Reception centre in Belgrade as well as Adaševci transit point close to the Croatian border. The main entry point, Preševo, was left out, because refugees are ill at ease while waiting to be registered and do not want to leave the queue. Therefore, it is not possible to arrange confidential meetings prior to registration. Once registered, they are keen to move on and do not want to take the time for interviews. Only upon arrival in Belgrade or at

the Croatian border and sure they will be able to move on, refugees were prepared to spend time participating in these interviews.

In all, the interviews were conducted with 148 persons, individuals, focus groups or families. 13 adults were interviewed in Krnjača, among them 11 males, one female and one transgender person. In Adaševci, 114 male and 20 female refugees were interviewed, including 39 children under the age of 18. Individual and group interviews were held from 2 to 10 December in Adaševci and on 2 December in Krnjača.

In a conservative estimate, the 150 interviews represent the collective experience of at least 300 to 400 persons or 10-12.5% of the refugees present in Serbia at any given time during data collection. Nationalities of interviewees were Afghans (61), Iraqis (32) and Syrians (35) as well as small numbers of individuals from Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Guinea, Ethiopia, Senegal and Brazil. For reasons of representativity and anonymity, only information obtained from the first three groups were used in this report.

In this fluid transit situation samples could not be structured methodically and over a long period of time, as would be necessary for obtaining reliable quantitative data. Also, some interviews were done in haste or remained incomplete as respondents wanted to mount their buses or trains and move on.

These complications notwithstanding, there is sufficient material for a valid quantitative evaluation of the responses of male refugees and migrants as the point of data saturation has been reached.

The concept of data saturation is applicable once patterns emerge and responses become repetitive. At that stage researchers can be reasonably assured that the inclusion of additional participants will not generate substantially new information.



The number of women actually interviewed is very small. Women practically never travel by themselves. In most cases it was the (male) head of household who spoke for the entire family. Very few women were prepared to speak with interviewers without the presence of a man from their group.

Interviewers were instructed to give priority to youth, unaccompanied and separated children, disabled persons, and women of all nationalities. In each interview issues pertaining to health, shelter, water, sanitation and protection were specifically raised. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Individual information is therefore not revealed in this report. In some cases, interviews were held with the assistance of interpreters, in some cases in English.



MULTIPLE TRIGGERS FOR FLIGHT



Practically all interviewees mentioned “flight from harm or fear of harm” as well as “armed conflict” as the basic reason why they left, regardless whether they came from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.

While war and general violence is the underlying reason for flight, it often takes an additional trigger for people to up and run. For Syrians it is war and losing a family member or having their house destroyed, the fact that there are family members with a disease who cannot get treatment due to the war or discrimination they are facing as members of an ethnic or religious minority.

“WE YEZIDIS CANNOT GET PASSPORTS; WE CANNOT REGISTER OUR PROPERTY. WHEN ISIS OCCUPIED OUR HOUSE AND KILLED MANY OF OUR PEOPLE, I DECIDED TO LEAVE.”
Yezidi teenager from Iraq

“MY 12 YEAR OLD SISTER HAS LEUKAEMIA. THERE IS NO WAY TO TREAT HER IN SYRIA THESE DAYS, SO I AM GOING TO GERMANY AND HOPE I CAN GET PERMISSION FOR HER TO JOIN ME.”
Young Syrian man

For many Afghans the trigger for leaving the country was either the resurgence of the Taliban in their provinces or the fighting between ISIS and the Taliban.

Some Afghans claimed they were particularly vulnerable to retributions having worked for police or a ministry or being sons of high ranking state officials. Among the refugees there were also a few interpreters who been employed

by the US army or international organizations.

Fear of being recruited by ISIS in Syria or by the Taliban or ISIS in Afghanistan was frequently mentioned as game changer. Danger of conscription is also one of the reasons why Afghan families send away their underage sons. Some of the very young Afghan respondents told interviewers that older brothers had already been recruited before.

“THE TALIBAN WERE RECRUITING YOUNG BOYS. MY FAMILY SOLD A PIECE OF LAND FOR 9,000 DOLLARS SO THEY COULD PAY THE SMUGGLERS TO GET ME OUT.”

Unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan



People who belong to minority groups are particularly exposed and compelled to flee from discrimination. Among the interviews there were Syrian Christian families and a stateless Bedouin family from Iraq as well as a number of Yezidis from Iraq. They hide their true identity even from their fellow refugees for fear of being harassed.

“WE ARE IN FACT BEDOUIN BUT WE SPEAK GOOD ARABIC. SO NO ONE HERE KNOWS WHO WE REALLY ARE. THEY THINK WE ARE IRAQI AND WE ARE AFRAID TO TELL THE TRUTH.” *Bedouin woman from Iraq*



MOVEMENT

PATTERNS

Most refugees admitted that they used the services of smugglers, either for the whole journey or for particularly difficult legs of the trip, such as borders or crossing the Aegean Sea between Turkey and a Greek island. None of the refugees said that they travelled completely alone. Some of them travel with families, especially Syrians, others travel in groups composed by the smugglers or they form temporary parties along the route, looking after each other to some extent.

The duration of the journey varies. For Afghan refugees the flight takes 1 - 2 months on average. Most of them use smugglers for the entire trip.

They are either transported in crammed vans or walk long stretches on foot in groups, especially across borders. The normal route from Afghanistan is via Iran and Turkey to Greece on the sea route and to Bulgaria on the land route. In Greece they join the main flow of Syrian refugees. From Bulgaria they proceed to Serbia where again they join the Western Balkans route. The logical route within the EU territory would be to Romania, then to Hungary and on. However, the entire border between Bulgaria and Romania is formed by the Danube. The only border crossings are over two heavily guarded bridges, which makes irregular movement nearly impossible.

Syrians and Iraqis drive or fly to Turkey and continue to Greece from there. Their voyage usually takes between seven and ten days from country of origin to Germany. Most of these refugees move on their own for most stretches of the trip and only take advantage of the services of smugglers for crossing the Aegean Sea.

“I WORKED FOR FOUR MONTHS IN TURKEY IN A FACTORY THAT PRODUCED PLASTIC BAGS BECAUSE I NEEDED TO EARN MONEY TO CONTINUE THE JOURNEY.”

Young Syrian man

Trips can take much longer for those refugees and migrants who either run out of money and have to work in Iran or Turkey to save enough for paying their onwards trip.

The second reason for delays is police detention between one and two weeks, which occurs with some regularity in Iran, Turkey and Bulgaria. If their belongings were confiscated, their departure is further postponed as they have to wait for additional money from their relatives or try to earn enough for onwards movement.



**“IT WAS A LONG
SCARY TRIP”**

During the journey, threats loom from many quarters. Leaving Afghanistan and Iraq is hazardous as road trips and long treks on foot lead through areas controlled by the Taliban or by ISIS, the very reasons why people are fleeing.

Another threat are the smugglers themselves, criminal gangs who want to extort as much money as possible. Most smugglers take all documents from their wards so they cannot run away and continue on their own.

During the journey some smugglers keep doubling the prices for food and water. They cram people in too small vans and shelters and press them on. If they are not happy with the money paid, smugglers resort to indiscriminate violence against men and women alike, some refugees reported. One young man said he witnessed sexual violence against female refugees.

An additional source of distress for migrants and refugees is police. Several respondents told UNHCR staff that they had been detained in Iran, Turkey or Bulgaria, often in overcrowded prison cells and lacking food and water. They were incarcerated for the duration of one or two weeks. Police would confiscate their money and cell phones. Respondents who experienced police detention regularly report verbal abuse and beatings. Some even had wounds and scars to show as prove of their ordeal.

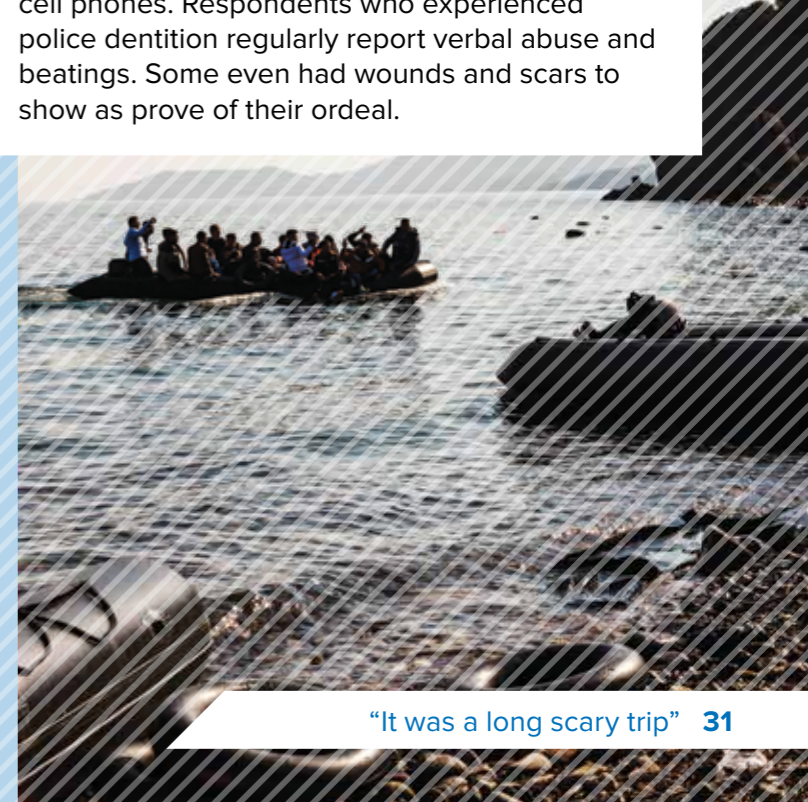


“IT WAS A LONG SCARY TRIP. THE MOST DIFFICULT WAS ALL THE WALKING AND NOT KNOWING WHERE WE WERE GOING.”

Afghan boy, unaccompanied

“I WAS ARRESTED IN SOFIA AND IMPRISONED FOR 15 DAYS. THE MONEY AND MOBILE PHONE WERE TAKEN FROM ME. WHEN I ASKED POLICE TO RETURN THEM TO ME I WAS BEATEN UP.”

Young Afghan man



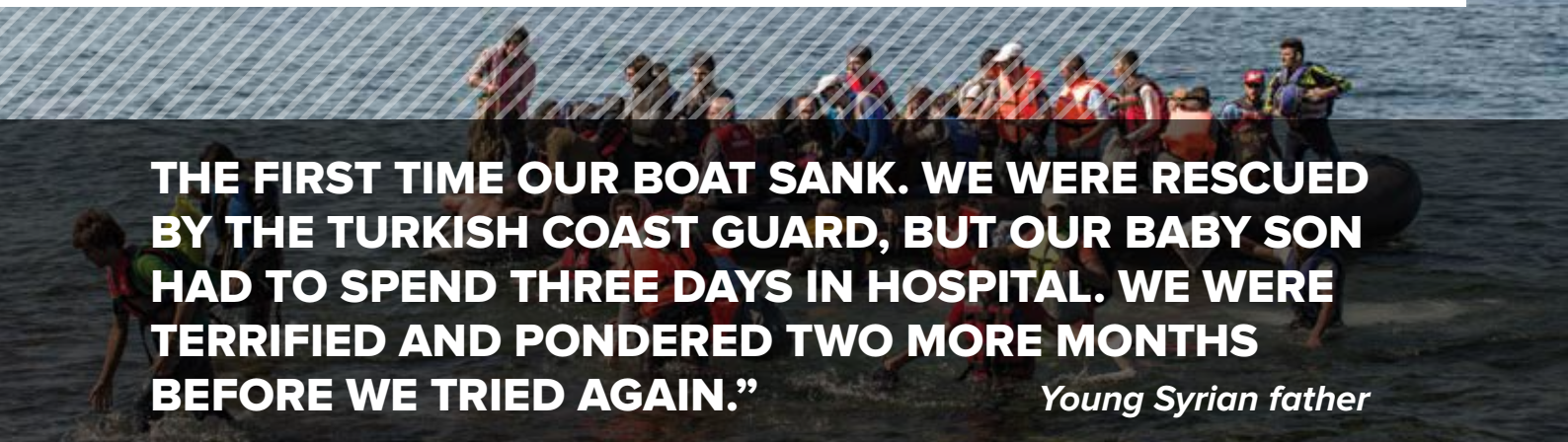
“It was a long scary trip” 31

When asked what they were most afraid of before and during the trip, all refugees mention the terror of crossing of the Aegean Sea. Even before they depart from their home countries they are aware that they would have to cross from Turkey to a Greek island on overfull, un-seaworthy rubber dinghies.

Coming from a landlocked country, most Afghans have never seen the sea before and are terrified. This is why many Afghans choose the land route through Bulgaria even if longer.

Under normal weather conditions the price for the sea crossing is EUR 1,000 per adult and less for children, depending on their age. In dangerous weather conditions, smugglers reduce their fees to lure people on the boats.

Some of the interviewees survived shipwrecks but nonetheless tried another time. Smugglers have a certain code of honour. If a crossing does not succeed and people are returned by police or due to a shipwreck, the smugglers will transport them a second time without additional payments.



THE FIRST TIME OUR BOAT SANK. WE WERE RESCUED BY THE TURKISH COAST GUARD, BUT OUR BABY SON HAD TO SPEND THREE DAYS IN HOSPITAL. WE WERE TERRIFIED AND PONDERED TWO MORE MONTHS BEFORE WE TRIED AGAIN.”

Young Syrian father

The determination of refugees and migrants to reach Europe makes them try again and again, even after having survived distress at sea.

Some people take precautions, they leave valuables and ID papers, diplomas, photos, etc. behind with trusted persons in Turkey and plan to have those shipped once they reach destinations.

“IN TURKEY I LEFT A DRESS WHICH HOLDS MANY MEMORIES AND A LAPTOP WITH PHOTOS WITH A SYRIAN FAMILY. THEY WILL SEND THEM TO ME LATER.” *Syrian woman*

Once in Europe, some of the refugees experienced desperate situations in the cold and rain, having to wait for long hours at border crossings, registration offices or for transportation.

“WE WERE CAUGHT IN THE RAIN. WE WERE FREEZING, I CRIED. BUT PEOPLE LIKE YOU (MEANING UNHCR STAFF) HELPED US AND GAVE US THINGS ESPECIALLY FOR OUR CHILDREN.” *Syrian mother*

Some of the interviewees had been present at the border between Greece and FYR Macedonia during clashes with police and were ostensibly traumatized by the events.

HOPING FOR SAFETY, EDUCATION AND LIVELIHOOD



People have a more or less blurred picture of what awaits them in Europe. With their predominantly urban, educated background, Syrians seem to have more information than others about the geography of Europe, the route and their final destination. They consult friends and relatives as well as the Internet before they leave.

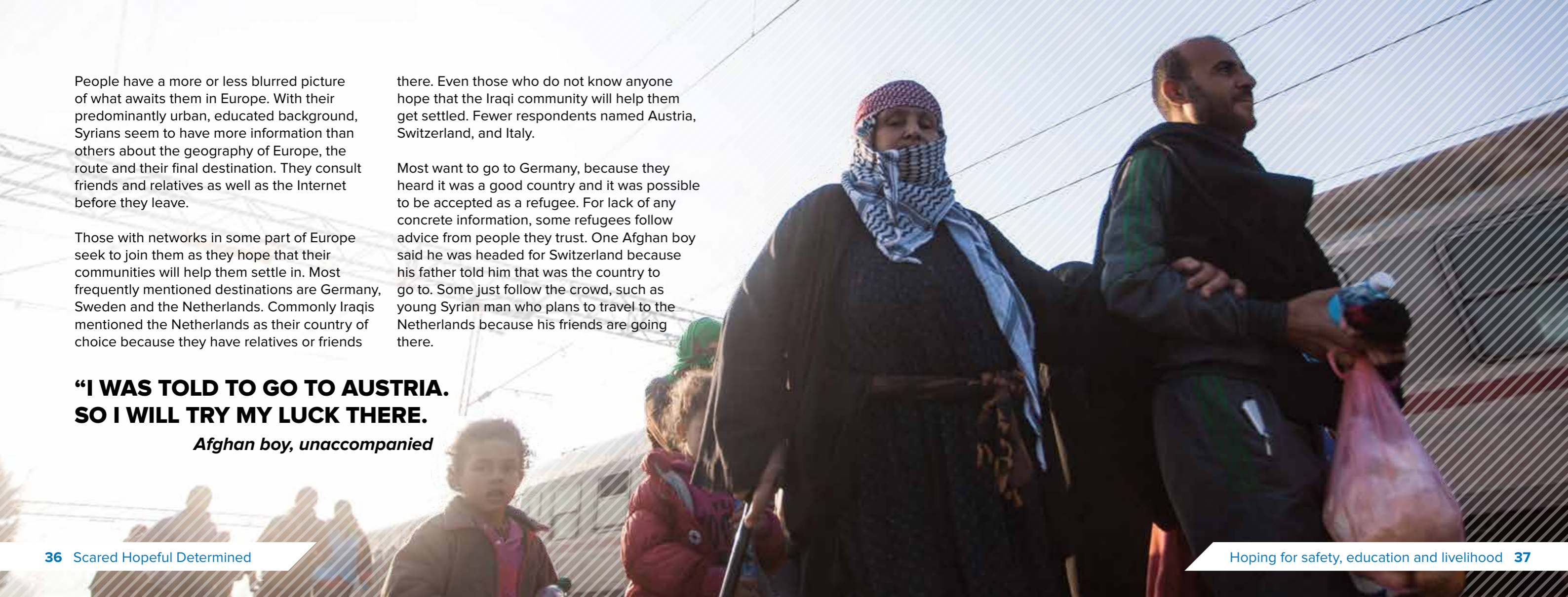
Those with networks in some part of Europe seek to join them as they hope that their communities will help them settle in. Most frequently mentioned destinations are Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. Commonly Iraqis mentioned the Netherlands as their country of choice because they have relatives or friends

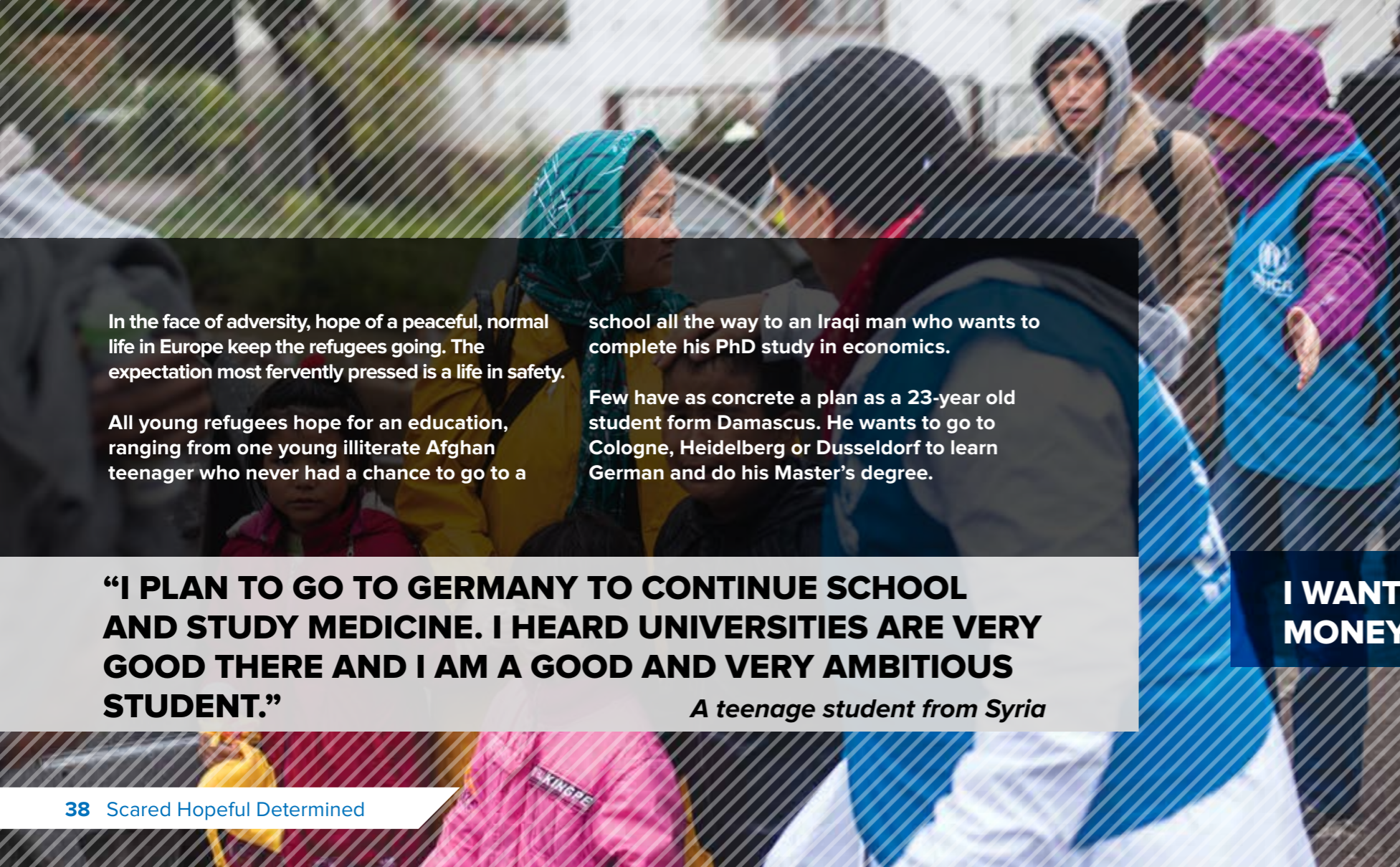
there. Even those who do not know anyone hope that the Iraqi community will help them get settled. Fewer respondents named Austria, Switzerland, and Italy.

Most want to go to Germany, because they heard it was a good country and it was possible to be accepted as a refugee. For lack of any concrete information, some refugees follow advice from people they trust. One Afghan boy said he was headed for Switzerland because his father told him that was the country to go to. Some just follow the crowd, such as young Syrian man who plans to travel to the Netherlands because his friends are going there.

**“I WAS TOLD TO GO TO AUSTRIA.
SO I WILL TRY MY LUCK THERE.**

Afghan boy, unaccompanied





In the face of adversity, hope of a peaceful, normal life in Europe keep the refugees going. The expectation most fervently pressed is a life in safety.

All young refugees hope for an education, ranging from one young illiterate Afghan teenager who never had a chance to go to a

school all the way to an Iraqi man who wants to complete his PhD study in economics.

Few have as concrete a plan as a 23-year old student from Damascus. He wants to go to Cologne, Heidelberg or Dusseldorf to learn German and do his Master's degree.

“I PLAN TO GO TO GERMANY TO CONTINUE SCHOOL AND STUDY MEDICINE. I HEARD UNIVERSITIES ARE VERY GOOD THERE AND I AM A GOOD AND VERY AMBITIOUS STUDENT.”
A teenage student from Syria

Practically all young respondents dream of starting or finalizing their education in the country of asylum. Most have a preference for science or engineering including medicine, chemistry, electrical engineering and aviation technology.


The refugees' economic expectations are modest. They hope for a leg up during the initial period but do not count on extended social care. They hope to find jobs and earn enough to keep themselves and their families afloat. Some heard that Germany was giving shelter or simply because they “believed in the German Government.”

I WANT A PEACEFUL LIFE AND THE CHANCE TO EARN MONEY TO SURVIVE.”
18-years old Afghan

Most plans do not reach further than arriving safely with the family and then seeing how to get on.



LOSING HOPE OF RETURN



Only a few refugees wanted to speculate about return. When asked whether they would return to their countries if the situation improved, many are indecisive or determined never to repatriate, unable to imagine a peaceful future. They say they do not believe their governments, they cannot imagine that their minority will ever be able to live in freedom or that the situation will improve any time soon.

I DO NOT KNOW IF I WILL EVER GO BACK, I MISS MY FAMILY, BUT I DON'T WANT TO LIVE THERE ANYMORE.”
Afghan man, 18 years old

But such decisions are not taken light-heartedly and many respondents say they would miss their families and their homes.

I WANT TO GO BACK AS SOON AS THE SITUATION NORMALIZES, I HAD A GOOD LIFE. DAMASCUS IS A BEAUTIFUL CITY WITH GREAT HISTORY AND CULTURE.”

Young Syrian man

Family reunification emerged as the preferred solution. Many respondents said that they had to leave close relatives behind as there was not enough money to pay the trip for all of them. However, they hope they will be able to bring their spouses, children, siblings or parents to Europe one day.

“I LEFT MY TWO SISTERS WITH MY GRANDFATHER. I WANT TO BRING THEM AS SOON AS I CAN AFFORD IT.”

Young Yezidi man, Iraq



WOMEN FLEEING ALONE



From anecdotal knowledge over the past months, UNHCR field staff know that in this emergency women practically never travel alone but in family groups or accompanied by a relative. During the 2015 participatory assessment, interviewers had trouble finding enough female respondents. There was great reluctance among women to speak to interviewers alone, they rather delegated that task to their fathers or husbands who felt they could speak on behalf of the entire family.

Hence, the responses UNHCR was able to obtain do not suffice to reach general conclusions but for one fact. Women who do not travel within the fold of their core family do so for family reunification or another reason related to their family status. They do not take the trip alone but are accompanied by a male relative.

Here are three typical examples:

A middle aged Syrian woman is traveling with her nephew to reunite with her husband and son who are in Germany already.

A 27-year old Syrian woman from Damascus is heading for Sweden to join her fiancé for an arranged marriage. She never met the man, but his uncle is married to her sister and she is confident he is a good man. Moreover, he will allow her to get additional education and to work.

The situation of an Afghan refugee woman from Iran became untenable when her husband was sentenced to death in Iran for drug trafficking. Her own family is not in a position to accommodate her and her two daughters in, so her brother is escorting her to Europe. She has very vague ideas of what to expect. She heard that women's rights are respected in Sweden but also that Germany is a good country.

“WE PRAY THAT WE CAN LEAD A NORMAL LIFE IN SWEDEN. I HOPE MY HUSBAND AND I WILL BE ABLE TO LEARN SOMETHING USEFUL SO WE CAN FIND WORK AND SUPPORT OUR CHILDREN. AND I DREAM OF VISITING LONDON TO SEE BIG BEN AND THE QUEEN’S PALACE.”

Bedouin woman from Syria

NON-REFUGEES ON THE WEST BALKANS ROUTE





Curiously, a few persons join the refugee trek through the Western Balkans though they are not refugees themselves but accompany relatives who have no legal way to reach Europe. Among the respondents was a 39-year old engineer of Syrian origin who works in the Philippines. He flew to Turkey and joined his old parents who fled from Syria. Attempts to get them on a plane with fake passports failed, so he decided to escort them on the Western Balkans route.

A 47-year old Syrian with German citizenship said he was doing the journey because his best friend asked him to escort his wife from Turkey to Germany.



SITUATION IN SERBIA



سرخ سارماتن مندن مندن یا کھینچ
 تماس کئید
 اپنے خاندان والوں سے کسی
 وقت بھی الگ نہ ہوں۔ اگر آپ
 کے گروہ میں سے کوئی کھو
 جائے تو یو این ایچ سی آر یا ریڈ
 کراس سے رابطہ کریں
 UNHCR

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Respondents were asked to rate the conditions in Serbia. Most of them praised the treatment by the authorities and the aid received by UNHCR and aid organization. Also, they were generally content with health services but criticized the quality of shelter and sanitation.

“I FIND TREATMENT IN SERBIA GOOD. WE GOT CLOTHES AND BLANKETS FROM UNHCR AS WELL AS FOOD AND SHELTER.”
Syrian mother



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