

The European Migrant Crisis

Situation Overview: Evzonoi, Greece

19 and 20 September, 2015

REACH Informing
more effective
humanitarian action

SITUATION OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

During the past three months, the Greek islands have seen an unprecedented increase in the influx of Syrian asylum seekers. As of 20th September, UNHCR estimated that in July alone, Greece received 50,242 new arrivals, which is far greater than the total number of asylum seekers which arrived in 2014 (43,200 people). Upon arrival in Athens and Evzonoi, asylum seekers travel to other European countries by crossing the border into Macedonia which is located one hour north of Thessaloniki. From there, they continue through the Balkans towards Northern Europe. For most, the preferred final destination is Germany.

On September 15th, a REACH team travelled to Greece to collect preliminary data to assess the current displacement routes and trends for Syrian asylum seekers arriving in the EU, as well as to identify motivating factors both for leaving their country of origin and choosing their target destination. The information collected will complement an ongoing social media review and findings from other ongoing

assessments by REACH teams in the Balkans and in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

This report outlines the findings from assessments conducted on the 19th and 20th of September on the border crossing of Evzonoi, one of the first points of entry for Syrian asylum seekers arriving in Greece. Data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with recently arrived asylum seekers and Key Informant Interviews. Due to the transient nature of these groups, the limited time spent together, and the complex and disparate nature of motivations and intentions, there are limitations on generalizing these issues. The sample is not statistically representative of all of those arriving in Evzonoi but interviews were consistent enough for trends to be perceived.

DISPLACEMENT

AREAS OF ORIGIN

At the time of the assessment the large majority of the recent arrivals in Evzonoi were from

Syria (approximately 40%), followed by asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan. Interviewed asylum seekers from Syria were mainly from the governorates of Damascus, Dara'a and Homs.

The vast majority of the interviewees reported spending less than three months in Turkey before coming to Evzonoi, with their displacement route having started directly in Syria. The interviewees



Figure 1: Recent arrivals near the border crossing at Evzonoi

indicated that it took them between three to four days to arrive at the border point in Evzonoi.

A small percentage indicated having spent some time in Turkey before leaving for Europe, mostly between three to twelve months. A small percentage also reported having travelled through other destinations, such as Jordan.

REASONS FOR DEPARTING TO THE EU

For those who had been displaced directly from Syria, active conflict in their areas of origin was the main reason cited for leaving. Lack of adequate services (such as education, water, and health), and fear of conflict spreading either to their areas of origin or to their prior location was the second most mentioned factor influencing their decision to leave Syria.

For all interviewed Syrian asylum seekers, the main reason for choosing to come to Greece - and then to Europe - was reported to be the relative ease of travel to Europe at the time of the assessment.

The fact that Europe was perceived as more welcoming to Syrians also played an important role in making the decision to travel to Europe.

MIGRATION ROUTES

FINAL DESTINATION INTENTIONS

All the Syrian asylum seekers that participated in these discussions intended to go to Germany as their final destination of choice. Holland was the second option mentioned, followed by Norway.

The key cited factors for choosing the country of final destination include the level of support provided by the host country, followed, in fewer cases, by access to better education for children. Most of the interviewees also mentioned the fact that Germany was their first choice as it would not send them back to the first country of arrival in Europe (Greece, in this case) as would normally happen in accordance with the Dublin agreement.

TRAVEL AND BORDER CROSSING

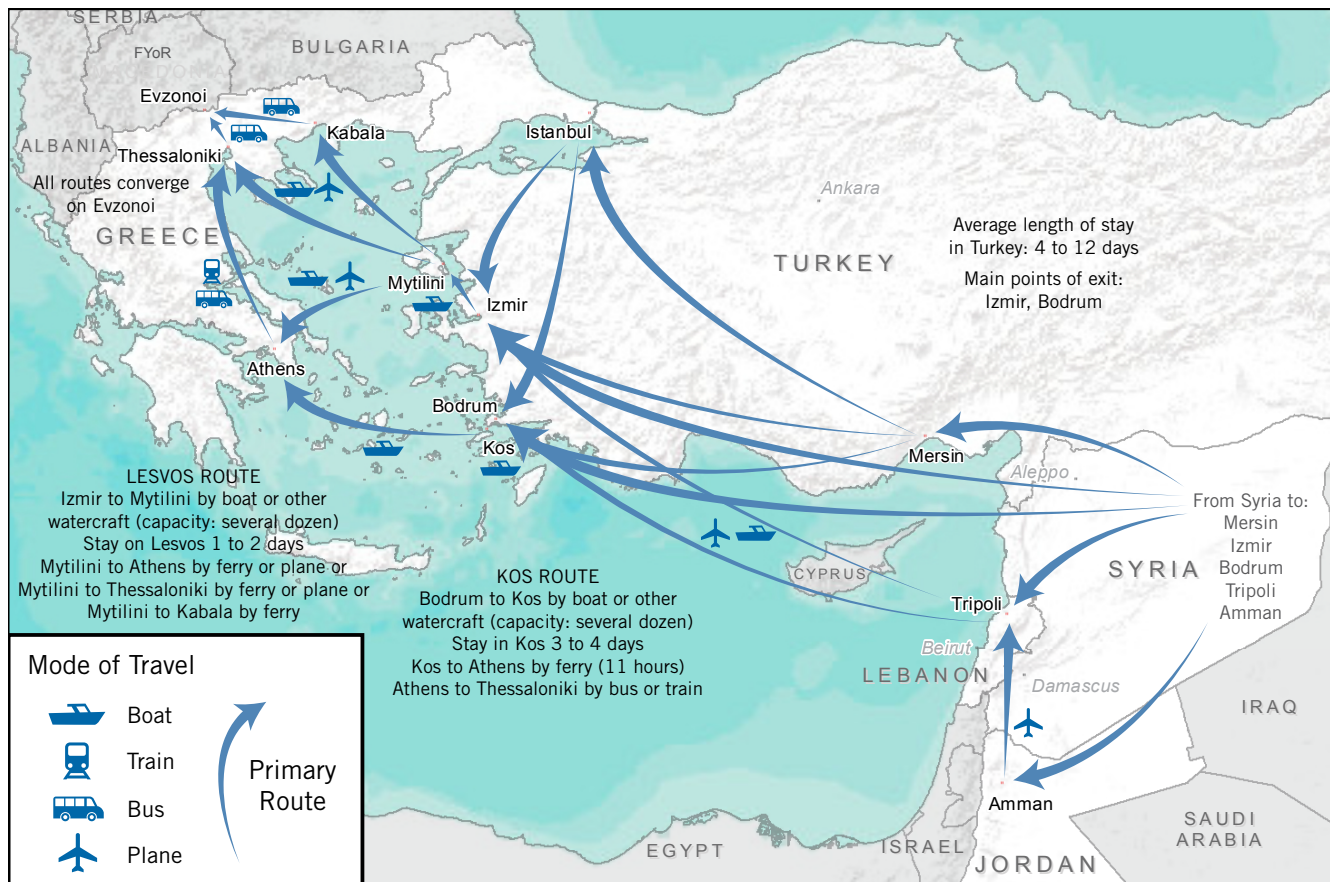
Evzonoi is the border crossing point between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Located 77 kilometers to the north of Thessaloniki, Syrian asylum seekers travel to Evzonoi by bus from Athens, a journey which takes between 6 to 7 hours. Few also travel from Athens by train or take the bus from Thessaloniki. A bus ticket from Athens to

Evzonoi costs between 40 and 50 Euros per person while one from Thessaloniki to Evzonoi costs 10 Euros per person.

Since Athens is only a transit point for them to continue their trip, Syrian asylum seekers only spend a few hours here until they arrange their bus ride to Evzonoi. Given that boats arrive at Piraeus port between 8 and 10 am in the morning, arrivals at the border are higher after 6 pm. Everyday, there are between 2,500 and 3,500 people on average arriving in Evzonoi and crossing the border into the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Although there is some fluctuation in the daily numbers, with some



Figure 2: Basic medicines and health check ups being provided upon arrival



Map 1: Primary migration routes through Greece

days being quieter than the others, these numbers have more or less remained stable since the 20th of August.

Once in Evzonoi, buses drop the asylum seekers off 2 km away from the crossing point. Each bus, carrying a group of 40 and 60 people, is assigned an order number upon arrival by the Greek police. Each group is then called to cross the border according to this given number. On an average day when it is not too crowded, the border crossing process takes about 30 minutes. During this process, some groups also receive first aid medical care and basic food and water supplies to continue their trip. On crowded days when arrivals go up to 3,000 people, groups have had to wait for hours at the border crossing area.

According to KI interviews conducted with security forces and NGOs, one group crosses the border every 15 minutes. The border is open for approximately 20 hours per day, and only closes on the side of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYOM) for security guard changes and logistical reasons. Between midnight and 6am, Greek police forces and the FYOM army are present on each side respectively. KIs reported fearing for their safety at night given the absence of paid staff, volunteers, doctors or any other kind of support during these shifts.

AVAILABLE INFORMATION

As was observed during similar assessments conducted in Athens, Kos and Lesbos, the main source of information for asylum seekers was social media updates (through WhatsApp and Facebook), followed by word of mouth and information provided by family members already in the final destination. Greek sim cards which are sold to them upon arrival in Athens enable asylum seekers to maintain this connectivity for the rest of their journey. However, there is a reported lack of access to points where phones can be charged. In response, groups of volunteers present in the area provide generators and electricity extension cords to charge phones.

Key information gaps reported include information on border crossing status, as well as the asylum seeking process in EU countries. Additionally, some respondents also reported a lack of clarity regarding the safety of the routes they are meant to follow. Asylum seekers also reported a lack of information about the availability and accessibility of primary health care services.

REPORTED NEEDS

When asked about priority needs, many of the respondents reported needs related to health. The most prominently reported health issues faced by asylum seekers upon arrival in Evzonoi include

fever, infection, and muscular and spinal pain. Some cases of child epilepsy were also reported and these were referred to the closest local hospital in Polykastro which is located 15 kilometers away from the border.

Although Médecins du Monde and Médecins Sans Frontières provide basic medicines and health checks upon arrival, these were reportedly not sufficient for supporting the high numbers of arrivals every day. Additionally, hats to provide protection from the sun as well as raincoats and more tents with water and electricity supply are reportedly needed to support asylum seekers, especially as the autumn weather becomes cooler.

About REACH

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

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions. For more information, you can write to geneva@reach-initiative.org. Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info