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## Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU: drivers, decisions and destinations

Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis (MEDMIG)

Research Brief No.2 September 2016

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UNIVERSITY OF  
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Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU:  
drivers, decisions and destinations

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## Introduction

In 2015 an estimated 1,011,712 people crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in search of safety and a better life. 3,770 are known to have died trying to make this journey<sup>1</sup>. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for International Development (DfID), the MEDMIG project examines the dynamics, determinants, drivers and infrastructures underpinning this recent migration across, and loss of life in, the Mediterranean.

There was a significant shift in the patterns of boat arrivals to Europe during the course of 2015. Whilst most people had crossed to Europe via the Central Mediterranean from Libya to Italy in 2014, the vast majority (84%) of those arriving by boat in 2015 crossed the Aegean from departure points dotted along the Turkish coast. In the last five months of 2015 the story of Europe's 'migration crisis' – which had been dominated by the stories of hundreds of people drowning in the Mediterranean seas between Libya and Italy earlier in the year – came to be dominated by images of

thousands of people arriving every day in Greece. In August 2015 more than 100,000 people arrived on the Greek islands, a significant increase on the 54,000 that had arrived the previous month. In the month of October, that figure doubled again to more than 200,000 people. The majority of people arrived on the small island of Lesbos (population of 86,000), with smaller numbers of people arriving on Kos, Chios and Samos (Figure 1).

This Research Brief presents our emerging findings in relation to refugees and migrants<sup>2</sup> who travelled via the Eastern Mediterranean Route from Turkey to Greece during 2015. An accompanying Research Brief (No. 3) sets out our findings from the Central Mediterranean Route. The Brief focuses on four main themes:

- The factors affecting the decision to leave;
- Journeys and routes taken to reach Greece;
- Intended destinations of those migrating; and
- The use of smugglers to facilitate the journey.

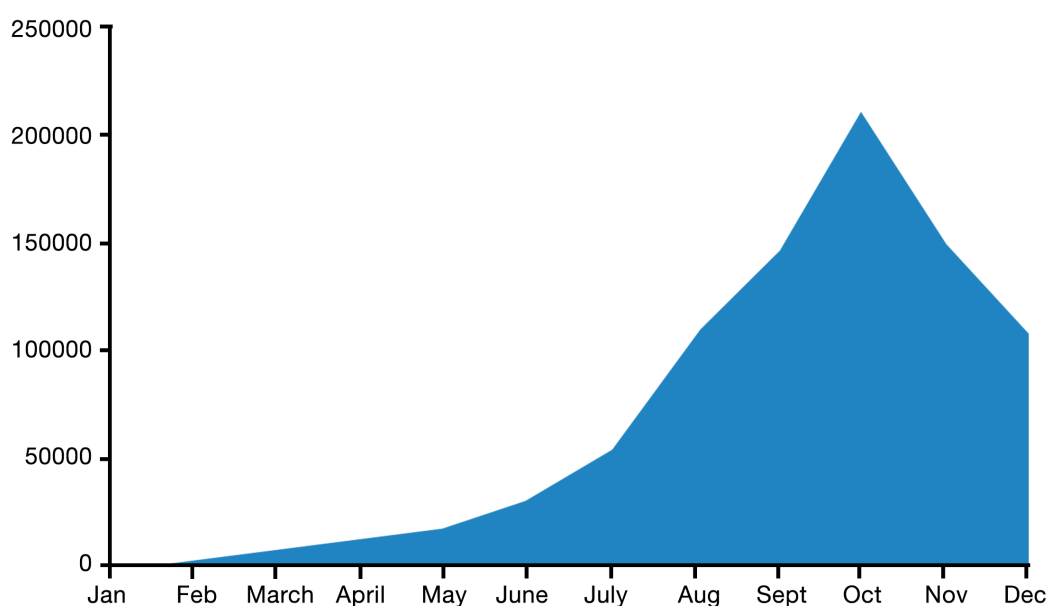


Figure 1: Arrivals to Greece across the Eastern Mediterranean Route, Jan-Dec 2015 (UNHCR 2016)

<sup>1</sup> See IOM (2016) Mixed Migration: Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: Compilation of Available Data and Information 2015. Geneva: IOM (GMDAC) [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation\\_reports/file/Mixed-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Compilation-Overview-2015.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/Mixed-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Compilation-Overview-2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> We use the term 'refugees and migrants' throughout this Research Brief to reflect the nature of 'mixed flows' across the Mediterranean.



Understanding the dynamics of migration across the Mediterranean and the fears, needs and aspirations of those who move provides new insights which can inform the development of more effective policy responses. We conclude the Brief by considering four key challenges for policymakers arising from the findings of our research. Our intended audiences include: policymakers and officials from EU governments, policymakers and officials from the European Commission, European Council, officials from UN bodies, in particular UNHCR, and Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organisations working with refugees and migrants.

The research took place between September 2015 and January 2016 when arrivals of women, men and children into the EU via southern Europe reached their peak. We conducted 500 interviews with refugees and migrants arriving into Greece, Italy, Malta and Turkey, and more than 100 interviews with a range of stakeholders. We also

observed 'the crisis' as it unfolded, including political and policy responses at the local, national and international levels. This Research Brief draws on:

- Data from interviews with 215 refugees and migrants interviewed in Greece (Athens and the island of Lesbos);
- Data from 28 in-depth interviews with stakeholders from government, international organisations and civil society; and
- A desk-based review of the existing literature<sup>3</sup>.

The profile of refugees and migrants we interviewed broadly reflects the composition of those arriving into Greece in 2015: almost half (45%) of the respondents were Syrian, 20% were Afghan and 13% Iraqi (Figure 1). This compares with 56%, 24% and 10% respectively of overall arrivals to Greece during 2015. The majority (85%) of respondents were male but many were travelling in families with wives and children.

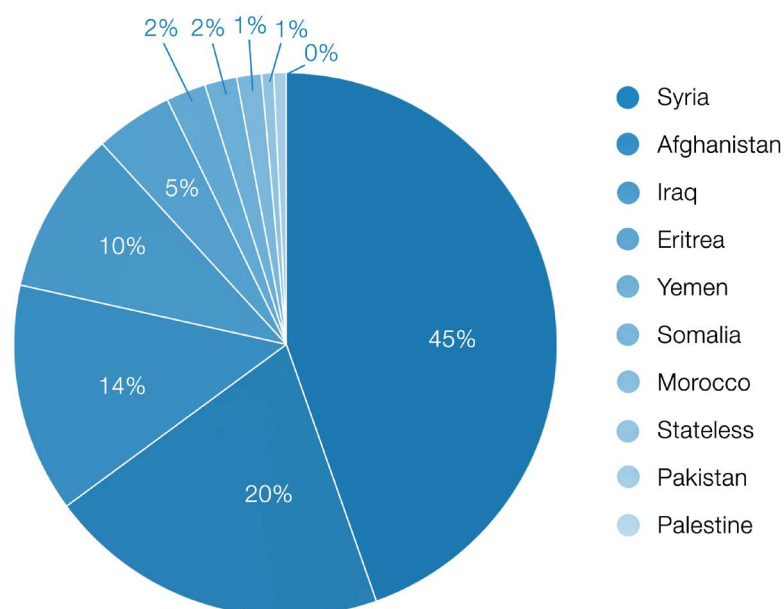


Figure 2: Nationality of respondents interviewed in Greece (n=215)

<sup>3</sup> Further information about the project can be found at the end of this Brief and on our website [www.medmig.info](http://www.medmig.info)

## The decision to leave

### Key points

**The vast majority (88%) of those interviewed in Greece told us they were forced to leave their home countries or the countries in which they were living due to conflict, persecution, violence, death threats and human rights abuse. Within this, the circumstances under which people had been forced to leave varied considerably.**

**More than a quarter (28%) of respondents said that the activities of Islamic State (IS), particularly in Syria but also in Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen, were a significant factor in their decision to leave.**

**Respondents from Syria and Iraq described kidnapping by a range of different state and non-state actors as an increasingly common threat to their safety and that of their families.**

**For Eritreans, Syrians and Afghans (living in Iran), the risk / fear of forced conscription into the government army, militia or rebel force was a major factor underlying the decision to leave.**

**Some respondents from minority groups (e.g. Hazara Afghans in Iran, Christians in Eritrea, Palestinians in Syria) described experiences of severe institutionalised discrimination, usually on the basis of ethnic or religious identity.**

Whilst the factors driving migration across the Mediterranean are complex, our research confirms that conflict in the countries neighbouring Europe, most notably the conflict in Syria which started in March 2011, was a major factor contributing to the significant increase in people arriving in Greece during 2015. When we asked our respondents to describe the circumstances under which they had decided to leave, the vast majority (88%) explicitly mentioned factors that could be described as ‘forced migration’ including conflict, persecution, violence, death threats and human rights abuse. This does not necessarily mean that the other 12% did not experience conflict, persecution, violence, death threats and human rights abuse but rather that they did not explicitly discuss these issues with the interviewer.

Within this, the particular circumstances under which people had been forced to leave varied according to the country context, and in relation to the individual, familial and group characteristics of respondents. For example, some of our respondents were persecuted by state agencies for their involvement in conventional political activity or the activities of family members. These included: a member of the opposition Pakistan People’s Party in Pakistan; a Syrian who was arrested and imprisoned because the authorities thought he would participate in a political protest; an MP

who opposed the actions of the Assad regime; an Airforce Colonel who was tortured for refusing to drop barrel bombs; and a former soldier in Assad’s army who left and became a founder of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Respondents who had been journalists, humanitarian and NGO workers and activists were also targeted in Syria and Iraq. In some cases, the persecution was perpetrated by non-state actors. For instance, one of our Somali respondents had fled Somalia when his father was killed by Al-Shabaab as a result of his work for the Somalian Information Office.

Nationality	Number	%
Syrian	84	87.5
Afghan (in Iran and Afghanistan)	39	88.6
Iraqi	27	93.1
Eritrean	21	100
Yemeni	9	90
Somali	5	100
Stateless (in Syria)	3	100
Palestinian (in Syria)	1	100
Pakistani	1	50
Others	0	0
Total	190	88.4%

Table 1: Conflict, human rights abuse and persecution given as reason for migration (by nationality)

Not everyone had been individually targeted. Many respondents said that they had left their countries because the violence had become intolerable and they consequently feared for their personal safety and that of their families. These included a large number of Syrians who were living in areas of conflict and who were subject to almost daily barrel bombings, sniper fire and other attacks.

**“ I was living in Damascus. The situation was bad. I was working as a civil servant for 16 years. We were living on rent, expensive rent. The schools closed down. The regime was dropping bombs every day. There was no future there. I decided to leave one year ago from Syria for my children. Everybody leaves Syria for the sake of their children.”**

(Syrian man aged 35 travelling to Germany to join his wife and four children)

Beyond these generalised experiences, there were four key issues that affected a significant proportion of those interviewed: the impact of IS, kidnapping, risk / fear of indefinite forced conscription and severe institutionalised discrimination.

More than a quarter (28%) of respondents said that a significant factor in their decision to leave was the activities of IS, particularly in Syria but also in Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen. These respondents had been detained, tortured or forced to watch beheadings by IS. They expressed grave concerns for the safety of their families, and particularly women (wives, sisters, daughters) who were perceived to be non-compliant with strict Sharia laws concerning their dress and behaviour.

Respondents from Syria and Iraq also described kidnapping by state and non-state actors (including a range of militia groups) as an increasingly common threat to their safety and that of their families. In some cases individuals were targeted because they were perceived to be a political threat. More commonly however people were targeted because they had resources and were viewed as being able to pay a significant ransom. Those with resources were most at risk.

**“ I was living in Damascus. I was scared about my daughter's life. We were rich, and whoever is rich is in danger of having their children kidnapped”**

(Palestinian Syrian woman aged 43 travelling with her six year old daughter)

For Eritreans, Syrians and those Afghans who had been living in Iran, the risk / fear of forced conscription into the government army, militia or rebel force was a major factor underlying the decision to leave. Eritreans in particular described military conscription as a form of forced or slave labour with poor quality working conditions, low or no salary and no prospects of release<sup>4</sup>. Several Afghans, including one child aged 16, told us that they had been forcibly conscripted into the Iranian army to support the Assad regime in Syria<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, respondents from minority groups described experiences of severe institutionalised discrimination, usually on the basis of religious or ethnic identity. The clearest example is that of Afghans living – and in some cases born – in Iran<sup>6</sup>. Whilst all Afghans appear to experience varying degrees of discrimination in Iran, the situation appears to be particularly difficult for the Hazara because they are more easily identifiable due to their distinctive physical appearance<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> UN Human Rights Council (2015) Report of Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea /HRC/29/42 <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Iran is fighting a proxy war in Syria in support of the Assad regime and Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) has recruited thousands of undocumented Afghans living there to fight in Syria since at least November 2013. See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria>

<sup>6</sup> More than three quarters (77%) of Afghan nationals interviewed in Greece had spent a considerable period of time in Iran (years rather than months) and several were born there.

<sup>7</sup> See Human Rights Watch (2013) Unwelcome Guests: Iran's Violation of Afghan Refugee and Migrant Rights, available at [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/iran1113\\_forUpload\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/iran1113_forUpload_0.pdf)

## Journeys and routes

### Key points

**The representation of the movements of refugees and migrants as a linear, singular uninterrupted flow of people heading toward Europe is grossly misleading. Rather there is significant diversity in the routes taken, the number of countries traversed and time spent there and a mix of regular and irregular movement within the whole journey.**

**Our findings challenge the idea that all those arriving in Europe crossed all the borders on their journey irregularly (without passports or visas). Some respondents were able to travel regularly for part of the journey.**

**Many respondents did not intend to travel to Europe when they first left their countries of origin but moved on due to secondary factors (lack of rights, limited access to employment, health, education, discrimination and harassment). Some people also expressed security concerns. These factors propelled them onwards.**

Media coverage of the arrival of refugees and migrants in Greece during 2015 gave the impression of a linear, uninterrupted movement of people heading towards Europe<sup>8</sup>. This was often represented through graphics depicting arrows from North Africa and the Middle East into Greece and Italy which heightened public anxiety and was used by the political right to stoke fears about the potential welfare and security implications.

But these stories and images of 'mass movement' into Europe conceal a much more complex picture. There are around 6.1 million refugees and 11 million displaced persons in the region (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, Iraq and Syria) only a minority of whom move onwards to Europe. Understanding the decisions, needs and aspirations of those who move enables a more effective policy response.

Our respondents had travelled through 21 countries prior to reaching Greece and they had travelled along 26 different routes. It is clear from their accounts of the journey that they did not always set out with a clear plan in mind to reach Europe, rather their plans developed and changed over time as opportunities arose or were closed down.

For those coming from countries which border Turkey (Syria, Iraq and Iran) journeys were mostly straightforward, if often dangerous<sup>9</sup>. Women, men and family groups crossed land borders into Turkey, mainly at Kilis and Gaziantep, travelling onwards to the coast via Ankara, Istanbul and Antakya. Some Syrians however stayed first in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and even Yemen and Libya, before finally moving on to Turkey. For others coming from countries which do not neighbour Turkey, the journey was much more complex. In particular, Eritrean nationals travelled through several countries, including Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda and Egypt before finally turning towards Europe.

Our findings challenge the idea that all those arriving in Europe in 2015 crossed all the borders on their journey irregularly (without passports or visas). Many respondents were able to travel to and enter Turkey with a passport<sup>10</sup>. There were however significant differences by nationality depending on access to documents and other resources. Among the Syrian interviewees there was a mixture of people who entered Turkey regularly and those who crossed the border irregularly. None of the Afghans had permission to enter Turkey: all entered irregularly.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35486655> in the UK and [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/world/europe/a-mass-migration-crisis-and-it-may-yet-get-worse.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/world/europe/a-mass-migration-crisis-and-it-may-yet-get-worse.html?_r=0) in the US. Many more examples can be found through a simple google search of 'migration to Europe'.

<sup>9</sup> Although there have been reports that the border between Turkey and Syria became increasingly difficult to cross in 2015 (see, for example Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/turkey-syrians-pushed-back-border>) our research was conducted prior to the escalation of border closures associated with the EU-Turkey agreement (see, for example, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/27/dispatches-isis-advance-traps-165000-syrians-closed-turkish-border>).

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that in January 2016 Turkey imposed new visa restrictions on Syrians entering the country which has made it considerably more difficult to cross the border including for those with passports <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-new-visa-law-for-syrians-enters-into-force.aspx?pageID=238&nID=93642&NewsCatID=352>



More than two thirds of Iraqi nationals entered Turkey legally using a passport and either flew to Istanbul, Ankara or Izmir or took a coach into Turkey.

Finally, many respondents had not intended to travel to Europe when they first left their countries of origin: rather the journey to Greece was part of a longer term trajectory.

Of our 215 respondents, 45 travelled through Iran, 32 through Lebanon and 22 through Sudan. Of these most Afghans, several Syrians and most Eritreans had stayed in Iran, Lebanon and Sudan respectively for significant periods of time, years rather than months. Our interviewees stayed in Turkey between two days and several years. Nearly half (44%) of all those who were interviewed in Greece did not travel straight onwards, but instead stopped to work or stay with friends or family while deciding what to do and where to go next.

Hence, there are secondary factors determining onward migration from the first countries of arrival. These factors include a lack of access to, or quality of, protection or status, unviable economic conditions, ethnic discrimination, police harassment, racism and racial violence, civil war in the case of Eritreans in Sudan and lack of language proficiency (all nationalities).

**“ [We went to] Gaziantep. We stayed for 11 months. I ran out of money. ...I couldn't find a job there”**

(Syrian man aged 30 travelling with his wife and seven children)

**“ I went to Sudan and worked. I was doing pretty well. Five months ago I had to leave because of the civil war and went to find my way to Europe”**

(Eritrean man aged 44 travelling alone)



## Intended destinations

### Key points

**For the majority of respondents the most important priority was to reach a country in which they felt safe.**

**Nearly a fifth (16%) of those who responded said that ‘Europe’, rather than a particular country, was their intended destination. Of those who referred to specific destinations, Germany received the highest proportion of mentions (32%), followed by Sweden (12%), the UK (6%), Switzerland (4%), Denmark and Norway (both 3%).**

**Although some people perceived that Germany would be more welcoming than other countries, evidence that refugees and migrants were drawn to Germany by the decision to suspend the Dublin Regulation was much less pronounced than anticipated.**

**The presence of family members or other social contacts (friends, acquaintances) was the most important factor for nearly two thirds (59%) of those who mentioned an intended destination.**

**Refugees and migrants have only partial information about migration policies in particular countries. Policies relating to refugee status and family reunion were more important than access to welfare support in shaping intended destinations.**

There is a widely held belief amongst European politicians and some sections of the media that refugees and migrants have a sufficiently detailed knowledge about migration policy in the countries of Europe to make rational and informed choices about their intended destinations. The impression given is that the vast majority of refugees and migrants in Africa and the Middle East are on their way to Europe, ‘pulled’ by the prospect of securing jobs and access to welfare support. There is also a perception that the significant increase in arrivals to Greece was caused largely by refugees and migrants wanting to travel to Germany following the decision by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to suspend the Dublin Regulation at the beginning of September 2015<sup>11</sup>.

We asked our respondents about their intended destination when they departed from their country of origin<sup>12</sup>.

Nearly a fifth (16%) of those who responded said that ‘Europe’, rather than a particular country, was their intended destination. This was particularly the case for those from Eritrea and also for those with limited education, some of whom did not realise that Europe is made up of a number

of different countries. For them, as for the majority of respondents, the most important priority was to reach a country in which they felt safe. Freedom from racism and discrimination was also an important factor, particularly for those respondents, such as the Hazara Afghans, for whom discrimination had driven their decision to move from Iran.

**“ I wanted to go to a country where we can live as human beings. I wanted to live in a country with peace and justice. I had no specific country in mind.”**

(Afghan man aged 26 years)

Others mentioned a total of 24 different countries as intended destinations, not all of which were within the EU. Germany received the highest proportion of mentions (32%), followed by Sweden (12%), the UK (6%), Switzerland (4%), Denmark and Norway (both 3%). Other intended destinations included Turkey, Greece, the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Austria, the United States, Italy, France, Canada, Australia, Iran, Lebanon, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Luxembourg.

<sup>11</sup> Until this point, all those seeking protection under international refugee law had been required to claim asylum in the first EU country in which they arrived.

<sup>12</sup> The research in Greece was conducted from September 2015 to January 2016 prior to the closure of the FYROM border when onward travel through the Balkans to other European countries remained possible.

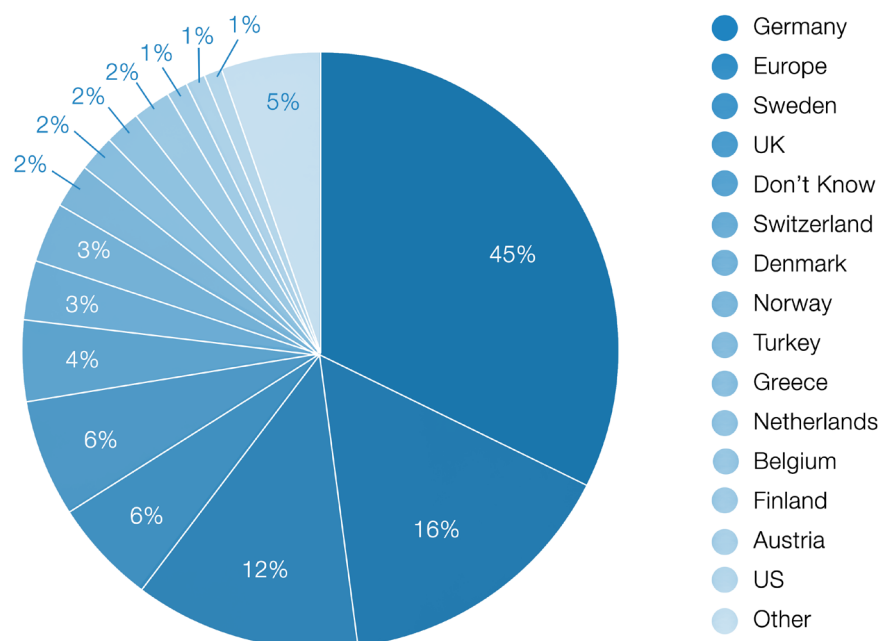


Figure 3: Intended destination country (% of mentions)

It is important to note that many people mentioned multiple intended destinations rather than a single country, indicating that they had not yet made a decision about where they would go but were waiting further information or advice at the point at which we interviewed them.

Our research confirms that for some people there was a perception that Germany would be the most welcoming country. This perception was particularly evident among Syrians, which accounts for the high number of mentions of Germany, but also some Afghan and Iraqi respondents.

**“ We want to go to Germany. Everybody is saying good things about Germany. It accepts refugees. They also told us that the asylum procedure doesn't last long there. We also heard that you get a salary and you are provided with a house if your asylum application is approved. We searched about those things on Google”**

(Syrian woman aged 31 years, travelling with her husband and three children under three years old)

Despite this, our findings challenge the idea that European asylum and migration policy is the only or most important factor influencing the intended destinations of refugees and migrants. There are a number of reasons why.

Firstly, for respondents who had travelled to Greece via the Eastern Mediterranean Route the presence of family members or other social contacts (friends, acquaintances) in European countries appears to shape and inform intended destinations above all other factors. This was particularly evident among Syrian respondents, many of whom maintained almost daily contact with relatives and friends (by telephone, Facebook, Whatsapp and Viber), but could also be seen among Afghans (travelling both directly from Afghanistan and Iran) and Iraqis. Relationships with family and friends living in specific European countries meant that some people were sent resources for the journey and that others felt more confident about what would happen to them on arrival.

**“ My brother is a recognised refugee in Norway. If I succeed, I want to go there so that we can help each other”**  
(Eritrean man aged 34 travelling alone)

This finding contrasts strongly with our findings in relation to the Central Mediterranean route, where the presence of friends or family members in particular countries appears to be a far less significant factor shaping intended destinations (See Research Brief No 3.)

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of the ways in which Syrian refugees use smartphone technology and social media networks see Gillespie, M., Ampofo, L., Cheesman, M., Faith, B., Iliadou, E., Issa, A., Osseiran, S. and Skleparis, D., (2016) Mapping Refugee Media Journeys, The Open University / France Médias Monde [http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/sites/www.open.ac.uk/ccig/files/Mapping%20Refugee%20Media%20Journeys%2016%20May%20FIN%20MG\\_0.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/sites/www.open.ac.uk/ccig/files/Mapping%20Refugee%20Media%20Journeys%2016%20May%20FIN%20MG_0.pdf)





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Secondly, our research found that refugees and migrants have limited information about migration policies in particular countries. The extent to which people are able to access information about asylum and migration policies depends, in significant part, on their economic, social and cultural capital, including the ability to access online digital sources of information. In the very rapidly changing policy environment seen during 2015 it often proved difficult, even for those with smartphones, to access accurate up-to-date information.

In this context decisions about intended destinations may be shaped by ad hoc information and chance encounters from those who have already arrived to Europe or are travelling along the same route. Where specific migration policies were cited they more frequently related to opportunities to secure refugee status and family reunification. These in turn were related to the desire of our respondents to support themselves after arrival.

**“ In the beginning, I wanted to go to Denmark, but later I changed my mind. Now I want to go to Finland...In Athens, I met a guy who lived for 10 years in Finland and he told some things about the country. That’s how I changed my mind and decided to go to Finland”**

(Syrian man aged 25 years travelling alone)

Finally, our research found that decisions about intended destinations are also influenced by perceptions of the economic situation in particular countries and opportunities to access employment. Whilst some respondents talked about the importance of allowances, housing support and access to medical treatment these factors were not as significant as the ability to secure a residence permit (often expressed as ‘papers’) and the right to work. These people cannot be described as ‘economic migrants’ as they had been forced to leave their countries of origin but having lost everything they were determined to find a place to live in which they would have the greatest opportunity to rebuild their lives.

**“ I am just looking for peace and a job. I would stay in any place in Europe that could offer me these two things”**

(Palestinian Syrian man aged 52)

**“ So the last two to three months I started thinking of going to Germany. It’s good there and there are jobs available. Germany has more employment opportunities than the rest of the countries in Europe”**

(Syrian man aged 36)

## The use of smugglers

### Key points

**All of our respondents engaged a smuggler for at least one stage of their journey. All except one hired a smuggler to cross the Aegean Sea.**

**People engaged the services of smugglers for two main reasons: firstly, in order to escape danger or because it was illegal/ forbidden to leave the country in which they were living and secondly, because of the inability to obtain a passport or visa which would allow them to access a safe and legal route to protection.**

**One in ten of our respondents told us that they had tried but failed to migrate legally, for example, through applying for a student or work visa, UN resettlement or family reunification. Others considered this option but decided it was unlikely to be successful.**

Political leaders and large sections of the media from across Europe have repeatedly referred to smugglers as ‘criminals’ and / or ‘traffickers’. Our research strongly suggests that smugglers were a necessity for our respondents to reach a place of safety. All of our respondents engaged a smuggler for at least one stage of their journey. All but one hired a smuggler to cross the Aegean Sea<sup>14</sup>. Our research found two main reasons why our respondents engaged the services of smugglers.

Firstly, and contrary to what is often assumed, the services of smugglers were as frequently engaged by individuals to help them leave their homes, as they were to avoid border controls and enter a country irregularly. This was either because the government or authority in the country in which they were living forbade departure or otherwise imposed travel restrictions (e.g. parts of Syria, Eritrea, Iran), or because travelling was dangerous and required personal security (e.g. Syria, Eritrea).

Almost half (43%) of those interviewed in Greece had used a smuggler in order to escape the country in which they were living. This included over a third of Syrians (including Palestinian Syrians) who had used a smuggler in order to leave Syria. Interviewees paid individuals to smuggle them out of areas of conflict or under siege (e.g. Aleppo, Daraa, Homs), or cities under IS control from which it was forbidden to leave (e.g. Deir Al-Zor, Raqqa).

All the Afghan nationals we interviewed who had been living in Iran prior to their departure started their journeys with smuggler, usually from Teheran and often in the boot of a car. This was because it is illegal for Afghans to travel from city to city within Iran, making internal travel within the country dangerous<sup>15</sup>. Smugglers guided Afghan interviewees past the Iranian army who are believed to shoot those trying to exit Iran through the mountains into Turkey.

**“ There is nothing left after 5 years of war. Yet in order to leave, I had to go through IS checkpoints. My plan was to go to Lebanon and find a job there. We went by car to another area in Raqqa which was controlled by the regime. We paid a smuggler 50 dollars per person. The car was full of clothes, and we were hidden among these clothes. It was a transportation vehicle supposedly. We first went to Palmyra, and from there to Damascus. We were stopped in Palmyra and asked where I was going and why I was leaving. It wasn’t allowed to leave the city if you are younger than 40 years old. In case you are stopped, you must not say that you are going to Lebanon. I told them that we were going to another city controlled by IS. The regime stopped us too. They checked our IDs. They cross check your ID in a computer, and if you are ‘clean’ they let you go. We arrived in Damascus and we went by coach to the border with Lebanon.”**

(Syrian man, travelling with wife and four children aged under 11)

<sup>14</sup> One respondent, an Afghan national, had bought his own boat with a group of friends. En route to Greece they lost their way and he expressed regret to the interviewer that he had not instead hired the services of a smuggler.

<sup>15</sup> See fn.7



**“ I left Tehran 22 days ago. I took my Afghan passport with me. I found a smuggler in Tehran. He was the same smuggler that my brother used in order to go to Germany. From Tehran we went to Urmia. We went by car. We changed five cars in order to reach Urmia. And we had to switch off our mobile phones. We had to follow these steps in order to avoid army detection.”**

(Afghan Pashtun man, living in Iran for 10 years and travelling with his cousin)

Similarly, all but one of the Eritrean men and women we interviewed paid smugglers in order to escape Eritrea, either because they had fled army conscription and / or it is illegal to cross the border out Eritrea <sup>16</sup>. Eritrean interviewees also specifically referred to hiring smugglers to help them avoid the risks of being kidnapped, extorted or murdered on the border between Eritrea and Sudan <sup>17</sup>.

Secondly, our respondents' inability to obtain a passport / and or visa to enter a country of protection meant that they had no alternative other than to engage the services of a smuggler to get to Greece. One in ten of our interviewees told us that they had tried but failed to migrate legally, for example, through applying for a work or student visa, UN resettlement or family reunification. Others considered this option but decided it was unlikely to be successful. For the most part however there were no operating embassies or consulates from which our respondents could seek a visa at the time of departure. For instance, there are currently no Western embassies operating in Syria, and Syrians are only able to apply for visas from embassies in Beirut (Lebanon) or Amman (Jordan). In other cases, applying for a passport would have been dangerous as this would alert the authorities to an intent to leave, for instance from Eritrea. Several respondents directly expressed a wish that they could have been able to obtain a visa, and therefore not needed to hire a smuggler.

**“ I didn't try to apply for visa. Nobody gets a visa. I wish we could pay the embassy instead of the smuggler in order to come here”** (Syrian man travelling alone)



<sup>16</sup> See fn.4

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/sudan-rashaida-kidnappers-demand-5000-ransom-threaten-death-eritrean-captives-1504974>

## Implications for policy

### Key points

**There is a complex relationship between forced and economic drivers of migration to Europe. This is particularly evident where conflict has undermined livelihoods but can also be seen among those who flee due to conflict but are unable to survive elsewhere.**

**The pressures that propel people forward on their journeys towards Europe are likely to persist. Efforts on the part of the EU to significantly expand the opportunities for access to protection through safe and legal routes have met with limited success. In this context the use of smugglers will continue and most likely increase.**

**There has been a failure at the national and EU levels to address the protection needs of those arriving from situations of conflict, persecution and human rights abuse. The Greek government's approach was undermined by political difficulties, a lack of effective planning and economic crisis. The EU has focused almost exclusively on policies designed to contain refugees and migrants in Turkey and Greece, thereby stemming the flow into other parts of Europe.**

**The extent to which the policy of containment continues to reduce flows to Greece and the EU remains to be seen. Much will depend upon the evolving situation in Turkey following the attempted coup and whether the underlying factors driving migration across the Aegean (conflict, persecution, human rights abuse) are addressed.**

We conclude this Research Brief with a discussion of four key challenges for policymakers that arise from the findings of this research: firstly, the need to better understand the overlaps between forced and economic migration and their implications for policy making; secondly, the protracted and increasingly fragmented nature of journeys and the ways in which policies intended to restrict flows can increase the use of smugglers; thirdly, the failure at the national and EU level to address the crisis of refugee protection which was particularly evident in the Greek context; and finally, the disconnect between the drivers of migration and EU policies of containment.

### ***Beyond forced vs. economic migration***

As was noted in our first Brief<sup>18</sup>, there is a complex relationship between forced and economic drivers of migration to Europe. Contrary to dominant political and media representations, migration across the Mediterranean in 2015 did not consist of a single coherent flow but rather was made up of a number of distinct 'sub-flows' from many

countries and regions, and included individuals and families with diverse trajectories. These flows merged in Turkey and Libya explaining, in part at least, the magnitude of arrivals in Greece and Italy in 2015. Our respondents in Greece included Syrians who had come directly from Syria but also others from the Gulf countries, where they had been labour migrants, and others who had been living as refugees in Lebanon or Turkey, as well as Afghans who had come directly from Afghanistan, but also from Iran where they had been living for many years, or had even been born.

Whilst the vast majority of those arriving in Greece during 2015 came from countries in which there was well-documented human insecurity, it is impossible to fully appreciate the complex drivers of migration during this period without examining the ways in which forced and economic factors come together to shape the experiences of those on the move. The longer people are on the move the more complicated – and difficult to unpack – these relationships become.

<sup>18</sup> Crawley, H. et al (2016) Unpacking a rapidly changing scenario: migration flows, routes and trajectories across the Mediterranean, MEDMIG Research Brief No.1 <http://www.medmig.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/MEDMIG-Briefing-01-March-2016-FINAL-1.pdf>



become. One of the consequences is that people may feel that they have no alternative other than to move even if they are not specifically targeted or, as yet, directly affected.

This is particularly clear in the context of Syria where protracted conflict has undermined the ability to earn a livelihood and feed a family by killing primary breadwinners, destroying businesses and making it impossible to travel to work. The conflict has also devastated the economic infrastructure of the country, increasing the prices of basic goods and commodities including food and oil. In Syria, price increases have been exacerbated by internal displacement and the movement of large numbers of people to some of the safer cities. Many respondents told us that they had taken the decision to move for economic reasons but it was conflict that had created their economic insecurity.

It is also clear from our research that many of those who leave situations of conflict find themselves in very difficult economic circumstances in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran and elsewhere as a result of limited rights, exploitation by employers and discrimination in the labour market (and beyond). These circumstances propel them onwards. A third (34%) of respondents had moved on for what might typically be understood as economic reasons: they were running out of money, found it impossible to secure employment or were working long hours for very little pay. With the passage of time, and in the absence of a resolution to the conflicts in their home countries, respondents told us that they had grown increasingly concerned about the impacts on their families, and especially their children, many of whom had

been out of schools for many years or had health issues. The arrival of significant numbers of people in Greece in 2015 therefore raises important questions about the long-term situation for refugees and migrants living in countries such as Turkey, a significant proportion of whom decided to cross the Mediterranean in 2015<sup>19</sup>.

### ***A lack of safe and legal routes***

The pressures that propel people to leave their homes are likely to persist. Despite this, efforts on the part of the European Union to significantly expand the opportunities for access to protection through safe and legal routes have met with limited success. In May 2015 the European Commission presented a comprehensive European Agenda on Migration which recognised the need to avoid those fleeing conflict and in need of protection having to resort to smugglers. Since that time just 8,268 people have been resettled, mainly from Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, under a scheme established in July 2015 to provide places for 22,504 persons in clear need of international protection<sup>20</sup>. A further 802 Syrian refugees have also been resettled from Turkey under the EU-Turkey agreement<sup>21</sup> and 2,682 have been resettled to the UK under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme<sup>22</sup>. At the same time there is evidence that it has become more difficult for Syrians to access work permits and visas for family reunion as the conflict has progressed. In the UK for example the refusal rate for Syrian visa applications has more than doubled from less than 30% before the conflict started to more than 60% in 2016<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> About 2.8 million refugees are registered in Turkey (2.5 million from Syria) between a quarter and a third of whom crossed the Aegean in 2015. Figures available at Department General for Migration Management (2016), Statistics. Ankara: DGMM, [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/migration-statistics\\_915\\_1024](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/migration-statistics_915_1024). It should be noted however that many Syrians are not registered and neither are registered Syrians deregistered once they have left. As a result these figures are widely considered unreliable.

<sup>20</sup> Figures correct as of 13th July 2016. See European Commission (2016) Fifth Report on Relocation and Resettlement available at [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160713/fifth\\_report\\_on\\_relocation\\_and\\_resettlement\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160713/fifth_report_on_relocation_and_resettlement_en.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> The EU-Turkey Statement of 18th March 2016 provides that for every Syrian being returned from Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU. Priority is given to refugees who have not previously entered or tried to enter the EU irregularly.

<sup>22</sup> 2,682 people were granted humanitarian protection under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in the year end June 2016 (2,898 since the scheme began in January 2014). See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/august2016>

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.freemovement.org.uk/refusal-rate-for-syrian-visa-applications-increases-yet-further/>

The findings of our research suggest that the failure of the European Union to provide safe and legal routes to protection has not only jeopardised the safety of refugees and migrants but has also significantly increased the use of smugglers who have become the only option for those unable to leave their countries or enter countries in which protection might potentially be available to them. This directly undermines one of the stated objectives of the European Migration Agenda. Whilst the European Commission is committed, in principle, to significantly increasing the scale of resettlement through establishing a common EU Resettlement Framework<sup>24</sup>, the extent to which this policy objective can be delivered in the current political context is questionable particularly given the lack of consensus between EU Member States on the issues of resettlement and relocation..

### **Access to refugee protection**

Despite overwhelming evidence that the drivers of migration to Greece in 2015 were primarily related to conflict, persecution and human rights abuse, there has been a failure at the national and EU levels to address the protection needs of those arriving. This was the result of two main factors. On the one hand there was an economic, and ultimately political, crisis in Greece which significantly undermined the ability of the Greek government to respond appropriately to the protection needs of refugees. At the same time EU politicians and policy makers became fixated with the idea that the rapid increase in arrivals to Greece represented a crisis of migration control and determined to reduce the flow at all costs.

During its election campaign in the end of 2014 and early 2015, SYRIZA had embarked on a bold 180-degree turn away from indiscriminate 18-month detention policies and restrictive migration laws which had characterised successive previous governments' approach<sup>25</sup>. Shortly after taking power, the (former) Deputy Minister for Immigration Policy announced that refugees and migrants who were previously detained would be accommodated in 'open hospitality centres'. These were to

be created in empty public buildings, vacant apartments and former military camps. Subsequently, in March 2015 an official document (allegedly a ministerial circular) was leaked, which specified that asylum seekers who enter the country irregularly would not be detained at the borders; instead they would be provided with a document which instructed them to leave the country in thirty days. This was widely viewed as an unofficial 'travel document' enabling people to transit through Greece. These moves constituted a major shift in Greek migration policies.

In the following four weeks thousands of asylum seekers, mainly vulnerable groups who had been detained for more than six months, were gradually released with a six month residence permit but no right to work. Consequently, by April 2015, a large number of asylum seekers were living on the streets of downtown Athens. These individuals were quickly joined by significant numbers of newly arrived Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, coming from the islands.

While bold, the Greek government's new approach was undermined by a lack of effective planning. Despite announcing the end of detention, no plans were made at that time for infrastructure to support those released. There was already evidence by January 2015 that the newly elected Greek government underestimated the clear signs of a significant increase in movement of people into the EU via Greece. As numbers began to rise through the spring and escalated during the summer months, efforts to develop an effective state-led emergency humanitarian response were hampered by five years of austerity measures, a political focus on the EU relationship and bail-out and a lack of clarity (and some conflict) in respective responsibilities between the Ministry of Migration which had been created in January 2015, the Ministry for Citizen Rights, Public Order and Police and the Ministry for Defence. Chaotic scenes on the beaches of Lesbos and the other Greek islands that dominated the media during the latter half of 2015 were an inevitable consequence.

<sup>24</sup> See [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-16-2434\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2434_en.htm)

<sup>25</sup> See Skleparis, D. 2016. (In)securitization and illiberal practices on the fringe of the EU. *European Security*, 25(1), 92-111. In early February 2015, former Deputy Interior Minister for Public Order and Civil Protection visited the 'Amygdaleza' detention centre after the suicide of a Pakistani detainee and proclaimed the closure of centre. Kathimerini, 2015. Migrant centers to be shut down after suicide, 14th February, available at <http://www.ekathimerini.com/167320/article/ekathimerini/news/migrant-centers-to-be-shut-down-after-suicide>

### ***The politics and policies of containment***

The European Union meanwhile, has focused almost exclusively on stopping the flows from Turkey to the EU and, in turn, attempting to reduce the political crisis with which migration across the Mediterranean has come to be associated. This is reflected in the introduction of policies at the national and EU levels designed to contain refugees and migrants in Turkey and Greece, thereby stemming the flow into other parts of Europe. From November 2015 onwards, the Balkan route was successively closed culminating in the complete closure of the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) on 9th March 2016. At the same time NATO and an increasingly number of Frontex vessels were deployed in the Aegean and detention was effectively reintroduced on the Greek islands through the development of closed reception centres ('hotspots'). Then, on 18th March 2016, Turkey was declared a 'safe third country' as a result of the EU-Turkey agreement to end irregular migration from Turkey to the EU<sup>26</sup>. Everyone who arrives in Greece is required to go through an expedited procedure. Those who do not apply for asylum or whose applications are to be considered unfounded or inadmissible in accordance with the Asylum Procedures Directive are supposed to be readmitted to Turkey, although Greek adjudicators often reject this view and do not order return<sup>27</sup>. In Turkey meanwhile visas were introduced for Syrians from third countries, borders closed and law enforcement measures enhanced (beaches raided and the activities of smugglers suppressed). There were also some efforts to improve conditions (for example, the introduction of access to work permits for Syrians).

These measures, aimed at reducing flows from Turkey to Greece through a combination of repressive and deterrent effects, have been strongly criticised, including by the Council of Europe<sup>28</sup>. Human rights abuses have been reported by Greek coast guards (pushbacks, shootings, killing)<sup>29</sup> and in detention (negligence, malnutrition, maltreatment). In Turkey there are reports of a lack of access to protection and refoulement<sup>30</sup>.

For the moment at least the policy of containment has been successful on its own terms. In the five months since the beginning of April 2016 only 11,662 refugees and migrants have crossed the sea to Greece, compared with 225,505 in the same period last year, a fall of 95%<sup>31</sup>. Faced with making a dangerous crossing across the Aegean and then being trapped in Greece, potentially in detention and with little or no prospects of employment, many have chosen to stay in Turkey and wait to see what happens next<sup>32</sup>. Meanwhile, applications for family reunification have increased, most notably to Germany. This is perhaps not surprising given the evidence from this research of family connections being an important factor shaping intended destinations.

<sup>26</sup> See [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-16-1664\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-1664_en.htm)

<sup>27</sup> In May 2016 a Syrian asylum seeker won an appeal against a decision that would have led to his readmission to Turkey, underscoring the fundamental shortcomings in the EU-Turkey agreement. See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/eu-turkey-deal-greek-decision-highlights-fundamental-flaws/>

<sup>28</sup> Council of Europe (2016) The situation of refugees and migrants under the EU-Turkey agreement of 18 March 2016, Strasbourg: CoE <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=22738&lang=en>

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, Z (2016) 'Shoot first. Coast Guard fired at migrant Boats, European Border Agency documents show', The Intercept 22/8/2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/22/coast-guard-fired-at-migrant-boats-european-border-agency-documents-show/> <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168069aa7f>

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/10/turkey-border-guards-kill-and-injure-asylum-seekers>

<sup>31</sup> Figures correct as at 28th August 2016. See <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

<sup>32</sup> See Crawley, H and Ozerim, G (2016) 'Selling up, settling down: how a Turkish neighbourhood adapted to its Syrian refugees', The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/selling-up-settling-down-how-a-turkish-neighbourhood-adapted-to-its-syrian-refugees-60738>





## Conclusions

The clearest finding emerging from this research is the striking disconnect between the evidence on the drivers of migration across the Eastern Mediterranean Route and EU policies of containment. Whilst increased arrivals are largely the result of conflict and instability in the region, most notably in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea and, most recently, Yemen, they also reflect the ‘coming together’ of a number of distinct ‘sub-flows’ from many countries and regions. These sub-flows are made up of individuals and families who have been displaced for months and even years looking for a place where they can secure protection and an opportunity to rebuild their lives. What is often considered a homogeneous flow of refugees and migrants across the sea should in reality, therefore, be seen as a series of sub-flows that converge in Turkey. The failure of EU policies to respond effectively to the increased movement of people across the Mediterranean in 2015 was in part a problem of implementation but also reflected flawed assumptions about the reasons why people move, the factors that shape their longer-term migration trajectories and their journeys to Europe. There is a need for nuanced, tailored and targeted policy responses which reflect these diverse, stratified and increasingly complex flows.

The extent to which the policy of containment will continue to reduce flows to Greece and the EU remains to be seen. The future of the EU-Turkey agreement, already subject to legal challenge<sup>33</sup>, has been brought into serious doubt as a result of the attempted Turkish coup of 15th July and subsequent political crackdown. Around 100 people arrived in Greece each day during August 2016, up from an average of 60 per day in July<sup>34</sup>. It is too early to tell whether this is the beginning of an upward trend. Meanwhile there are 58,635 people stranded in Greece many of whom have been unable to access procedures for asylum or family reunification<sup>35</sup>. The refugee relocation scheme from Greece, explicitly described as an act of European solidarity and responsibility sharing by the European Commission,<sup>36</sup> has relocated just 2,682 people of the 66,400 (4%) originally agreed<sup>37</sup>.

Finding protection in Europe remains elusive, even for those coming from some of the most desperate war-torn situations in the region. These drivers are powerful and seem likely to persist into the future. In the absence of safe and legal routes to protection for those outside Europe - and a significant increase in relocation and family reunification opportunities for those who are stuck in Greece – the prospect of a ‘solution’ to the Mediterranean migration crisis remains elusive.

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/05/eu-turkey-deal-greek-decision-highlights-fundamental-flaws/>

<sup>34</sup> Information on daily and weekly arrivals is available via the UNHCR at <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

<sup>35</sup> Figures correct as at 18th August 2016. See <http://migration.iom.int/europe/>

<sup>36</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2\\_eu\\_solidarity\\_a\\_refugee\\_relocation\\_system\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_eu_solidarity_a_refugee_relocation_system_en.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> See fn.20

## About the project

Since September 2015 a team of researchers led by the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University working in collaboration with University of Birmingham's Institute for Research into Superdiversity and the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at Oxford University in the UK and partners in Greece (ELIAMEP), Italy (FIERI), Turkey (Yasar University) and Malta (People for Change Foundation), has been undertaking research into the migration crisis at the borders of Southern Europe.

The MEDMIG project aims to better understand the processes which influence, inform and shape migration by speaking directly with those who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 and with the numerous state and non-state actors who create opportunities and constraints along the way. It provides the first large-scale, systematic and comparative study of the backgrounds, experiences, routes and aspirations of refugees and migrants in three EU Member States - Italy, Greece and Malta – and Turkey. Our researchers were based in the field from September 2015 to January 2016, observing events as they unfolded. During this time we interviewed 500 refugees and migrants travelling via the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes: 205 in Italy (Sicily, Apulia, Rome, Piedmont, Bologna) and 20 in Malta (Central Mediterranean route); 215 in Greece (Athens, Lesbos) and 60 in Turkey (Izmir, Istanbul) (Eastern Mediterranean route). We also interviewed more than 100 stakeholders, including politicians, policy makers, naval officers and coastguards, representatives of international, non-governmental and civil society organisations, as well as volunteers to gain broader insights into the experiences and journeys of the refugees and migrants with whom they came into contact.

These four countries enable a comparison of the backgrounds, experiences and aspirations of those using different routes and contribute to better understanding the ways that nationality, economic status and education,

gender, ethnicity and age shape the journeys and experiences of refugees and migrants. This also enables us to investigate how migration flows respond to changing political opportunities and policy openings led by national governments and EU-wide initiatives. Within these countries the project employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that the backgrounds and demographic characteristics of respondents were broadly reflective of wider trends.

Further information about the MEDMIG project, past and forthcoming events and future outputs together with contacts details for all of the team members can be found on our website [www.medmig.info](http://www.medmig.info)

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