



# The European refugee crisis: Key facts from new research with refugees in Turkey

*The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has a unique vantage point on the worst refugee crisis since World War II. The IRC is working inside Syria; in the four refugee receiving countries that surround it – Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey; in other major countries which people are fleeing from like Afghanistan; and on the island of Lesbos, the arrival point of over half of the hundreds of thousands of people seeking asylum in the European Union (EU) through Greece. Finally, the IRC resettles refugees in 26 cities across the United States.*

*The IRC recently interviewed more than 800 refugee families<sup>1</sup> in Turkey who hoped to reach refuge in the EU. This is one of the first pieces of research to collect information directly from and about the people taking these desperate and dangerous journeys.*

## Key findings

**Most people coming to the EU from Turkey are refugees, not economic migrants.** 75% of people interviewed said that their primary reason for fleeing to Europe was 1) generalized violence and warfare, 2) a specific, individual threat, or 3) forced military service.<sup>2</sup> Refugees have the right under international and EU laws to seek asylum in Europe. Most EU countries have made it nearly impossible for refugees to enter Europe legally, however, so refugees are left with no option but to take dangerous illegal journeys. This is why the EU and its Member States must provide safe, legal routes for refugees into European countries.

**Case study:** Sara\*, a Syrian mother of six, was desperate to protect the rest of her family after her husband was killed in Syria. She initially fled to a country 1,000 miles away to seek refuge. Finding conditions there too difficult, she applied to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for resettlement but was told to go through the Turkey office. In Turkey, she was informed that UNHCR was not currently taking Syrian cases. Her efforts to go through legal channels thwarted, Sara paid smugglers to take her family into Europe.

**People will keep fleeing to Europe from war-torn countries.** 80% of the people whom the IRC interviewed in Turkey were from the war-torn countries of Syria and Iraq, with many others fleeing conflict in Pakistan and Afghanistan. One of the only ways to end the refugee crisis is for the global community to work harder to resolve conflicts in the countries refugees are fleeing.

**Case study:** After months of paying off the Taliban to avoid being forced into their ranks, Farooq, from Pakistan, faked his own death and walked and hitchhiked the 4,500 km across Iran and Turkey to reach the Turkish coast. For the next two years, Farooq worked 12-hour days in a factory for meagre pay. Whenever he had enough money saved, he headed for the border. 17 times he was forcibly returned to Turkey. On his 18th attempt, he finally made it safely to Greece.

**Turkey and other countries who normally host refugees can no longer cope.** The Syrian crisis has forced four million Syrian refugees into neighbouring countries. Turkey alone hosts two million Syrian refugees, more than any other country in the world. The impact of this massive influx has been enormous: Turkey puts the cost of sheltering Syrians at \$7.6 billion. Because conditions for refugees have worsened significantly in host countries, refugees must seek refuge farther afield in the EU. The majority of refugees interviewed had been in

<sup>1</sup> Representing 2,285 individuals.

<sup>2</sup> The rest said they were primarily seeking economic opportunity or education.

\* Some names and other minor details have been changed to protect individuals' identities.

Turkey for a short time and entered the country with the express purpose of transiting to Europe.<sup>3</sup> This means that it is critical for EU countries both to give greater support to countries hosting the bulk of refugees, and to provide their fair share of shelter for people fleeing harm.

**By the time they have arrived in Europe, many families are in desperate need of help.** Smugglers charge refugees exorbitant sums to reach Europe. Refugees reported having spent an average of over \$1,800 to reach the transit point in Turkey. One third of those interviewed had sold their home to finance just this first leg of the trip. Even after spending all of their savings and selling their homes and belongings, 39% of interviewees said they could not afford the approximately \$3,500 needed to reach their final destination. EU countries must provide humanitarian assistance for these desperate people, both in Turkey and in EU border countries.

**Case study:** Married Syrian couple Ammar and Zeinah sat in the shade with their two young children outside the bus station. While they spoke of the violence raging in their hometown in Syria, what Ammar and Zeinah emphasized most was the devastating effect the war had had on their seven-year-old's education; he had already missed his first two years of school. They had heard education was excellent in Germany and hoped to make it there. For the moment, however, they were stuck on the Turkish coast, without money or a plan.

**Winter and rough seas won't stop desperate people from trying to reach Europe.** Sea crossings on shoddy smuggling boats are already extremely dangerous: More than 3,000 people are known to have drowned in 2015. In the winter, seas will become much more treacherous, likely resulting in greater numbers of deaths. Hypothermia is another serious concern for those making the crossing. Nevertheless, only 8% of those interviewed said that they would return home if sea crossing was not possible over the winter. The rest will wait in Turkey or try to cross by land. This means that the EU needs a comprehensive, holistic response to the crisis now.

## Recommendations

The European Union and Member States should:

### **Improve reception conditions in the southern Mediterranean, especially in Greece, through:**

- Continued support for search and rescue missions;
- Providing urgent funding and technical support for the humanitarian response in Greece and Italy; and
- Establishing a coordinated and rapid emergency response mechanism that is able to deal with this recurrent crisis.

### **Increase safe, legal routes to and through Europe for refugees, by:**

- Greatly expanding use of all possible tools for safe entry into Europe, including humanitarian visas, humanitarian and medical evacuation programmes, flexible application of family reunification admission, and resettlement;
- Enabling more frequent, flexible use of family reunification mechanisms under the Dublin System, and otherwise suspending or abandoning the Dublin System;
- Fulfilling commitments to relocate 160,000 asylum-seekers from EU border countries and revising commitments upward to cope with far greater numbers of arrivals; and
- Establishing a comprehensive, common EU asylum policy with minimum standards of protection.

### **Address the reasons why people are fleeing to Europe, by:**

- Working with other donors to provide a massive increase in humanitarian support for the Syria region;
- Advocating for the World Bank to allow economic support to middle-income countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees; and
- Committing renewed diplomatic and political muscle to solving conflicts and ending persecution.

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<sup>3</sup> 21% of interviewees had been in Turkey for one week or less, and 49% for less than two months. Another 25% had been in Turkey for a year or longer and had recently decided to transit to Europe.