

The European Migrant Crisis Situation Overview: Lesbos, Greece

17 and 18 September 2015

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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 September 18th, UNHCR estimated that in July alone, Greece has received 50,242 new arrivals, which is far greater than the total number of asylum seekers which arrived in 2014 (43,200 people). Once in Greece, asylum seekers travel to other European countries; from Athens and Thessaloniki they cross the border into Macedonia and continue through the Balkans towards Northern Europe. For most, the preferred final destination is primarily Germany.

On September 15th, REACH teams 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 overall social media review and findings from other ongoing assessments by

REACH teams in the Balkans and the Middle East.

This report outlines the findings from assessments conducted on 17th and 18th September on the Island of Lesbos, one of the first points of entry for Syrian refugees in Greece. Data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with recently arrived asylum seekers. 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 Lesbos but interviews were consistent enough for trends to be perceived.

DISPLACEMENT AREAS OF ORIGIN

At the time of the assessment, the large majority of recent arrivals on the island of Lesbos was from Syria, followed by Iraq and Afghanistan. Interviewed asylum seekers from Syria were mainly from the

governorates of Damascus and Homs, followed by Dara'a, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor and Idlib.

The vast majority of all interviewees reported spending less than three months in Turkey before coming to Lesbos, all of these having started directly from Syria. A small percentage indicated having resided in Turkey before leaving for Europe, mostly between three to twelve months. In two out of the six groups interviewed, there was a mention



Picture 1: Asylum seekers arriving on the island of Lesbos

Profile of Syrian refugees in Lesbos as of 18 September

According to the media, up to 20,000 asylum seekers have arrived during the course of the past three months in Lesbos. Boats arrive every day on the coast in Molyvos which is situated on the northern part of the island. From there, they either walk 3 – 5 hours, or take one of the buses run by an organization of volunteers in the area, to get to the port area in Mytilene. Once there, they receive a travel document to leave the island.

Most of the asylum seekers arriving at Lesbos are from Syria, with a lesser number of Iraqis and Afghanis. Due to the high number of arrivals in the island, boat tickets to Athens run out quickly every day. Each person will pay 60 EUR for the 13 hour journey. Very few have a valid passport and are able to take the plane as a means of transport. Most of the Syrian asylum seekers who participated in the study have university degrees, mostly in Sciences, Social Sciences, and Literature.

REASONS FOR DEPARTING TO THE EU

For those who had been displaced directly from Syria, the fear of the spread of the armed conflict or active conflict in their place of origin were the main reasons for leaving. Lack of services (such as education, water and health) 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 Lesbos - and then to Europe – was reported to be the relative ease to travel to Europe at the time of the assessment, facilitated by favourable weather conditions, a decrease in the cost of the journey and by access to services and support received upon arrival at the final destination. The fact that Europe was perceived as more welcoming to Syrians also played an important role in the decision taken to travel to Europe.

MIGRATION ROUTES

FINAL DESTINATION INTENTIONS

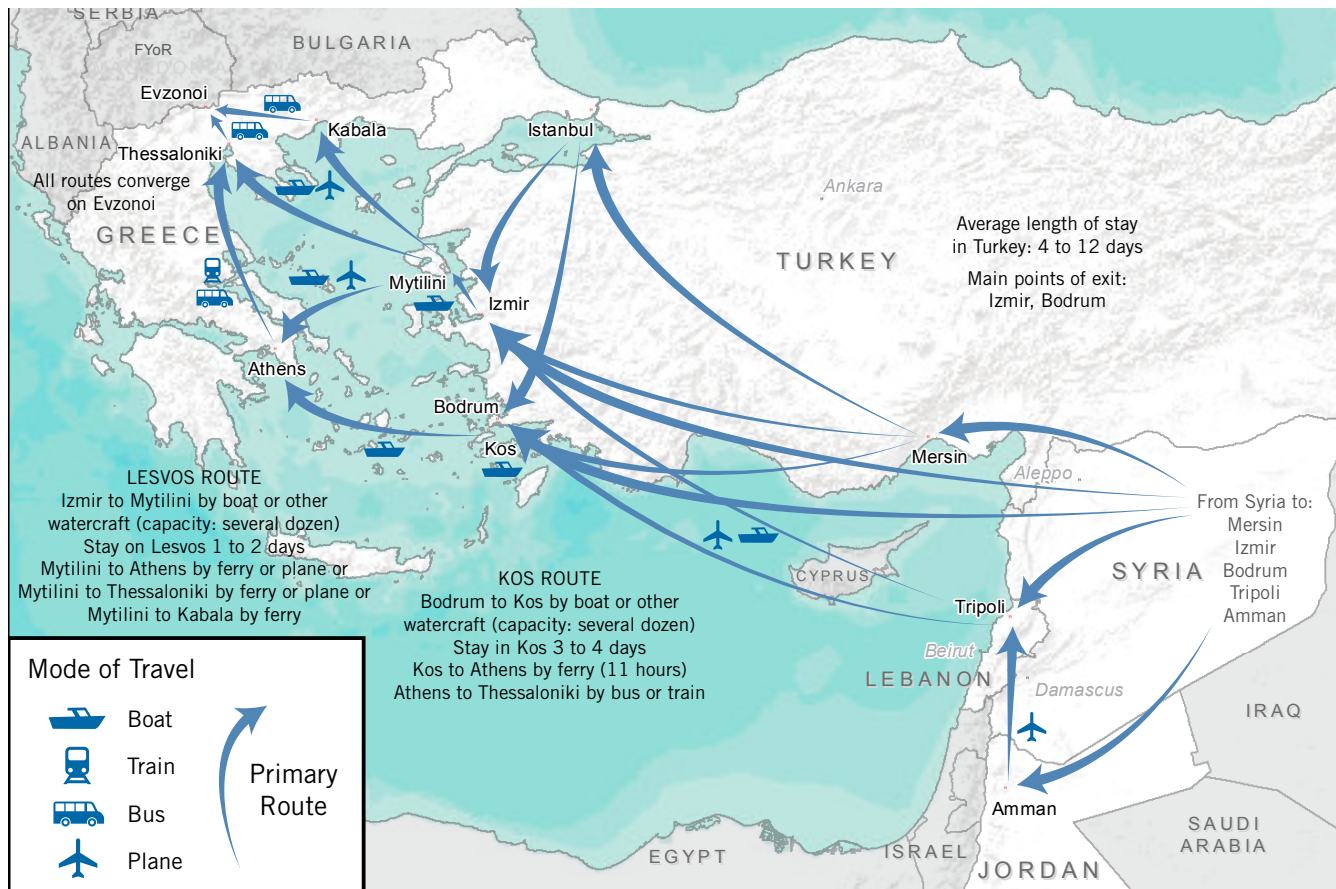
All the Syrian asylum seekers that participated in these discussions intended to go to Germany as their preferred final destination. Sweden was the

second option commonly mentioned, followed by Holland and Finland. The key factors for choosing the country of final destination included the level of support provided by the host country, followed, in fewer cases, by the access to better education for children. Other factors included the speed of the refugee status determination process, the ease of finding jobs, and the fact that the final destination country would not send them back to the first country through which they entered Europe (Greece in this case).

JOURNEY INTENTIONS

Lesbos is, together with Kos and Samos, one of the first entry points for Syrian asylum seekers in Europe. Once migrants arrive in Lesbos, they are provided with a travel document to travel to mainland Greece. The process of acquiring the travel document is shorter in Lesbos than in Kos and takes between 30-60 minutes to acquire.

From Lesbos, Syrians travel by boat to Piraeus port in Athens, or to Kavala in Northern Greece. They buy their tickets themselves and reported that the Greek government had increased the availability of boats for the journey. Once in Athens, Syrian asylum seekers planned to either take a bus or a train (and in a very few cases mentioned, a plane) to travel to Thessaloniki, the closest city to the border of Former Yugoslav Republic.



Map 1: Primary migration routes through Greece

INFORMATION SOURCES

The main source of information for the asylum seekers was reported to be social media updates (through Whatsapp and Facebook). Word of mouth and information from families already in the final destination were also mentioned as sources of information. Syrian asylum seekers were able to go online using free wifi provided by restaurants and cafes.

Key information gaps reported include information on border crossing status, as well as the asylum process in EU countries. There is also very little

information available for those who recently arrived in Lesbos about any services available for them on the island such as primary health care. Although medical NGOs are present on the island, groups interviewed repeatedly mentioned their lack of knowledge on where to go, or who to contact for assistance.



Picture 2: Tent encampment, Lesbos

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