

Situation Overview: European Migration Crisis, Western Balkans

December 2015



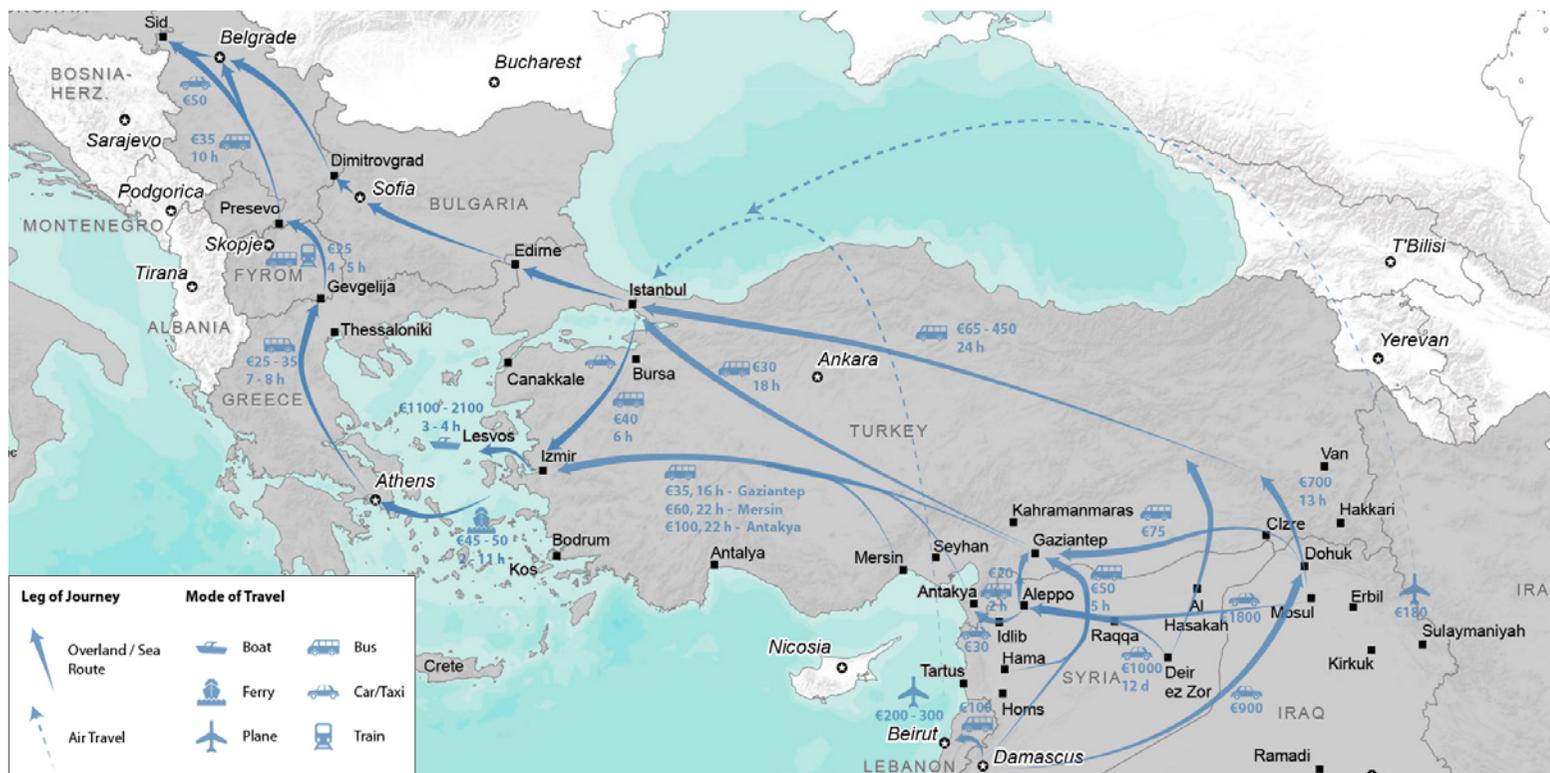
REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

INTRODUCTION

The scale of ongoing migration into Europe is unprecedented, with over a million asylum seekers arriving in 2015.¹ The current migration flow transiting through the Western Balkans mainly originates from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, with people having travelled through Turkey, and entering the EU through Greece. From there, the vast majority travel northwards to destinations such as Germany and Sweden.

Increasingly harsh weather conditions and rough seas have recently reduced the flow of migrants entering Europe by the sea-crossing from Turkey to Greece, with figures from UNHCR showing a decrease in the number of migrants arriving on the Greek islands in the second half of December. This reduction is also reflected in the number of arrivals within Serbia and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM), with an estimated 86,405 new arrivals in Serbia in December 2015, according to UNHCR—a significant decrease compared to the number of arrivals in November (152,531) and October (185,910).²

In order to address humanitarian stakeholders' information needs about current migration trends, REACH, with support from ECHO, has established a displacement monitoring mechanism to assess the flow of new arrivals into Europe through the Western Balkans. Information is collected through structured



Map 1: Overview of reported migratory routes from Syria and Iraq to FRYoM/Serbia.

interviews and participatory mapping with migrants at key transit points in Serbia/FYRoM; and complemented by interviews with key humanitarian, government and UN actors; and regular monitoring of social and mainstream media to understand new and developing trends.

This report is the first of several situation overviews, which will summarise information

collected through the monitoring mechanism about migration trends through the Western Balkans and the demographic profile of those in transit. The focus of this report is on Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan nationals traveling through the FYRoM and Bulgaria to Serbia, with the intention of continuing their journey into Europe. Data and analysis are intended to support humanitarian stakeholders operating in areas of origin and along the transit route.

Findings are based on 111 group interviews (902 individuals) representing 487 Syrians, 256 Iraqis, 142 Afghans and 17 Pakistanis.

1 IOM: [EU Migrant, Refugee Arrivals by Land and Sea Approach One Million in 2015](#), 18 December 2015

2 UNHCR: [Daily Estimated Arrivals per Country- Flow through the Western Balkans Route](#), 28 December 2015

3 UNHCR: [Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response- Mediterranean](#)

4 EU Observer: [Balkan countries close borders to 'economic migrants'](#), 20 November 2015

*This report uses the word migrant to refer to all those travelling to Europe, including those who intend to seek asylum and may later gain refugee status

METHODOLOGY

Findings presented in this report are drawn from primary data collected by REACH between 9 and 31 December 2015. Information was gathered through 111 structured interviews and participatory mapping exercises conducted with groups of migrants at major transit points, in order to understand their demographic profile, displacement history, humanitarian needs and future intentions.

Throughout this report, findings are complemented by data from regular monitoring of mainstream and social media, as well as with other sources of humanitarian information. Findings are also triangulated with information from interviews with operational NGOs in the Balkan corridor.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the purposive selection of groups for interview, results do not constitute a representative sample of all migrants travelling through FYRoM/Serbia at the time of assessment. Rather, the information collected provides a snapshot of migration through a key transit country at a particular point in time, which is also indicative of wider trends. Alternative routes and experiences exist that are not represented in this assessment.

Findings have been triangulated with social and mainstream media, as well as anecdotal evidence from the REACH assessment team and humanitarian actors on the ground.

PLACE OF ORIGIN

The majority of groups (98%) interviewed originated from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, which also corresponds to the nationalities represented at registration centres in the area.³ It is also a reflection of government policies by FYRoM, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia to deny entry to those considered to be economic migrants, i.e. those coming from countries other than Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴

Of the groups interviewed from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, 55% were from Syria, 26% from Iraq and 19% from Afghanistan.

Interviewed arrivals from Iraq mostly originated from northern parts of the country including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A few groups reported traveling from Diyala and Al-Qadisiyyah governorates. Interviewed arrivals from Syria originated mainly from Aleppo, Damascus and Deir-ez-Zor but also from the governorates of Idlib, Lattakia, Ar-Raqqah, Rural Damascus, Dar'a and As-Sweida.

Those travelling from Afghanistan originated from a variety of areas, including Herat and Paktya in the south, and Kunduz in the north, among others.

GROUP COMPOSITION

Families were found to be more prevalent

among the travelling groups than individuals traveling alone or with friends. This is a shift in demographics compared to REACH survey results from September, where single men made up the majority of groups. More than half (61%) of interviewed Syrian, Iraqi and Afghani asylum seekers arriving in Serbia were travelling with at least one other adult family member.

AGE AND GENDER

The dominant profile (74%) of an individual traveler, journeying through Serbia in December, was male between the ages of 18-59, travelling with at least one family member, in an average travel group of 8 persons. The groups interviewed are comprised of various ages from infants to elderly with the majority of migrants (male and female) between 25-59 years of age. While there is an almost equal proportion of male and female children travelling from ages 0-14, the gender balance begins to dissipate around the age of puberty. Only 19 females aged 15-17 were interviewed compared to 56 males in this age group.

Figure 1: Age and sex distribution of interviewed groups



Of the 39 individuals interviewed who identified as an unaccompanied minor, 95% of them were males 15-17 years of age, the remaining 5% were males aged 10-14 and travelling either with adults they had met along the journey or friends of family. In addition, 14% of men interviewed reported travelling alone without family, the majority of these (65%) young men aged 18-24.

EDUCATION

All children aged 10-17 in the interviewed groups reported at least started primary or secondary school, while more than half (69%) of adults had some level of primary or secondary school education. A significant minority of adults had completed university (11%) with social sciences and medicine being the most common degrees.

Education levels within travel groups were found to be relatively uniform: for example, travel groups where members had no education at all seldom included someone with a university degree, and vice versa.

LIVELIHOODS AND EMPLOYMENT BEFORE DEPARTURE

People interviewed came from households that primarily relied on stable employment (reported by 57% of groups) and/or businesses and trade (39% of groups), in their area of origin, and reported that they had sufficient resources to complete the trip. However, a significant minority (38% of groups) came from households primarily depending on unstable, daily labour. An increasing number of migrant

groups are arriving to Serbia via FYRoM without enough means to continue their journey and are relying on humanitarian cash assistance to pay for their trip from Presevo to Sid.

Generally, those traveling from Iraq and Syria appeared to be better off financially than those travelling from Afghanistan. Between 66% and 60% of groups interviewed in December from Iraq and Syria reported holding stable employment in their place of origin, compared to only 33% of Afghans.

Employment, however, was not necessarily found to be indicative of adults' education level. In many instances those who had completed university indicated relying on unstable employment—similar proportions to those who had only completed primary or secondary education.

DRIVERS OF DISPLACEMENT

PUSH FACTORS

During the assessment, people were asked why they decided to leave their area of origin. Most highlighted insecurity and conflict at home (90% of groups) as their primary reason. However, when breaking down the groups by area of origin, those coming from Iraq and Syria more commonly cited active armed conflict as their motivation for leaving, while Afghans report mainly widespread violence and insecurity.

Secondary reasons for leaving included lack of access to basic services, specifically education

Figure 2: Primary reported push factors for leaving area of origin, by country of origin

Primary Push Factors	Country of Departure		
	Syria	Iraq	Afghanistan
1 Active armed conflict	90%	93%	5%
2 Violence / insecurity	0%	0%	81%
3 Lack of basic services	26%	0%	14%
4 Fear of spread of armed conflict	7%	3%	0%
5 Fear of military recruitment	2%	0%	0%
6 Other	0%	3%	0%

Figure 3: Primary reported pull factors for coming to Europe, by country of origin

Primary Pull Factors	Country of Departure		
	Syria	Iraq	Afghanistan
1 Security and safety	80%	83%	0%
2 Access to services and state support	3%	7%	70%
3 Family reunification	8%	3%	0%
4 Job opportunities	0%	0%	20%
5 Other	8%	6%	10%

reported by 26% of Syrians and 14% of Afghans. Others mentioned fleeing because of personal threats made against them by non-government armed groups; while fear of forced military recruitment men was also mentioned as a reason for leaving by young single. Social media platforms monitored by REACH also contained group discussions of forced military recruitment as being a driver of displacement.

PULL FACTORS

Throughout the December assessment, reported reasons for choosing to come to Europe mirrored reasons for leaving – security and safety being the most prominently

mentioned pull factor (reported by 78% of groups), followed by access to basic services (43%). Afghans were more likely than other groups to report service access (70% of these groups) and jobs (20%) as primary pull factors.

Family reunification was only mentioned by a small proportion of group members as their primary reason for coming to Europe by Syrians (8%) and Iraqis (3%).

WHY NOW?

Many reflected that they had decided to leave at this particular time, because the situation at home had deteriorated to an unbearable level (60% of groups).

In addition, a key reason for choosing to travel to Europe at this time in particular was the decreased cost of travel as reported by 31% of groups.

Prices for the crossing into Greece, the most expensive leg on the FYRoM/Serbia route continue to drop. In September, REACH reported a drop from 1,200 USD to below 800 USD per person.⁵ Recent social media reviews confirm a further decrease in cost, with Facebook adverts indicating prices as low as 500 USD. The decrease in price may lead to asylum seekers with fewer economic resources being persuaded to attempt the sea crossing, facing higher risks than those who travelled during the summer months and arriving in the Balkans with less financial resources than those that have previously passed.

The majority of groups interviewed (91%) contained members who had left family behind in their area of origin, who still considered the journey too risky and felt too vulnerable to depart, due to age, sickness or other factors. The overwhelming reason for staying behind expressed by all groups, which was also featured in Facebook group discussions, was that households did not yet have enough resources saved to send everyone together.

The fact that the FYRoM/Serbia route was considered easier than before was expressed as the main reason for travelling at this time by 19% of groups. This perception may also

⁵ REACH: Migration trends and patterns of Syrian asylum seekers traveling to the European Union, 28 September 2015

mirror the changing demographic profile of people passing along the route- as the journey has become less challenging it is becoming increasingly accessible for more vulnerable individuals.

Social media monitored sites revealed Facebook group discussions which indicated expectations that asylum laws would become more restrictive, hence prompting a decision to move at this time.

MIGRATION ROUTE

All of the groups interviewed reported transiting through Turkey on their way to Europe. The most commonly reported entry points were Gaziantep and Van, predominantly travelling across the border by car or foot. A few groups from Syria reported travelling through Antakya. Most groups (97%) reported spending less than 3 months in Turkey, having travelled directly from their area of origin.

Asylum seekers commonly travelled from their entry point in Turkey towards Izmir or Istanbul, before choosing one of two well-known migration routes from Turkey into Europe, travelling either via Greece or Bulgaria. The route through Greece to FYRoM and then Serbia is currently the preferred route, with more than 806,000 migrants recorded traveling this way in 2015. However, those who fear the sea crossing; do not have enough money to pay for the journey by boat; or who are traveling through “agents” (smugglers) by land, arrive in Europe via the “Bulgarian route” and enter Serbia through the shared border.⁶

Irregular travel

During interviews, REACH encountered several cases of migrants traveling on false documents and/or by irregular means. Often when speaking with migrants who have travelled through the use of smugglers or “agents” as the migrants refer to them, there are significant sections of the journey that they cannot account for. Some report travelling in containers or hidden within vehicles for hours or sometimes days. Those travelling through agents also reported long periods of walking, usually at border crossing points in Turkey, Iran and Bulgaria. It is these points at which migrants have reported problems with border guards and/or police. Some reported having spent time in detention facilities in route.

In addition, many migrants report traveling on falsified documents with their nationalities and ages modified in order to facilitate their passage in light of changing government policies. Unaccompanied minors travelling as adults do not qualify for age-specific assistance and are likely to represent a particularly vulnerable subset of this group.

DESTINATION COUNTRIES

Germany remains the most commonly intended destination (78% of groups), with the main reason being the perceived speed of obtaining refugee status (62%). Reunification with immediate family was highlighted by 46% groups intending to reach Germany, while the ease of access to jobs (34%) was also a

popular response. In addition, perceived ease of access to education was also mentioned by 20% groups as motivation for choosing Germany as their final destination.

Sweden was also commonly mentioned although to a lesser extent (23%), where again ease of access to services, jobs and education were key drivers of movement. Other destinations mentioned include the UK, Austria, France and Italy. Most travel group members had decided which country they wanted to reach before setting off on their journey. However, REACH assessment teams and humanitarian actors as on the ground are frequently asked which country was ‘the best’ to go to, as people sought to verify their decision.

PROTECTION CONCERNS

A number of protection challenges for migrants have surfaced during the assessment.

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

Of the total number of males travelling alone, 21% reported being unaccompanied minors aged 15-17. They were travelling either with adults they had joined since starting the journey or friends of their family.⁷ Unaccompanied minors (under 18 years of age) remain a concern for humanitarian actors. Many of the young men interviewed during this first round of assessments were from Afghanistan and admitted travelling on falsified documents which indicated they were over 18. During interviews, unaccompanied minors admitted

experiencing traumatic events during their journey, with several mentioning beatings; a small number having lost fellow travelers on the journey, due to injury, sickness or separation; and others reporting the theft of personal items.⁸

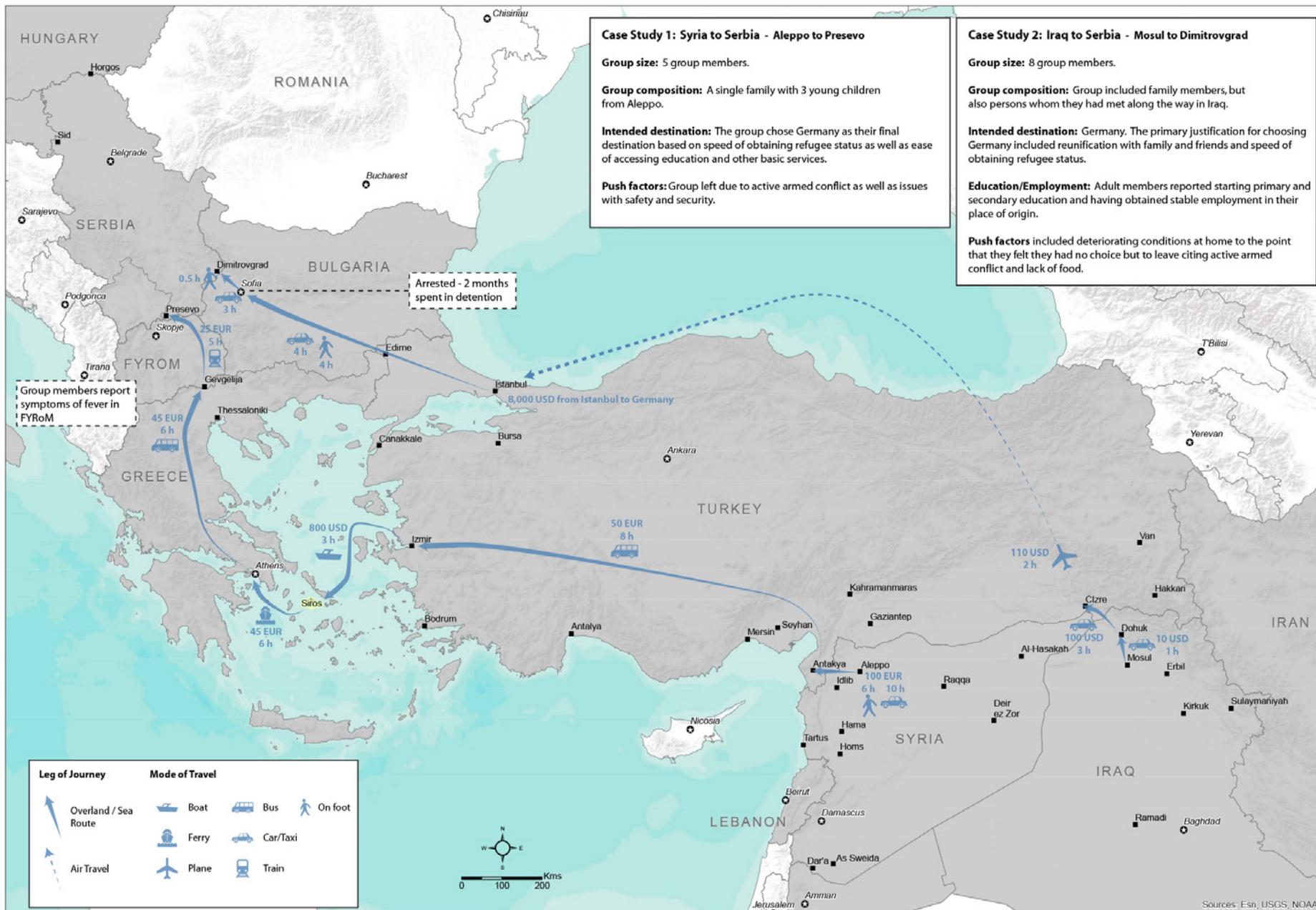
An increase in unaccompanied minors arriving in Europe is confirmed by figures from destination countries, which are witnessing an increase in asylum applications from unaccompanied minors. In Sweden for example, authorities report 32,180 applications for asylum from unaccompanied minors in November alone.

SINGLE MEN

A significant minority of young men (14% over 18, reported travelling with their friends and without other family members. Single men reported frustration at finding themselves disadvantaged in the distribution of aid, since food, warm clothing and access to covered and heated areas target vulnerable groups i.e. women and children but often exclude single men. This in turn has created tensions among the migrant groups.⁹

HEALTH

Interviews conducted from 19-31 December saw 59% of groups with at least one group member suffering from fever, which started during their travels. The majority (35%) of those traveling with a fever say the symptoms began in FYRoM and Greece. In contrast, only 15% of those traveling with a group member suffering from fever say the symptoms began



Map 2: Two case studies of migration routes as reported by two groups travelling from Syria and Iraq.

in their place of origin. Recent reports from the Vrajne Health Centre show an increasing number of migrants report arriving to Serbia with influenza, high-fevers and sore throats.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

This report provides a snapshot of ongoing migration from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan into Europe via the Western Balkans route in December 2015. As found in a previous assessment in September 2015,¹¹ active armed conflict along with violence and insecurity continue to be the main drivers of migration followed by lack of basic services, fear of the spread of conflict, and forced recruitment. The profile of groups travelling has changed since September, with the majority (61%) of groups travelling now comprised of families, on average of 8 persons, rather than groups of young single men and married men travelling alone.

Most have spent the longest time since their departure in their place of origin. This indicates that those interviewed have predominantly not experienced protracted displacement in neighboring refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan but fled directly from their areas of origin.

Migrants explained that the relative ease of travel (reported by 19%) as a primary reason for leaving now rather than before. Most also indicate that the recent deterioration of the situation in the area of origin is the main push factor for their departure and citing security as their main reason for choosing Europe.

The decreased cost of travel from Turkey to Greece by sea may enable individuals and groups with fewer economic resources to travel in the coming months as people accumulate savings. This translates into more vulnerable migrants, both physically and financially, arriving in the Western Balkan corridor.

Protection concerns highlighted in December include the specific risks faced by unaccompanied minors travelling on false documents; reported tensions related to excluding single men from distribution; and increasing signs of illness among migrants. While it is too early to tell for certain whether there has been an increase in the proportion of unaccompanied minors, asylum application statistics indicate that this is a growing trend, leading to concern among humanitarian and government actors.

In coordination with its partners, REACH will continue to monitor the situation of migration to Europe over the coming months. In the next monthly Situation Overview, REACH will also include information gathered from data collected in areas of origin.



Image1 : People gather to board the train from Presevo, Serbia to Sid on the border with Croatia.

About REACH Initiative

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information, you can write to us at: geneva@reach-initiative.org. Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info.

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