



MIGRATION TO EUROPE THROUGH THE WESTERN BALKANS

SERBIA & THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

REPORT

DECEMBER 2015 - MAY 2016



Humanitarian Aid
and Civil Protection

REACH Informing
more effective
humanitarian action

Cover image: Refugees cross from Serbia to Hungary © UNHCR/M.Henley

About REACH

REACH is a joint initiative of two international non-governmental organizations - ACTED and IMPACT Initiatives - and the UN Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT). REACH was created in 2010 to facilitate 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 in support to and within the framework of inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information about REACH and to access our information products, please visit: www.reach-initiative.org. You can also write to us at: geneva@reach-initiative.org and follow us [@REACH_info](https://twitter.com/REACH_info).

Summary

Since the autumn of 2015, over half a million people migrated to Europe via the Western Balkans, the vast majority having sought asylum in countries across the European Union (EU). This report consolidates primary data collected by REACH over a six month period to understand the characteristics of migration through the Western Balkans from December 2015 to May 2016 and to determine the factors affecting people's decision to travel to Europe.

Building on a rapid assessment conducted at the peak of migration to Europe in September 2015, this study sought to provide an overview of recent migration trends, identify the influence of changing European policies towards migration and provide more granular information about the profile of people who have travelled to Europe through the Western Balkans.

Who are the people migrating in Western Balkans?

The vast majority of migrants to Europe have come from countries affected by conflict. Syrians have continued to make up the majority of new arrivals, although their overall proportion has decreased. Instead, an increasing presence of other nationalities has been recorded, including many other refugee-producing countries.

The majority of arrivals to Europe have been young adults, while males outnumber females. Most travelled with immediate family members from their area of origin, with an increase in the proportion of families observed in Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan groups over the past six months.

Many migrants are educated, with experience of stable, skilled employment. However, the proportion of groups containing more vulnerable migrants has increased since December, with increasing proportions reporting no education and reliance on unstable livelihoods in their area of origin. The majority of assessed groups (55%) contained adults that had completed at least primary or secondary education, while one in five assessed groups (20%) contained individuals with experience of higher education. Prior to leaving their area of origin, people reported relying on a mixture of "stable" sources of income (eg. salaried work, skilled employment or business ownership) and "unstable" sources (eg. daily or casual labour), although reliance on stable income was more common among all nationalities but Afghans. Most had made a significant investment in order to make the journey, commonly selling assets and property, spending savings, or taking out loans.

The vast majority of interviewed migrants (90%) reported having travelled directly from their home in their area of origin to Europe. However, the proportion of groups reporting they had lived in another location for more than three months increased from December to April, suggesting an increase in the vulnerability of people in transit.

Why do they travel to Europe?

People have primarily travelled to Europe to flee conflict and insecurity in search of safety and opportunity. Active conflict and generalised violence and insecurity were the primary reported "push factors" leading people to leave their place of origin, while reported "pull factors" for travelling to Europe included safety and security, the possibility of employment, and access to services such as education and healthcare.

When examined over time, reasons for leaving among Syrians and people of other nationalities remained relatively constant, while those for Iraqis and Afghans changed. For Iraqis, the proportion of groups reporting active armed conflict decreased, moving instead towards generalised violence and insecurity. In contrast, Afghan intentions shifted from "violence and insecurity" to "active armed conflict", coinciding with the intensification of conflict in Afghanistan.

When asked about why they chose to leave now rather than before, the majority (52%) of all interviewed groups reported a recent deterioration of the situation as their primary reason, while 11% of groups reported that they travelled now because they perceived Europe to be more welcoming to refugees. However, changing policies can be seen to have influenced intentions to migrate to Europe, with a significant decrease observed in the proportions intending to leave Syria for Europe since March 2016.

Throughout the past six months, Germany has remained the preferred destination of interviewed groups, reported by 70% of all interviewed groups. The decision to travel to Germany and other destinations in northern and central Europe was influenced by the perception that refugees were welcome, jobs were available, and often because other friends or family members were already living there.

How are they travelling?

Most people have attempted to travel to Europe as safely and as cheaply as possible, but changing laws, restrictions and dwindling available resources have often left them with limited choices. The sheer variety of routes and experiences documented over the past six months clearly demonstrates how patterns of movement and the cost of travel have varied over time, both as a result of personal circumstances, and in response to increasing restrictions and changing risk.

Until March 2016, unrestricted migration through the Western Balkans allowed most people to travel on a single major route, leading from Turkey to Greece and northwards through the Western Balkans. Starting in late February, the introduction of successive new policies, border closures, and finally the implementation of the EU Turkey Plan led to a proliferation of new routes both into and across the Western Balkans, as people sought alternative means to continue their journey and reach their intended destination.

What are their humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities?

While the majority of migrants are working age adults, those fleeing conflict and violence are more likely to be vulnerable as a result of years of protracted insecurity and frequently require external support in the face of shocks, delays and setbacks.

Those travelling have included large numbers of vulnerable individuals, particularly unaccompanied minors, who were reported present in 18% of interviewed groups. Over the past six months, travelling groups have become increasingly vulnerable: Syrians and Iraqis have increasingly travelled with children; larger proportions of all groups were living in refugee camps or vulnerable housing types prior to departure; and overall levels of education and reliance on stable employment are lower than those observed in December 2015.

Length of travel, journey time and increasing restrictions have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, stretching available financial resources and diminishing people's capacity to cope, both in transit, and upon arrival in their intended destination.

Following the implementation of the EU Turkey Plan in March 2016, the numbers of "stranded" migrants increased dramatically, causing people to wait for weeks or even months in accommodation that was largely unsuitable for a longer stay. **Most reluctant to resort to alternative routes in the face of restrictions, families with small children were consistently the most likely to remain stranded at such sites in largely inadequate conditions.**

How have people been affected by changing migration policies?

The introduction of border closures and incoherent migration policies across the Western Balkans has further increased the vulnerability of people in transit. People who continue to travel despite new restrictions have been forced to take illegal routes, exposing them to increasing levels of personal risk such as physical violence, trafficking and exploitation. In addition, hundreds have been left stranded along the migration route in Greece, FYRoM and Serbia, unable or unwilling to continue their journey. **Stranded migrants face an uncertain future and specific needs—both unable to move forward, yet often incapable of returning home without assistance, these individuals require support to meet their immediate needs.**

Note on terminology

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

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Context

Between October 2015 and June 2016, over half a million people migrated to Europe via the Western Balkans.¹ The scale of migration to the region was unprecedented, reaching a peak of 221,374 arrivals via the Mediterranean Sea in October 2015.² The vast majority of migrants travelled from Turkey to Europe via Greece and onward to central Europe through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM), Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia to Austria, Germany and the rest of central and northern Europe (see Map 1).

Map 1: The primary migration route through the Western Balkans, October 2015 - March 2016



Until late February 2016, migration was relatively fluid, with most people able to travel from Greece to their intended destinations in less than a week. While transit and receiving countries were largely unprepared, authorities along the Western Balkans route made efforts to facilitate transit, issuing travel permits, allowing passage via public transport, and in some cases providing buses between entry and exit points. At the same time, civil society and local and international aid organisations mobilised to provide assistance to people on the move. Migrants travelled primarily via public transport and on foot, usually stopping for only a few hours at a time to receive food, water, medical assistance and other basic items. Despite significant efforts to cater for new arrivals, transit sites were often at full capacity or overcrowded and available assistance was prioritised for traditionally more vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors, families with small children, or single-headed households.

In February and March 2016, the situation changed significantly. The introduction of new policies and successive border closures in Austria, Slovenia and FYRoM led to temporary blockages, leaving large numbers of people waiting further back along the migration route. First, entry to each country along the route was restricted according to nationality, with only Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians allowed to continue; shortly after, travel was limited to only Iraqis and Syrians. By early March, entry was prohibited to people travelling from specific areas controlled by armed groups—such as Raqqa in Syria and Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq—as well as to people travelling from areas considered safe, such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).³ By mid-March, further restrictions on travel meant that the Western Balkans route was effectively closed, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of weekly

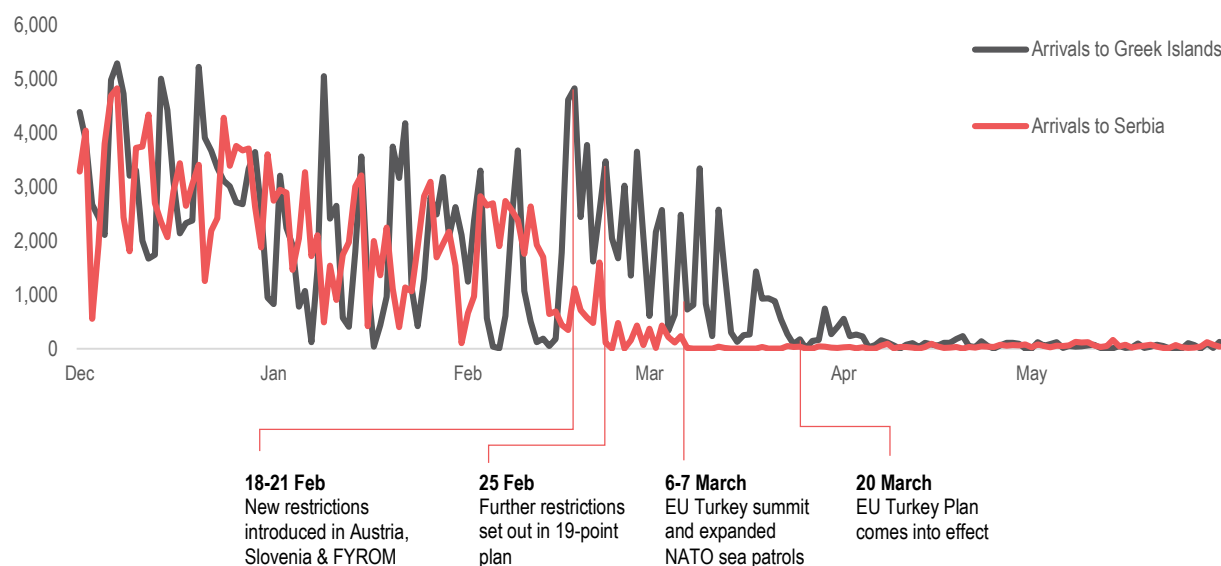
¹ A total of 529,804 individuals were recorded entering Serbia between 1 October 2015 and 31 May 2016. UNHCR, [Daily Estimated Arrivals per Country](#), June 2016.

² UNHCR data portal, [Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean](#), June 2016.

³ REACH, [Situation Overview: rapid assessment of the humanitarian impact of new border policies in the Western Balkans](#), 4 March 2016.

arrivals to FYRoM and Serbia and leaving over 50,000 recent arrivals stranded in Greece, notably at Idomeni informal site on the border between Greece and FYRoM.⁴

Figure 1: Daily arrivals to the Greek Islands and Serbia and key policy changes, December 2015 - June 2016⁵



On 20 March, the EU-Turkey Plan came into effect, resulting in the official closure of all borders along the Western Balkans route to migrants. Any new arrivals were given the option of claiming asylum in Greece or travelling back to Turkey, while those who had arrived earlier remained stranded in transit sites across the Western Balkans, with limited legal options for onward movement. Since then, the number of new arrivals to the Greek islands and Western Balkans decreased significantly.

However, the decrease in recorded arrivals in Greece has not stopped migration along the Western Balkans route, as seen by the total of 176,335 asylum applications filed in European countries in April and May alone.⁶ This trend, together with a proliferation of advertisements for alternative routes on social media, indicates that regardless of border closures, **significant numbers of people have continued to travel via alternative or irregular means to their intended destinations, despite the increased personal risk** associated with the use of smugglers and the longer sea-crossing via the Southern Mediterranean route to Italy.

⁴ By 7 April, were 53,063 people estimated to be stranded in Greece. IOM, Europe Mediterranean Migration Sitrep, 7 April 2016.

⁵ Source of reported arrivals: UNCHR, [Daily Estimated Arrivals per Country](#), June 2016

⁶ Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Monthly data.

Methodology

Between December 2015 and June 2016, REACH collected primary data from migrant populations in FYRoM and Serbia, as well as from some of their countries of origin, in order to provide detailed and actionable information on migration to relevant humanitarian actors and policy-makers. This report consolidates the qualitative and quantitative information collected in order to examine key characteristics and trends related to migration to Europe over the past six months. In particular the study examines the demographic characteristics of people travelling to Europe; the push and pull factors affecting their decision to travel; and their humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities along the migration route.

In the Western Balkans, primary data was collected from a total of 1,060 group interviews with migrants at key transit sites and transportation hubs in FYRoM and Serbia, representing a total of over 5,600 individuals. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with authorities, site managers and humanitarian actors in order to understand the key challenges and changing situation in different sites.

In countries of origin, primary data was collected through key informant interviews with communities from which migrants were leaving in Syria, Iraq, Mali and Niger, while focus group discussions were conducted in Afghanistan. Monthly information was collected from up to 370 communities across Syria from December to May, while one-off assessments were conducted in March 2016, drawing on the knowledge of 80 key informants in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 46 in Niger, 45 in Mali and 14 in Afghanistan.

Primary data collected in areas of origin and in the Western Balkans was triangulated with secondary data from a variety of published sources, including official migration and asylum figures, humanitarian updates, newspaper reports and social media. The research team monitored several channels of English and Arabic language social media including Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter on an ongoing basis in order to better understand changing intentions, identify new migration routes, and observe immediate concerns reported directly by people in transit.

Where relevant, comparisons are made with findings from a rapid assessment of Syrian migration to Europe through Greece and the Western Balkans, conducted by REACH in September 2015.⁷

Limitations

Primary data was collected through purposively sampled group interviews with migrants. Findings are therefore not generalizable to all those travelling through the Western Balkans during the period of research but are instead indicative of broader trends across population groups and over time.

While people were generally willing to answer questions, research teams did not ask to see identity documents to verify information provided and it is possible that people may have provided untruthful answers to some questions. Reasons for this may include restrictions on age or nationality, or reluctance to discuss travel by illegal means. In particular, the presence of unaccompanied minors and reports of protection concerns related to smuggling may be underreported.

Protection and ethics in data collection

Throughout data collection, people were given the opportunity to opt-out of answering questions, or to terminate questioning if they felt uncomfortable. No information was collected on the names of people travelling, protecting their identities and preventing information from being traced back to any individuals in transit.

⁷ REACH, [Migration trends and patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union](#), September 2015.

Key findings

Who are the migrants arriving in the Western Balkans?

The vast majority of migrants to Europe have come directly from home in countries affected by crisis, primarily Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The majority have been young, with 68% aged under 25, while males (69%) outnumber females (31%).⁸ Most travelled with immediate family members from their area of origin, with an increase in the proportion of families observed in Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan groups over the past six months.

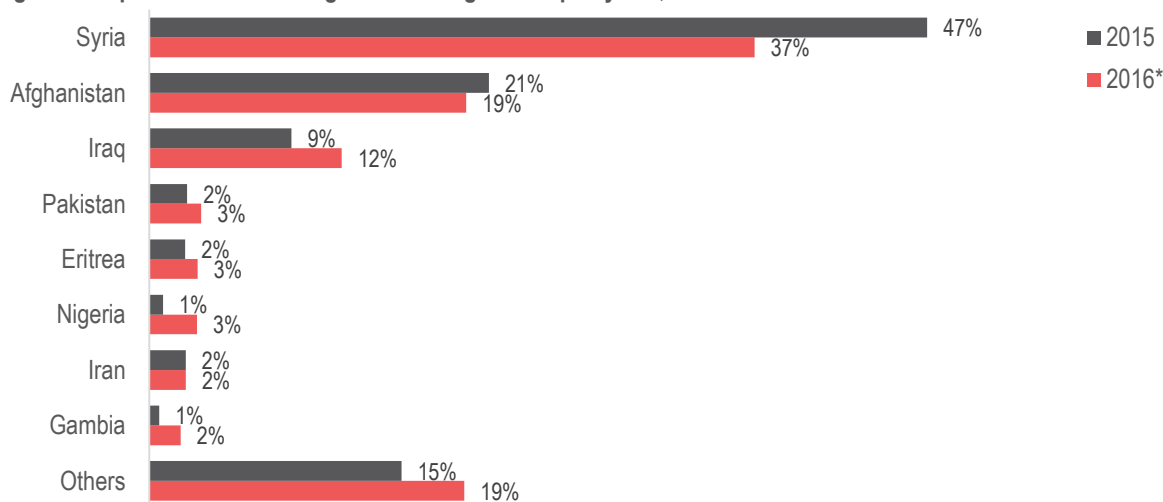
Many migrants are educated, with experience of stable, skilled employment, although large proportions took on debt and/or sold property and assets to finance their journey. However, the proportion of groups containing more vulnerable migrants has increased since December, with increasing proportions reporting no education and reliance on unstable livelihoods in their area of origin.

Despite these general trends, people migrating to Europe should not be considered as a single, homogenous group. This section explains findings related to migrants' place and country of origin, demographic characteristics and socio-economic background. In particular, it explores the key differences between the profiles of the three main nationalities—Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis—as well as some of the key trends observed over the past six months.

Nationality and place of origin

Syrians have consistently made up the largest proportion of assessed migrants in Europe via the Western Balkans, followed by Afghans and Iraqis, a finding in line with the broader migration trends to Europe. According to overall arrivals data from UNHCR, other countries of origin are represented by much smaller numbers of migrants and include Pakistan, Eritrea, and Nigeria (each accounting for 3% of arrivals by sea in 2016), and Iran and Gambia (each 2%).⁹ These top countries of origin have been all been affected by ongoing or recent conflict and insecurity, while Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea also count among the top ten refugee-producing countries worldwide.

Figure 2: Top nationalities of migrants arriving to Europe by sea, 2015 and 2016¹⁰



While the top three countries of origin have remained the same throughout the past six months, data collection teams observed a notable reduction in the proportion of migrants arriving from Syria since 2015, consistent with overall arrivals figures. Instead, growing proportions of migrants of other nationalities have been recorded in 2016, despite the fact that their passage towards central Europe was one of the first to be restricted by policy changes.

⁸ Official figures from UNHCR [Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean](#), as of 30 June 2016

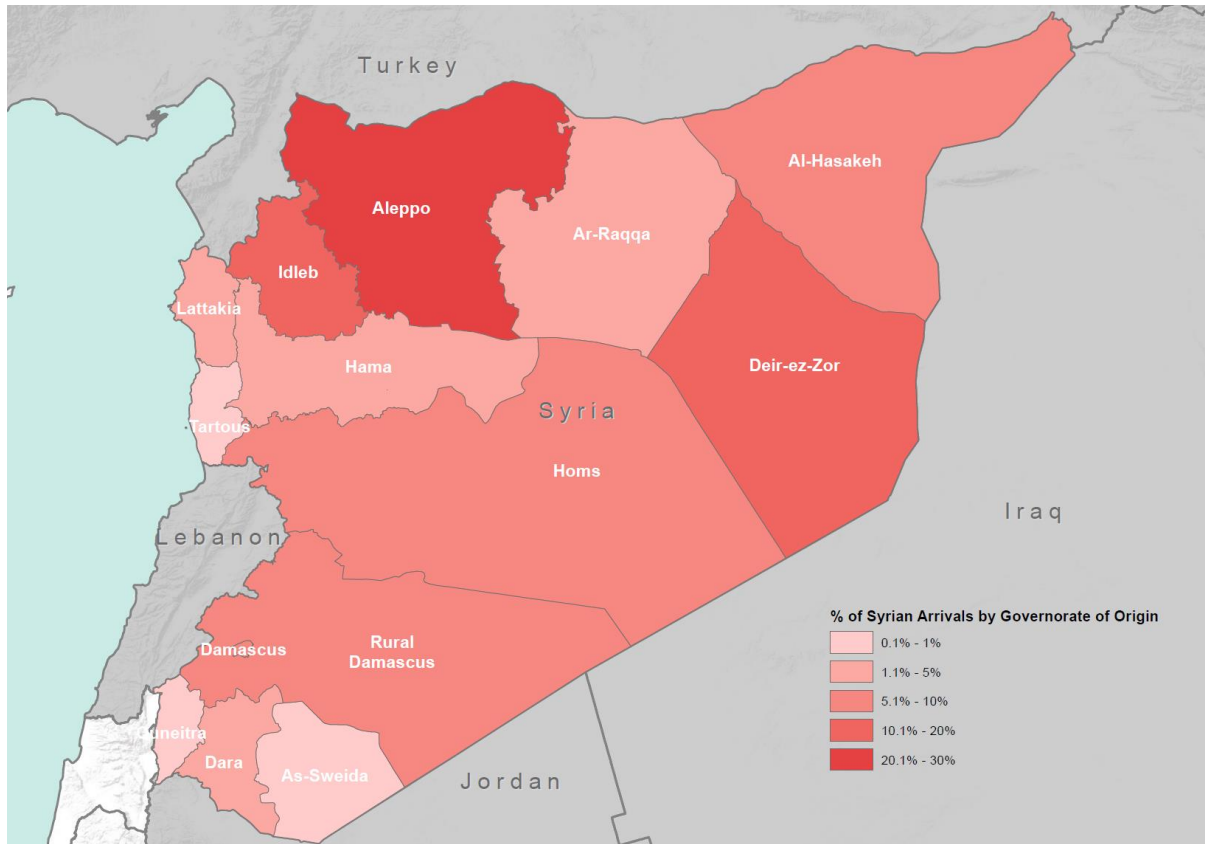
⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

*Figures for 2016 include only January-June

Within the three major countries of origin, migrants can be seen to come from a wide variety of locations, including areas of active conflict. The following maps show the governorates of origin of interviewed migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

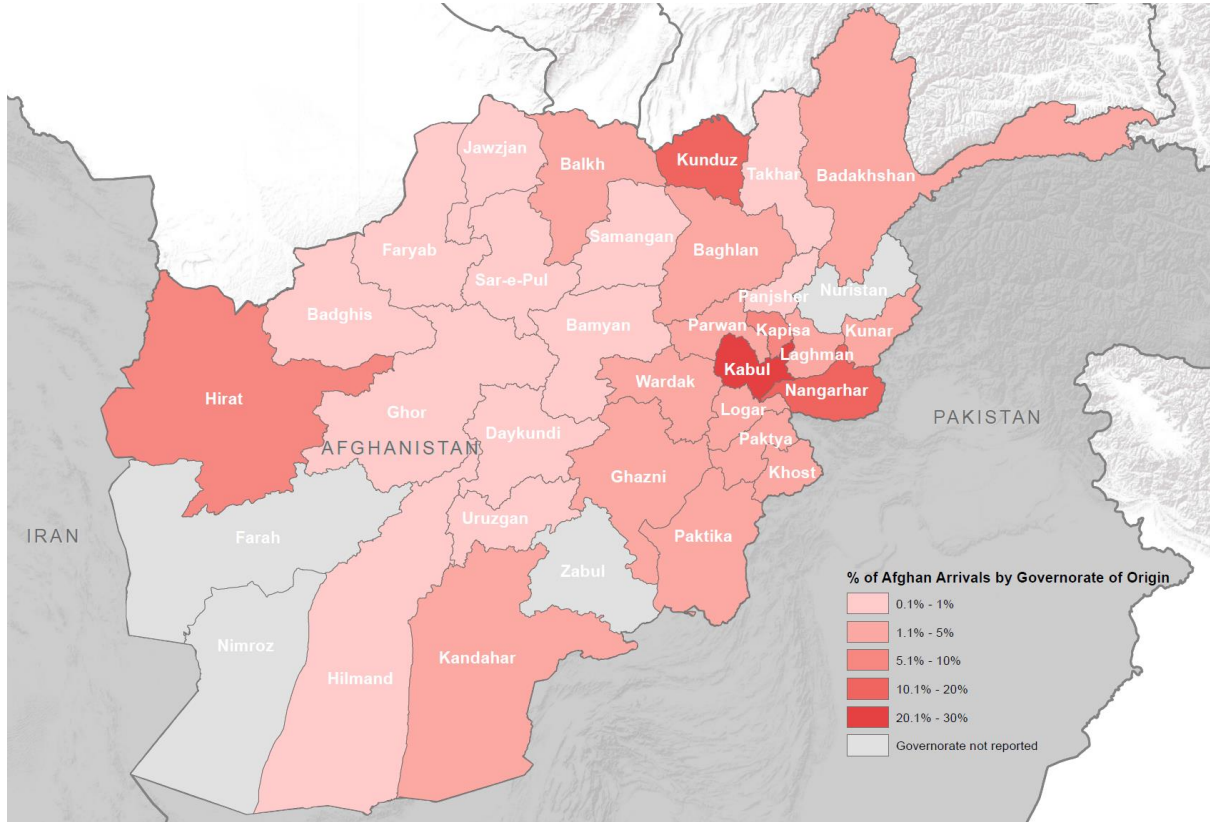
Map 2: Location of origin of interviewed Syrians in the Western Balkans, December 2015 - June 2016



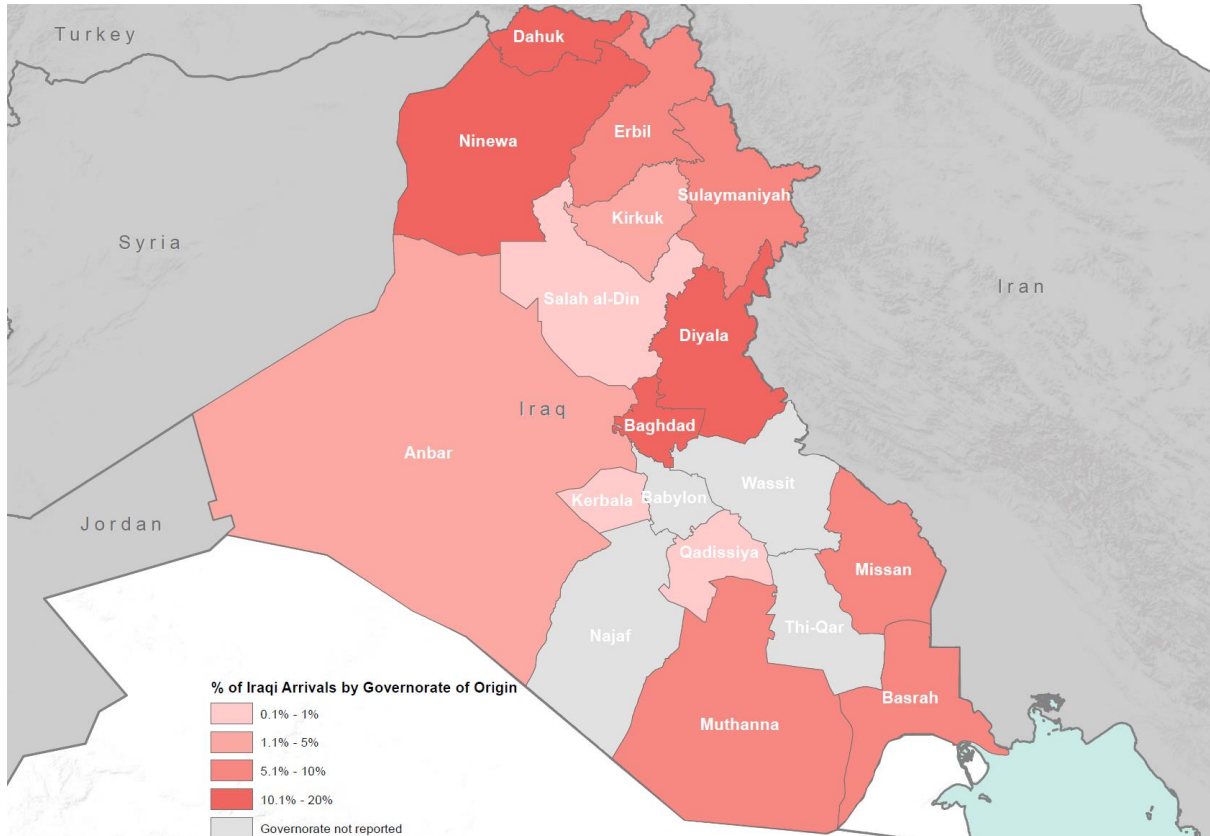
Interviewed Syrian groups have included people travelling from all governorates across the country, including areas controlled by the Government, the opposition, and other armed groups. The largest proportions of Syrians travelled from the Northern governorates of Aleppo, Idleb, Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh. This is likely to have been influenced by the geographic proximity to the primary migration route through Turkey, as well as by the high intensity of conflict in these areas. The link between migration and escalating conflict was particularly apparent in February and March 2016, when unusually high proportions of Syrians reported travelling from Aleppo Governorate following the intensification of conflict and mass displacement in this area.

Consistent with monthly figures, reported areas of origin in Afghanistan and Iraq show a less clear trend (see maps 3 and 4). The highest proportions of Afghan migrants reported travel from Hirat, Kunduz, Kabul and Nangarhar, while the largest proportion of Iraqis reported coming from the governorates of Ninewa and Dahuk. While Dahuk, as other parts of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, may be considered relatively safe, significant proportions of people reported having travelled from areas of active conflict, such as Ninewa, Diyala and Baghdad.

Map 3: Location of origin of interviewed Afghans in the Western Balkans, December 2015 - June 2016

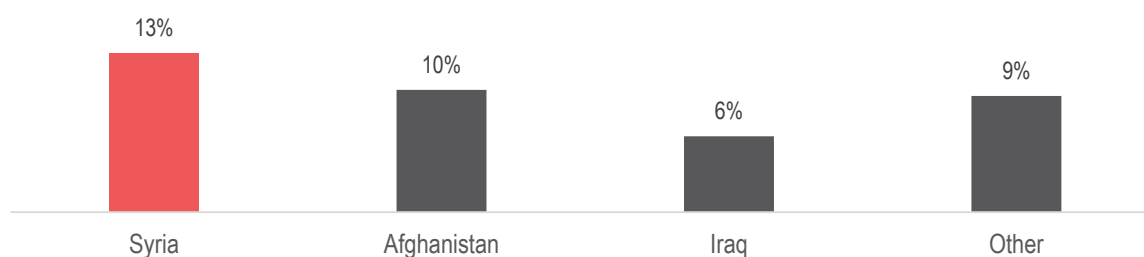


Map 4: Location of origin of interviewed Iraqis in the Western Balkans, December 2015 - June 2016



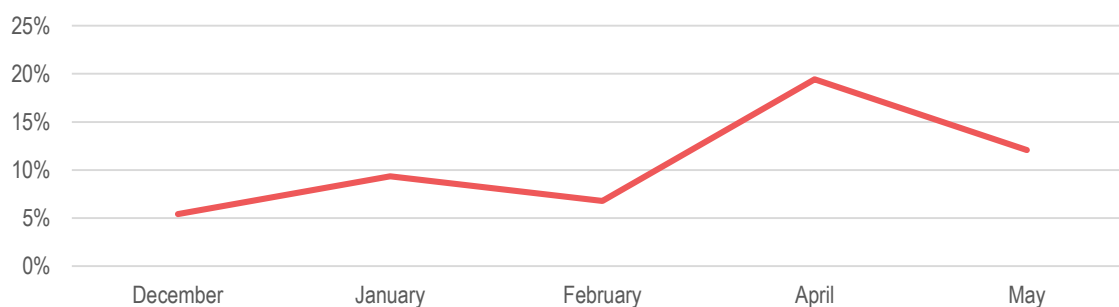
The vast majority of assessed groups (90%) reported travelling directly from their homes in their area of origin. The proportion of migrants living elsewhere prior to departure (including those who had been internally displaced, living as refugees elsewhere, or stopping for extended periods during their migration) remained relatively low across all nationalities. Syrians were the most likely to report living in another location than their country of origin (13%), the majority of them in Turkey. For the 10% of Afghans that reported living outside their country of origin, Iran and Pakistan were the most commonly reported locations.

Figure 3: Proportion of assessed groups living outside their country of origin prior to leaving for Europe, by nationality



Overall, there has been a general increase in the proportion of groups travelling from another location than their country of origin since December 2015. As shown in figure 4, this reached a peak of 19% in April 2016, likely due to lower travel costs during this period, which allowed even those with fewer resources to make the journey to Europe.

Figure 4: Proportion of all assessed groups living away from home prior to travelling to Europe



Demographics and group composition

Adults aged 18-59 make up the largest proportion of interviewed migrants travelling through the Western Balkans, many travelling with younger family members. According to consolidated arrivals figures from UNHCR, adults aged over 18 made up over two thirds of arrivals by sea since the start of January (67%).¹¹

Significant proportions of unaccompanied minors were observed across the Western Balkans, with 18% of interviewed groups reporting their presence. Unaccompanied minors were particularly common in groups of Afghans (present in 50% of assessed groups) and “other” nationalities (29%), suggesting particularly high levels of vulnerability among groups of these nationalities. Since unaccompanied minors were not officially permitted to travel along the Western Balkans route, their consistently reported presence over the past six months indicates serious shortcoming in screening and provision of support to these individuals further upstream along the migration route.

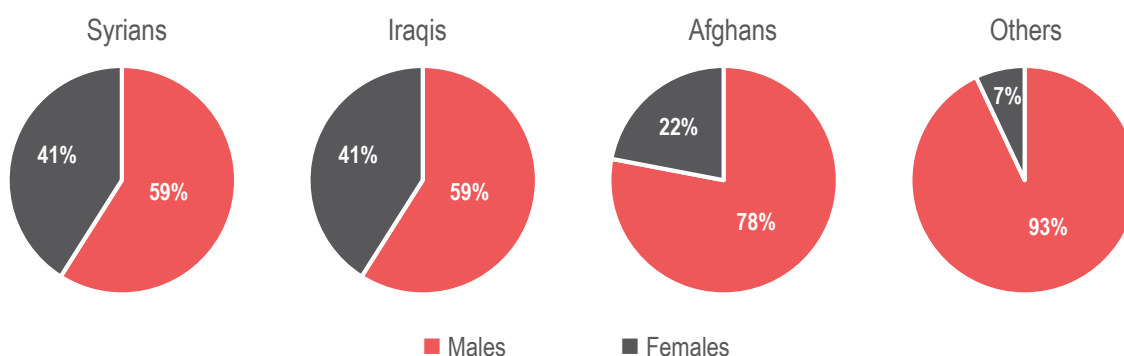
The balance between males and females has remained uneven throughout the past six months, with considerably more males (72%) than females (28%) according to overall arrivals figures.¹² While a similar overall ratio was observed among groups interviewed by REACH, the proportion of males and females appears to be closely related

¹¹ Official figures from UNHCR [Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean](#), as of June 2016

¹² UNHCR [Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean](#), as of June 2016

to nationality. As shown in figure 5, Syrian and Iraqi groups contained more even proportions of males and females, while groups of Afghans and other nationalities have been more likely to consist of only males.

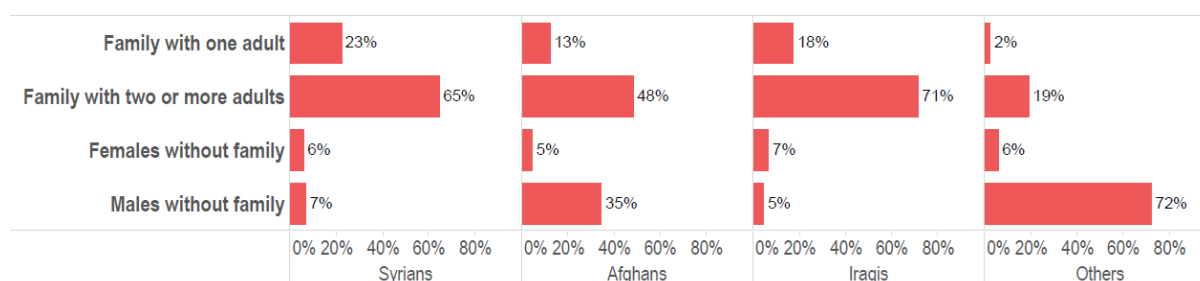
Figure 5: Proportion of males and females in interviewed groups, by nationality, December 2015-May 2016



Over the past six months, the composition of interviewed groups has shifted, with a notable increase in the proportion of Syrians and Iraqis travelling with family members, rather than alone or with friends. Overall, the large majority of interviewed groups contained immediate family members, most commonly two parents travelling together with children. Males travelling without family were much more common among “other” nationalities (representing 72% of recorded responses) and Afghans (35%). The proportion of females travelling without family remained low across all nationalities, accounting for no more than 7% of recorded responses.

Large proportions of assessed migrants reported leaving family members behind, among them some of the most vulnerable individuals who were reportedly unable to migrate at all, either because of a lack of resources to fund the journey, or inadequate physical condition to travel without assistance due to age or disability.

Figure 6: Demographic composition of all interviewed groups, by nationality, December 2015-May 2016¹³



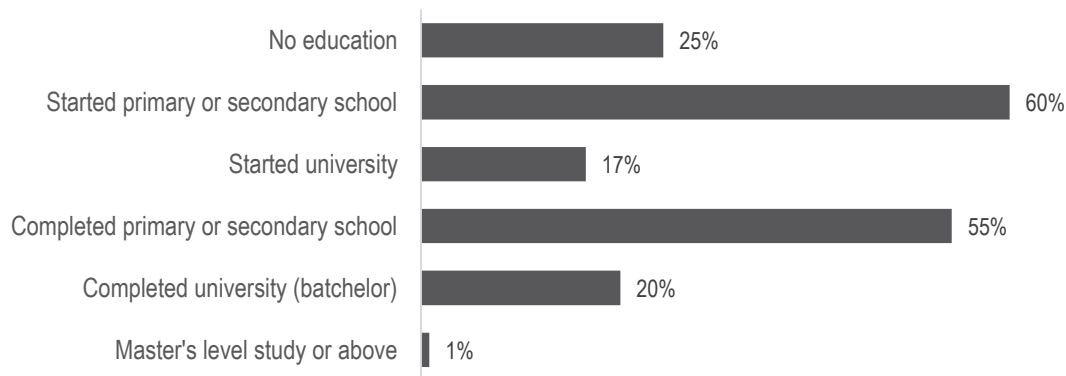
Socio-economic background

The majority of assessed groups (82%) lived in owned or rented accommodation prior to leaving their area of origin. 17% reported more vulnerable shelter types such as tents (6%), unfinished buildings (5%), hosted accommodation (4%), public buildings (1%) or no shelter at all (1%). Groups travelling from other locations than their home were much more likely to report living in vulnerable shelter types prior to departure. Of these, the largest proportion of (42%) lived in rented accommodation, while around a third of groups lived in tented accommodation or camps (30%). Smaller proportions lived in unfinished buildings (10%) or reported no shelter at all (7%).

Large proportions of adult migrants had completed formal education, while significant proportions had experience of higher education as well. Over half of interviewed groups (55%) contained adults that had completed at least primary or secondary education. One in five groups (20%) were reported to contain individuals that had completed university, while 17% contained individuals that had started, but not completed university.

¹³ Since a single group may contain multiple families and unrelated individuals, proportions are shown as a percentage of all recorded responses for each nationality.

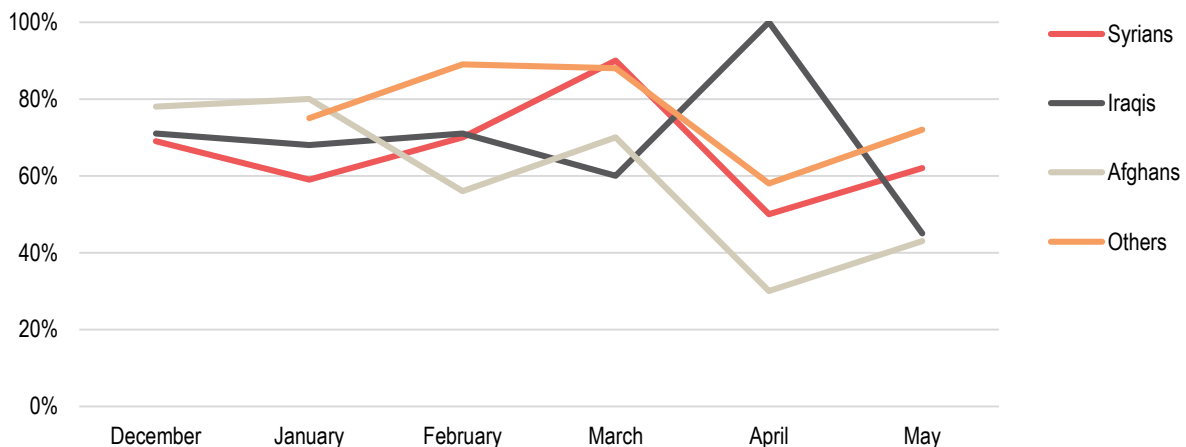
Figure 7: Proportion of interviewed groups reporting individuals with education experience, by type¹⁴



While some fluctuation was observed between months, the presence of adults with higher education experience was most common among Syrian groups (29%), followed by Iraqis and “other” nationalities. Completion of all types of education was least common among Afghan groups among both adults and children.

When examined over time, a general decrease can be seen in the proportion of interviewed groups reporting adults having completed at least primary or secondary education, as shown in figure 8. It is possible that this general decrease is related to an overall trend in increasing vulnerability, whereby poorer families, who were least able to access education in their countries of origin or displacement, were unable to travel to Europe earlier, when the journey was more expensive. In the early months of 2016, average journey prices dropped considerably compared to September—notably for the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece—thereby permitting those with fewer resources to make the journey.

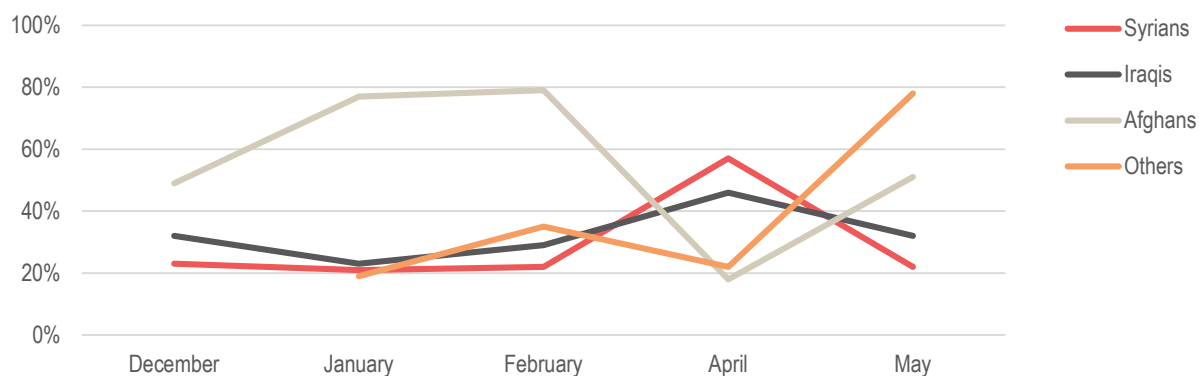
Figure 8: Proportion of interviewed groups in which adults had completed at least primary or secondary education, by nationality, December 2015-May 2016



When asked about their pre-crisis livelihoods, particularly about whether they relied on stable (salaried or professional employment), or unstable (daily or casual labour, or no livelihood) sources of income, **the majority of Syrian, Iraqi and “other” groups reported reliance on stable sources of income.** In contrast, Afghans were generally more likely to report reliance on unstable income sources, indicating comparatively higher levels of financial vulnerability. In almost all cases, the proportion of groups reliant on unstable income can be seen to have increased over time, as shown in figure 9—another possible indicator of increasing overall vulnerability among migrating groups.

¹⁴ Multiple selection was allowed for this question.

Figure 9: Proportion of interviewed groups reliant on unstable sources of income, by nationality



Faced with a high cost of travel, significant risk and increasing restrictions, **people migrating to Europe have invested significant resources in order to travel safely to Europe**. Data collected in March 2016 (see figure 10) shows the extent to which migrants of different nationalities were reliant on different resources to fund their journey. Iraqis were more likely than other nationalities to rely on savings (71%) and/or to sell their house in order to fund their journey (54%). In contrast, Afghans were less likely report spending savings, but instead were more likely to sell other assets (56%). In all cases, over half of interviewed groups reported taking out loans, requiring the repayment of this debt at a later date, either upon arrival, or by other family members remaining behind. The high proportion selling property, and other (often productive) assets is also of concern, meaning that in the case of a failed attempt to travel, migrants may have little to return to and would require external assistance.

Figure 10: Reported means used to finance journey to Europe, by nationality¹⁵

	Loans	Savings	Sold house	Sold other assets
Afghans	56%	33%	41%	56%
Iraqis	61%	71%	54%	43%
Syrians	57%	67%	21%	52%

What are the reasons for migrating to Europe?

People have primarily travelled to Europe to flee conflict and in search of safety and opportunity. Active conflict and generalised violence and insecurity were the primary reported “push factors” leading people to leave their place of origin, while reported “pull factors” for travelling to Europe included safety and security, the possibility of employment, and access to services such as education and healthcare.

This section examines the push and pull factors behind migration, the triggers causing people to leave at a particular moment in time, and people’s intended destinations upon arrival in Europe.

Push and pull factors

Overall, the primary reported push factors among interviewed groups were active conflict (35%) or generalised violence and insecurity (24%). Other commonly reported push factors include a lack of income to pay for living costs (20%) and lack of access to basic services (9%) – all factors linked to or exacerbated by years of protracted conflict and instability.

When examined by nationality, Syrians were the most likely to report the presence of active armed conflict as their reason for leaving (64%), followed by Iraqis (43%), and Afghans (30%). In contrast, people of “other” nationalities were much less likely to report conflict, violence or insecurity, and instead reported a lack of income (64%) or a lack of access to basic services (11%).

Reported reasons for leaving among Syrians and people of other nationalities remained relatively constant when examined over time, while those for Iraqis and Afghans changed, as shown in figures 11 and 12. For

¹⁵ Multiple selection was allowed.

Iraqis, the proportion of groups reporting active armed conflict decreased, in favour of generalised violence and insecurity. In contrast, Afghan intentions shifted from “violence and insecurity” to “active armed conflict”, coinciding with the intensification of conflict.

Figure 11: Reported push factors by Syrian and Iraqi groups, December 2015 - May 2016

The darker the colour, the more commonly reported

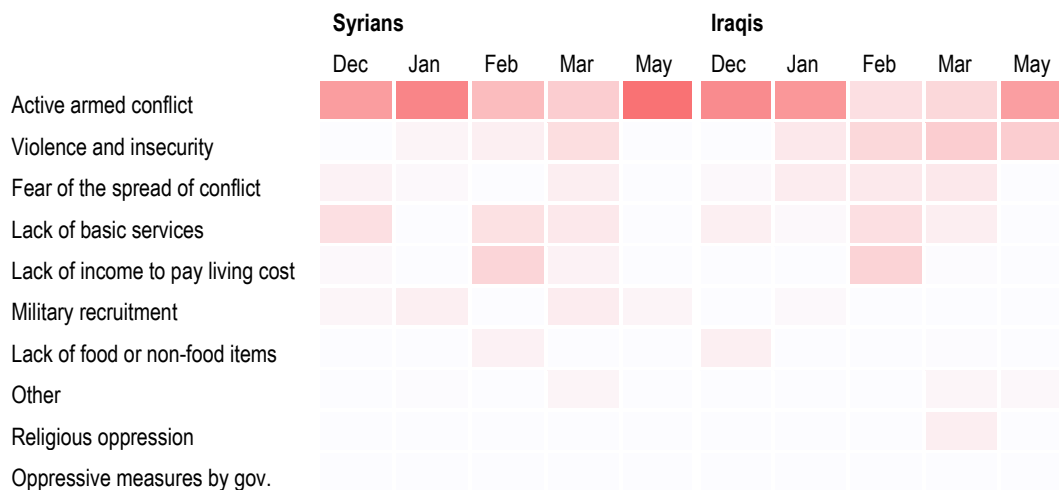
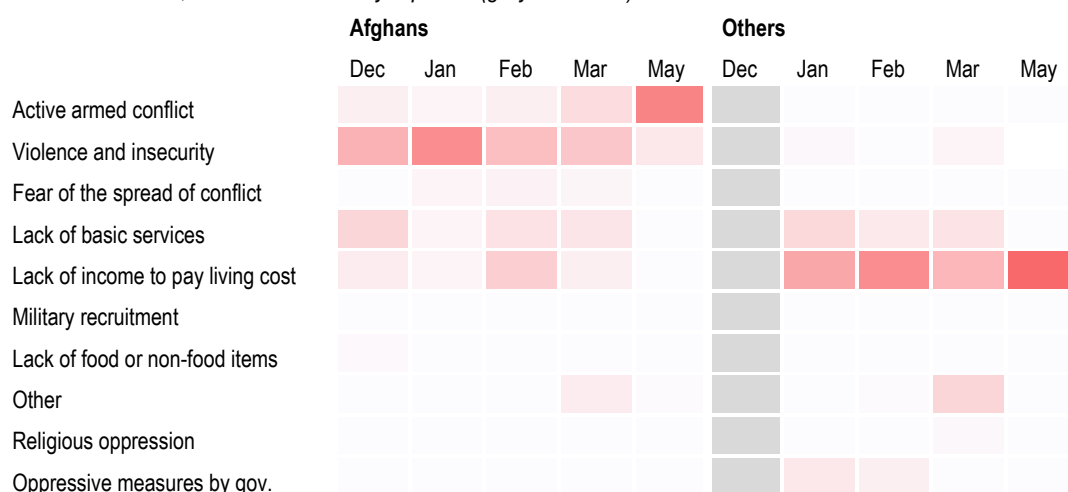


Figure 12: Reported push factors by Afghans and other nationalities, December 2015 - May 2016

The darker the colour, the more commonly reported (grey = no data).



Overall, reported pull factors—the reasons for travelling to Europe—mirrored the push factors provided by each nationality. The presence of safety and security was the primary reported reason for wishing to travel to Europe for 29% of Syrians, 32% of Iraqis and 30% of Afghans, while “other” nationalities were more likely to report access to job opportunities (32%) as the primary pull factor. Access to services and state support was also a commonly reported pull factor, reported by 23% of Afghans, 17% of Syrians and 15% of Iraqis, closely followed by access to job opportunities.

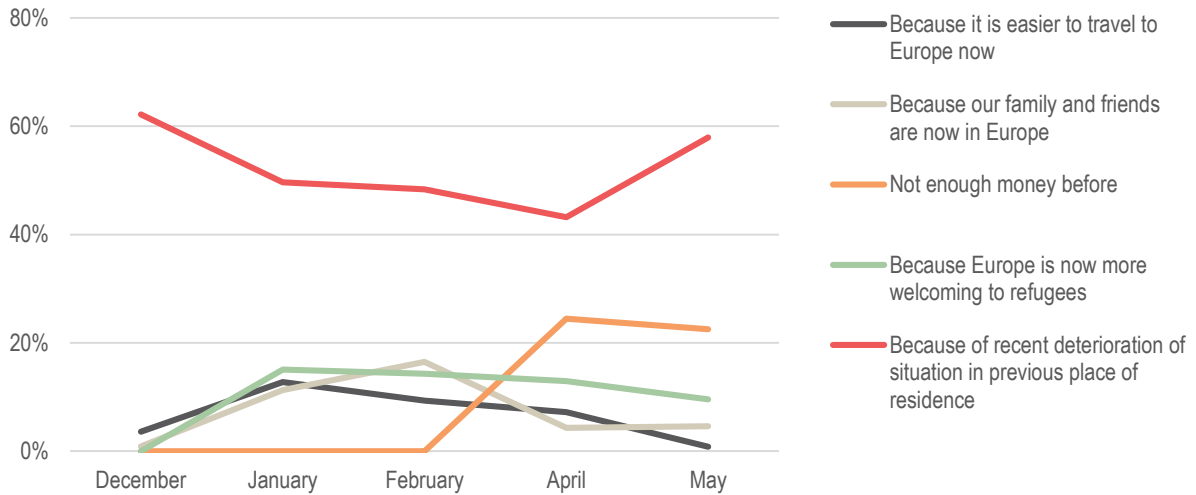
Triggers for migration

When asked about why they chose to leave now rather than before, the majority (52%) of all interviewed groups reported a recent deterioration of the situation as their primary reason, while 11% of groups reported that the perception of Europe as more welcoming to refugees was their reason for travelling when they did. However this proportion decreased significantly following policy changes, and was reported by only 1% of interviewed groups in May 2016.

While the role of time bound push factors, such as an escalation of conflict, appears to be much more important than time bound pull factors, an examination of reported triggers over time reveals several trends, which tie in with

the changing political climate and increasing restrictions limiting migration to Europe. As shown in figure 13, the proportion of groups reporting the relative ease of travel can be seen to increase between December and January—likely related to the lack of restrictions on migration and relatively fast flowing route—but decreases steadily from January onwards as blockages and restrictions became more commonplace.

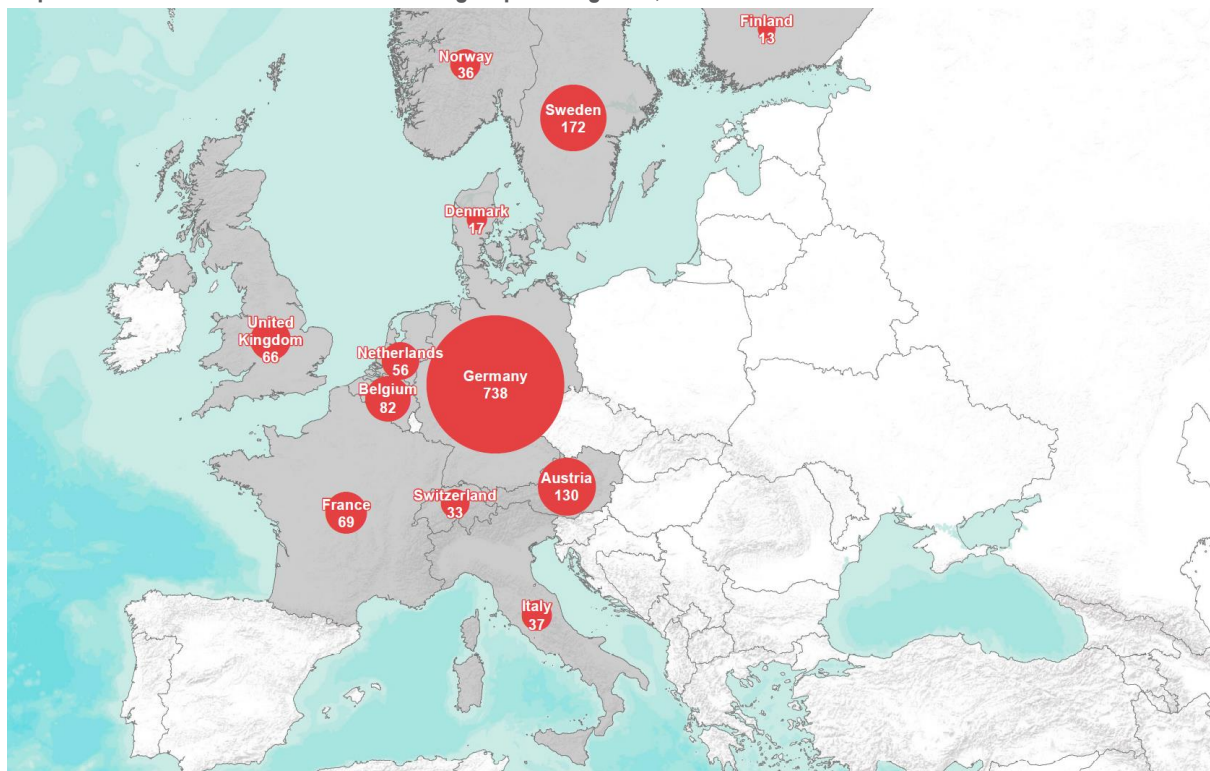
Figure 13: Top reported reasons for travel to Europe now, December 2015 – May 2016



Intended destination

Throughout the past six months, Germany has remained the preferred destination of interviewed groups, reported by 70% of all interviewed groups. The decision to travel to Germany and other destinations in northern and central Europe was influenced by the perception that refugees were welcome, jobs were available, and often that other friends or family members were already living there.

Map 5: Intended destination of interviewed groups of migrants, December 2015-June 2016



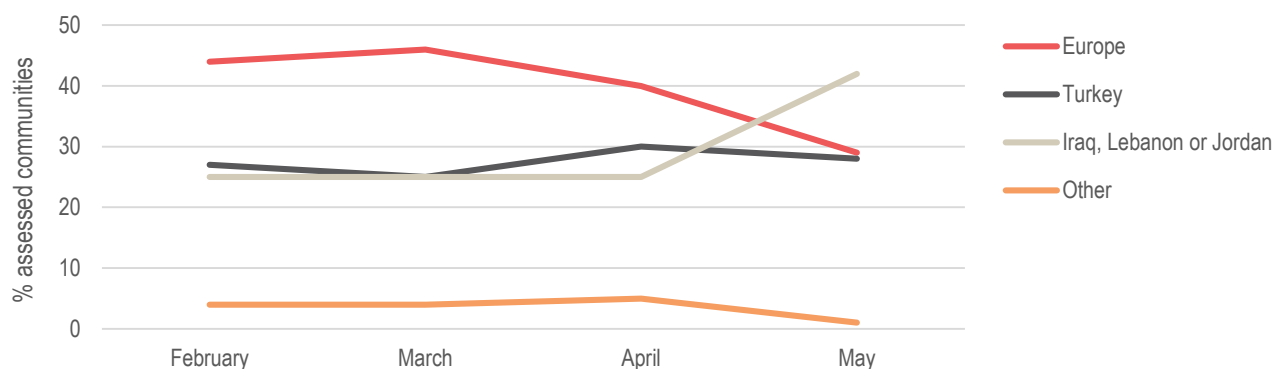
In almost all cases, interviewed groups had a preferred destination in mind, although were often keen for additional advice about where was considered a good location. Such openness to a variety of potential destinations reflects

both how “anywhere in Europe” was considered a viable alternative by many migrants, as well as a fairly widespread understanding—usually by word of mouth—of how rapidly policies, restrictions and opportunities upon arrival were changing.

Analysis over time shows several trends regarding intended destination. On the one hand, **the proportion of people reporting the intention to travel to Germany compared to other destinations increased consistently between December and March (from 60% in December to 80% in March), while on the other, the list of alternative destinations became increasingly diverse.** By the end of May, destinations including the UK, France, and Italy had become more commonly reported by a small minority, primarily because of language and cultural ties. At the same time, the proportions reporting the intention to travel destinations in Northern Europe such as Holland and Sweden had decreased compared to earlier months, reflecting the introduction of stricter asylum policies in these countries compared to 2015.

The influence of changing policies on intended destinations can also be seen in data collected from areas of origin. Monthly data collected from Syria between February and May 2016 shows how Europe declined in popularity as an intended destination for those reportedly leaving assessed communities. As shown in figure 14 below, the proportion of assessed communities reporting Europe as the primary destination of those leaving had dropped to only 28% by May 2016, while other neighbouring countries including Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan had grown in relative popularity.

Figure 14: Reported primary destinations of those who left communities in Syria, by month



How are people travelling to Europe?

Most people have attempted to travel to Europe as safely and as cheaply as possible, but changing laws, restrictions and dwindling available resources have often left them with limited choices. The sheer variety of routes and experiences documented over the past six months highlights how patterns of movement and the cost of travel have evolved over time, both as a result of personal circumstances, and in response to increasing restrictions and changing risk.

This section examines the major and minor migration routes used to travel to Europe via the Western Balkans, including the factors affecting the means and length of travel and the conditions experienced by those along the route.

Unrestricted migration: autumn 2015 – March 2016

Until March 2016, the popularity of the Western Balkans migration route was largely thanks to the relative ease and safety of travel, earning it the reputation of the path of least resistance and lowest risk. The large numbers of arrivals in the summer and autumn of 2015 and the significant media attention this attracted appear to have boosted knowledge of the Western Balkans route on a global scale, leading to increased proportions of people from north Africa (see map 7), the Middle East and Asia to travel to Turkey, a key transit country for all those travelling the Western Balkans route.

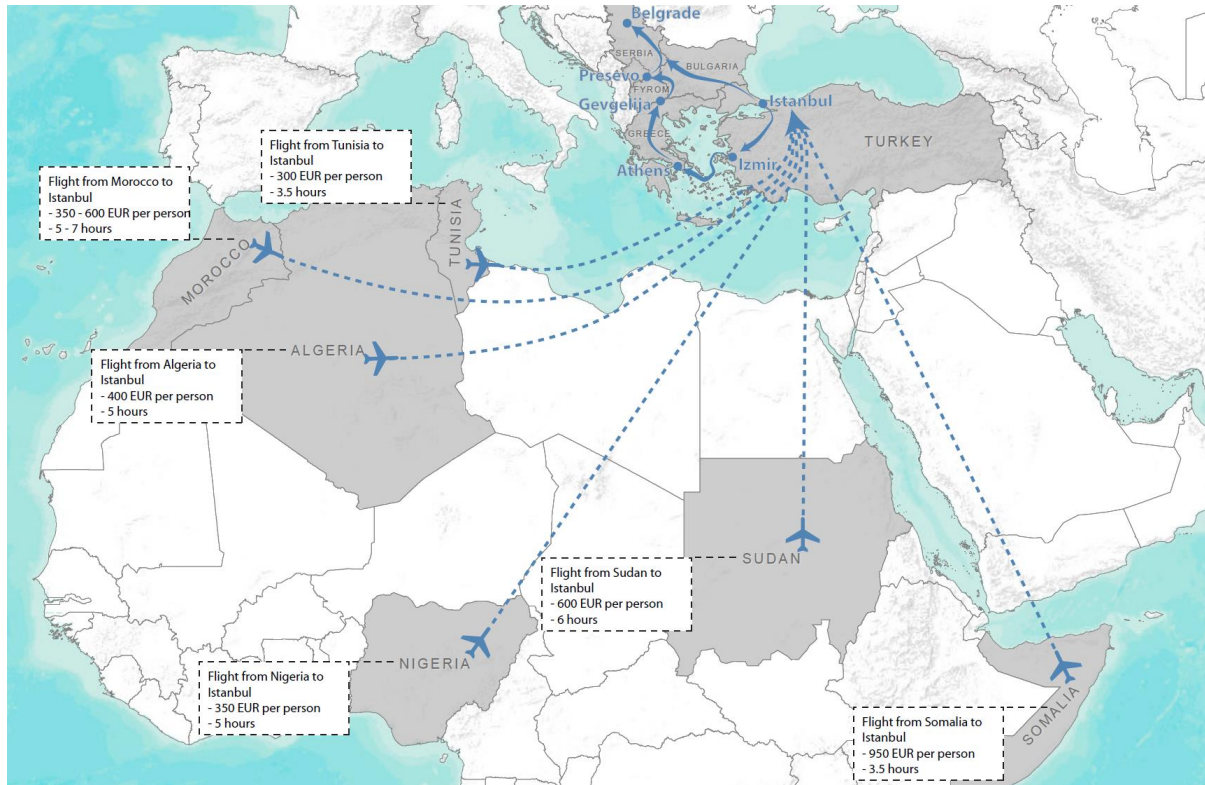
While the risk and cost of travel from areas or origin varied considerably, once paths converged in Turkey, the journey was relatively straightforward. The sea crossing from Turkey to the Greek Islands, as shown in map 6, was generally arranged through smugglers in Izmir and represented the primary migration route for groups of all nationalities. Although the crossing was expensive and dangerous—particularly as a result of overloaded boats, insufficient fuel and rough winter seas—travel to the Greek islands was relatively quick, lasting only a matter of

hours and considered a viable option even for those travelling with small children or elderly family members. Decreasing costs appear to have played an important role in the popularity of this route, with reported costs in January 2016 (€1,000-2,000) only a fraction of the prices reported the previous spring (€7,000-8,000).¹⁶ This decrease in cost is likely linked to changing supply and demand, whereby the number of smugglers increased dramatically in the summer and autumn of 2015 in response to increased demand. The onset of harsh winter weather and rougher seas from December to February appears to have decreased demand, inducing smugglers to lower their prices in order to attract new “customers”.

Map 6: Case study of a migration route via the Greek Islands, used by a group from Syria (February 2016)

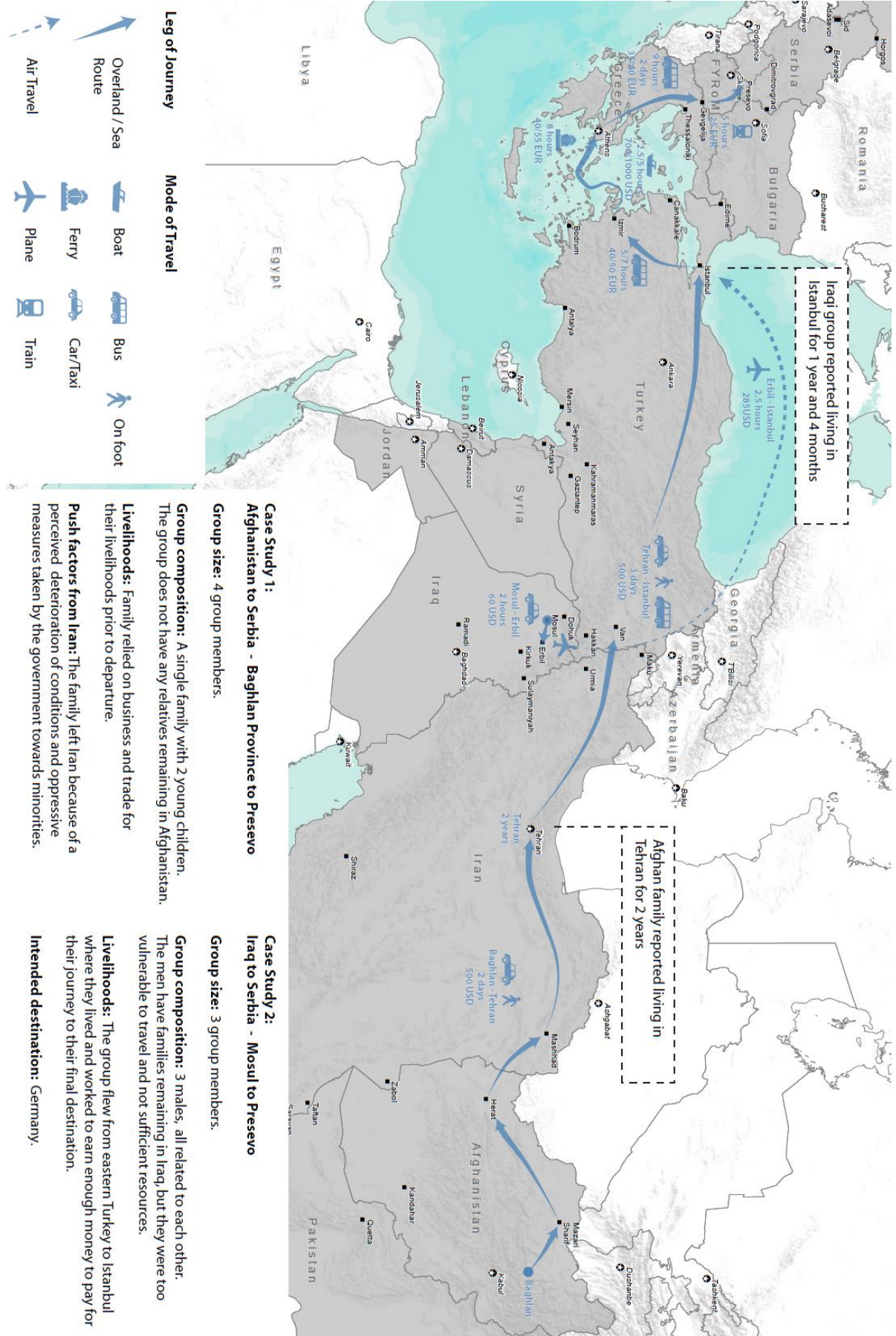


Map 7: Reported migration routes from northern Africa via the Western Balkans route (January – March 2016)



¹⁶ REACH, [European Migration Situation overview: Hamica, Bregana](#), September 2015

Map 8: Case studies of migration from Iraq and Afghanistan (February 2016)



A secondary route, known as the “land route”, traced overland from Turkey to Bulgaria. This longer route was more expensive and generally considered more dangerous as a result of long passages across difficult terrain by foot and a risk of detention by authorities. Until March 2016 the “land route” was much less common and used primarily by small groups of Afghans, Pakistanis or Iranians, who commonly reported organising their entire trip from start to finish through agents (smugglers) in their area of origin.¹⁷

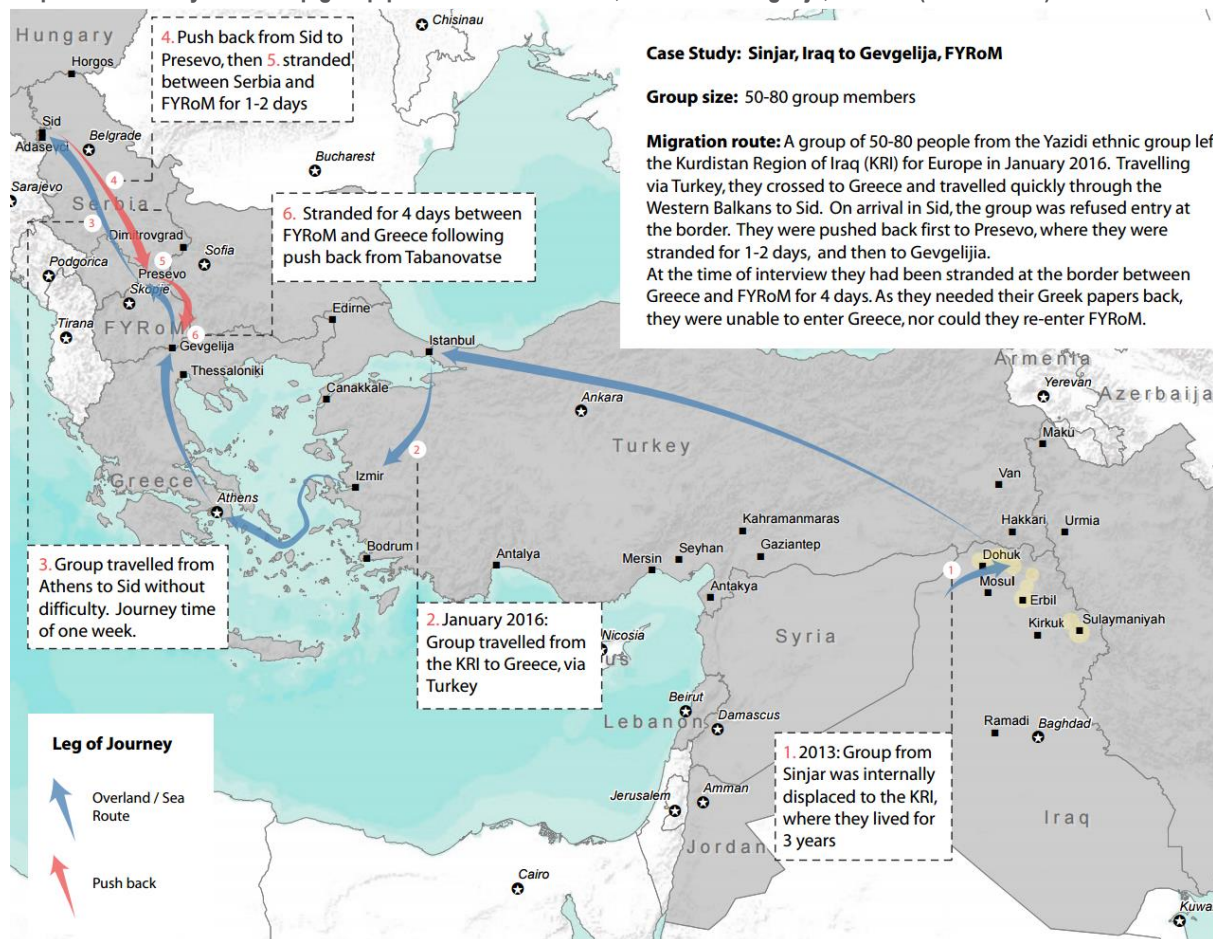
Whether arriving on the Greek Islands by sea, or in Bulgaria via land, both migration routes converged in Serbia. From here, onward travel through Serbia to Croatia, Slovenia and eventually Austria was largely unrestricted, allowing people to quickly reach their intended destinations in central and northern Europe via public transport, usually within a week of arrival.

Blockages, closures and pushbacks: March 2016

Starting in late February, the introduction of successive new policies and border closures led to an increase in “pushbacks”, leading migrants to be refused entry and turned away at borders. On occasions, people were transported back to the entry point through which they arrived in the country, such as in the example in map 9.

Those who could remained at transit sites in the hope that borders would re-open soon. Blockages along the route caused numbers to build up quickly, exacerbating already difficult conditions in transit sites and informal camps. Reports of illness were common, including outbreaks of diarrhoea at several sites, which were blamed on inadequate access to sanitation facilities.

Map 9: Case study of an Iraqi group pushed back from Sid, Serbia to Gevgelija, FYRoM (March 2016)



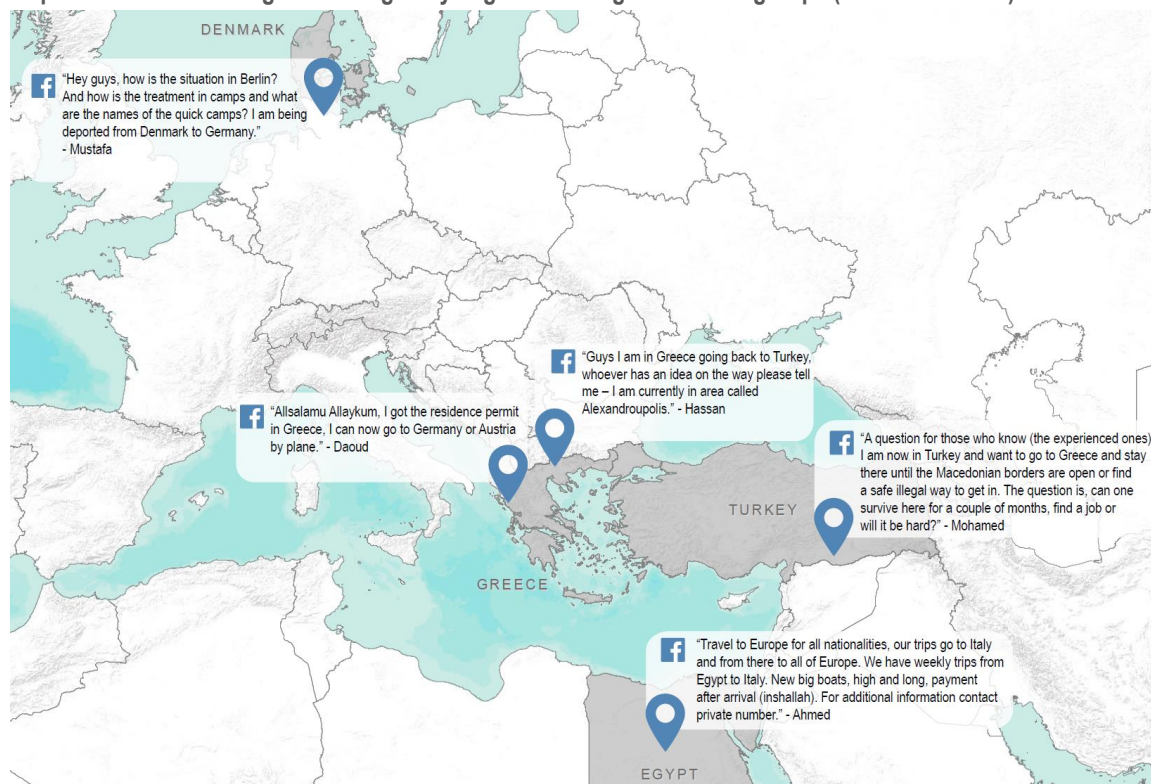
¹⁷ REACH, Situation overview on Migration to Europe to the Western Balkans, March 2016.

The proliferation of alternative routes: March 2016 onwards

From March 2016, the introduction of new restrictions on people travelling and widespread border closures led to a proliferation of new routes both into and across the Western Balkans. By the end of March 2016, the implementation of the EU-Turkey Plan meant that all migrants were affected by closures, leading to a dramatic increase in the numbers resorting to alternative routes.

From Turkey, the Aegean Sea crossing became more tightly policed, reducing the numbers able to cross to the Greek Islands. Instead, the land route via Bulgaria became increasingly popular once again. At the same time, alternative sea routes also began to appear, with social media showing advertisements for passage to Italy (see for example map 10) and Slovenia, among others.

Map 10: Selected messages exchanged by migrants through Facebook groups (13-17 June 2016)¹⁸



Once in Greece, some migrant groups reported having continued to Italy by boat, either directly or via Albania. Others ventured overland through FYRoM, including some who reportedly camped in forests for several weeks before managing to cross into Serbia.

In both Serbia and FYRoM significant numbers of migrants applied for asylum in order to prolong their legal stay, afraid that changing legislation would lead to their deportation. However, few reportedly remained long enough to see their application processed.¹⁹

By mid-April, the border between Serbia and Hungary was reopened following several months of closure, with small numbers of people once again allowed to cross legally at Kelebija and Horgos.²⁰ Many families that had previously been waiting in transit sites across Serbia headed to the border, where they waited in informal camps to cross. While many had to wait for several days, families were generally given priority to enter Hungary. As of 28 April, the average stay of interviewed Syrian and Iraqi families at Kelebija was only 1-2 days, compared to around 20 days for single males of any nationality.²¹

¹⁸ Note that all names have been changed to protect anonymity

¹⁹ REACH, [Rapid Assessment of Asylum in Serbia](#), 12 April 2016; REACH, [Rapid Assessment of Intentions of Stranded Migrants in Tabanovatske, FYRoM](#), 26 April 2016

²⁰ As of 28 April, 30 individuals were allowed to cross at each point on a daily basis. By 31 May, this had been limited to 15 at each point. Similarly small numbers of daily arrivals to Hungary have continued to be recorded in June 2016.

²¹ REACH, [European Migration Rapid Assessment: Belgrade and North Serbia](#), 28 April 2016

While ease, risk and cost appear to have been the primary concerns affecting people's choice to take the Western Balkans route, social media has provided a wealth of information on alternative routes, some of which meet few of these criteria. In much smaller numbers, people have travelled vast distances along very indirect routes due to a perceived likelihood of success. Notable examples include routes to Europe advertised on social media from Syria, via Brazil and French Guyana; and from Syria via Sudan and Libya.²² Both of these routes were considered as viable alternatives due either to the relative ease of obtaining a visa compared to other, more direct routes, leading to a heightened chance of success.

An understanding of changing policies and the influence of perceived likelihood of success is also apparent from information collected from areas of origin. According to information collected on a monthly basis from communities in Syria, similar proportions of assessed communities have continued to report that people are intending to move, but their intended destinations have changed following implementation of the EU Turkey Plan, showing a decrease in the proportion of people intending to leave for Europe, and an increase in those heading for the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.

What are the humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities of migrants in the Western Balkans?

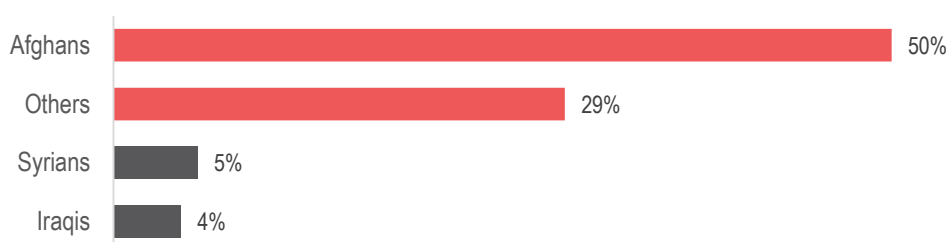
While the majority of migrants are working age adults, those fleeing conflict and violence are more likely to be vulnerable as a result of years of protracted insecurity. In many cases, existing vulnerabilities are compounded by events along the journey, such as shocks, delays and setbacks, leaving migrants in greater need of support, both in transit and upon arrival. This section describes the existing vulnerabilities reported among migrant groups and examines the influence of travel time, shocks and setbacks on changing vulnerability along the Western Balkans migration route.

Vulnerabilities present in migrant groups

Existing vulnerabilities, such as a lack of resources, official documentation and social capital, have an effect on people's choice of migration route from country of origin to Europe, as well as upon the risks they face once in transit. **For those able to migrate, risk is generally greater for those with limited financial means.** While those with the most resources are able to travel by plane—with a small number even staying in hotels along the way—the vast majority are reliant on limited resources and humanitarian assistance, especially upon arrival in Europe.

Among those who migrate, of particular concern is the significant proportion of groups reporting the presence of unaccompanied minors (18%) is of particular concern, as shown in figure 15. This was particularly common among groups of Afghans (50%) and other nationalities (29%), and much less so in groups of Syrians and Iraqis.

Figure 15: Proportion of groups containing unaccompanied minors, by nationality (December 2015 – May 2016)

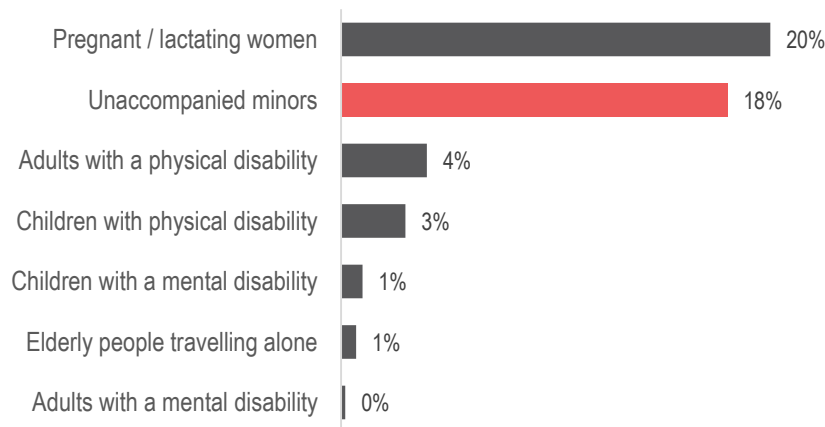


Interviewed groups of migrants in the Western Balkans contained relatively low proportions of other individuals with specific vulnerabilities. This is likely to be affected by the overall demographic composition of migrating groups, in which adult males make up the largest proportion, as well as by difficulty of the journey and need for relatively good health in order to travel. For example, the proportion of groups including adults with a physical disability (4%), is considerably lower than among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, where 7% of refugee households include a disabled adult.²³

²² Maps of both routes are available in REACH, [Situation Overview of European Migration to Europe](#), April 2016.

²³ Unicef, UNCHR, WFP, [Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon](#), December 2015.

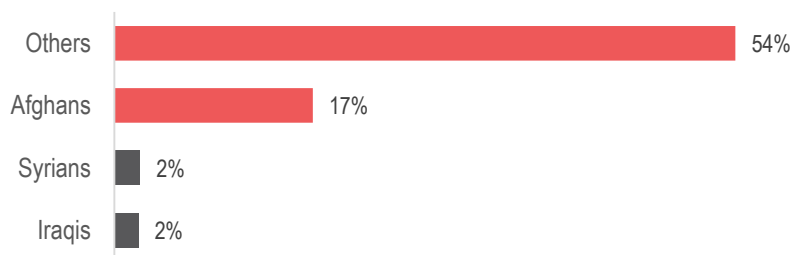
Figure 16: Proportion of all assessed groups containing individuals with specific vulnerabilities, by type



Vulnerabilities along the migration route

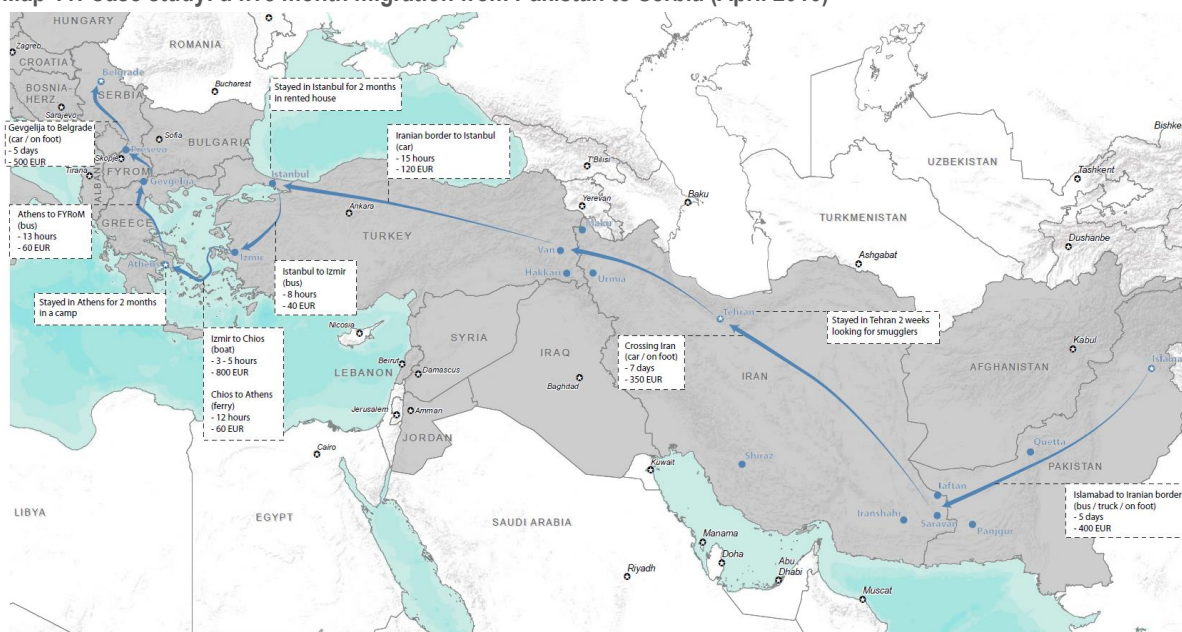
Time and length of travel is also an important factor in understanding vulnerability, since longer journey times, especially as a result of delays, stretch available financial resources and diminish people’s capacity to cope, both in transit, and upon arrival in their intended destination. The physical toll of long overland journeys is also significant, with many young men much more vulnerable upon arrival in Europe than they would otherwise have been, often having sustained injuries, beatings, or detention along the way. Physical assault, for example, was significantly more common among groups from other countries (reported by 54%) or from Afghanistan (17%) than from Syrians or Iraqis, as shown in figure 12.

Figure 17: Proportion of interviewed groups reporting physical assault en-route (December 2015 – May 2016)



Map 11, on the following page, shows the route of a group from Pakistan, who had taken over five months to reach Belgrade, Serbia. While their actual travel by bus, car, truck and on foot, took less than a month, they had spent significant amounts of time at points along the journey: looking for smugglers in Tehran, gathering funds to pay for the next leg of the journey in Istanbul, and finally waiting in Athens to arrange alternative passage towards central Europe, since Pakistanis were not entitled to the same transit papers as Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis.

Map 11: Case study: a five month migration from Pakistan to Serbia (April 2016)



Once in Europe, vulnerability to risk can be seen to be largely dependent on whether migrants are stranded or on the move, and if continuing to travel, dependent on whether they do so by legal or illegal means.

In December and January, groups of “other” nationalities were the most likely to be stranded at points along the migration route and often struggled to access assistance due to their lack of an entry permit. **Following implementation of the EU Turkey Plan in March 2016, the numbers of migrants stranded in the Western Balkans increased dramatically,**²⁴ including all nationalities.

Those choosing to wait were obliged to do so for much longer periods, often spending several weeks in accommodation that was largely unsuitable for a longer stay. Conditions for those stranded at points along the route have consistently been difficult, particularly related to inadequate provision of sanitation facilities. Since most transit sites were designed to accommodate people for only a matter of days, facilities for washing were particularly inadequate for people who eventually stayed for weeks. The location of transit sites has also proved difficult, since changing policies have led to a build-up of people at different points along the migration route. One such example is the Presevo transit centre, situated at a key entry point to Serbia. Following closures, demand for assistance and accommodation in Presevo decreased dramatically, since everyone already in Serbia was kept to continue travelling, heading instead to other locations such as Belgrade to arrange alternative passage, or the border with Hungary, where makeshift camps were overcrowded and lacked basic sanitation facilities.

In camps and transit sites across Greece, Serbia and FYRoM, families with small children were consistently the most likely to remain stranded for longer periods in the hope that policies would change, while young males travelling alone or with friends were generally the first to leave in search of alternatives. However, as time spent waiting lengthened, growing proportions of all groups reported they would consider resorting to alternative means to continue their journey, indicating that increasingly vulnerable groups were prepared to take greater risk as time went on.

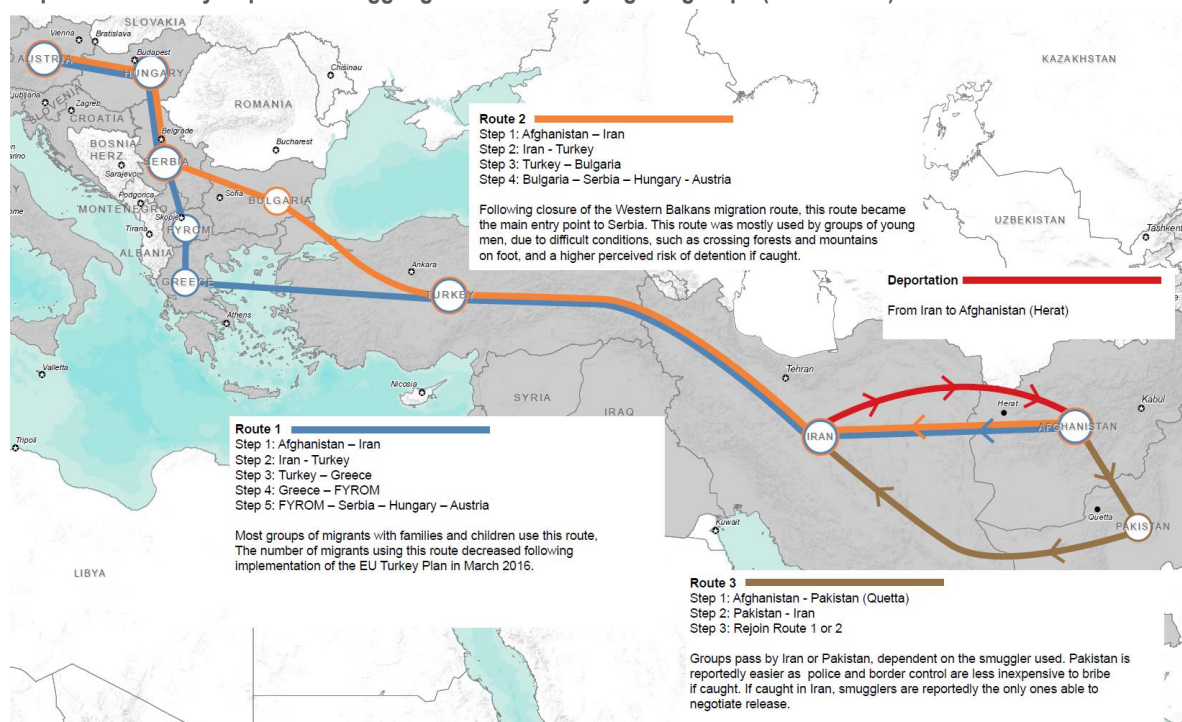
For those stranded along the Western Balkans migration route in Serbia, FYRoM and Hungary, people have increasingly resorted to applying for asylum as a strategy to prolong their stay, although many have failed to follow through with their claim. These individuals are generally not entitled to a second chance in the same country, and may also be decreasing their likelihood of receiving asylum status in subsequent countries as well.

Following the closure of the Western Balkans route, almost all those continuing to travel had been forced to resort to irregular means in order to travel despite border closures. These individuals were more likely to risk exploitation by smugglers or traffickers—the latter a particular concern for unaccompanied minors in light of a recently published report from Europol estimating that 10,000 refugee children had “disappeared” from reception

²⁴ REACH,

centres across Europe.²⁵ In addition, those attempting illegal border crossings often risked physical injury, beatings and detention, and missed out on any available assistance in order to go unnoticed.

Map 12: Case study: reported smuggling routes used by Afghan groups (March 2016)



Afghans have generally been among the most likely to have migrated with the assistance of smugglers, as shown in Map 11. Cheaper routes often equate to the most difficult journeys, involving longer periods of travel on foot. As a result of this, Afghan groups—already containing particularly high proportions of vulnerable individuals—have often undergone some of the longest journeys to reach Europe in the first place, in some cases arriving only to find that policies had changed while in transit.

In addition, Afghans have often struggled to access available aid once in Europe, due to their arrival through the officially closed land route via Bulgaria, yet also lacked resources to purchase basic goods including food and hygiene items for themselves. Faced with the unlikelihood of more relaxed entry criteria, lacking the funds to return without assistance and more likely to be travelling alone, this group has tended to take the greatest risks to continue travelling, further exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

Vulnerability of returnees

For those unable or unwilling to continue their journey upon arrival in Europe, one option is to return home, although many recent arrivals to Europe are unable to do so without assistance. For those who sold property or other assets, their situation upon return is likely to be particularly difficult, likely leaving them more vulnerable upon return than prior to departure. As a result, return was considered a “last resort” by interviewed migrants, with the vast majority preferring to wait or try alternative routes if borders were not to reopen.

For those who do return, depleted resources and increased vulnerability following months of travel will leave people of some nationalities—particularly Afghans—heavily reliant on repatriation programmes. While there is some evidence that people in transit sites in the Western Balkans have participated in assisted voluntary return programmes, more information is required to understand conditions experienced upon arrival.

²⁵ European Parliament News, [Press Release: Fate of 10,000 missing refugee children debated in Civil Liberties Committee](#), 21 April 2016.

Conclusion

Implementation of the EU Turkey Plan in March 2016 has officially closed the Western Balkans migration route and caused a dramatic decrease in the number of migrants travelling through the region. Despite this, information collected between March and May 2016 shows that smaller numbers have continued to migrate through more dangerous alternative routes. **While closure has resulted in an overall decrease in the number of new arrivals, this has not stopped migration to Europe all together, instead leaving those who do travel exposed to greater risk.**

Analysis has shown that people are leaving their countries of origin in order to escape active conflict, violence and insecurity and are travelling to Europe in search of safety and opportunity. Even in cases where active conflict was not cited as the primary reason for leaving home, the large majority of arrivals to Europe come from major refugee-producing countries, where access to services, income and jobs has been affected by war and protracted insecurity.

Groups travelling through the Western Balkans have included large numbers of highly vulnerable individuals, particularly unaccompanied minors, which were reportedly present in 18% of all interviewed groups. Moreover, **analysis over the past six months indicates that travelling groups have become increasingly vulnerable:** Syrians and Iraqis have increasingly travelled with children; larger proportions of all groups have travelled from refugee camps or other vulnerable housing types; and overall levels of education and reliance on stable employment are lower than those observed in December 2015, leaving those who travel in greater need of support than those who went before them, both on the route and upon arrival.

The introduction of border closures and incoherent migration policies across the Western Balkans has further increased the vulnerability of people in transit. People who continue to travel despite new restrictions have been forced to take illegal routes, exposing these individuals to increasing levels of personal risk including physical violence, trafficking and exploitation. Hundreds have been left stranded along the migration route in Greece, FYRoM and Serbia as a result of new policies, who face an uncertain future—unable to move forward, yet reluctant and often incapable of returning home without assistance.

Continued assistance is required at several levels to address the humanitarian needs of crisis-affected populations, including those intending to travel, on the move or stranded along the migration route. Tailored assistance is required in migrants' areas of origin, to assist some of the most vulnerable community members who were forced to remain behind. People in transit are likely to take increasing risks as a result of border closures, and are likely to require lifesaving assistance, including access to food, water and healthcare, at multiple points along the route. Stranded migrants across the Western Balkans require assistance to proceed with applications for asylum, seek family reunification and to help meet their basic short term needs. In particular, the large proportions of families with young children stranded in transit sites have specific needs which may require specialist support. Finally, many of those who wish to return will require support to do so, both to travel home and re-establish themselves upon arrival.

As seen in the past six months, migration to Europe has remained very dynamic. Routes have fluctuated over time in response to changing restrictions and policies, altering the needs and dynamics of people in transit, and changing levels of vulnerability among different population groups. For this reason, it is important that migration trends continue to be monitored in the future to inform both humanitarian responders of changing needs, and policy makers of the implications of their actions.