



# FROM A REFUGEE PERSPECTIVE



Discourse of Arabic speaking  
and Afghan refugees and  
migrants on social media  
from March to December 2016



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Editorial Note</b> .....	5
<b>Foreword</b> .....	6
<b>Context</b> .....	7
<b>Methodology</b> .....	8
<b>Summary of Findings</b> .....	10
<b>Cross-References to Related UNHCR Studies</b> .....	13
<b>Part 1: Pashto and Dari speaking communities</b> .....	16
Pre-departure info.....	16
Relying on the narrative of smugglers.....	16
Smuggling agents in Afghanistan.....	16
Smuggling offers on the internet.....	17
How the smuggling industry works.....	18
Selling the European Dream.....	20
Accommodation offers.....	21
Smugglers pose as “legal advisors” for asylum.....	22
Document fraud.....	22
Smuggling versus trafficking.....	23
Afghans on the move.....	24
Discourse in and from Europe.....	24
Integration: Personal problems are not shared.....	25
Sentiment of Afghans in Europe 2016.....	25
<b>Part 2: Arabic speaking communities</b> .....	27
Facebook is the market place for information exchange.....	27
Smuggling Networks emerging within months.....	27
Fluctuating Smuggling prices.....	30
On the move.....	30
Struggling with the mysteries of the European Asylum System.....	31
Grappling with Integration.....	32
Sentiment of Syrians and Iraqis in Europe 2016.....	32
<b>ANNEX 1: Research on Communication and Migration Patterns Among Afghan Refugees and Migrants</b> .....	34
<b>ANNEX 2: Research on Communication and Migration Patterns Among Arabic speaking Refugees and Migrants</b> .....	41



# EDITORIAL NOTE

This publication is based on social media research conducted by a small UNHCR team consisting of a project manager, one Pashto and Dari speaker, two native Arabic speakers and an English copy editor. All members of the team possess an intimate knowledge of the asylum and migration context and the cultural norms of the target audiences. Between March and December 2016, they issued weekly monitoring reports which have now been compiled into this synopsis.

Initially, information was collected in order to analyze the discourse among the Afghan and Arabic speaking communities related to flight and migration. The monitoring was meant as part of a research phase in preparation for an information campaign that would reach out to the target audiences, counter the narrative of smugglers, explain the difficulties of the journey and the basics of the European asylum system, and empower potential refugees and migrants to make informed decisions.

It soon transpired, however, that the social media findings were useful to an extraordinary large number of different stakeholders in Europe, including UNHCR, national and EU asylum authorities and law enforcement agencies and that social media monitoring should become an ongoing exercise, but partly goes beyond the mandate of UNHCR. So, as of 1 January 2017 the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in Valletta started gradually taking over. At the time of writing it is still a joint UNHCR-EASO project, but the transition will be finalized in April.

Links to primary and secondary sources were omitted because many of them were short lived and had been closed down by the time this report was compiled. The content does not reflect the views of UNHCR, nor is UNHCR responsible for its accuracy, reliability or legality.



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Regional Bureau for Europe – Communicating with Communities Unit

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**Cover Photo:** Syria. The Old City of Homs has been destroyed by years of conflict. © UNHCR / Andrew McConnell / 2016.  
**Illustrations inside** taken from various social media accounts during 2016

Layout & design: BakOS DESIGN

# FOREWORD

In December 2016, UNHCR presented a paper on *Better Protecting Refugees in the EU and Globally to the European Union*. It called for a more holistic response to the refugee and migrant situation the continent is facing. This issue has many aspects, which need to be taken into consideration, beginning with the countries of origin and first asylum and extending all the way to their reception and the processing of their claims in Europe. Quick fixes will not work.

Policy decisions – and sometimes the lack thereof – deeply affect the lives of millions of people of concern to UNHCR. Insufficient international crisis management creates situations, which force people to flee their homes. The insufficient funding of humanitarian operations in countries of first asylum and the fragmented approach of many donors on the mixed migration routes destabilizes refugee populations and sets in motion secondary movements. In addition, the absence of credible legal pathways to Europe increases the volume of irregular movements and the dependency on international smuggling networks.

A lack of awareness about the eligibility criteria for asylum also plays into the hands of these smuggling networks and human traffickers. Insufficient information concerning the rights and obligations of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe lead to rumors and half-truths, making integration unnecessarily difficult. Communications from the diaspora can either play a useful or a detrimental role in this context.

Nonetheless, we rarely hear what refugees themselves have to say about the situation, how they personally cope with their predicament and what they hope for their future.

“From the Refugees’ Perspective” is an attempt to provide a systematic analysis of the discourse among the persons of concern for the first time. From March to December 2016, a small team of researchers in UNHCR’s Communicating with Communities Unit monitored refugee and migration related exchanges among Arabic speakers and Afghans on social media and issued weekly reports which are summarized in this document, providing a longitudinal view of 10 months of observation.

In this study, refugees and asylum-seekers – usually the disempowered objects of asylum policy – are turned into individuals who have something to say for themselves and whose voices are heard.

The topics cover the refugees and migrants’ decision making processes and the interaction with smugglers prior to departure and all the way to the difficulties of reception and possibly integration in Europe.

The paper provides the reader with a better understanding of mixed migration flows, the practices of smugglers and traffickers, the situations refugees and migrants have to cope with, their needs – including information needs – and their emotions.

The sharing on a weekly basis of the information collected with a wide network of Government actors and European institutions led to a better understanding of the flows. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest that it also led to enhanced preparedness or contingency planning in Europe. The fact that week after week the same trafficking networks circulated their “offer” also casts some doubts on the real and publicly stated determination of some states to effectively defeat the business model of traffickers.

Information from refugees on the social media clearly demonstrates that today’s refugee/migration situation is both complex and multifaceted. As a result, potential solutions need to be equally comprehensive and sophisticated in order to have an impact.

**Vincent Cochetel**  
*Director, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe*

# CONTEXT

During the large influx of asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants to Europe in 2015, it became apparent that most people started their journey without a clear understanding of what lay ahead of them. Many were unaware of the experiences they would have on the move and upon arrival. They were hardly aware of the intricacies of the European asylum system, nor did they clearly understand the rights and obligations of refugees in Europe. It was a mixed migration movement that included many people who were not entitled to protection, but were lured into leaving by the false promises of smugglers and, potentially, traffickers.

In order to understand decision making patterns, information needs and communication habits among the two largest groups, namely Arabic speakers (notably from Syria and Iraq) and Afghans, UNHCR started to monitor social media in Pashto and Dari as well as Arabic in March 2016.

The observations were summarized in weekly reports which brought to light valuable information about the *modus operandi* of smugglers, the dangers of trafficking, the misconceptions about asylum and life in Europe, the hopes and fears of those on the move, and the struggle with integration of those who arrived.

Social media monitoring (SMM) was originally intended as a temporary activity. Along with the findings from focus group discussions held with Arabic speakers and Afghans in four European countries, SMM was meant as preparatory research, feeding into the development of information campaigns, by which UNHCR intended to reach out to potential migrants and refugees before they embark on the journey to Europe, and before they pay large amounts of money to smugglers. Those who have a choice whether to leave or stay should be empowered to make informed decisions about their future.

Meanwhile, both campaign designs have been developed, and, once funding from the European Commission (DG Home) is released in 2017, the projects will start. However, the weekly SMM reports proved so valuable to several hundreds of recipients, including UNHCR field staff, other UN agencies, governments, EU institutions and even law enforcement agencies that a decision was made to continue the monitoring throughout 2016. Requests to dig deeper into some of the social media sites proved too demanding for a small team of only three researchers (two for Arabic and one for Pashto/Dari). UNHCR neither has the resources nor the mandate to follow up on many of the findings.

Therefore it was decided to gradually transfer the entire service to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in Malta in 2017. There, SMM will be a permanent activity furnished with sufficient resources to develop it into a standard EASO service.



## METHODOLOGY

When the researchers first started in March 2016, they did not know what they would find. Based on preceding focus group discussions it became clear that neither Twitter nor Instagram played a role among the two target audiences. Both groups, being grounded in an oral communication tradition, use Facebook as the logical medium that is bringing personal interaction up to 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. The majority of Afghan and Arabic refugees and migrants ignore institutional websites, news portals and media outlets unless links reach them via Facebook. A number of blogs and YouTube channels play a role as well, albeit secondary to Facebook. Private internet-based communication channels such as Viber and WhatsApp also play a role, but of course cannot be monitored.

Hence the team started researching Facebook for interactions on flight and migration. The social media monitoring was conducted in a purely qualitative way: the team started from a small number of pages and sites, gradually enlarging their outreach until they monitored a couple of hundred Facebook pages in Arabic and Dari (there is little information online in Pashto) on a continuous basis. They used accounts specifically created for the intended purpose and only observed without actively engaging other Facebook accounts, be they individuals, discussion groups, bloggers or smugglers. Only when the researchers came across smuggling pages which misused the logo of UNHCR they intervened with Facebook to have them closed down. In a few cases when other UN logos were detected, the organisations concerned were informed accordingly.



Each report thus provided a snapshot of the latest situation and the discourse among Facebook users. While this methodology does not provide quantitative data about people on the move or in Europe, it gives us a very clear picture of new developments and changes in the sentiment of the target audiences as well as the change in pricing and promotion strategies of smugglers.

Moreover, qualitative data provide an explanatory matrix, against which migration and population data can be evaluated in their social and cultural context. This report is based on the:

- Summary of 10 months of social media monitoring;
- Information obtained from focus group discussions with several hundreds of people in four European countries (Belgium, France, Germany and Austria) in early 2016 (the detailed reports are added in the annex);
- Insight gained from numerous discussions with transiting refugees and migrants in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia during the author's field work in 2015;
- Information obtained indirectly by the tow of the researchers when working with Afghan and Arabic speaking migrants and refugees from 18 October to 5 November 2016 in Calais.

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Afghans	Syrians/Iraqis
<b>INFORMATION PRE-DEPARTURE</b>	
<p>Many people from rural areas with a low level of education, little knowledge of the length of the journey, nor asylum matters or life in Europe. The only sources of information are the local smuggling agents.</p>	<p>People understand the geography of getting to Europe, but only have a vague understanding of asylum and life in Europe. Their main source of information are their fellow Syrians and Iraqis who already made the journey. Media are not seen as trusted sources of information per se.</p>
<b>CONTACTING SMUGGLERS</b>	
<p>Local recruiters in smuggling networks enjoy trust and a high reputation. In all regions, there are smuggling agents that are well known to the population. Pashtuns get in touch via direct contact. Among Dari speakers, there are both direct contacts and advertisements on social media. Often travel agencies will operate legitimate as well as illegal businesses. Some smugglers proactively approach the fathers of underage boys.</p>	<p>Potential clients ask each other on social media about ways to get to Europe or certain countries. Smugglers monitor Facebook conversations and post their offers. Negotiations are done via private channels (Viber, Imo, WhatsApp,...).</p>
<b>BOOKING ARRANGEMENTS</b>	
<p>Afghans practically always book all-inclusive trips from country of origin to destination. The fathers take the decision and entrust their sons without hesitation. The boys are firmly instructed to listen to the “uncles” (code for smuggler) and no one else.</p>	<p>Syrians and Iraqis distrust smugglers and only use them where they have no legal option to move. They engage with them for the separate legs of the journey that they cannot do on their own.</p>
<b>PAYMENT MODALITIES</b>	
<p>The money is deposited with a “saraf” (private money changer) who only releases the money upon the clients’ arrival.</p> <p>If the family does not have enough cash, they also take land.</p> <p>Towards the end of 2016, smugglers started offering credit card payments for the first time.</p>	<p>The money is deposited for safekeeping until arrival at so-called “insurance offices”, mostly located in Turkey.</p>
<b>INTERNATIONAL SMUGGLING NETWORKS</b>	
<p>Networks have been developing for over two decades. Many seem to be based in Iran (or are at least using Iranian Farsi on social media). They work with recruiters, <i>sarafs</i>, local guides in all countries along the route, providers of accommodation, providers of fake and stolen documents and “legal advisers” on asylum matters. Until recently there was little competition, evidenced by the fact that smugglers were recommending each other on social media. Recently there have been reports of very violent Kurdish traffickers moving in.</p>	<p>Due to the closure of regular access to Europe, the level of sophistication dramatically increased between March and July 2016 from opportunistic local money-making schemes to international networks, advertising complex trips over a wide variety of routes, as well as fake and stolen documents and visas obtained from corrupted officials in various consulates.</p>

Afghans	Syrians/Iraqis
<b>ADVERTISEMENTS</b>	
<p>Afghan smugglers sell the “European Dream” with enticing pictures and promises of a good and safe life.</p>	<p>Smugglers who cater to Arabic speakers advertise in a matter-of-fact manner: routes, prices, phone numbers. Only towards the end of 2016, advertisements became more attractive, possibly due to increasing competition and a greater reluctance of Iraqis and Syrians to embark on the trip to Europe.</p>
<b>SMUGGLING VS. TRAFFICKING</b>	
<p>The voluntary – albeit illegal – transaction of smuggling degenerates into trafficking when coercion is involved. Smugglers use weapons to force clients into dangerous situations: crammed, suffocating hideaways in vehicles, dangerously fast rides on open trucks, night walks across mountain ranges, boarding overcrowded vessels.</p> <p>In general, the Afghan travellers are very young and uninformed, and rely entirely on their smuggler, which makes them vulnerable to abuse, including sexual exploitation.</p> <p>There are even a few reports that a traveller or a relative in Afghanistan was held hostage if not enough money was paid. Recently there have been occasional reports of Afghans being taken hostage and tortured in Iraq in order to extort a ransom.</p>	<p>Force is involved when clients are pushed onto crowded vessels or forced to embark despite rough weather conditions. This is sometimes done at gunpoint.</p> <p>There are reports on social media of swindlers who promise smuggling services and cheat clients out of their money. The victims post names and pictures of such persons to warn others.</p>
<b>INFORMATION ON THE MOVE</b>	
<p>Most Afghans completely entrust themselves to their local smuggling guides and follow their instructions. They speak their language and are considered more trustworthy than NGOs, local authorities or UNHCR. They rarely possess mobile phones, much less smartphones.</p>	<p>Travellers from Iraq and Syria use maps, mobile phones and information obtained on Facebook to decide on the best routes and methods of onward movement. The decision of where to go is sometimes guided by coincidences and sometimes by the fact that they have ties in a certain country.</p>
<b>REPORTING BACK HOME</b>	
<p>When talking to their family back home, Afghans usually do not admit to problems but rather say that everything was alright so as not to upset the parents. They consider it their duty to live up to parental expectations.</p>	<p>Iraqis and Syrians are engaged in a continuous exchange of news. They report about their dwindling chances for asylum due to other nationalities taking away asylum places from Syrians and Iraqis, terrorist attacks committed by Muslims, restrictive policy and reduced chances for family reunification.</p> <p>As of summer, more and more users in Europe are trying to dissuade others from coming by sharing their own disillusionment.</p>
<b>KNOWLEDGE OF THE ASYLUM SYSTEM</b>	
<p>Afghans generally know very little about the asylum system, who is entitled to asylum, the Dublin Regulation or what to do if rejected. The smuggling networks offer online training against payment and allegedly advise them on “how to prepare for asylum interviews”. The information deficit is even higher among Pashtu speakers, as there is little to no information in their language on the Internet.</p>	<p>Knowledge of the asylum system is scant; people try to understand it and ask each other by sharing information that is often incomplete, wrong or based on rumours. Most debated points are the length of procedures, fingerprinting and what it entails, as well as family reunification and the wish to visit family in other countries.</p>

Afghans	Syrians/Iraqis
<b>INTEGRATION ISSUES</b>	
<p>Personal problems are rarely shared; private success stories sometimes are. Instead, Afghans debate asylum policy issues and rising xenophobia.</p>	<p>Arabic speakers widely discuss personal integration problems, notably learning the new language and understanding the new culture. They debate Western influence on their women and youth, resulting in women claiming more rights and some filing for divorce, and in children not adhering to customary dressing and behavioral codes. They also discuss politics, rising xenophobia in Europe and attacks on refugees and accommodations centers. They worry how acts of terror committed by Muslims will diminish their chances of getting asylum. Jokes and black humour serve for venting stress and bewilderment about cultural differences.</p>
<b>VOLUNTARY AND FORCED RETURN</b>	
<p>Fears of forced return and pros and cons of voluntary return are being discussed. Afghans try to mobilise against returns by organising demonstrations in various European cities to point out security problems in Afghanistan.</p>	<p>While in the beginning of 2016, most posters were preoccupied with the closure of the Balkans route and how to get to Europe, the tone started changing in July/ August, as there were more complaints about living conditions in reception centers in Europe as well as long waiting periods for asylum and family reunification. For the first time, alternative destinations are now being discussed, such as returning to Turkey or going to Sudan.</p>

# CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELATED UNHCR STUDIES

Monitoring social media is not a precise method of data collection, rather a series of more or less representative snapshots of the situation at the time. However, when compared to other studies and data collected through different channels, there is a high degree of accordance between findings.

One major shortcoming of the social media discourse, however, is its lack of focus on protection issues. Users tend to discuss publicly how to get to Europe and how to make a life there, but normally do not need to explain to each other why. The individual motivations and reasons for leaving to Europe in the first place are not a subject of intra-community dialogue on Facebook. If the protection situation at home is raised at all, this is done when users discuss forced and voluntary returns.

With refugee protection being at the very core of UNHCR's mandate, UNHCR repeatedly profiled new arrivals in Greece in early 2016 on a monthly basis, taking a closer look at the reasons for flight and the protection needs of newly arrived Afghans<sup>1</sup> and Syrians/Iraqis<sup>2</sup>.

The key findings represent the quantitative data that UNHCR collected in Greece during May 2016. This data is comprised of a small sample size and therefore is not representative for the entire Afghan or Syrian/Iraqi refugee population. Nevertheless, the information indicated in these findings corroborate the qualitative research conducted by the CwC Unit.

In Sweden, UNHCR carried out a profiling study of unaccompanied or separated Afghan children arriving in Sweden in 2015<sup>3</sup>, the key findings of which are also summarized below.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://goo.gl/AROHYG>

<sup>2</sup> <http://goo.gl/O3gkwb>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/582c789f4.pdf>

## Questionnaire Findings for Afghans in Greece, May 2016 – Key results

- 
- More than **71%** of respondents left Afghanistan due to war/conflict.
- 
- **43%** of respondents were internally displaced in Afghanistan before starting the journey to Europe.
- 
- **77%** of respondents came directly from Afghanistan and were not living in another country before coming to Greece.
- 
- **75%** of the respondents directly witnessed or experienced protection incidents during the journey.
- 
- **66%** of respondents were travelling with at least one close family member (father/mother, spouse, children, and siblings).
- 
- **64%** of respondents had left close family members behind. The main reasons why family members were left behind were lack of financial resources (**31%**) and the fact that family members did not want to come (**31%**). **9%** of those plan on eventually bringing them to the country of destination.
- 
- In the current situation, **61%** of the respondents want to go to another European country, while **15%** want to remain and live in Greece and **23%** have not yet decided. The main reasons for choosing the intended destination country were respect for human rights (**34%**) and family member(s) already being in the country (**32%**).

## Questionnaire Findings for Syrians in Greece, May 2016 – Key results

(This is the last in a series of monthly polls carried out in Greece and thus closest to the reporting period of this paper.)

- 
- More than **92%** of respondents left Syria due to war/conflict.
- 
- **86%** of respondents were internally displaced in Syria before starting the journey to Europe.
- 
- More than **85%** of respondents came directly from Syria and were not living in another country before coming to Greece.
- 
- **89%** of respondents directly witnessed or experienced protection incidents during the journey. Most of the protection incidents experienced or witnessed occurred in Turkey (**82%** of all incidents). The two main incidents experienced or witnessed by respondents were detention (**27%**), mainly in Turkey, and shooting or threat of shooting (**19%**), only in Turkey.
- 
- **83%** of respondents were travelling with at least one close family member (father/mother, spouse, children, siblings).
- 
- **62%** of respondents had left close family members behind, lack of financial resources being the main reason. **36%** of those plan on eventually bringing them to the country of destination.
- 
- In the current situation, **77%** of the respondents want to go to another European country. The main reasons for choosing the intended destination country were (**45%**) family member(s) already being in that country.

## Profiling Afghan minors in Sweden in 2015 – Key results

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→ **Background:** Around **84%** of interviewed unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) were born in Afghanistan. However, **37%** stated Iran as their main place of residence prior to the journey. The vast majority (**74%**) identified themselves as Hazara with most of them coming from Ghazi, Day Kundi, Kabul and Kunduz in Afghanistan, as well as Teheran, Qom and Isfahan in Iran.

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→ **Education and work:** The majority of those surveyed had completed primary school, while two thirds reported they had worked for an average of ten months in the past year (mainly construction, agriculture, and food service), which had prevented them from attending school. In Sweden, **84%** stated being able to read and write and **20%** said they could already speak and write Swedish.

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→ **Family background:** Most of the Afghan UASCs interviewed lived with their nuclear family prior to embarking on their journey. However, those interviewed often reported that their parents, or habitual care-givers were missing. For example, half of the UASCs participants reported that their father was deceased, and one quarter of those surveyed noted that their mother was either deceased or missing.

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→ **Reasons for leaving:** Overall, Afghan UASCs provided protection-related reasons for their departure from their countries of habitual residence, irrespective of the country (Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan). While UASCs leaving Afghanistan primarily stated security-related reasons for embarking on the journey – including conflict and violence – UASCs departing from Iran mainly reported discrimination, lack of access to rights, and lack of documentation as their primary motivation for leaving. Economic reasons were only mentioned by a small fraction (**9%**) of UASCs interviewed.

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→ **Journey:** The interviewed UASCs spent an average of 7 months traveling. All of them came through Iran and Turkey and had witnessed or experienced death, violence and abuse along the journey.

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→ **Choosing their destination:** The interviewed UASCs chose Sweden to apply for asylum, as they perceived the country as offering good education opportunities (**41%** of interviewed UASCs), good human rights standards (**32%**), and a fair and efficient asylum procedure (**29%**), as well as economic opportunities. The decision was typically made along the journey based on information from other travelers and smugglers.

# PART 1: PASHTO AND DARI SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

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## PRE-DEPARTURE INFO

Afghans pondering to leave for Europe are much more preoccupied with raising the money for the smugglers than with practical preparations. They have a notion that the trip might be difficult, but are convinced it is worth it. None of the focus group participants had even heard of an Afghan who would have researched routes, destination countries, or whether they would qualify for asylum in Europe.

## RELYING ON THE NARRATIVE OF SMUGGLERS

Consequently, Afghan refugees and migrants rely entirely on the biased narrative of smugglers as their main source of information about the trip. For obvious reasons, smugglers downplay the dangers of the journey and paint an unrealistically positive picture of the situation of Afghans in Europe. (Afghan saying: *“They make a soup of the ocean.”*) The traditional reliance on fate and destiny among uneducated Afghans prevents them from seeing beyond these promises or from questioning the narrative.

In urban areas, the Afghan Government and media are actively trying to dissuade people from leaving by broadcasting horrible pictures and stories about those who died on their way to Europe. Participants said they did not believe this information, considering it government propaganda.

People in rural areas are totally disconnected from the reality of the journey and of life in Europe. They are convinced that everybody will receive protection, accommodation and gainful employment upon arrival. Coming from a country

with a weak legal system, they are totally unaware of the rules related to asylum before they leave Afghanistan.

Afghan society is very patriarchal. Therefore in many cases, especially in rural areas, it is not the young man or boy himself who resolves to leave but the head of household – the father or grandfather – who makes the decision, convinced that they are offering their young ones the chance for a safer and better life. Participants said that parents mostly want to save their young males from being forcibly recruited by the various warring factions (Taliban, ISIS) operating in different parts of Afghanistan.

## SMUGGLING AGENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Unlike in other cultures, in Afghanistan smugglers enjoy a good reputation, although SMM revealed an increase in the number of critical voices in 2016. They also see themselves as providers of important services rather than criminals.

In Afghanistan local smuggling agents are influential personalities; they are considered to be well-travelled and world-wise. Smuggling networks are often attached to travel agencies who have both a legitimate business and a more sinister branch. They operate openly in Afghanistan. If one has the financial resources and the wish to leave to Europe, finding a smuggler is a quick and expedient task.

In Kabul, smugglers operate mostly in the currency exchange market (*saray-e-shahzada*) and in many areas of Kabul city, such as Zer-zamini, Kot-e-sangi and in Gul Bahar Center. Though it is an open secret what they are doing, they run their illegal businesses under the guise of travel agencies,

electronic repair shops, etc. In their offices, they display posters of European cities to attract customers.

In cities, smugglers proactively approach young adults to find candidates for Europe. One such location is in front of the Passport Department in Kabul, where a huge number of youths stand in line to get passports. In rural areas, smugglers pay a commission to young boys for finding candidates to smuggle to Europe. Some of them operate door-to-door campaigns, for example in Herat.

## SMUGGLING OFFERS ON THE INTERNET

On Facebook, there are hundreds of pages of smuggling networks and a wide range of affiliated services easily accessible and with full contact numbers. Legal and illegal offers are often mixed. When asked whether his services were completely legal, one smuggler on Facebook in July replied: “it depends”.

Looking at the Facebook accounts, it is safe to deduce that smuggling is a stable and well-established industry. Almost all “old” smugglers are interconnected as friends on Facebook and they rarely seem to be in competition. Most of them have obviously been active on this network for several years and have accumulated over 4,000 friends. Some of them claim having “25 years of experience”.

The main pages are online permanently, and either post new offers at least once a week or re-advertise old offers if the prices or routes remain stable. There are also smuggler Facebook pages, which are very rarely updated, but contain offers to specific EU countries that are attractive enough for potential clients to contact them for detailed enquiries.

Prices and routes are announced on Facebook along with contact details. When clients post questions openly, they are instructed to use private communication lines (telephone, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc.).

Language (mostly Iranian Farsi and not the Dari variant spoken in Afghanistan) implies that many of those networks are managed from Iran and Turkey. Each specific service is advertised on a separate page. Given the fluctuation of pages which are sometimes taken offline permanently or for certain periods of time, it is impossible to determine exact numbers of active networks.

- The majority of offers are apparently from large providers, estimated at around one hundred at any given time;
- Over a hundred other users will randomly post offers, but they are not permanent and constantly change their identities;
- More than 50 Facebook pages offer short-term accommodation in transit countries (mainly in Turkey);
- Over a hundred financial agents (*sarafs*) are present on Facebook. They not only keep the deposited smuggling fees as intermediaries between smuggler and client, but also manage financial transfers;
- Over 100 “asylum and immigration consultants” offer so-called “advice on asylum claims” and provide fake “proofs” of persecution;
- Occasionally up to 20 users will pretend to be “satisfied clients” posting messages of gratitude, or pictures to express their thanks, on certain smuggler pages. This usually occurs as a reaction to posts denouncing the irresponsibility or cruelty of smugglers;
- Around 50 Facebook accounts promise student visas for Europe and other developed countries;
- During the reporting period, about a dozen accounts used original or altered logos of international organizations to demonstrate their “respectability”.

## SMUGGLING OFFERS ON THE INTERNET

added 2 new photos.

12 April at 14:15 ·

تتها مرکز تخصصی ویزا ، اقامت و پناهندگی  
( امریکا ، کانادا ، شنکن ، انگلستان ، استرالیا )  
(imo, Whatsapp, Line, Telegram) 0090-5393157509  
(viber, Whatsapp, imo, Line, Telegram) 00357-96097348  
دوستان عزیز لطفا از طریق ایمو واتساپ وایبر پیام بید وقت بگیریید ...  
See more ...  
See Translation




Like Comment Share

Write a comment...

added 2 new photos.

12 April at 12:36 ·

تتها مرکز تخصصی ویزا ، اقامت  
( . کانادا ---- شنکن ---- انگلستان ---- استرالیا . )  
(imo . Whatsapp, Telegram) 0090-5393157509  
(viber, Imo, Whatsapp, Telegram) 00357-96097348  
دوستان عزیز لطفا از طریق [ ایمو -- واتساپ ] پیام بید وقت بگیریید ...  
See more ...  
See Translation



Public group  
4,324 Members

+ Join group

Like Comment Share

updated his profile picture.

12 April at 12:33 ·



Share

## HOW THE SMUGGLING INDUSTRY WORKS

The usual way to travel for Afghans is to book an all-inclusive trip from the country of origin to the promised country of destination and move in a group. Some Afghan refugees and migrants are held up along the route because they need to earn more money or because they get arrested or separated for other reasons from their group. For those persons, there are other offers as well. Ads sometimes specify whether trips will be on foot, by car, plane or ship or a combination thereof. Sometimes the countries of destination are specified, sometimes destination is vaguely described as “EU”.

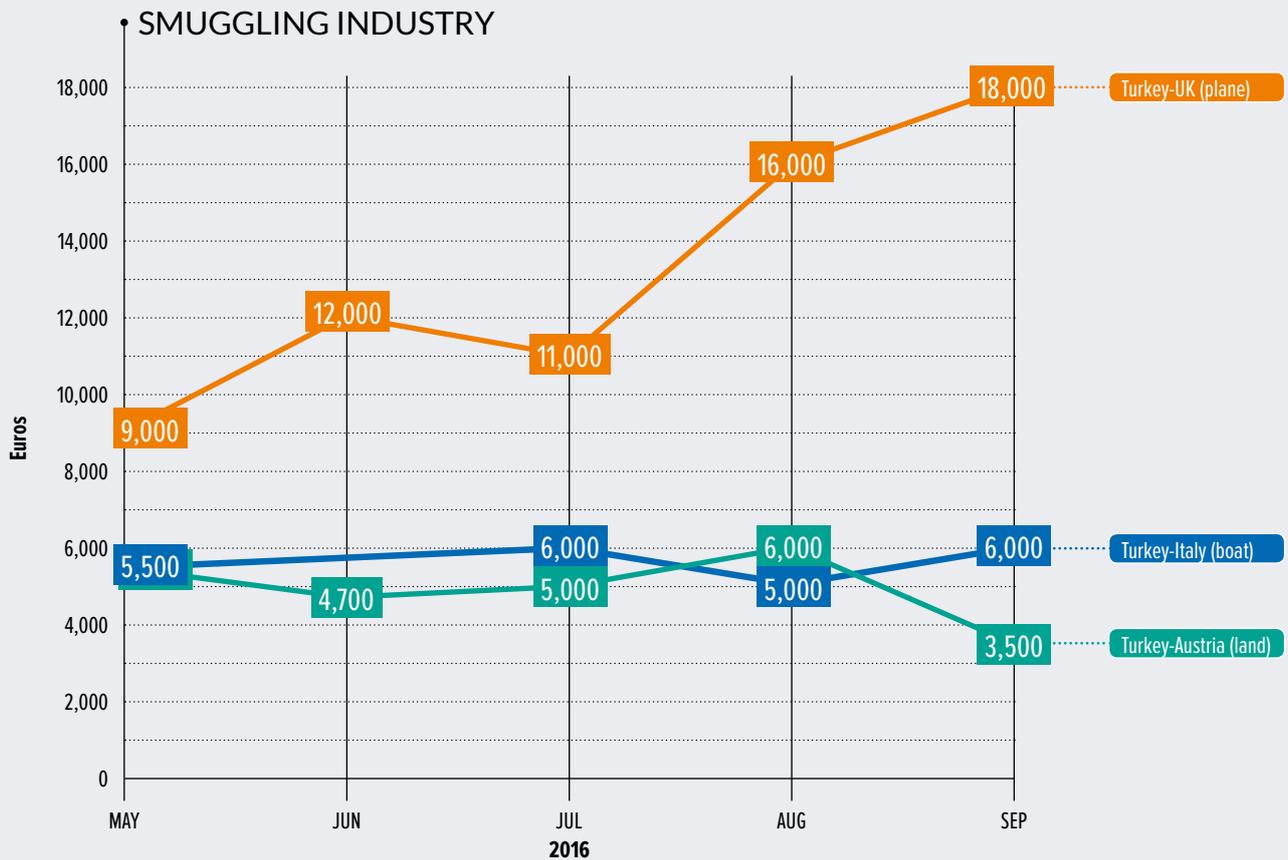
When business is booming, smugglers post vacancy notices as they are looking for additional staff on the ground, most often females. These vacancy notices contain very concrete requirements (language skills, experience with logistics and booking software, customer friendly behaviour etc.).

Clients respectfully refer to their local smuggling agents as “uncles”. At home they have been instructed to follow their directions unconditionally. They travel in groups of 5 – 10 young boys/men, usually accompanied by one such agent for each country. The clients themselves have little knowledge about the geography or the length of the trip; they just rely on their guides.

Smuggling networks collaborate with *sarafs* (freelance bankers) who play the role of fiduciaries between the smugglers and migrants. They receive the payment in advance, but only hand the money to the smuggler once the clients reach their destination.

Afghan families often sell their property to collect enough money for paying the smugglers. In many cases, the smugglers conveniently suggest buyers prepared to pay for land in cash, albeit far below market value.

The smuggling industry largely follows market logic. The movement of such large numbers of refugees and migrants drove smugglers to normalise their routes. Offers are listed with a departure point and arrival country (i.e. Istanbul-Austria) as well as a vague indication of the types of border crossings



involved such as land, sea, or air. These descriptions are located directly next to the prices (for examples of prices see image above). Over the course of the last ten months, these prices have fluctuated, sometimes by considerable margins.

When the demand for smuggling services is low (e.g. due to bad weather), the prices for travel go down. During these periods, they typically offer discounts for groups, families and children. When the demand goes up during peak season in summer, or when travelling becomes more difficult due to increased border controls or route closures, prices go up.

For example, the price of travelling from Turkey to Austria by land remained relatively stable and consistent from May to July 2016. After prices peaked in August they suddenly dropped to almost half their value in September (see image to the right). This abrupt change may have been the result of a newly opened land route through Bulgaria around that time. The ability to move more people through this region probably drove down prices, since smugglers could take larger groups with less effort.

In July 2016, the cost of a typical smuggling trip by plane from Turkey to the UK was approximately EUR 11,000. A mere two months later that price jumped to EUR 18,000 (see image above). One explanation for this sudden price surge is the announcement that the infamous camp in Calais, the so-called Jungle, was going to be closed down. The “Jungle” was the place from where most refugees and migrants were smuggled to the UK. Smugglers, as well as Afghan social media accounts, constantly posted updates with regards to the dismantlement of the camp, prompting a sense of urgency to get to the UK as soon as possible. This anticipation may have increased the demand for trips to the UK and resulted in a EUR 7,000 rise in prices.

In August, when the demand was particularly high, one smuggler posted the following text: “Due to the large number of enquiries about emigration to Europe/Canada and lack of time for our consultants, please pay USD 50 to our account if you are seriously interested in migration.” Only then would he would start dealing with the potential client.



## SELLING THE EUROPEAN DREAM

In their promotion strategy, smuggling networks are not only selling a trip, but the European dream, very similar to the “American Dream” European emigrants followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their Facebook pages are adorned with enticing images of iconic European sites such as the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben, with European flags, maps and pictures of lush green landscapes.

Smugglers build up an image of life in Europe that takes expectations to quixotic heights. They emphasize the ease of travel, the possibilities to work and study and their successful business. Trips are often advertised as “100% guaranteed”.

In September, a smuggler listed the “privileges of EU residency” promising, among other things, that there is “no obligation to pay taxes”, that everyone can study for free, live and work wherever they choose and that clients “will forever be free from taboos”.

In some cases, the smugglers resort to outright lies to attract clients: When asked about opportunities in Germany, a smuggler replied in April that “depending on his profession a person will first be trained and then the State will provide him with a job”.

Another example is the German initiative *Start With A Friend* which links up volunteers one-on-one with refugees to help them integrate. This was distorted on a smuggling website which displayed the link to the initiative and a picture of a young Afghan man and a German woman from the initiative’s website. The smuggler explained that every Afghan will be given a girlfriend who also sorts out his life in Germany. Slogans like “Welcome to your future in Europe” are intended to attract Afghan youth in Afghanistan and Iran.

Sometimes smugglers post more or less imaginary “advantages” of different countries, from Germany and Austria to Portugal or Slovakia which range from beautiful landscape to education opportunities or easy access to residency. In December, one smuggler claimed that the UK was the “best country in the world when it comes to living costs,” and posted listed prices for various food items.

Criticism of the dangers of irregular migration voiced on Facebook pages pose a threat to the business and smugglers retaliate in different ways. When more and more Facebook users reported about the dangers of sea crossings, smugglers started publishing wonderful pictures of yachts and luxurious cruisers, making potential clients believe that these were the vessels they would be using. Images of safety, and people being carried to Europe on angel wings appeared.

Others appealed to hope and courage: “We can guarantee arrival at destination but we cannot say whether the person will be allowed to stay or not.” – “No one says it is going to be easy. The journey to Europe is not for the weak.” Some smugglers even invoke God’s help, posting special prayers for travelers.

One smuggler even claimed that, unlike his competitors, he puts the safety of his clients before his profit.

In an interview shared widely on Facebook in April 2016, a smuggler by contrast explained how unimportant the life of a migrant was to his business. “The more he is paying the better services he will receive, but there is no guarantee for their safe arrival.”

## ACCOMMODATION OFFERS

Smuggling services extend into the real estate market as well. They provide housing for two specific purposes. The first is filling the need for temporary housing along the long journey. Smugglers post photos of luxury apartment complexes in Turkey and claim customers can rent them for a reasonable price while they wait to depart for Europe.

The second purpose is to provide a “legal” means of obtaining residency in an EU Member State. They offer houses and apartments for purchase in countries with lower property values such as Slovakia, Hungary and Spain. They claim that buying property (through their agencies) entitles them to permanent residency anywhere in the EU. Offers for housing in Slovakia are advertised as a way to move easily to other European countries.



## SMUGGLERS POSE AS “LEGAL ADVISORS” FOR ASYLUM

During 2016, the researchers found increasing numbers of pages offering “legal advice” for asylum procedures, reflecting the fact that many Afghans are completely overwhelmed with the legal intricacies of the asylum system and do not understand its basics. The need for legal explanations and support in simple Pashto and Dari apparently is not being met by authorities or NGOs, so bloggers, well-meaning members of the diaspora, but also smuggling agents step in to fill this need, some out of solidarity, some for money.

### SUCH OFFERS INCLUDE:

- Simple explanations of technical terms (Schengen Zone, Dublin Regulation, EURODAC etc.);
- Advice where to turn to for medical/financial/legal/religious assistance, including addresses of UNHCR offices;
- Descriptions of the asylum procedure;
- Assistance with filling in forms;
- Escorting asylum seekers to appointments with authorities and helping with interpretation;
- Sample interview questions;
- Assistance with formulating the client’s asylum story;
- Provision of fake supporting documents.

The most remarkable offer was for an e-book that they claimed could be purchased online with a credit card and downloaded. The offer appeared on a smuggler’s FB page in September and was called “Secrets of Asylum”. According to the publisher, this book covered “all aspects of asylum procedures under UNHCR rules”.

In December, a smuggling network posted 102 questions regarding Christianity in order to “prepare their clients for asylum interviews”, in case they claimed they converted to Christianity.

## DOCUMENT FRAUD

Smuggling networks not only provide transportation but also the necessary documents. There are countless offers on Facebook at any given time, including contact numbers of the vendors. In some cases they inform potential clients about the expected waiting time and the price.

Document fraudsters are much more cautious in their online communication than smugglers providing trips. They never discuss the transactions on social networks, but rather request to be contacted on private channels such as Viber, Imo, Messenger, etc. When clients post enquires on Facebook these messages are swiftly removed, presumably to cover the tracks.

Fake visas are on sale continuously. In addition, there are short-term offers for real visas from varying embassies/consulates. These include visas for “Schengen” or specific EU Member States, but also Turkey, Ukraine, Canada and the US. In some cases, the offers include details on the type of visa, such as tourist or student visa, but also rather bizarre specifications such as “visa for marriage”, “visa and residency”, “visa for investment” or “visa for buying property”.

Stolen passports are advertised very frequently, often with the name and picture of the original owner clearly visible. Often the documents are photographed under ultraviolet light to demonstrate that they are not forged. Typically these ads would contain reassuring wording such as “100 % guaranteed and legal”.

### Typical ad:

- *Hundred percent guaranteed migration to Europe, Canada and America,*
- *Visa delivery and guaranteed asylum claim (this sentence is highlighted),*
- *Under the supervision of an experienced lawyer.*



72k Views

Like Comment Share

Prices are rarely listed.

This ad found in May is an exception:

- To Europe with legal visas with guarantee: 7,500 €
- Original EU visa with guarantee: 6,000 €
- European passport with guarantee 9,000 €
- EU passport for England with guarantee 13,000 €
- Bi-national Canadian passport with guarantee 40,000 €
- Legal visa to America with guarantee 30,000 €
- Bulgarian passport within 30 days with guarantee, with legal registry stamp provided in your presence at the Turkish border". (For additional credibility they posted a link to Wikipedia listing countries which can be entered with a Bulgarian Passport without visa.)

The large number of passports and the frequent offers of visa from certain embassies indicate that smugglers are part of larger networks of organised crime, able to steal documents in one country and resell them elsewhere. They also regularly manage to bribe officials at embassies and consulates in order to obtain legitimate visas.

## SMUGGLING VERSUS TRAFFICKING

On all major migration routes, there are grey areas where smuggling (voluntary, albeit illegal transaction between two consenting parties) turns into trafficking (when the client is moved or stopped from moving against his/her will). For the Afghan route, such incidents of coercion were few and not reflected on social networks during most of 2016.

From focus group discussions, researchers learned that during dangerous segments of the journey, people would be forced to climb into cramped, suffocating spaces in vehicles, onto overcrowded pick-up trucks driving at neck-breaking speed through Iran and Turkey, or be made to walk across dangerous slippery mountain paths in the dark without proper shoes. There are stories of people left behind to die if they are injured or too exhausted to move on.

What can be found on social media is evidence that smugglers force their clients on overcrowded boats at gunpoint.

The agents of the smuggling networks have near complete authority over their clients, who are young, uninformed and vulnerable, often illiterate and do not speak any foreign language. In individual interviews with our researcher in Calais, a number of very young boys hinted at having been abused physically and sexually by their handlers, but this is something an Afghan youth normally would not talk about for fear of stigmatisation and/or retribution.

As for hostage taking and extortion of ransom, the research team only came across scarce anecdotal evidence of hostage taking in cases where the client could not pay the full price. The victims would either be the clients themselves or one of their family members back in Afghanistan.

While such violent practices are very common in North Africa, it was only toward the end of 2016 that researchers came across them on the route between Afghanistan and Europe. Afghans on the move and in Europe were becoming more critical during the reporting period. In 2016, there were only few posts by Facebook users who publicly named and shamed smugglers and traffickers, but the number is increasing. Users would accuse them of violence, of being responsible for drownings, of money extortion, hostage taking, selling hostages and cheating clients.

This might be an indication that competition among smuggling networks is intensifying and that new, more violent gangs are entering the business. In late December 2016, for the first time there was a video showing two young men of Afghan appearance with their wrists bound behind their backs. They were being brutally beaten by several men. The video explains that these were traffickers, beating their victims to extort more money. The users claimed that the traffickers were Kurds and published the image of a man – allegedly the smuggler, who sold his clients to violent traffickers.

One user posted a link of a Turkish governmental website to be contacted for reporting traffickers and smugglers.

## AFGHANS ON THE MOVE

Afghans do not often post while they are still on the move, mostly because they either have no smartphones or no affordable connectivity. Nonetheless, images documenting the hardships of the journey are sometimes disseminated by Facebook groups in Europe. The issues raised include shooting and mistreatment by police and/or civilians in Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria and Hungary, as well as difficult living conditions in Greece and along the Western Balkans route.

Most Afghans completely entrust themselves to their local smuggling guides. Decisions where to go and how to get there are usually not made by the traveler en route, but are pre-determined by the smuggling agreement reached in Afghanistan.

The smugglers are seen as more trustworthy than NGOs, local authorities or UNHCR. In cases where humanitarian workers try to advise Afghan migrants and refugees on alternative solutions, they refuse as advised by the smugglers. There are also cases where smugglers proactively prevent their clients from getting in touch with humanitarian workers, as observed in Calais in 2016 and in Belgrade in 2015. Any asylum claim lodged “prematurely”, before the clients reach the agreed destination country, would decrease the profit of the smuggling network.

## DISCOURSE IN AND FROM EUROPE

One of the first things Afghan refugees and migrants buy upon arrival is a smartphone. It is both a status symbol and a lifeline. They use web-based telecommunication apps to contact the families back home. They also create Facebook accounts to communicate with Afghans in Europe.

Complaining is frowned upon in Afghan culture. In order not to upset the parents, they do not tell them about difficulties they might face, but instead try to convey the message that everything is going well. The family sacrificed a lot to pay for their trip, so they are under enormous pressure to be successful.

The Afghan culture is more collective than individual. Consequently, Afghans in Europe do

not post personal matters openly, but use open accounts to discuss matters of common concern. In most countries, they create Facebook groups (Afghans in Austria, Afghans in Sweden, etc.) where they exchange information on developments in the country of origin and the country of asylum.

## INTEGRATION: PERSONAL PROBLEMS ARE NOT SHARED

Private discussions by the Afghan researcher, as well as a new Facebook trend, indicate that many young Afghans feel lonely and isolated in Europe as opposed to living in large, multi-generation families at home. It has become very common that Afghans leave the cameras of their phones constantly switched on throughout the day and even while they sleep. So they can see their friends and be seen – as a kind of cyber flat-share feeling.

Occasional news about Afghans committing suicide in Europe is always widely shared and lamented.

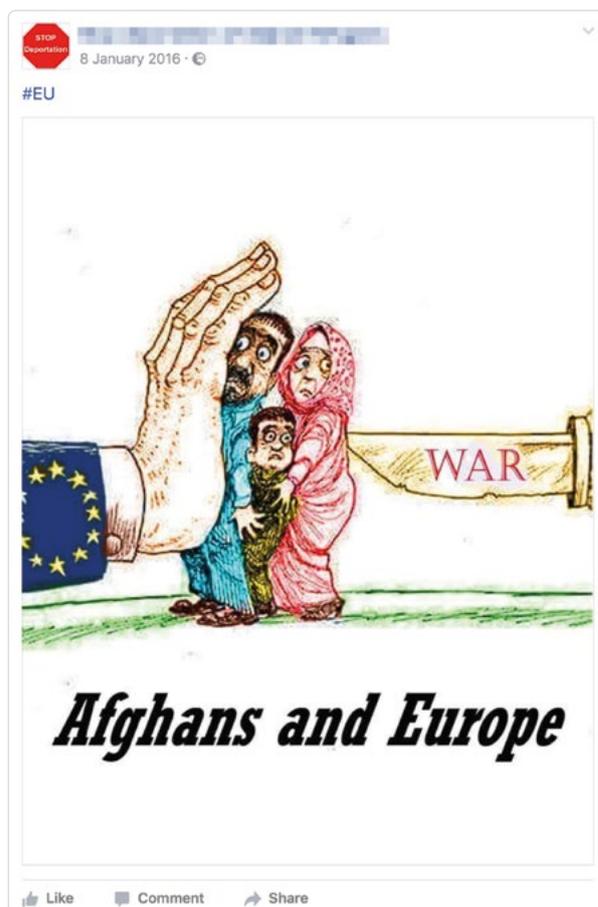
Individual integration problems are usually not revealed on Facebook. Discussions mostly revolve around the chances of obtaining asylum, hate crimes committed against Afghans in Europe and, since May 2016, increasing concerns about forced returns, as well as debates on voluntary returns. Activists organised a number of demonstrations in European cities under the motto “Afghanistan is not safe”.

Interestingly, the fears of the Afghan diaspora about the security situation in the country are not matched by voices from home. Many posts from Afghanistan denounce the fact that youths are leaving the country and welcome returns.

Sometimes fights between Afghans and asylum-seekers from other ethnic groups make it to Facebook, but again it is not personal accounts, but rather shared news articles in Afghan languages.

While personal problems are not being shared, personal success is: several Afghans who integrated particularly well showcase their success in Europe with videos and photos, and encourage others to make the effort of learning the language and familiarising themselves with the society of their host country.

March – December 2016



## SENTIMENT OF AFGHANS IN EUROPE 2016

This timeline was compiled based on the most frequent topics found each month during the reporting period on the Facebook pages monitored:

**MARCH:** Afghan Facebook users show lots of interest in various routes to Europe, many of them actively looking for smugglers on Facebook and asking for general information how to get to Europe.

**APRIL:** Conditions in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are worsening. Some Afghans speak out about the dangers of the journey and dissuade others from coming to Europe, but they are chastised and insulted by other Afghan users for doing so.

Anger is expressed over the Iranian Government's treatment of Afghans. Particularly the Revolutionary Guard's recruitment of Shia Afghans to fight in Iraq against Sunni Muslims.

.....  
**MAY:** Activists encourage people to move to Europe and organise demonstrations for reopening borders. Successfully integrated Afghans in Europe encourage others to make the effort, but worries and disappointment are spreading.

Clearly not understanding the concept of asylum, some Facebook users keep asking Afghan(!) Ambassadors to intervene with governments for the admittance of refugees, especially those with special needs.

Bad living conditions in Greek refugee camps result in a myriad of complaints and even a hunger strike.

Afghans grow increasingly worried about deaths at sea, and share information about the cemeteries of unknown migrants who died on the route to Europe.

.....  
**JUNE:** Hate crimes against refugees, including arson attacks on asylum centers, start distressing refugees. They also voice concern about Syrians being favoured in asylum determination procedures.

It is Ramadan and Afghans speak about the hardships of fasting in Europe, where the days last several hours longer than in Afghanistan.

.....  
**JULY:** An increasing number of testimonies about losing family members during the journey to Europe are shared. Afghans report the closure of temporary asylum centers in Germany due to the decrease in new arrivals.

.....  
**AUGUST:** A substantial number of Afghans write about the possible collapse of the EU-Turkey deal. They express their optimism about the re-opening of EU borders, while smugglers tell them to keep coming to Turkey.

Afghans within the EU are fatigued by the long asylum procedure. Many of them find the waiting period and uncertainty of the outcome worse than the actual journey to Europe.

.....  
**SEPTEMBER:** Frustration over the European Union and its efforts to increase the number of forced returns is spreading. Activists call for an organized and peaceful protests against the Afghan-EU deal in several European cities. Afghans discuss the worrying security situation back home.

.....  
**OCTOBER:** Members of the Afghan Hazara community encourage asylum claims that are based on Pashtun persecution. Tensions between the two communities seem to rise.

Many Afghan Facebook groups start discussing voluntary returns as a serious option.

.....  
**NOVEMBER:** Multiple bombings that occur in Afghan cities are pointed to as proof by the “Afghanistan is not safe” campaign, organized by European and Afghan activists. They keep organizing demonstrations.

Opinions are divided among users regarding “forced returns”. Those living in Europe are against the returns, while those in Afghanistan support them and denounce the exodus of the Afghan youth.

.....  
**DECEMBER:** Many individuals express their concerns after the Berlin terrorist attack. They fear that their asylum claims could be affected negatively.

# PART 2: ARABIC SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

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## FACEBOOK IS THE MARKET PLACE FOR INFORMATION EXCHANGE

In total, there are approximately 500 FB pages and groups created by refugees. On these pages and groups, they discuss migration issues, life in Europe, and the situation on the move as well as in their countries of origin. Although pages emerged as early as 2013, there was a substantial change since.

Given the rapidly deteriorating situation within Syrian and Iraqi areas in 2016, many people were forced to quickly flee, without having the time or choice to obtain information about the journey to Europe, or what to expect there prior to their departure. Enquiries about possible countries of destination were usually posted on the Internet by persons on the move. They had already left Syria and Iraq and were stuck in a difficult situation in the countries of first asylum or on route.

Stemming from a tradition of oral communication and a culture of trusting “one’s own”, Arabic speakers usually do not seek information from institutional websites, media or smugglers. Instead they tend to rely on fellow countrymen, who have already made the journey and shared their experiences. Facebook is the big market place for information exchange.

Unlike Afghans, whose trusted source of information are smugglers, Arabic speakers only trust their communities for advice about regular or irregular ways to get to a safe country. Those who are looking for smugglers would rather ask each other to recommend one than look for smugglers on their own, for fear of fraud. Consequently, Iraqis and Syrians who were cheated by smugglers or dissatisfied with a certain smuggler’s service, will often share this information and warn each other.

## SMUGGLING NETWORKS EMERGING WITHIN MONTHS

Smugglers are not always present directly on Facebook. They use the pages and groups created by the communities to publish their offers. Research indicates that there are no more than 50 FB pages and groups for smuggling. Often they maintain a normal identity, without referring directly to smuggling activities.

Smuggling is a demand-driven business. Consequently, the smuggling industry for the Afghan clientele is well-established, boasting of over 20 years of business. By contrast, smuggling networks catering to Arabic speakers underwent an incredible evolution in 2016. It started with opportunistic local money-making by offering transport and accommodation, and transformed into an intricate international criminal business within a few months. Now, smuggling offers on Facebook include international illegal travel by land, air and sea, bribing embassy officials into providing visas, stealing passports in one country and selling them in another, and forgery of a large variety of documents. This was accompanied by a boost in online presence and marketing sophistication.

In the early months of 2016, opportunistic local service providers offered minor deals, such as dinghy rides or life vests for the short sea passage or short car rides across land borders.

In April, the Western Balkans route was “closing down”, following an agreement between the EU and Turkey reached on 18 March 2016. Simultaneously, FYROM barred refugee entries from Greece. Local criminal minds reacted: In Turkey, they offered to move names up on the waiting lists of certain EU embassies, where asylum-seekers were registered for interviews. Owners of private yachts offered

to take the well-off to Italy. One smuggler – afraid for his business – reassured potential clients on Facebook that they should keep coming, as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s border would “reopen soon”.

By that time, larger players seemed to move in. On Facebook, offers started appearing to purchase visas for several European countries for study, medical treatment or tourism. Some were from EU embassies, offering Schengen visa, but such offers also included visa for Ukraine, Russia and Moldova. The smugglers, however, gave the impression that from these countries, Syrians and Iraqis would be able to move into EU territory.

For a short time, smugglers experimented with alternative routes through Albania and Montenegro, or with more exotic options: to Brazil (no visa required) and onwards to French Guyana and France. Another offer suggested a route from Brazil to the British island of Montserrat and onwards to the UK, promising “immediate refugee status and generous assistance”.

There were also some harebrained schemes, such as a Jet Ski trip from Morocco to Spain for EUR 4,000 or reaching European shores in submerged plastic containers advertised as “self-made submarines”.

Such bizarre options quickly disappeared and a professional smuggling industry started emerging at breathtaking speed. From the services offered one can infer that international criminal networks are involved, with impressive logistical skills and local staff in many countries at their disposal. Interestingly, some prices are in Euro, some in US Dollars, implying cooperation of different actors. This is one advertisement posted in May:

#### “Smuggler Akid Al Shamal:

*Flights to all EU countries – price 7,500 EUR*

*To Canada and UK – price 11,500 EUR.*

*Direct cruise from Turkey to Italy – price 4,000 USD per person, children under 10 years at half price and under 2 years for free.*

*By road from Thessaloniki to Germany – price per person 2,500 EUR.*

*By road from Istanbul to Bulgaria (only half an hour walking) – price 2,000 EUR.*

*Direct flight from Greece to all European countries – price 4,500 EUR.*

*By road from Istanbul to Austria via Bulgaria without walking – price 3,800; to France – price 3,300 EUR; to Italy – price 3,300 EUR.*

*For children under 2 years free of charge and under 8 years at half price. The trip will last 4 or 5 days, including hotel accommodation for one or two days in Sofia.*

*From Istanbul to Mytilene Island/Greece by sea – cost 700 USD.*

*Please call me on Viber or WhatsApp : 00905346108XXX”*

By June, many people found themselves stopped in Greece and desperate to move on. The international smuggling business was already booming. Smugglers were monitoring private posts of potential clients enquiring about ways to get to Germany, Sweden, leave Greece etc., and were quick to respond. Here a typical exchange:

*Hello, I would like to travel to Germany.*

*Comments: Smuggler: “Where are you?” Refugee: “I am in Turkey.” Smuggler: “Sorry I only work from Athens.”*

Soon, travel services were complemented by the sales of visa, as well as stolen and forged documents. Another offer in June says:

- We have guaranteed original Syrian passports issued by the opposition government for 700 USD.
- We have original European passports offered at different prices.
- We have original unrestricted Schengen visas. The price is 2,000 USD.
- We have original European Identification materials. The price is 500 EUR.
- We have Greek Khartiya (ID paper). The price is 300 USD.
- In addition we offer a variety of papers that our Syrian brothers might need in Istanbul.
- Please call me on Viber or WhatsApp at 00905368173- Abu Walid.

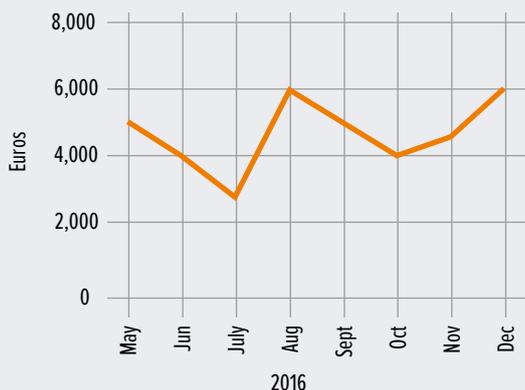
By the end of July, professional offers, different routes, fixed prices, and documents (both fake and stolen) were available. Departures and logistics for professional smugglers did not seem to be impeded much by the agreement between the EU and Turkey: “As of today we have daily trips to Greece. Please note that we have 10 furnished apartments in Izmir, which families and individuals can use until departure.”

Smuggling networks were reacting as new needs arose. Their service offers soon included financial transactions as well as advice on legal issues, such as family reunification and the asylum system in Europe.

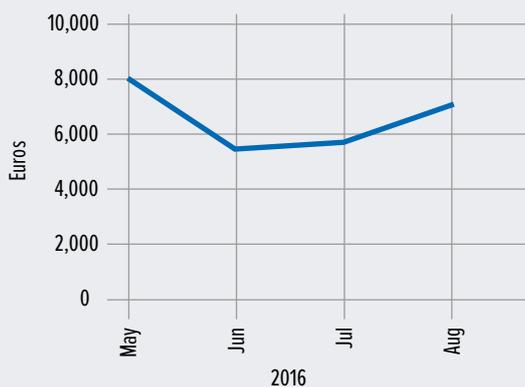
Stolen documents were regularly on offer as of summer, sometimes photographed under ultraviolet light to prove their authenticity. Clients apparently did not quite grasp the implications of using stolen documents, as one smuggler explained in September regarding a Bulgarian passport he was selling, that: “*passports only serve for facilitating the passage*”, and that the buyer did not become a citizen of Bulgaria by its purchase.



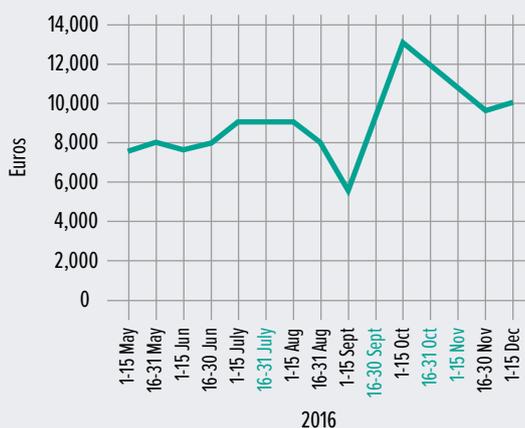
### TURKEY-ITALY (PLANE)



### TURKEY-GERMANY (PLANE)



### TURKEY-EU (PLANE)



In October, when rumours started spreading on social media that Sweden would grant subsidiary protection to all asylum seekers from Yemen, the industry immediately reacted, offering trips from Yemen to Europe: “this is an opportunity for our Yemeni brothers”.

Whereas before smugglers for the Arabic clientele posted artless texts and price lists, competition seemed to be getting fiercer, necessitating more enticing designs and pictures.

“We have smuggling offers for flights from Turkey to all European countries and the UK. Also, from Greece to all European countries. Contact by phone, WhatsApp, Viber, LINE, and IMO on 00905312302 and 00306940428XXX”.

### FLUCTUATING SMUGGLING PRICES

New offers and new service providers constantly entered the smuggling business for Syrians and Iraqis during the reporting period. The types of trips offered, the number of offers and the prices changed in a more erratic way than those of the well-established smuggling industry catering to Afghans and it is impossible to interpret the reasons.

### ON THE MOVE

While on the move, practically all Arabic speaking migrants and refugees have smartphones at their disposal. They use them for navigation, to stay in touch with friends and family, and to obtain information about where to go and how to get there. The main source of information is Facebook, where they post questions and seek the advice of fellow Arabs who have made the journey and have experience.

The decision of which country to choose is sometimes made on the move, due to random information heard or opportunities offered. In some cases, the decisive factor is having links to a certain country, having family there or speaking the language.

## STRUGGLING WITH THE MYSTERIES OF THE EUROPEAN ASYLUM SYSTEM

Most refugees left their countries of origin with a notion that they would find protection and start a new life for themselves and their families in European countries. Upon arrival, they are overwhelmed with the intricate system of laws, rules and procedures related to obtaining refugee status and the complex practicalities of everyday life in Europe.

Arabic speaking asylum-seekers do not have a comprehensive understanding of the system, yet they are expected to navigate it. This leads many of them to turn to Facebook and ask for advice from their own communities. Those within the community are happy to oblige, sharing their own views and interpretations of the problems at hand.

### These are examples of typical questions posed on Facebook:

A Syrian who made it to the EU asked: *“A question for people with relevant experience: My family is in Syria and I cannot get them out to Turkey to attend the family reunification appointment. How can I postpone the appointment?”*

Another user: *“Are there any refugees who arrived in Italy by sea? What are the entry control measures? Do you have to give fingerprints or do they only keep you in camps? Can refugees continue their trip to other European countries?”*

Woman: *“I am living in Liege, Belgium, and I need a certified translator from English and Arabic to French for the recognition of my diplomas. Please help me.”*

Man: *“Hello everyone! Can you please advise me about my wife’s pregnancy? Is she required to fill special forms? Does she receive benefits?”*

People typically reply to the best of their knowledge. As a result, half-truths, rumours and misinformation spread through social media, indicating a lack of access to reliable, official information in Arabic.

In early 2016, Facebook users started exchanging observations and notes on their understanding of certain aspects of the asylum procedure. Those included comparisons of the duration of family reunification procedures, social allocations, types of protection status, duration of asylum procedures and accommodation provisions in different EU Member States.

Later in 2016, the process for pre-registration in Greece, in preparation of relocation to other EU Member States, served as an initiation for most asylum-seekers from Arabic countries into the perplexing enigma of the European asylum system.

The most frequently asked questions during the reporting period pertained to the following issues:

- Dublin Regulation and fingerprints, and how they affect the freedom of movement of asylum-seekers within the EU;
- The asylum procedure, its length, what to expect in an asylum interview, and what to do in case of rejection;
- The differences in asylum procedures and social assistance in different EU Member States;
- Family reunification, eligibility, procedures, waiting time;
- Access to jobs, recognition of diplomas, access to higher education;
- Is a recognized refugee allowed to visit its family in countries of first asylum, or in the country of origin?
- Relocation from Greece, eligibility, procedure, duration;
- Forced and voluntary returns; who will be returned, on which conditions.

## GRAPPLING WITH INTEGRATION

Integration in Europe is a constant theme in many posts. Difficulties with learning a new language – particularly German – are among the most debated topics. Sometimes issues are discussed seriously, sometimes jokingly, making fun of behavioural patterns and misunderstandings.

Throughout the reporting period, the researchers found debates about the differences in morals and social norms between the Arabic world and Europe.

There were many complaints about Arab women and girls shedding the veil and refusing to dress modestly. Others expressed concerns about women who “stop being obedient” to their husbands, about shifts in the structure of families and the presence of domestic violence.

Another recurring topic related to women is the increasing number of Syrian women filing for divorce in Europe. One incident was widely discussed in July: it took a male Syrian refugee in Sweden one year to get permission for family reunification. However, the moment his wife arrived at the airport, she reported to the police that she wanted to be taken to the police station, because she wanted to divorce her husband.

Users frequently discuss integration classes and the fact that they unduly influence women and girls in their view.

Young people of both genders are being scolded for the way they dress and do their hair in Europe. The fact that young girls publish their pictures on Facebook is frowned upon. Alcohol, sex out of wedlock and homosexuality are seen as dangers for the moral development of the youth. Joint swimming classes for boys and girls are a source of worry to many parents, as is the fact that slapping children is not allowed.

Religion and the observance of religious rules were the main topics of discussion during Ramadan, but were not very prominent during other periods.

In December 2016, 13 educational rules for observing Islam in Europe were widely shared:

### I am a Refugee in Europe:

- I still observe my prayers.
- I still keep my head cover.
- I have not changed my religion.
- I have not divorced my husband.
- I do not have sexual relations.
- I do not drink alcohol.
- I do not frequent discos.
- I do not take drugs.
- I do not take money as an interpreter for refugees.
- I do not take pictures with girls.
- I do not have ear piercings.
- I do not neglect my people.
- I do not ask for a bride price.

Comment: “Some people already broke them all.”

## SENTIMENT OF SYRIANS AND IRAQIS IN EUROPE 2016

Throughout the entire year, users exchanged news about refugees and migrants losing their lives at sea and about difficult and lengthy family reunification procedures. They are worried about terrorist attacks in Western countries that give a bad name to Muslims in general.

These were the most discussed topics in the reporting period by month:

.....  
**MARCH:** Refugees discuss safety of sea passage from Turkey to Greece, weather forecasts, wave heights, availability of life jackets. People from the Maghreb are joining Syrians in Turkey and moving on to Europe.  
.....

**APRIL:** Discussions about people from different countries posing as Syrians; people explore legal options such as buying citizenship in certain countries (including such improbable ones as Kiribati); those on the move enquire about living conditions from those who have already arrived in Europe.  
.....

**MAY:** Fear of getting stuck in Greece due to the closure of FYROM border and the long duration of the pre-registration process. Users exchange

information about alternatives, in particular settling in Muslim countries such as Turkey or Sudan.

**JUNE:** As options to move to Europe decrease, competition between different groups leads to inter-ethnic clashes. Syrians are afraid that others are taking asylum places that would rightfully belong to them.

**JULY:** Frequent reports about attacks on refugees and reception centers in several European countries alarm Facebook users. Turkey is offering easy naturalisation for highly qualified Syrians. Pros and cons are discussed.

**AUGUST:** Lists of universities and organisations that provide scholarships for refugees are being exchanged, including details on how to apply. Crimes and violent acts committed by Muslim extremists in Europe are criticised as they could jeopardise the prospects for receiving asylum.

**SEPTEMBER:** increasingly, users debate the return options for both Syrians and Iraqis, including best methods, costs and papers required.

**OCTOBER:** Arguments are levied about Donald Trump's election campaign in the US and possible repercussions for Syrian refugees. At the same time, the popularity of Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau increase due to his welcoming messages for refugees.

**NOVEMBER:** Those stuck in Greece and the Western Balkans are afraid of the approaching winter. More and more Syrians in Europe complain about stress due to the situation of relatives in Syria (Aleppo crisis), difficulties with family reunification, and life in Europe. There are more discussions about returning to Turkey and even to Syria.

**DECEMBER:** The dire situation of civilians in Aleppo and harsh winter conditions in various tented camps in the Middle East and in Greece are the main topics.

For Iraqis, disappointment about Europe, forced returns as well as the pros and cons of voluntary repatriation to Iraq remain high on the agenda.



# ANNEX 1: RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION AND MIGRATION PATTERNS AMONG AFGHAN REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings in the following document were gleaned from five focus group discussions held in four European countries and a few one-on-one interviews as well as findings from monitoring social media in Pashto and Dari.

Focus group discussions were held in Marseille, Brussels, Berlin, Vienna and Antwerp with Pashto and Dari speaking communities between 31 March and 26 April 2016. Four were with men and (few) women, one was held for females only to balance the gender to some extent. In total, there were 122 participants (13 female and 109 male). The men were aged between 18 and 40 years, the age range of women was between 18 and 70 years. The participants originated from the provinces of Kabul, Kandahar, Wardak, Ghazni, Baghlan, Samangan, Paktia, Laghman, Nangarhar, Herat, Uruzgan, Balkh, Kapisa, Bamyan, (Parachinar of Pakistan), Logar and Kunar and had been in Europe between three days and eight years.

The discussions were moderated following a set of themes which included:

- Communication patterns;
- Trusted sources of information;
- Interaction with smugglers;
- Levels of information pre-departure, during the journey and upon arrival;
- Comparison between expectations and reality;
- Integration and life in Europe;
- Plans for the future.

The level of saturation was reached after the fourth meeting. (In qualitative research, this is the point in time when additional interviews do not produce new information but become repetitive.)

## PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

To date, numerous information campaigns have been carried out on Afghanistan by governments of various destination countries, mostly attempting to deter people from moving to Europe. They were not successful for several reasons:

- Push factors in Afghanistan (generalized and personalized violence) are so strong that people are willing to take their chances trying to reach a safer place;
- Afghans do not trust information coming from governmental sources or the media always suspecting ulterior motives;
- Unlike Syrians, who consult with each other, Afghans are not a trusting society. They do not believe something unless they have seen it with their own eyes.

Based on the results of this paper, UNHCR will design an awareness raising campaign in Afghanistan to inform people about the dangers of the journey as well as the legal, social and economic situation of Afghans in Europe. The purpose, of course, is not to dissuade people with protection needs from leaving but to enable them to take an informed decision knowing what lies ahead.

## INFORMATION PRE-DEPARTURE

People pondering to leave for Europe are much more preoccupied with raising the money for the smugglers than with practical preparations. They have a notion that the trip might be difficult but are convinced it is worth it. None of the 122 participants had heard of an Afghan who would have researched routes, destination countries or whether they qualified for asylum in Europe.

Consequently, they rely entirely on the biased narrative of smugglers as their main source of information about the trip. For obvious reasons, smugglers downplay the dangers of the journey and paint an unrealistically positive picture of the situation of Afghans in Europe (Afghan saying: “*They make a soup of the ocean*”). The traditional reliance on fate and destiny among uneducated Afghans prevents them from seeing beyond those promises or from questioning the narrative.

None of the participants understood before the journey how easily the paid service of smuggling can turn into forced trafficking. (Examples: In order to extort more money, traffickers took one participant’s child back home hostage. Others talked about being forced against their will onto overcrowded boats at gunpoint. Some participants reported that smugglers were withholding food and water if they were not able to pay extra money.)

In urban areas, the Afghan government actively tries to dissuade people from leaving by broadcasting horrible pictures and stories about those who died on their way to Europe. Participants said they did not believe this information, considering it government propaganda.

People in rural areas are totally disconnected from the reality about the journey and about Europe. They are convinced that everybody will receive protection, accommodation and gainful employment upon arrival. Coming from a country with a weak legal system, they are totally unaware of the rules related to asylum before they leave Afghanistan.

## SMUGGLERS IN AFGHANISTAN

Smugglers have an ambiguous status in Afghanistan. The Afghan word for smuggler has a negative connotation if referring to drugs trade or human trafficking. If used for a person taking people to Europe for a fee, it has a positive ring. Smugglers are seen as influential personalities whom one should obey unconditionally. They hold the monopole for travels to Europe and have a widespread strong network both financially and materially.

Smugglers operate openly in Afghanistan. If one has the financial resources and the wish to leave to Europe, finding a smuggler is a quick and expedient process.

In Kabul, smugglers are operating mostly in currency exchange markets (*saray-e-shahzada*) in many areas of the city, such as Zer-zamini, Kot-e-sangi. Though it is an open secret what they are doing, they run their businesses under the guise of travel agencies, electronic repair shops etc. In their offices they display posters of European cities to attract candidates. In addition, some smugglers have Facebook pages announcing their services and providing contact numbers.

Smuggling networks collaborate with *sarafs* (freelance bankers) who play the role of fiduciaries between the smugglers and migrants. They receive the payment in advance but only hand the money to the smuggler once the clients reach their destination.

In some cities, smugglers proactively approach young adults to find candidates for Europe. One such location is in front of the Passport Department in Kabul, where a huge number of youth stand in line to get passports. In rural areas, smugglers pay commission to young boys to find candidates to smuggle to Europe. Some of them do door-to-door campaigns, for example in Herat.

Afghan families often sell their property to collect enough money for paying the smugglers. In many cases, the smugglers conveniently suggest buyers prepared to pay for land in cash, albeit far below market value.

If the full amount is not paid on time, smugglers have the power to take hostage either the traveler or a family member back in Afghanistan.

## SMUGGLING NETWORKS: MULTIPLE SERVICES, INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS

Smugglers are organized in a pyramid system. A large majority of them seem to be Iranian nationals operating from Turkey. They recruit young Afghans to help the travelers cross borders. The travelers are never in direct contact with the leaders of the smuggling networks.

Social media, in particular Facebook, are used by smuggling networks for connecting to Afghans mostly outside of the country. Details of the route, prices, and transportation methods are readily available.

Services offered are not limited to transportation, but involve the following:

- Visa (tourist and work) for EU Member States, Canada and the US with Facebook pages specifying which consulates are providing them against a bribe;
- Sale of forged or stolen passports valid for entering Western countries;
- Fake Taliban threatening letters for up to USD 1,000 for potential asylum-seekers in Europe to use as “proof” of persecution. (Taliban publicly stated that they no longer send such letters having changed their modus operandi.)

On social media, the smuggling networks are swift to react to new developments: Changes in routes, closure of borders, increased border controls, even imminent restrictions in asylum legislation, are immediately being flagged and alternative routes and means of transport are being offered.

Smugglers and *sarafis*, i.e. the financial component of smuggling networks, operate rather openly in European countries (on social media, UNHCR found proof of live contacts in UK, Hungary, Austria, Germany and Ireland).

From Turkey onwards, smugglers also offer “legal services”. Against a fee, they provide advice about asylum procedures, what to say during interviews, which documents to produce etc.

## AFGHANS BECOMING MORE CRITICAL OF SMUGGLERS

In the past, not many Afghans in Europe dared criticizing smugglers and their methods for fear of retaliation against the families at home. Now, with the large numbers of arrivals, things have changed and word got back to Afghanistan about the dangers of the journey.

Participants of focus group discussions reported about the perils they faced during their route that were not revealed to them by the smugglers before. Similar news are posted on Afghan social media:

- Walking for days without water, food, medicine or shelter;
- Getting shot at and beaten up by police at Iranian borders;
- Rape by smugglers;
- Suffering from claustrophobia and suffocation in trucks and hidden compartments of vehicles;
- Being forced on overcrowded boats at gunpoint;
- Hazardous night treks through the Van mountains (up to 3,500m) without adequate clothing and shoes;
- Dog attacks at the Bulgarian border;
- Deliberately being kept without food and water;
- Physical abuse by smugglers or police;
- People (including children) disappearing along the route;
- Being left behind injured after accidents or when too exhausted to walk.

According to news on social media, bus companies in Afghanistan noticed a decrease in the number of young Afghans leaving for Europe. Also, reports indicate an increasing return movement from Europe to Afghanistan, due to the deterioration of the situation of migrants on the route to and inside of Europe.

Smugglers react to the rising criticism of their methods and started emphasizing the safety of their offers (“safer travels to Europe”), promising boats that will not be overloaded and so on. For enhanced “legitimacy” some pretend to be connected to renowned institutions such as the UN, UNHCR

or IOM, but they often use those names in the local language and alphabet, thus harder to detect.

Even the graphic design reflects this effort of crisis communication and damage control. One major smuggling page uses pictures of migrants being carried to Europe on angel wings, safely and comfortably.

## THE ROUTE TO EUROPE

Most refugees and migrants are instructed to travel to one of the cities such as Kabul, Jalalabad or Nimroz on their own. There, smugglers have the first of a chain of gathering points, called “game” both in Afghanistan and along the route. Once a sufficient number of migrants are gathered, the journey begins. Each border crossing is called *andakht*, which means jumping.

If the journey is by land, refugees and migrants usually go to Nimroz city to cross to Iran. Those who have more money prefer to travel to Iran by air to avoid long days of walking, high mountains, and the risk of being shot by the border police. In most cases, smugglers seize the mobile phones of the travelers so they cannot be detected, especially during boat trips.

The common itinerary to Europe for Afghans is to cross through Iran, Turkey, Greece and then either through FYROM and Serbia to an EU country or from Greece to Italy by sea. Some choose the land route from Turkey to Bulgaria to avoid travelling in a boat.

Afghans from rural areas use smugglers for the entire journey due to the lack of geographical understanding and language skills. Humanitarian workers along the entire route experience that Afghans, especially unaccompanied minors, regularly refuse offers of assistance or accommodation. They insist on staying put at a gathering point as they are under strict instruction to only listen to the “uncle” who is going to contact them.

To some extent, those more educated and coming from urban areas take independent decisions and manage to get the necessary information from humanitarian workers on the way to Europe.

Only after arriving in Greece, refugees and migrants try to obtain information from the Afghan community on how to continue on their own, rather than using the services of smugglers. Afghan women, in particular, talked about forming groups with other Afghans to travel more safely.

Afghan females do not travel alone and are usually accompanied by husbands or sons. Despite this fact, they seem more traumatized by the journey than men.

## SECONDARY MOVEMENT FROM IRAN

Europe sees an increasing number of Afghans who not only transited Iran but used to live there as refugees. According to the reports of focus group participants, the secondary movement is driven by risks Afghans are facing in Iran, including:

- Danger of forcible recruitment for fighting in Syria;
- Difficult access to education;
- Problematic access to health care;
- Prohibition to buy property and settle in Iran;
- Abuse and humiliation by police forces;
- Discrimination against Afghans in all spheres of life.

Several participants reported in individual conversations that they were refugees in Iran. They decided to leave for Europe when faced with a threat from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. They were told to either go and fight in Syria along with Assad’s forces and get 20 million Rial (USD 660) per month and Iranian citizenship or to be deported to Afghanistan and never be allowed to re-enter Iran.

This information can be corroborated by a large number of videos posted by Afghans and Syrians on YouTube, which show Afghan refugees interrogated as prisoners of war in Syria. In these videos they say how they were, “sent to Syria from Iran”.

Most of the victims are Afghan Hazara refugees in Iran, given that they are Shia Muslims like most Iranians. They only receive 20 days of military training before deployment. Videos on Afghan and Syrian social media show Afghan prisoners of war being tortured by Syrian rebels.

## FEEDBACK FROM THOSE IN EUROPE

Next to smugglers, the other, by far less dominant source of information is the feedback from Afghans who have reached Europe. Their presentation of the situation is also heavily biased because it is customary in Afghan culture not to share bad news with the beloved ones so as not to upset them.

Unaccompanied minors often face enormous difficulties in Europe but will not tell their families about their problems. This works both ways: When families have a problem in Afghanistan, they do not communicate it to their relatives in Europe for the same reason. So unaccompanied minors sometimes do not fully understand why they had to leave and cannot explain the reasons in their asylum interviews.

It is not the minors themselves who decide to come to Europe (as Somali youth often do). Generally the parents – more specifically the fathers – take the decision and expect the sons to comply. Most participants of the focus group discussions felt that parents would refrain from sending children if they knew about the extent of their suffering during the journey and upon arrival.

However, when frustrated Afghans do communicate the negative sides of life in Europe, relatives in Afghanistan tend to dismiss this. They suspect that those in Europe jealously guard their privilege and do not want others to follow.

## COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Word-of-mouth is a significant channel for dissemination of information. In Afghan cities, there are specific locations where laborers gather in the morning to look for work and every one shares stories. In Kabul, one such location is a roundabout called Sar-e-chawk. (Afghan saying, “If you would like to be well-informed follow the *Khabar Haa-e-Sar-e-chawk* news.”)

Many rural areas are disconnected from most forms of communication because power supplies are scarce and mobile networks have not reached the area or were destroyed by insurgents. Villagers who visit the closest town for shopping and other

chores bring back news and rumors to the villages. Families that receive news from their relatives in Europe, disseminate this information in the villages.

The most trusted sources of information are tribal leaders and *maleks* (heads of village). In big cities, the government appoints “Wakil-e-gozaar” (neighborhood leaders) who serve as information sources. Teachers, especially in remote areas, are not well-educated themselves and often under threat from the Taliban and thus not persons to be asked for advice.

Additional sources of information are the Mullahs and information made accessible during Friday prayers.

Afghan refugees in Iran are organized in cultural and religious associations. In a communication campaign, they could potentially be reached through those channels.

## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN EUROPE AND AFGHANISTAN

In general, TV, mobile phone and Internet coverage is poor in Afghanistan and further deteriorating, because of problems with electricity and the Taliban’s destruction of mobile phone antennas.

In the four big cities Kabul, Mazar-Sharif, Jalalabad and Herat, Internet and telephones are accessible without restrictions. Most provincial capitals are also relatively well-connected. They use Internet and mobile phones to stay in touch with their relatives on the move or in Europe.

In other parts of Afghanistan, communication of relatives between Europe and Afghanistan requires logistical preparations. If families do not own a phone, callers from Europe can pay a messenger from the next city who will travel to the village to take a message or make an arrangement for the family to come to the city at a certain time for calls.

Where there is some connectivity, families agree on a fixed call time when they go to a place with phone coverage (mountain, rooftops, etc.) to talk.

While on the move, refugees and migrants use mobile phones (not necessarily smartphones)

and buy SIM cards in each country. Those who have smartphones use all phone applications: Whatsapp, Viber, Ims, Messenger. Facebook is increasingly used by Afghans to stay in touch and inform each other.

## TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The Afghan society is clan-based and has intricate rules of credibility and trust. Interestingly, not all relatives are perceived as equally credible sources of information. Within the family structure, maternal uncles usually enjoy exceptional trust. Maternal relatives in general are considered the protective part of the family members, while the paternal side is often perceived as hostile and competitive.

In Afghanistan, people watch TV in areas with electricity (Tolo news, Shamshaad TV, Ashna) only. However, they mistrust journalists, particularly Afghans, as they suspect a hidden political agenda.

Radio is accessible everywhere (VoA and BBC as well as local broadcasters). The most popular and most trusted media in Afghan society is the radio, especially BBC as with its popular edutainment formats<sup>4</sup> in Pashto and Dari. Practically each family has a receiver. Farmers even listen to battery operated radios while working in the fields.

Radio is also the only media easily accessible to females. Some participants confirmed that that Afghan women regularly listen to special programs for women on BBC. In focus group discussions women said they loved UN programs as the UN promotes women's rights and gender equality.

The UN in general, and UNHCR in particular, enjoy a very good reputation among Afghans. In the context of a future information campaign,

UNHCR's credibility could be an advantageous factor.

Print media are not very popular, partly due to the absence of a newspaper tradition, partly due to low literacy rates. Access to the Internet in Afghanistan depends on the availability of power. Illiteracy is not necessarily an obstacle for the use of computers, as people will watch videos and listen to audio files on the web.

## EXPERIENCES IN EUROPE

Practically all interviewees said they were shocked by the situation they found themselves in upon arrival in Europe. Afghans face difficult living conditions and they do not understand the asylum system. The only information they have is a blurred notion that fingerprinting should be avoided since it would hamper their onwards movement.

Their image of Europe has been formed by films, TV and the discourse within their communities. This image oscillates between high hopes for a good and safe life and uncertainty about living in a non-Muslim society.

On top of all this, they are desperate to work and pay for the debts incurred by the journey.

Many move from country to country, thinking that the living conditions will be better in the next one (Calais phenomenon).

This continued movement is also encouraged by smugglers, who promote far and expensive destinations. The UK has taken on the status of a mythical place (*Afghan joke: Son calls on the phone: Father, I arrived in the UK. Father, angry: What are you doing there? You must go to London!*). Currently, offers to move on from Europe to Canada are increasing on smuggling pages.

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<sup>4</sup> Pashto BBC radio started its operation in Afghanistan in 1981 to allow communication between Afghans in Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora abroad during the war. Besides the news, BBC started to broadcast special educational programs for public awareness in Pashto and Dari. The first educational "radio novela" broadcasted by Pashto BBC was "New home, new life" which covered all daily aspects of Afghan life such as: Importance of vaccination for children; Prevention of illnesses; Programs about the life of women; Mine awareness etc. Another program is used by BBC Pashto called "Your Voice", which is a kind of hotline allowing Afghans from different provinces to phone in and discuss specific subjects live on radio.

Even those who receive asylum have difficulties adapting to the life style (“*small rooms like for chickens*”, “*houses built of plastic*”). Many feel discriminated against.

Despite the deteriorated living conditions and a less welcoming climate Afghans reported, they expressed feelings of safety and security in countries where they enjoy freedom.

Women said that before coming to Europe they did not know what exactly was waiting for them. Once they arrived they found “humanity and the rule of law”, things they missed at home. Female participants stated their satisfaction about their treatment in Europe. They do not feel discriminated, even when wearing head-scarves and in general seemed more confident about their future than Afghan males.

## USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

As soon as young Afghans have the possibility to purchase smartphones they quickly become computer literate. Facebook is exceptionally popular and used both to stay in touch with family and friends and to obtain information.

The news widely shared by Afghans range from political developments in Afghanistan to the situation of Afghans *en route* and in Europe. They post both news about the suffering and discrimination as well as news about those who made it and are role models of integration.

Asylum policy and restrictive measures in EU Member States are of particular interest to Afghan Facebook users.

When Afghan refugees and migrants proactively seek information from others, it is usually concerning legal issues around asylum. Especially the Pashto speakers are starved for information, as there are many more sources available in Dari/Farsi than in Pashto.

Despite the deteriorated living conditions that Afghans reported, they expressed feelings of safety and security in countries where they enjoy freedom.

As for personal information, Afghans in Europe prefer posting pictures taken in front of skyscrapers and beautiful cars and avoid telling about their problems for multiple reasons:

- They do not want to worry their families (unless they are forced to contact them under torture by traffickers demanding more money);
- Some perceive their problems as a personal failure, which they want to hide;
- Many Afghans feel lonely and want to encourage others to join them.

## PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Afghans are extremely attached to their tradition and their homeland. The diaspora has established cultural associations in European cities and virtually, on social media, to maintain a link with their culture. In most European cities, Afghans created special Facebook pages for their communities. They use these pages to provide up-to-date information and discuss issues of interest, both related to Afghanistan and to Europe.

Most of the participants said they would like to return to Afghanistan, provided it was safe, and would participate in the peace-building and reconstruction process.

# ANNEX 2: RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION AND MIGRATION PATTERNS AMONG ARABIC SPEAKING REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

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## METHODOLOGY

The findings in this document were gleaned from five focus group discussions held in four European countries as well as a few one-on-one interviews and from monitoring social media in Arabic.

Between 16 March and 26 April 2016, the CwC Unit carried out focus group and individual discussions with Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian refugees and asylum-seekers in different EU countries: Belgium (Brussels, Antwerp), France (Paris), Germany (Essen), and Austria (Vienna). These locations were chosen because they are home to a sizeable number of Arabic speaking refugees. The meeting in Antwerp was held for females only.

In all, there were 136 participants: 91 males, 45 females including 88 Syrians, 27 Iraqis and 22 Palestinians. Participants ranged from 18 to 55 years old. Their duration of stay in Europe was between 2 weeks and 2 1/2 years. In addition, a Skype discussion was held with 2 Syrian activists based in Gaziantep, Turkey.

The focus groups consisted of mixed educational backgrounds. This ranged from highly-educated and computer-savvy persons with urban background to people with only basic education.

The discussions were moderated following a set of themes which included:

- Communication patterns;
- Trusted sources of information;
- Interaction with smugglers;
- Levels of information pre-departure, during the journey and upon arrival;

- Comparison between expectations and reality;
- Integration and life in Europe;
- Plans for the future.

The level of saturation was reached after the third meeting. (In qualitative research, this is the point in time when additional interviews no longer produce new information but become repetitive).

## PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The movement of persons from Arab countries to Europe is a mixed one, comprising of:

- Persons with real protection needs fleeing from their countries of origin due to generalized and personalized violence or from countries of first asylum due to an insecure legal status and lack of basic assistance;
- Migrants from various Arab countries posing as Syrians and using the opportunity to get to Europe;
- Persons originating from countries at war, who lived in third countries (mostly Gulf States) and were lured into the trip by the opening of the borders in 2015 or by smugglers and their false promises.

Migrants and refugees often underestimate the dangers of the journey. They have unrealistically high expectations of reception conditions, legal and economic opportunities in Europe. Many do not fully grasp the concept of asylum, nor that it is reserved to a clearly defined group of persons with protection needs. They underestimate the time and effort asylum procedures, family reunification and integration will take.

Among many of the migrants and some of the refugees, this ultimately leads to disillusionment and regrets of having come to Europe at all. Such sentiments were expressed by a number of participants in focus group discussions and are widely discussed in social media.

UNHCR wants to enable people from Arab countries to make an informed choice. They should obtain independent and objective information before they embark on the journey. They should understand the perils of the trip as well as the basics of the European asylum laws and who is entitled to asylum before they take a decision to invest all their property in such an endeavor.

Based on the results of this research, UNHCR will design an awareness raising campaign that reaches out to the Arab world and meets their information needs. As a refugee protection agency, UNHCR by no means attempts to dissuade refugees from seeking protection, but wishes to provide all people who think of leaving with objective and comprehensive information.

## INFORMATION PRE-DEPARTURE

Given the rapidly evolving crises in Syria and Iraq, many Syrians and Iraqis are forced to flee in a hurry, without having enough time to obtain correct, neutral and trustworthy information about both the journey and European asylum laws prior to their departure, but they try to obtain information as early as possible on the trip.

Those who already have relatives or friends in Europe are more likely to embark on the journey. They turn to their contacts for guidance and assistance and try to reach to the countries/cities where these persons live.

Syrians who came to Europe in the first years of the civil war had very little information, thus, experienced the most difficulties. Those following now are benefiting from information shared on Facebook by the first-comers.

The majority of those arriving later attempt to learn as much as possible about the asylum procedures in Europe (especially the Dublin Regulation) early on. Some of them look at official websites of

destination countries, including those of UNHCR, but with limited success. They found those websites not to be mobile-friendly. They rather contain legal documents and not the practical information about living conditions and opportunities for employment and education they had hoped for. Little information is available in Arabic.

So refugees and migrants seek out information primarily through social media from fellow countrymen and -women in Europe, without having many options to verify whether it is correct or not. They trust such guidance quite unconditionally, especially if it is information they want to hear. As a consequence, refugees and migrants are faced with a mix of facts and rumors on which they base their decisions.

## SMUGGLING NETWORKS

There are many reasons that push Syrians and Iraqis into the arms of smugglers, who often remain the only available option. These reasons include: the dangerous situation in Syria, the lack of protection in countries of first asylum (Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt), the absence of a permanent status in Gulf countries, alongside the absence of legal avenues for those who are still in Syria and Iraq.

Communication and interaction between refugees and smugglers is usually conducted via social media, telephone, relatives who used smuggling services before, and even by direct interaction. Information about meeting points is passed on by word-of-mouth or via social media and they include meeting places in Europe, such in certain hotels in Budapest and Vienna.

Smuggling is a profitable business determined by demand and supply. Prices go up when border controls get tighter or weather conditions are good and many people want to cross. In bad weather, smugglers have "special offers" with low prices, free rides for children etc.

In addition to smugglers, those selling fake or stolen documents also prosper. There is an increasing demand for such services, which usually include delivery (even to Europe) of: diplomas, ID cards, passports, driving licenses, visa and medical

attestations, reunification documents. Other rampant fake offers come from those claiming to work with UN agencies. They offer to facilitate the resettlement and registration for interested people.

The methods of smugglers differ by entry routes:

**The Eastern Mediterranean Route** (Turkey – Greece – Balkans – Western Europe or Turkey – Italy – Western Europe) is the least dangerous. Smugglers are not needed for the entire trip, but mainly for the boat ride between Turkey and Greece (or Italy).

Refugees and migrants either get in touch with smugglers through Facebook, they find their advertisements in the streets of Turkish cities or they are approached by brokers and middlemen in Turkey. When selecting smugglers, refugees and migrants also trust the judgment of fellow countrymen who have already travelled. They are aware that smugglers are lying about the dangers, but have no other choice and try to choose “the least bad ones”.

The money for the trip has to be deposited upfront at a so-called “insurance office” which will only pay out the smuggler once the clients have reached their destinations. So if a boat is intercepted and brought back to Turkey, the smugglers are obliged to retry without additional payment.

Therefore, it is in the interest of smuggling networks to get their clients to the destination as soon as possible. So even if migrants and refugees have last minute doubts about mounting an overcrowded vessel or taking the trip in bad weather conditions, smugglers sometimes force people on the boats at gunpoint or with knives. Other than that there are no indications that they use coercion.

Smugglers and many shops in Turkey offer life vests, the cheaper ones fake and totally unsuitable to save someone from drowning. Usually smugglers do not accompany their clients on the boat, but on Facebook there are reports that smugglers, once they have enough money, pose as refugees and join the flow.

**The Central Mediterranean Route** (Egypt or Sudan – Libya – Italy – Western Europe) is by far more dangerous and there is only a thin line between smuggling (a criminal transaction between two willing parties) and human trafficking (the trafficked party becomes the object of various forms of coercion and exploitation). This route is becoming increasingly popular among Syrians because they can still enter Sudan without a visa and start the journey from there.

While smugglers on the Western Balkans route openly declare what they do on social media, the practice in North African countries is more concealed. They use Arabic and the different Arabic dialects as the main languages of communication and do not directly refer to “smuggling”. This caution implies that they are either more experienced or law enforcement is more efficient in some North African states.

Refugees and migrants are by far less aware how dangerous this route is before they start the trip. They mostly worry about the sea passage, but focus group participants who came via Libya emphasized that more people die in the desert, on the way than in the sea. They may die from sun strokes, car accidents, dehydration, suffocation, etc.

Smuggling in Libya quite frequently turns into coerced trafficking when smugglers hold people hostage and abuse them physically and sexually to extort more money. Their possessions may be “confiscated” by the smugglers as well. When travelers are afraid to embark on rickety vessels, they are forced on board at gunpoint.

**The Western Mediterranean Route** (Morocco – Spain – Western Europe) is used by considerably few Syrians. That route is more popular among Sub-Saharan Africans and Moroccans who take it either by boat or try to cross the fence to the Spanish enclave of Melilla.

With the reinforced controls exercised by both Spanish and Moroccan border guards, smugglers looked for new alternatives for more affluent customers. They offer 15-minute Jet Ski trips from Ksar es-Seghir to the Spanish beach of Tarifa at a price of USD 4,000.

**Other Countries and Bizarre Routes:** Smuggling networks do not only operate in Turkey, Sudan, Libya, Morocco, but even within Europe itself, as is clearly visible from the contact numbers indicated on social media. The brokers and middlemen are comprised of many different nationalities including Turks, Syrians, Palestinians, Iranians, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Moroccans and some Europeans. As a rule, middlemen are from the same nationality as the travelers. It is unknown who runs those networks that stretch over multiple countries and continents.

Some Moroccan and Lebanese migrants for example, fly to Turkey to join the refugee movement to Europe pretending they are Syrians.

Given the new, restrictive environment towards Syrian and Iraqi refugees, reversed smuggling offers from Europe back to Syria and Iraq have appeared recently.

After the EU-Turkey deal, prices for smuggling increased dramatically, reaching in some cases EUR 15,000. Smugglers found themselves compelled to find alternatives for their business, thus, they started promoting new bizarre destinations, taking advantage of the refugees' vulnerable situation. So new routes are suggested, such as reaching French Guyana or the British island of Montserrat via Brazil where, according to the smuggling offers on Facebook, Syrians can get a visa upon arrival.

Smugglers are also very creative when it comes to the methods used. Apart from the above mentioned trips on Jet Ski from Morocco to Spain, they offer parachute jumps from Turkish cargo flights, as well as passages by some kind of self-made "submarines".

## ALTERNATIVES TO SMUGGLING

In general, refugees and migrants from Syria and Iraq do not like to use smugglers and would prefer legal pathways to Europe. However, there are very few such avenues and the wait for relocation/resettlement programs is considered too long.

Refugees trying alternative ways of entering Europe had limited success (trying to obtain humanitarian visa, buying Schengen visa from corrupt officials, using fake or stolen passports, and getting tourist visa for secondary movement from Gulf States).

Sudan is becoming a hub for Syrian refugees for transit and as a destination. Sudanese people and authorities publish welcoming messages for Syrians.

More and more Syrian refugees try to arrange family reunification procedures from Sudan, as the majority of German and other European embassies in the Middle East are either closed or refuse to receive Syrians. Their first major obstacle is how to move the families from Syria or neighboring countries to Sudan. The second is to stay financially afloat in Sudan during the waiting period of around 6 months.

Some Syrians in Turkey research living conditions in Arabic speaking Sudan as well. Most notably they have looked into conditions related to jobs. There are even Facebook discussions among Syrians in Europe about relocating to Sudan.

## COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Throughout the entire journey, Syrians and Iraqis make use of all Internet-based communication tools such as: Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, Telegram, LINE, Suma, etc. (Twitter is not used). While traveling, the main problem they faced was electricity (recharging phones) and connectivity (accessing Internet). Some of them bought new SIM cards in every country.

Arabic societies have a strong oral tradition, placing their trust in word-of-mouth, private contacts and individual experience shared via social media. Hence, neither media nor official websites play a major role in decision-making.

Syrians and Iraqis tend to travel in groups and inform one another about events and current developments. So information is likely to spread also to those who do not possess smartphones.

According to the focus group participants, selected information from news websites (Arabic and non-Arabic media) mostly reaches them indirectly, through shared Facebook posts. They are less inclined to access such sites directly suspecting bias or ulterior motives in media portals. Some said they would consult a UNHCR app, if one existed, but would not necessarily follow the advice given.

The exchange of information between Arabic-speaking refugees and migrants is no longer limited to random private links but has reached a more structured level. Many Syrian activists now gather information on all European countries and even rate asylum systems to stay updated and inform each other. However, there is a daunting amount of false or misunderstood information that is still circulating on social media.

When asked whether Syrians and Iraqis share the problems they face in Europe with their families at home, most participants said they did not tell outright lies on Facebook, but rather concealed certain issues. They did this because they were ashamed to complain, seeing what their families and friends were going through at home. If approached directly by persons considering coming to Europe, they would tell the complete truth. However, beautiful pictures taken in Europe “speak for themselves” and give a certain positive impression.

## INFORMATION REQUESTED FROM UNHCR

From UNHCR, they seek information that can broadly be clustered into the following themes: family reunification; access to the asylum procedure; entry into the EU; fingerprinting (Dublin Regulation); how to benefit from resettlement for family members, and access to humanitarian services.

When asked who could be a trusted source of information or a kind of Goodwill Ambassador, participants mentioned athletes and actors. They also suggested some ideas such as to:

- Disseminate information through the popular refugee Facebook pages and not through UNHCR's sites;
- Create a number on WhatsApp and Viber to update the identified info;
- Create a free UNHCR hotline which can be reached by Internet connection too;
- Provide the information in Arabic;
- Disseminate relevant information in a fast manner and in simplified language, rather than in a complicated, long, and legal way.

## EXPERIENCES IN EUROPE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR INTEGRATION

During focus group discussions and on social media, most Syrians and Iraqis said they were shocked when they arrived in Europe. Iraqis usually had higher expectations about the living conditions in Europe than Syrians, but both groups were disappointed.

There is a competition among various asylum-seeker groups, especially Syrians who suspect that other nationalities will pretend to come from Syria and take up refugee places that would rightfully belong to them.

Refugees are grappling with life in Europe and sharing advice on FB posts. They tell one another how to behave appropriately, but also warn fellow Syrians to keep their religious values. The things Arabic-speaking refugees and migrants find most rewarding in Europe are the safety and security.

They are appreciative of the overall humanity and compassion shown to them.

However, life in Europe turned out to be much more difficult than expected. The slowness of the asylum procedure is the most common complaint. The Arabic-speaking community was surprised how difficult it was for them to:

- Live in reception centers with lack of privacy, unfamiliar food, tensions with other nationalities etc.;
- Experience racist abuse, sometimes even physical assault in the streets;
- Rent accommodation (landlords do not trust them and request unaffordable deposits);
- Have diplomas recognized and be able to work in one's line of profession;
- Access university education as a refugee;
- Overcome the language barrier which is the biggest obstacle for finding work;
- Getting used to doing bank transactions, bookings and many interactions with authorities through electronic channels.

Discussions about the differences in the mores and cultures of Arabic and Western societies are high on the agenda in social media.

Many Syrian and Iraqi male feel their role as head of households diluted by Western customs and changing behavior of their wives and children who try new dressing styles, remove head scarves and behave more freely. Parents fear that their children will take on Western customs, including extramarital sexual relationships and alcohol consumption. Numerous Facebook pages claim that an increasing number of Arabic women are filing for divorce in Europe.

Approximately one third of the focus group participants claimed that they would never have come to Europe had they known what to expect beforehand.

## PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

When the participants of the focus group discussions were asked where they see themselves in ten years, the answers were divided:

Approximately half of the Syrians said they would go back to Syria as soon as the situation allows. Some of them consider returning back to Syria or its neighboring countries in the near future either to visit their families, as family reunification procedures are taking too much time, or to stay there definitely. Some also think about relocating to Turkey, as they found the situation more comfortable with regards to schools, food and practicing their religion. Others have the intention of staying in Europe.

Palestinians from Syria and Iraq expressed their intention to integrate and stay for good because they are stateless anyway.

Iraqis were the most frustrated group. Some of them expressed their wish to return in the near future, regardless of the outcome of their asylum procedure.





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