

DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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Going to Europe: A Syrian Perspective

INTRODUCTION

“It’s better to die than stay here (in Lebanon). We’ll carry our ‘kafan’ (burial shrouds) in our hands and go.” – Female Syrian refugee

The number of refugees and migrants arriving to Europe by boat reached the record high of one-million in 2015. Most of these people departed from Turkey and were Syrians (48% of all arrivals).¹

In order to canvass refugees’ perceptions and attitudes about going to Europe DRC Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey protection teams have conducted several informal discussion groups with Syrian refugees. This aims to provide a more nuanced and deeper perspective on decision making and adds to what is already known about drivers of refugee movement out of the Middle East region – such as the constrained protection and asylum space for refugees; restrictions on legal stay and access to livelihoods as well as education and cuts to humanitarian assistance. As the conflict in Syria enters its sixth year, Syrian refugees are becoming increasingly aware of the narrowing likelihood of return to their country of origin in the short to mid-term. Thus they start to look further afield to countries in Europe, leading to large movements of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The information compiled in this report does not represent any statistical significance but rather illuminates broader trends in the region. It draws on over 50 focus group discussions and 444 household interviews with men and women in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan conducted in late 2015. Syrian refugees are the focus of this research, though it should be noted, they are not the only group making the journey to Europe. Other groups include Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians, Pakistanis, Eritreans, and Sudanese, among others.

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Though not all participants had definitive plans for onward movement to Europe, the majority of those in Turkey and Jordan expressed their belief that it was a ‘good idea’ and that they wanted to make the journey. Germany, Sweden, Holland, and Norway were commonly listed as desirable countries to move to. Respondents from the larger Lebanon group were more varied in their opinions of the journey.

EXPECTATIONS FOR LIFE IN EUROPE

Participants displayed a wide range of expectations with regards to life in Europe and reasons for going there. Much of the information that participants had about Europe was received through friends, family and other community connections (see 'Decision Making' below). A key expectation and motivation for travel to Europe was the promise of respect and dignity that participants felt to be lacking in their current country of residence.

One participant explains,

"We're going to live in peace and safety. We're going to be treated like humans. We're going to get rid of this rent and these healthcare costs."

Other expectations are varied, but include:

- Language classes;
- More job opportunities, if not guaranteed employment;
- Access to health care and medical treatment;
- Government provided accommodation;
- Educational opportunities;
- Human rights and dignity;
- Large sums of cash on a weekly basis.

Focus group facilitators in Lebanon reported an obvious lack of consensus regarding what benefits they expect to receive in Europe. Participants often contradicted each other's information and disagreed on the validity of each other's claims.

Though many Syrians have idealized expectation of what life in Europe is like, others expressed doubts and fears about the decision to move. Participants indicated their fears that the differences between European cultures and Syrian culture will affect their children and the ways in which they want to raise them. The traditions and language of European societies are daunting for some Syrians who expressed their fears of being unable to cope with the changes. The range of opinion reflects the fact that Syrians in the MENA region are themselves a diverse group in terms of educational levels, age, gender and professional experience.

DECISION MAKING

Many, if not all, Syrians know family, friends, neighbours or community members who have already attempted the journey to Europe. These individuals act as a primary source of information regarding routes, challenges, expenses, and expectations for life in European countries. This information is shared in a variety of ways. The internet, closed Facebook groups, and discussion groups on WhatsApp offer details as specific as the roads to take, the price of bus fare, and even places to sleep. For those without immediate community connections and limited word-of-mouth advice, the media plays a crucial role as an information source.

Focus groups showed a variance in attitudes towards onward movement that they learn about through word-of-mouth and the experiences of community members. Participants whose community members have successfully arrived in Europe expressed an increased desire for onward movement upon hearing of the success of their peers. Meanwhile, other participants reported community members who attempted to move to Europe and died or went missing during the trip. These focus group participants expressed their discouragement with regards to onward movement. Further, communities without members who attempted onward movement appear to be reliant on media reports for information and usually express a lack of awareness regarding onward movement. This highlights the importance of information sources used by Syrians to determine future plans.

Several focus groups report the likelihood of children traveling to Europe alone. They believe that children are more likely to be granted family reunification procedures in Europe than are adults. As described by one focus group participant,

“Some families will send their boys alone. That way the [authorities] there will let them bring their families later.”

The universal theme among participants is their reliance on rumour, word-of-mouth, and anecdotal experiences from other members of their communities when making decisions regarding onward movement.

BARRIERS TO ONWARD MOVEMENT

While many focus group participants expressed a desire to move from their respective countries of residence to Europe, many face significant barriers to moving. For example, lack of financial means was often noted as a prohibitive factor for the journey, as was

lack of documentation. Others noted that the desire to remain near family and friends. For some the fear of leaving was too great.

Across all countries, focus groups, and demographics the participants in this research resoundingly **want to return to Syria**. The universal desire to return to Syria, when it is safe to do so, acts as counter-balance to the many motivations that people have for movement to Europe. The cultural and geographic proximity of Lebanon and Jordan to Syria plays a key role against onward migration. In the words of one participant,

“German culture isn’t like ours. We need to keep our values. My family’s staying in Lebanon because it feels like we’re still in Syria.”

However, as the conflict in Syria endures and living conditions deteriorate, many Syrians are recognizing that their prospects for return are diminishing and that it could be a very long time before their country is safe to return to. With this in mind, some Syrians are reluctantly choosing to move onward to Europe. It should also be noted that there are a number of Syrians reportedly spontaneously returning to Syria.²

For elderly refugees, the decision may not entirely be their own. Focus groups reported that elderly Syrians sometimes choose to stay in a country where they share the same culture and religion, or to move back to Syria rather than attempting the journey to Europe. Focus groups in Lebanon, however, indicated that elderly family members are at risk of being ‘left behind’ if the family moves to Europe, because of the physical challenges associated with their travel.

MOTIVATIONS

ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS

Among all participants access to livelihoods in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, respectively, was a key motivator for onward movement and contributor to poverty and hardship. Participants noted that the lack of *legal right* to work was forcing Syrians into poverty, ‘undignified’ labour, and labour exploitation. In Turkey, where it *is possible* to obtain a work permit, the lengthy and complicated process of acquiring residency, applying for a permit and obtaining the proper passport stamps, along with the financial and legal requirements of the process, are significant barriers. Similar residency regulations force Syrians in Lebanon to restrict their movement which in turn limits their

access to economic opportunities, food and humanitarian services. Access to livelihoods is known to be an issue for Syrians throughout the region.³

Focus groups in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan all revealed that **Syrians want the right to legally work**. Participants lamented the high cost of living in their respective countries of residence, and the speed at which personal and family finances are being depleted. Though it was outside the scope of these focus groups, other research has shown that for some Syrian refugees rental costs account for more than half of household expenditures.⁴ Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon are often unable to afford food, clothing, or medicine.⁵ Many have no other choice but to opt for informal work where they earn low wages and may be exploited. This includes working without insurance or any legal protections. Syrians in Jordan reported stories about people found by authorities to be working without a permit who are returned to camps or deported.

Participants perceived that those who are able to meet minimum basic needs, affording at least rent and food, are less likely to attempt onward movement. For those without such means, however, a variety of coping mechanisms are being employed, including the sale of personal possessions and land in Syria, to fund onward movement. A participant in Lebanon related his story:

"I was shot in Syria and I need surgery for my leg. My wife and I sold all our things, all our furniture, so I could go to Europe. I reached Izmir and was about to go to Greece. I was mugged before I could get to the boat. They took all my money. I had \$10,000 on me. I had no choice but to come back to Lebanon. I'm going to try again if I can get enough money."

Lack of access to livelihoods and depleting finances are also leading to untreated health issues, another motivator for onward movement to Europe. Regionally, Syrians report limited and declining access to health care and humanitarian services. Where healthcare is available, concerns over its quality were noted. If healthcare was available, according to some participants, they would feel more motivated to stay in their current countries.

EDUCATION

Participants listed education as a motivator for onward movement with regard to both continued education and the education of children. For adults, opportunities for the completion of higher level studies are limited and difficult in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan and perceived to be more accessible in Europe. Participants found that their educational qualifications and certificates were not recognized in their countries of

residence. Participants also cited the difference in language between Arabic and Turkish (in the case of Turkey) as an additional challenge for education.

Participants in all countries agreed that providing their children with access to education is of the utmost importance, something believed to be more possible in Europe. While children have varying levels of educational opportunities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey participants questioned the quality of that education. Syrians in Jordan described the problems they are facing in registering their children for school as well as the discrimination that their children face there. Parents reported harassment in schools at the hands of both students and teachers as well as the unequal treatment of Syrian students in relation to Lebanese, Jordanian or Turkish.

QUALITY OF ASYLUM

Deteriorating quality of asylum in the region was overwhelmingly listed as a motivation for onward movement to Europe. Jordanian focus group participants addressed the poor conditions in Azraq camp with regards to clean water and proper sanitation as well as the disrespect shown to refugees by staff at the camps. Participants explained that they do not feel safe in Jordan as they feel they may be forced back to Syria or a camp at any time.

Aid is similarly deteriorating throughout the region. In Lebanon participants described the deteriorating aid conditions with a particular emphasis on the reduction in quality and quantity of food assistance. In Jordan, participants reported feelings that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has not helped them and that there is no answer when they telephone the hotline, or they are left on hold until the line disconnects. One participant described the UNHCR hotline as the *'coldest line ever'*. Participants also noted that they rarely receive services from community based organizations and if they do it is typically only once.

Lack of respect and dignity for Syrians in the region was also a key concern for focus group participants. A participant in Lebanon felt that,

"Lebanon humiliates and abuses [Syrians]. 'Umam' [humanitarian agencies] in Lebanon forgot about [Syrians]."

Such sentiments were also prevalent for participants in Jordan who described experiences of verbal abuse by taxi drivers and mistreatment at security and medical facilities. Syrians feel that in Jordan their dignity is constantly insulted.

Similarly, reduced mobility due to residence restrictions in Lebanon has led to a high degree of anxiety and emotional stress among Syrian communities. Participants described the feeling of living in a cage or a prison. In the words of one participant:

"We're in jail. They [security forces and host community] treat Syrians like criminals. It's better to leave than to live with this stress."

And another:

"The ones dying at sea are at least going quickly. The rest of us here are dying slowly"

Weather conditions were also described as a concern and motivator for onward movement to Europe. The onset of winter being an impetus for people to move in summer before the colder winter weather makes the boat journey more perilous.

ROUTES AND RISKS

ROUTES OF TRAVEL

When travelling to Europe, Syrians primarily use the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkan route⁶. The Eastern Mediterranean route originates in Turkey and sees refugees and asylum claimants enter Europe by sea via Greece or by land through the Bulgarian border. In Turkey Syrians pay large sums of money (estimated at US\$900 to US\$2,000)⁷ to smugglers for a seat on an, often unseaworthy, boat or dinghy which then makes the short but dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean to the Greek islands. Alternatively, some refugees take the more expensive, but safer land route with smugglers across the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Along this route there have been reports of violence and robbery. Depending on the route, Syrians may pay anywhere from US\$2,700 to US\$5,700 for transportation on the route to Europe.⁸

Turkey is the main transit point from Lebanon and Jordan to reach Europe. Until recently Syrians generally did not require special documentation to enter Turkey, and focus groups said that most community members opt for legal trips to Turkey.⁹

The preferred method of travel to Turkey from Lebanon is from the Tripoli port, as travel by sea is the most financially viable option for many households. Several focus groups discussed the availability of unofficial routes into Turkey. Members of a number of communities have reportedly reached Turkey in fishing boats.

AWARENESS OF RISKS

For all of the idealized expectations that participants had concerning life in Europe, they were also aware of the risks inherent in irregular journeys using smugglers. It is commonly agreed that the trip from Turkey to Greece is the most dangerous part of the route to Europe, regardless of whether the journey originated in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon. Many participants noted that the trip is particularly unsafe for women and children. One focus group participant, whose relatives had recently reached Europe, says that,

“The most dangerous part is going to Greece. If the weather doesn’t kill you, the smugglers will. Sometimes, when the boat doesn’t get to Greece during the night, before sunrise, the guy in charge of the boat throws the travelers into the sea so he doesn’t get caught.”

For some, the risks are ‘worth it’ or perceived to be surmountable. One individual said that having survived Syria, they can survive the trip to Europe. Others explained that their current conditions are too dire, and that the benefits of a life in Europe outweigh the risks of the journey there. UNHCR figures indicate that 1,015,078 individuals arrived in Europe by sea in 2015.¹⁰ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports 3,772 deaths in the Mediterranean during the same period.¹¹ Based on these numbers, less than 1% of migrants died when crossing the Mediterranean. Thus, the feeling that the risks are ‘worth it’ is likely also based on the knowledge that the overwhelming majority of Syrians reach Europe. Once they arrive the likelihood of receiving asylum is similarly high. According to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) 97 % of Syrian asylum applications resulted in a positive outcome; 81 % were granted refugee status and 16 % subsidiary protection.¹²

Syrians understand the risks of travelling to Europe, particularly the serious and documented risk of death at sea, but for the majority of those with the ability and means to make the journey, the risks are believed to be worth it. As the above figures indicate, there is a roughly 99% chance of making it to Europe and a 97% chance of receiving protection. A participant in Jordan explained that they might drown in the sea, but every day they feel like they are dying in Jordan.

KEY FINDINGS

- The preferred durable solution amongst Syrian refugees is safe and dignified return to a Syria that is free of conflict, though many are realizing that this option may not be possible for some time
- Conditions in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are the main driver for Syrians to consider onward movement, compounded by a prevailing sense of the protracted nature of the conflict in Syria.
- The pursuit of viable livelihoods (accompanied by the legal right to work), education, medical care, and increased aid are all motivations for the journey to Europe.
- Syrian refugees have varied and sometimes idealized expectations of life in Europe. Information is passed primarily by word-of-mouth through community connections and is not always reliable.
- The risks and challenges of the journey to Europe are known to Syrian refugees, though for many these risks are considered to be “worth it.”
- For some Syrians, concerns about cultural differences in Europe and the distance from Syria make the trip an undesirable option.
- Syrian refugees are spending considerable sums of money, including going into debt, to take boat journeys to Europe.

Space for Further Knowledge

Though this report focuses on the movements of Syrian refugees, (who make up 48% of Mediterranean arrivals in Europe¹³), they are only one group among many using similar routes. This phenomenon, known as mixed migration, includes refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants, both within and outside of the region, all of whom have unique motivations, perceptions and challenges regarding the journey to Europe. While

Syrians are at the fore of public discussion, Afghans, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Iranians, Lebanese, Eritreans, Sudanese, Moroccans, and a variety of other groups are similarly on the move towards Europe. This report makes room and points to the need for further knowledge regarding the motivations and experiences of other groups on the move.

Similarly, within the population of Syrians on the move there are distinct groups and categories that may need more attention if a comprehensive understanding of migration motivations is to be achieved. For example Christian Syrians, Syrian women, Syrian children, Palestinian refugees from Syria, and those formerly involved in the conflict may all have unique experiences and concerns regarding onward movement to Europe. There may also be differences between those hailing from different regions of Syria.

Ultimately those who are on the move to Europe do not form a homogenous group. There is much space for further understanding regarding the groups who are migrating and the motivations for this movement.

¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34504418>

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/sep/11/destitute-syrian-refugees-jordan-lebanon-may-return-to-warzone>

³ <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/right-future-empowering-refugees-syria-and-host-governments-face-long-term-crisis>

⁴ http://unhcr.org/jordan2014urbanreport/#_ga=1.159737855.358089114.1443956217

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/567185d71509.html>

⁶ <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/migratory-routes-map/>

⁷ [http://www.globalinitiative.net/download/global-initiative/Migration%20paper%20289%20final%20for%20WEBSITE\[1\].pdf](http://www.globalinitiative.net/download/global-initiative/Migration%20paper%20289%20final%20for%20WEBSITE[1].pdf)

⁸ http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_migration_trends_and_patterns_of_syrian_asylum_seekers_in_the_eu_sept_2015_0.pdf

⁹ Turkey introduced a visa requirement for Syrians in January, 2016.

¹⁰ <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

¹¹ <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>

¹² <https://easo.europa.eu/analysis-statistics/>

¹³ <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>