

Migration trends & patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union

ASSESSMENT REPORT

28 SEPTEMBER 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent weeks have seen a dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving to in the European Union (EU). The unprecedented number of new arrivals has not only received significant media attention but has also stretched the capacity of authorities, non-government organisations and civil society to respond.

Despite this, little consolidated information currently exists to explain who the migrants are, the reasons and triggers for the sudden increase in their numbers, or the ongoing and likely future migration trends to the EU. In response to this information gap, between 15-23 September 2015, REACH conducted a study of current displacement trends of Syrian migrants to the EU, through data collected from the areas of departure in the Middle East, from transit points along the Balkan corridor, and through the monitoring of key social media used by asylum seekers.

This report summarises key assessment findings, with the aim of informing the immediate response and contingency planning to the migrant crisis by European authorities and aid actors. Although findings cannot be generalised, they provide a good indication of the key trends and patterns of the crisis.

Who are the Syrians coming to the EU?

Syrians travelling to the EU are predominantly young and male. Around half of this group reported to be unmarried, while the rest have family elsewhere, whom they hope will join them at a later date. Meanwhile, families represented only around a quarter of those arriving, mainly due to the high cost and difficulty of the journey. Across all groups, **new arrivals were found to have relatively high levels of education**, many with university level qualifications and past experience of skilled employment.

How do they travel?

Prior to their displacement, **the majority of Syrians had been living as refugees in neighbouring countries** such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. However, during the course of the study, assessment teams recorded increasing proportions of people travelling directly from Syria. While almost all those included in the study had travelled through Turkey, displacement routes varied significantly: those who could do so reported travelling directly to Turkey via sea or plane; while a significant proportion had travelled through Syria from Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon, often at considerable personal risk. Following a sea-crossing from Turkey to Greece, most Syrians took similar routes northwards through Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia towards Germany, the preferred destination for the overwhelming majority of those interviewed. From Serbia onwards, border closures, transport provided by authorities, and a lack of information have resulted in significant confusion and a multiplication of routes through Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia. Highly reliant on information from others making the same journey, people waited to hear whether borders were open, many travelling long distances by foot and thousands attempting to cross away from official border points.

Why travel to Europe now?

Syrians are travelling to Europe for a multitude of overlapping reasons. For all, the **ongoing conflict was responsible for their initial displacement from Syria**. For those in neighbouring countries, deteriorating conditions in their country of residence, including **decreasing aid, a lack of opportunity and uncertainty about the future had made the situation increasingly difficult**. Northern Europe represented safety and security; access to

services; the opportunity to join family and to work. When asked about why now, people explained that **the journey had become easier than before due to a reduction in the overall cost and the perceived decrease in punitive measures** for those who attempted to make the journey. Both of these are a result of the **changing political climate towards refugees**, including official welcome messages from EU leaders, the provision of transport within Europe, and the popular protests among civil society in support of refugees. With winter weather fast approaching, there was also a perception that the current window of opportunity could not possibly last.

Where do they intend to go?

The overwhelming majority of Syrians intended to travel to Germany, due to the presence of family and friends, the availability of services and support, and the opportunity to work. When asked about their second and third destinations of choice, Sweden and Holland were commonly reported due high expectations on the level of assistance and on the swift family reunification processes.

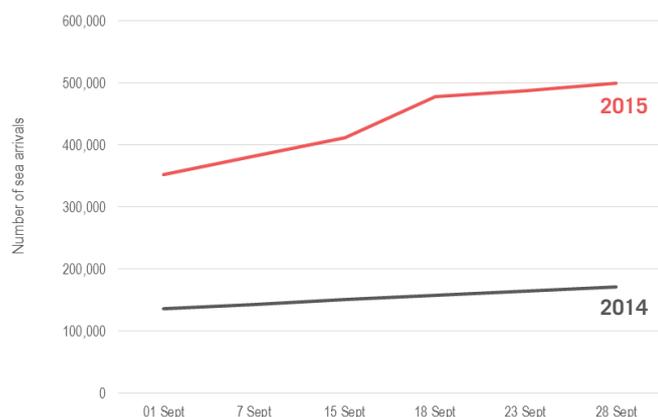
Will current migration trends continue?

Assessments conducted in Syria and among Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries suggest that **the high number of people arriving to Europe is likely to continue until the onset of winter, before picking up again in the spring**. As more Syrians reach the EU, they will act as a pull factor for their family and friends, while the growing demand for transport to Greece has already driven increased supply and resulted in lower prices. European countries should prepare for a short term increase in the number of people arriving and be ready for the influx to continue again in spring. In as far as possible, European governments and aid actors should support asylum seekers along key migration points where problems are likely to arise (especially separation of minors), as well as provide clear information on travel possibility and asylum processes. Lack of information does not act as a deterrent to migration, but rather creates confusion, frustration and chaos among the migrants. It is also recommended that a real time information displacement monitoring mechanism is set up to provide European governments and aid actors with additional predictive capacity to guide the future response.

BACKGROUND

According to UNHCR, as of September 28th Syrians represent the largest proportion of the 499,831 sea arrivals to Europe in 2015, accounting for 54% of the total number of recorded arrivals in Europe, mainly via Greece and Italy.¹ These figures show a significant increase compared to previous years, with the number of new arrivals in September 2015 nearly four times higher than in 2014.

Figure 1: Number of sea arrivals to Europe in September 2014 and 2015 (UNHCR, 2015)



While the number of new arrivals is widely circulated, little consolidated information exists to explain the reasons and triggers for this sudden increase, ongoing trends and future intentions. In response to this information gap, between September 15th and 23rd REACH conducted a study of current displacement trends of Syrian asylum seekers, through data collected from the areas of departure, as well as from areas of arrival in the Balkans, triangulated with daily monitoring of social media.

Specifically, the assessment sought to answer the following questions: Who are the people currently making this journey and how are they travelling? What are the factors affecting their decision to move, and why now?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in order to provide an overview of current displacement trends for Syrian asylum seekers arriving in Europe, based on primary data about those departing from Syria and neighbouring countries; and from those arriving in Greece and travelling through the Balkans. Primary data was then triangulated with information collected through the daily monitoring of key social media used by migrants.

DATA COLLECTION

Primary data was collected from Syrian migrants arriving in five countries in Europe (Greece, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia), and from communities across the Middle East from where Syrians had recently departed

¹ UNHCR, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean, as of 28 September 2015.

(including within Syria as well as Syrian refugee communities in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan). With the exception of Syria, data was collected through semi-structured group discussions and participatory mapping exercises in each assessed location, with Syrians in Europe responding for themselves and those who travelled with them, while those in the Middle East reported on trends observed in their communities. All teams used specially developed questionnaires, with comparable indicators to enable results to be triangulated. In Syria, information was collected remotely through a network of 93 key informants, representing 91 locations across the country. For each set of assessments a report was produced.

Primary data was triangulated with information collected through an ongoing monitoring of key social media. Facebook pages used by Syrians to inform their migration were monitored on a daily basis by a Syrian national. Information was gathered on routes, common questions and challenges faced by migrants and potential migrants. These were consolidated in daily social media reports.

Due to the fluid nature of the current situation, the information collected is not statistically representative of all Syrians arriving in Europe, but is based on trends observed from the over 50 group discussions and 93 key informant interviews conducted from 15–21 September 2015, triangulated with the parallel daily monitoring of key social media.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The rapidly changing situation in Europe and the constant onward movement of new arrivals posed several challenges to the assessment: people had travelled to Europe along a multitude of different routes and through a mixture of legal and illegal means. Reporting is likely to have been affected by issues related to both sensitivity and a lack of knowledge about routes and locations, particularly once in Europe. In addition, the relatively small sample size means that findings reported here focus only on the most commonly reported routes to Europe. Many more alternative routes and experiences exist which are not presented in this study.

As findings are not drawn from a representative sample of Syrians, either at the point of departure or of arrival, they cannot be generalised across all Syrians arriving in Europe, nor those arriving in other locations such as Italy, which was not included in the assessment. However, findings presented here focus on consistently reported trends that have been triangulated where possible with other sources of primary and secondary data (including daily social media monitoring), and may only be considered indicative of the situation at the time of assessment.

KEY FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of those making the journey to Europe were young (aged 18-30) and male, predominantly having departed alone, but travelled with companions of a similar age whom they had met along the route. This group can be divided roughly into two subgroups, with around half single and the other half reporting to be married. Males from this second group commonly reported that they planned to bring family to join them at a later date, once they had settled in their preferred destination. This strategy was only reported to be possible when it was safe and feasible to leave family members behind. The presence of other members of the extended family nearby, and a secure tenure arrangement where remaining family did not risk eviction, were mentioned as contributing factors.

The second most commonly observed group were families travelling together. On average, families consisted of two adults and two children, with minors normally under the age of 12.

Although in much smaller numbers, migrants also included females travelling without husbands. Among them were young females travelling alone, who had a similar demographic profile to young males, as well as (in even smaller numbers) females with children. The majority of this latter group had been widowed as a result of the conflict and were travelling with an average of two children. A small proportion reported to be travelling to join husbands who had already successfully arrived in Europe.

Finally, unaccompanied minors represented a very small proportion of those observed in Greece and the Balkans, but faced particular protection concerns. In most of these cases, children had become separated from their parents at crossing points in the Balkans, when panic and confusion had caused large numbers of people to move very quickly. In a small number of cases, assessment teams also encountered boys aged 6-17 who had been sent alone from Turkey to Greece. This was reportedly because families had insufficient funds to travel together and believed that an unaccompanied minor would have a better chance of receiving a quick refugee status

determination, after which it was hoped that parents and siblings would be able to join through the family reunification process.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The majority of those travelling to Europe had at least a high school diploma and others a university education. Prior to the crisis, a large proportion of all those interviewed had held mid-level professional employment, such as work in the public sector. Understandably, this was more common among those over 25, who had worked in Syria prior to their displacement.

Of all those interviewed, young males represent the most highly educated group, although several reported that their university study in Syria had been disrupted by the conflict. Among young females, most had also completed secondary education and some had pursued further study. Many spoke good English and had worked for NGOs or in the service industry in their countries of displacement.

DISPLACEMENT ROUTES

Various displacement routes were available for Syrian migrants to travel to the EU. The choice of route was made according to a number of factors, including: suggestions by friends and relatives before departures and during travel; cost of the trip; availability of passport; propositions by smugglers; ease of crossing borders; route safety.

SYRIA TO TURKEY

Syrians arriving in Greece and the Balkans can be classified into one of two groups: those who had travelled directly from Syria, and those who had spent an extended period of time in another neighbouring country prior to leaving for the EU. While nearly all those assessed had travelled through Turkey, the displacement patterns of both groups appear to depend on primarily two factors: country of residence, and possession of official documentation, particularly a passport.

Figure 2: Observed household profiles

Population group	Common characteristics
1 Young males	Single males (aged 18-30), travelling alone Married males (aged 25-40), travelling alone but planning for family to join at a later date
2 Families	Relatively small family groups, with an average of two children aged 0-12 years old
3 Young females	Single females (aged 18-30), travelling alone or with friends
4 Females with children	Married females (aged 25-35), travelling with an average of two children aged 0-12 years old Widowed or travelling to join family already in Europe
5 Unaccompanied minors	Children, predominantly male (aged 8-17) Some accidentally separated from family members, others deliberately sent ahead.

Map 1: Primary reported routes towards Europe from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan**Syrians with passports:**

For those with passports, the majority had taken the most direct route to get to Turkey, either by plane from Beirut, Amman, or Erbil, or by boat from Tripoli (Lebanon). Due to the official closure of border crossings points between Syria and Turkey and the presence of roadblocks and ongoing conflict, many migrants arriving directly from Syria reported having travelled via Lebanon instead.

Syrians without passports:

For Syrians without passports it was more commonly reported to travel via Syria, then crossing the border into Turkey illegally. The most commonly reported crossing point was near the village of Khirbat al-Joz in Idlib governorate, which is relatively easy to access for those already in the north of Syria, but much more dangerous and expensive for those who live in the south of Syria, Jordan, or Lebanon, some of whom had travelled via Homs, Hamah and Aleppo. Several groups reportedly travelled through territory controlled by armed groups, such as Ar Raqqa. In all cases, money for bribes was reported to add to the cost of the journey through Syria.

While any Syrian should be able to obtain or renew a passport from the nearest embassy for a fee of around 400 USD, refugees reported two common reasons for not doing so: primarily due to fear of interacting with government authorities at the embassy, or in some cases, due to a lack of information about the process itself.

TURKEY TOWARDS NORTHERN EUROPE

Once in Turkey, the vast majority of all those interviewed indicated that they had followed similar routes from their point of arrival towards the ports of Bodrum or Izmir, before taking the boat onwards to Greece. From close to Izmir, smugglers arrange boats for around USD 1200 per person to the island of Lesbos. Other boats travel to Chios, Samos and several other islands close to the Turkish coast. Depending on the weather and the condition of the boat, the journey was reported to take anything from 45 minutes to several hours. Smugglers did not commonly travel in boats; instead, a passenger was nominated to navigate the short stretch. From Bodrum, migrants were transported through a similar arrangement to the island of Kos, although this route was considerably less popular than Lesbos, and a greater police presence in Bodrum was reported to make travel arrangements more difficult. A much smaller proportion of migrants had travelled via Istanbul, towards Bulgaria, although the cost of this journey was around three times more expensive than the crossing to Greece.

Once in Greece, new arrivals often reported walking to points where they were registered and could then take boats to mainland Greece, most commonly via Athens but also via Thessaloniki, before travelling onwards by bus towards Evzonoi and the border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. From here, migrants travel northwards (mainly by train) to Serbia, with facilitation from authorities.

Map 2: Primary reported routes through the Balkan Corridor



In Serbia, the situation became considerably more complicated, with a multitude of different routes observed between Serbia, Slovenia, Hungary and Croatia. The use of different routes was primarily influenced by the opening and closing of borders, the provision of transport by authorities, and rumours among those travelling as to which routes were quickest and easiest. The rapidly changing situation since September 16th caused considerable confusion and rising tensions between different groups, resulting in confrontations with security forces and a small number of cases in which family members became separated from one another.

With limited access to information from authorities and increasing mistrust, people were highly reliant on word of mouth, social media, and communication with others via telephone. While some tried to verify reports of border closures, and to seek information about alternative crossing points, the numbers of those waiting for news and updates continued to grow. Once possible routes were identified, information spread quickly, on occasion causing thousands to travel at once, for example during the night of 17 September when more than 5,000 people crossed the border between Serbia and Croatia through fields on either side of the Sid-Tovarnik crossing, despite reports of landmines.

While the situation remained fluid, civil society volunteers, the Red Cross, and other non-government organisations offered

assistance. The role of civil society was particularly important, as the provision of generators, phone chargers, and mobile hotspots provided by individuals helped people to locate one another and to plan their next steps. Local people were also reported to have offered directions and guided people along safe routes, such as the paths taken through the fields near the Sid-Tovarnik border crossing.

Figure 2: Reported costs of travel to mainland Europe

Country of Departure	Total cost (USD)	Examples of cost breakdown (USD)
Jordan	\$3400-5700	\$250-500: By land through Syria to the Turkish border \$800-\$900: Boats from Istanbul to Athens via Greek islands \$1200-\$1500: Boats from Izmir to Athens via Greek islands
Iraq	\$5000-9000	\$400: Crossing by foot to Cizre, Turkey \$60-100: By bus (\$60-80), flight (\$90), car (\$100) from Cizre to Istanbul \$30-40: By bus from Istanbul to Izmir \$1200-\$1500: Boats from Izmir to Athens via Greek islands
Lebanon	\$3500- 4500	\$300: By boat from Tripoli to Mesrin \$40: By bus from Mesrin to Izmir \$3000: Boats from Izmir to Athens via Greek islands
Syria	\$2700-3400	\$340-500: By land to the Turkish border \$2300-2800: From Turkey to final destination

REASONS FOR MIGRATING TO EUROPE

There are many, often overlapping, reasons why migrants leave Syria or their country of residence to seek asylum in the EU. These vary depending on individual situations and perception, and over time, as new information becomes available to inform choices on the route to take for the final destination.

CONFLICT IN SYRIA AND SAFETY IN EUROPE

Underlying all the reported reasons for leaving Syria was the presence of ongoing conflict, and the threat and fear of violence in people's areas of origin. As mentioned by one migrant interviewed near the Croatian/Slovenian border: "the individual reasons [for migrating] are all distinct and difficult to untangle from each other; we left because of everything, and they are all attributable to the war".

While this reason was reported by all migrants, those that had spent time elsewhere had particular reasons for their displacement, including the high cost of living and recent reductions to humanitarian aid, a lack of employment opportunities, restrictive regulatory barriers, and inadequate access to services such as healthcare and education. For those coming directly from Syria, recruitment by armed groups was also commonly reported.

With civil war in Syria currently entering its fifth year, refugees in both Europe and throughout the Middle East commonly reported a feeling of increasing pessimism about the situation as a whole, and the lack of any tangible improvements to the situation in Syria which might allow those who had already left to return home. Faced with such uncertainty about the future, and with few opportunities for residency in their countries of displacement, Northern Europe represents the possibility for a better quality of life, increased stability and security and the chance to earn a decent living.

When asked about the reasons for wanting to come to Europe, migrants reported similar reasons, regardless of their previous place of residence. These were primarily the presence of family

“ the individual reasons [for migrating] are all distinct and difficult to untangle from each other; we left because of everything, and they are all attributable to the war. ”

— Syrian asylum seeker in Slovenia

and friends already in Europe (a pull factor that will continue to increase) and the availability of services and support. Underlying both of these reasons was access to security, safety and opportunity.

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

With the majority of the push and pull factors described above having been present for many years, migrants were asked to qualify why they had chosen to make the journey now, rather than before.

Nearly all spoke of the relative ease of the journey compared to previous months and years, due to several inter-related factors. Key among them was that the overall price of the journey to Europe had decreased, due both to the increased availability of legal transport once in Europe, and to a small reduction to the cost of smuggling, as a result of increased supply to meet growing demand. For example, during a focus group in Harmica, Croatia it was reported that the overall cost of the trip from Syria to Europe had decreased from 7000-8000 EUR to around 2000-4000 EUR per person. Reduced regulatory constraints, such as relaxations on registration in the country of first arrival (in relation to the Dublin agreement), and the perception that people were less likely to be detained or imprisoned during the journey were also cited as important contributing factors.

The increasing presence of family and friends in Europe was also an influential factor for many Syrians. The experience of these individuals was not only proof that the journey was possible, but served as an important source of information for others planning the journey. Stories and advice were shared via social media, particularly Facebook, about possible routes,

Figure 3: Most commonly reported push factors, by country (the darker the more common)

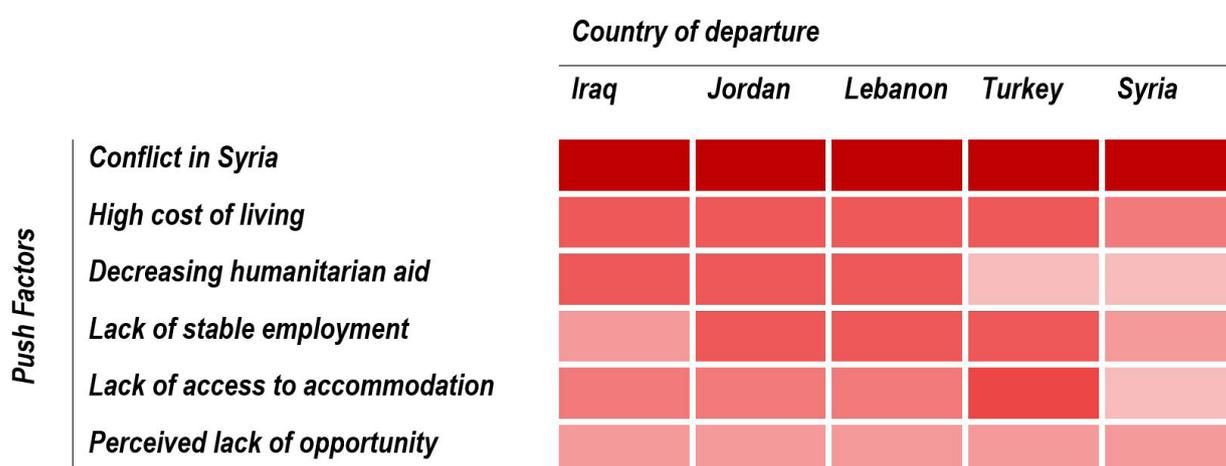


Figure 4: Most commonly reported pull factors, by intended destination (the darker the more common)

		<i>Intended destination</i>			
		<i>Germany</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Holland</i>	<i>Others</i>
<i>Pull Factors</i>	<i>Security/ Safety</i>				
	<i>Availability of services and support</i>				
	<i>Presence of family and friends</i>				
	<i>Opportunity to work</i>				
	<i>Feel welcome</i>				

reliable smugglers, and the costs of the different stages of the journey.

Another recent pull factor was the feeling of welcome for refugees, spurred by announcements from some European leaders. This was most commonly reported as a reason to come to Germany, the first choice destination for the overwhelming majority of those interviewed. Moreover, the changing attitude of civil society in Europe made manifest through popular protests in support of refugees, and through the provision of in-kind assistance to those arriving, had contributed to a wider feeling that refugees were welcome.

Finally, there was a widely held perception of a limited time window in which the journey to Europe would continue being possible. In part this was due to seasonal changes, with the rapidly approaching onset of winter soon to make the Mediterranean crossing significantly more difficult. It was also commonly reported that the current window of opportunity, with relaxed legislation and increased assistance from European authorities, was unlikely to continue, resulting in a feeling that it was “now or never”.

WHERE IN EUROPE?

When asked about their intended destination in Europe, Germany was consistently reported as the first choice, both among those already in Europe and those across the Middle East. Reported reasons included the welcome given to refugees, the availability of services and support, the presence of family and friends already there, and the opportunity to work. Smaller numbers of people reported that in Germany they would not be sent back to their point of arrival in Europe, as would normally happen under the Dublin agreement, and others because it would be possible to family members to join them later on.

When pressed for second choices, Sweden and Holland were commonly mentioned as popular second or third choice countries in which to seek asylum. It was understood that Sweden in particular provided housing and financial support to asylum seekers, while Holland offered opportunities for a relatively quick family reunification process.

Despite the reasons and preferences above, it is important to note that a significant proportion of those travelling did not know where their final destination would be. Among this group, people commonly reported intending to follow others with whom they had travelled to their current location, and overall priorities were similar: first security and safety, followed by the availability of services and support, the opportunity to work, and a general sense that Europe offered a “better life”.

AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION

Access to information had a significant effect on people’s understanding of the current situation, their intentions and ultimately their onward movement. With limited access to often conflicting sources of official information, word-of-mouth, mobile phones and social media were commonly cited means of journey planning and communication.

Social media provided practical information about routes, costs, the reliability of individuals, and changes in policy, with people relying on family, friends and extended social networks as their most trusted sources of information. Access to communication devices was facilitated by efforts from civil society to provide phone-charging facilities and mobile hotspots along the route, while online volunteers provided continuous support at the most challenging stages of the journey, such as the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece.

In addition, people reported to be highly reliant on information through word of mouth, regardless of its accuracy or timeliness. Many reported following the advice of family members who had travelled several months previously, even though this information was often outdated. Others referred to printed instructions provided by smugglers, which were also often outdated, but provided a bare minimum of information about the asylum process and the availability of support.

Those interviewed in Europe, particularly in the Western Balkans, reported lack of access to information as one of the main issues they are facing along the migration route. This created a mistrust of authorities and a fear of being sent back, refused entry or registered in a country that was not their preferred destination.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a snapshot of the ongoing situation with regards to arrivals to the EU at a particular point of time, while focusing on a specific sub-set of the population: Syrian asylum seekers arriving via the Balkans. One of the key findings of the report is that **migration flows to the EU are highly dynamic and multi-faceted, reflective of the variety of backgrounds and motivations of each individual asylum seeker**. With that in mind, some key patterns can be identified in relation to the profile of the asylum seekers, their intentions and the motivating factors behind them. These patterns are behind **a migratory trend to the EU which is likely to continue until winter, and then accelerate in the spring**, when routes to the EU will open again.

As European governments and aid actors struggle to respond to and plan for the unprecedented number of arrivals, their decisions rely on the availability of real time information to better qualify and analyse trends in the migrant influx. Complementing other available information from aid, government and media actors, this report seeks to play a small role in contributing to the existing body of knowledge on the so-called “migration crisis”. However, information gaps remain and meeting them should be considered as a priority by government and aid actors. **More systematic, actionable and real time information is required in Europe and the countries of departure**, preferably with primary data collection among all migrant groups travelling through the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean migratory channel, triangulated by social media reviews. In addition to increasing information available to EU actors, it seems **equally important that new arrivals are provided with clear information along the displacement route**, to minimise misunderstandings, chaos and the likelihoods of incidents such as separation of minors.

Finally, the assessment confirmed the **correlation between on the one hand the recent drop in humanitarian support to Syrian refugees and Syrian communities; and on the other hand the increase in the number of Syrians making their way to the EU**. This is in turn indicative of the increased vulnerability of Syrian populations. Donor countries should consider responding through increasing their humanitarian commitments in Syria and neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees.

In coordination with its partners, REACH will continue to monitor the situation of migration to Europe over the coming months.

Note on terminology

Throughout this report we refer to Syrians travelling to the EU firstly as people, and also as migrants or asylum seekers.

This choice of words is due to the fact that many are yet to receive refugee status determination in their final destination. However it does not imply that migrants will not receive refugee status, not that their primary reason for leaving Syria was anything other than conflict.

About REACH

REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT, its sister-organisation ACTED, and the United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT).

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions.

For more information about this report or about REACH, you can write to geneva@reach-initiative.org. Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info.