

The European Migrant Crisis Situation Overview: Athens, Greece

19th September 2015

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humanitarian action

SITUATION OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

During the past three months, the Greek islands have seen an unprecedented increase in the number of Syrian asylum seekers. As of 19th September, UNHCR estimated that in July alone, Greece had 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 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, Iraq and Syria.

This report outlines the findings of assessments conducted on 19 September in Athens: in Piraeus port and Omani Square, the point of reference for Syrians to arrange their bus transportation directly to Ezvoni. Data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with asylum seekers who had recently arrived in Greece. 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. While the sample is not statistically representative of all Syrian asylum seekers currently in Athens, interviews were consistent enough for trends to be perceived.

DISPLACEMENT AREAS OF ORIGIN

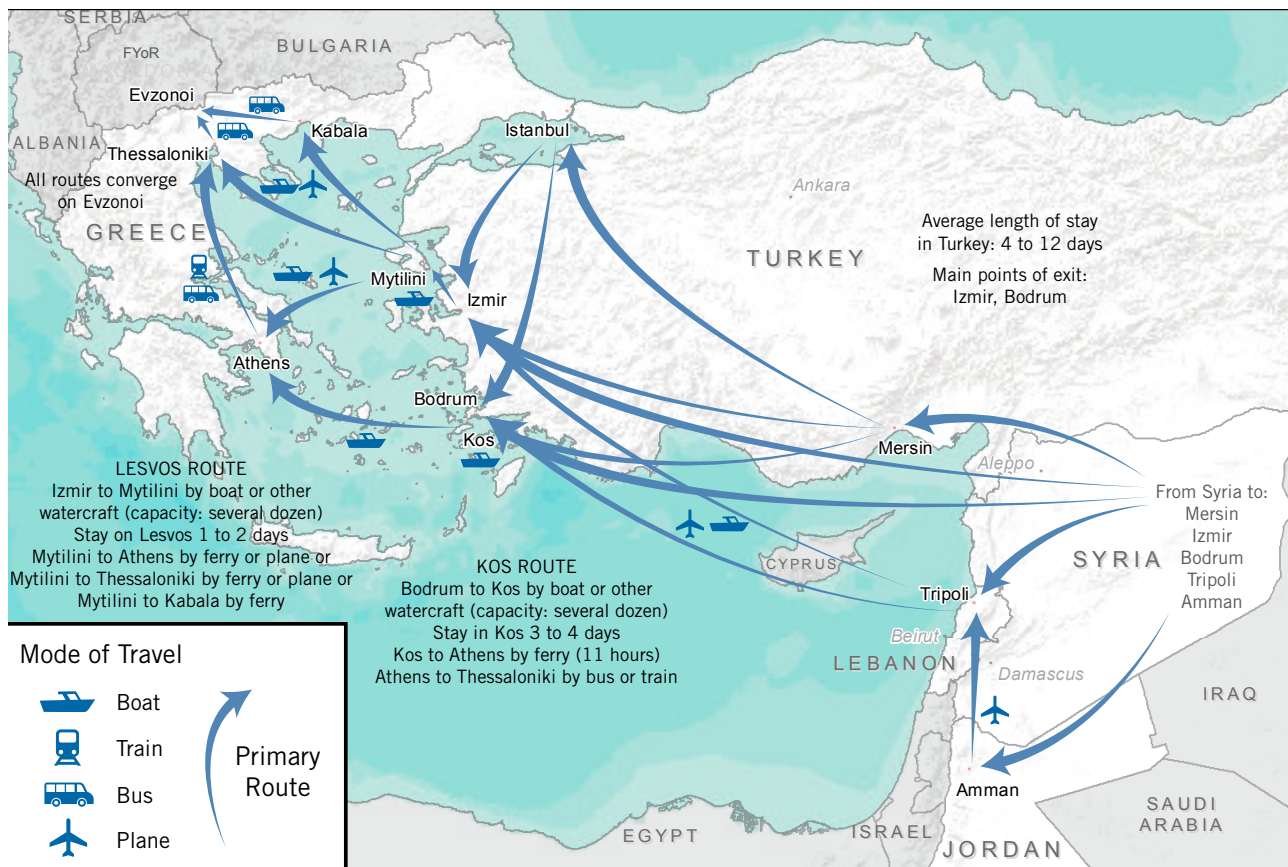
Athens is a transit point on the route followed by Syrian asylum seekers as they travel from the Greek islands to mainland Greece and then northwards

toward other EU countries.

The origin of the groups assessed in Athens was mainly Damascus governorate. They mentioned that the all Syrians entering Europe are currently coming via Greece. However, while Syrians from Damascus, Homs, and Dar'a governorates were most likely to transit through Lebanon and Turkey first; the majority of those from Aleppo, Idlib, and



Picture 1: Mobile phone companies selling SIM cards to recent arrivals, Athens



MAP 1: Primary routes taken from Syria to Greece

Refugee Profile in Athens as of 19 September

The past weeks have seen an increasing number of Syrian asylum seekers arriving in mainland Greece from the Greek islands, their first arrival point in Europe.

Boats arrive each day to Piraeus Port at 8am and 8pm from Lesbos, together carrying thousands of asylum seekers on a daily basis.

Most asylum seekers no more than one day in Athens, long enough to secure themselves a place on the next bus to Evzoni, the next stop on their trip.

Most of the asylum seekers arriving at Piraeus are from Syria, with a smaller number of Iraqis and Afghanis seen here. Most of the Syrian asylum seekers who participated in the study have university degrees, mostly Sciences, Social Sciences, and Literature.

Al- Hassekeh, fled directly through Turkey using the Jabat al Joz crossing point.

Consistently, following the same trend that appeared in the Greek islands of Lesbos and Kos, all groups interviewed had spent less than three months in Turkey before arriving to Athens. In all cases, they reported having left directly from Syria.

REASONS FOR DEPARTING TO THE EU

For those asylum seekers from Syria, the presence of armed conflict in the place of origin, or the fear of armed conflict were reported as the main reasons for leaving. These were followed by reports of a lack of basic services, such as education, water and

health. While many people had travelled through Turkey on their way to Greece, all had spent less than three months there.

For all of the interviewed Syrian asylum seekers, the main reason for choosing to come to Europe now was reported to be the relative ease of travel at the time of the assessment, primarily due to good weather, and a decrease in the total cost of the journey. Perceived access to services and support in their final destination, as well as the understanding that refugees were welcome had also played a part in their 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. Sweden was the second most commonly mentioned destination country, followed by Holland and Finland. The main reason for choosing their final destination was the level of support expected by the host government, followed in a smaller number of cases by the opportunity to access to better education for their children.

JOURNEY INTENTIONS



New arrivals at Piraeus Port, Athens

Athens is currently only a short transit point in the journey of Syrian asylum seekers. Therefore, the time spent here is very limited, and only with the purpose of finding the way to continue the route to the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Once asylum seekers arrive in Piraeus port, they search for a bus to take them directly to Ezvoni, the town closest to the border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In the past few months, Syrian asylum seekers would also use the train to travel to Thessaloniki, then onwards to the border. However a new direct bus service was recently established between Athens and the border town of Ezvoni. These buses are reportedly mainly run by migrants from Arab countries - for example from Egypt and Iraq - that had already settled in Athens. Syrian asylum seekers pay approximately 35 EUR per person for one bus ticket. Children of less than three years old can travel free of charge, and children between three and twelve years old pay half the price for the same trip.

INFORMATION SOURCES

The main source of information for asylum seekers was reported to be social media updates (such as Whatsapp and Facebook). Word of mouth and information from families already in final their final intended destination were also mentioned as important sources of information. Upon arrival in

Piraeus port, cell phone companies offer asylum seekers sim cards to be able to maintain the connectivity they need for their trips in Europe.

Asylum seekers reported that the key information gaps are on border crossing status, as well as asylum process in EU countries. Mobile phones and mobile internet have also proven to be essential for the journey of thousands of Syrians, not only to communicate with others, but also to have updated reliable information on border status, as well as for their own security.

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