



BEHIND THEM, A HOMELAND IN RUINS:

The Youth of Europe's Refugee Crisis

CONTEXT

Of the thousands of forced migrants arriving every day on Europe's shores, most are young. In the first seven months of this year, 67 percent of them were between the ages of 14 and 34.¹ While some fear these youth are a threat – to Europe's security, economy and culture – world leaders must get past the rhetoric, learn who these refugees actually are and design policies accordingly. That is the aim of this report.

The real danger of Europe's refugee crisis is that policy will be driven by ignorance or fear, leading communities and politicians to focus on keeping refugees out, or marginalizing them once they're in.

*In devising a response to this crisis, one guiding principle stands out above all: **We must choose engagement over isolation.** Empowering refugees and helping them build happier, more productive lives will benefit both those arriving and the communities who will host them.*

From Afghanistan to Syria and Somalia, Mercy Corps has worked with these refugee populations for years. They are peaceful. After years of war and deprivation, they want desperately to build a future. In most cases, they would much prefer to be living in their home countries, but events have pushed them out. The majority of forced migrants heading to Europe deserve asylum. According to Eurostat, 94.7 percent of Syrian asylum seekers were granted positive recognition in the year preceding June 2015. This figure is 84.9 percent for Iraqi asylum seekers, 67 percent for Afghans and 62.6 percent for Somalis.² Europe is already receiving these people. They want to work and continue their educations. In fact, many are already skilled. Beyond being simply a moral and legal obligation of the world's developed countries, Europe's refugees are a resource to be empowered and engaged.

Nevertheless, immense challenges are on the horizon. As an international community, we must develop a meaningful and forward-thinking approach to the looming task of helping refugees rebuild their lives, in new host countries. Of course, this means a better sharing of the responsibility. But it also means getting relocation and resettlement right. Failing this runs the risk of replicating, on European soil, the isolation, grievances and hopelessness that many suffered for years. This can and must be avoided. By leveraging insights from international organizations such as Mercy Corps that work with refugees and host communities – in the Middle East and elsewhere – we can ensure policymakers and leaders in Europe have the tools to make the relocation and resettlement of these people a success.

Europe's refugee crisis should be a wake-up call for Brussels, certainly, but also for the rest of the world. While thousands of people seek asylum in Europe, millions continue to languish in the world's crumbling and violence-ridden states. They scrape by without proper housing, education or opportunities for work. This includes the more than 4 million Syrians who have fled their country, but also the 7.5 million people displaced inside Syria. Recent military developments in Syria, including the entry of Russian forces, are likely to precipitate further movements of people.

1 This percentage refers to the number of the people from ages 14-34 who applied for asylum in the EU28 in the first 7 months of 2015. Information from the European Union's Eurostat database, accessed at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>.

2 Oliver Hawkins, "Asylum Statistics," House of Commons Library Briefing Paper. 2015. Available online: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01403/SN01403.pdf>

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT YOUNG REFUGEES:

- **They are fleeing years of instability and violence at home** – not just from Syria but a range of countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.
- **Until push factors are addressed, they will not stop coming.** Many of the refugees are resolved to reach Europe no matter what. They have already escaped violent conflicts, therefore upping border controls or attacking smuggling rings is unlikely to deter them and may prove counter-productive.
- **They are motivated by hope.** They believe Europe is their last chance for a good life and will risk everything to get there. In spite of security concerns, they are peaceful and optimistic. They want to build a new future and contribute to their host countries.
- **They found life unlivable in under-funded refugee camps and crowded host communities.** The inability to work or receive a proper education means they see no future for themselves there.
- **They leave behind increasingly vulnerable family and friends** – many of whom have sold their remaining assets to send their sons to Europe.
- Although they are optimistic and future-oriented, following years of displacement and war **many refugees suffer from profound psychological stress.**
- **They are an opportunity for Europe and other countries,** if they are accepted – refugees are a potential economic and demographic boon to aging Europe. But properly integrating them will require smart, comprehensive policies to build social capital between refugees and host communities, mitigate potential conflicts and ensure future stability.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

In responding to the refugee crisis, ***we must choose engagement over isolation.*** Empowering refugees and helping them build happier, more productive lives will benefit both those arriving and the communities who will host them. Our recommendations are based on that principle.

Meet the particular needs of youth to maximize this opportunity and reduce the risk of conflict:

- Local and national leaders in destination countries should adopt policies to enable the successful integration of young people into host communities.

Resettle refugees in significant numbers from the Middle East, and better share the responsibility for doing so, to reduce the informal and dangerous journeys being made to Europe:

- World leaders from Europe, North America, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific should negotiate a comprehensive plan of action for significantly increasing the numbers of refugees they collectively resettle from the Middle East.
- European countries should facilitate a range of safe and legal routes for refugees.

Address the push factors driving refugees out of camps and host communities:

- Governments in the Middle East, supported by donors, should improve conditions and the dignity of refugees, particularly by enabling them to work.

Address the ultimate causes of this crisis:

- World leaders should step up diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution to the Syria crisis.
- Donor governments and development agencies should change the global approach to assisting fragile states.



Toni Gravias for Mercy Corps

THE MERCY CORPS EXPERIENCE

Mercy Corps is on the ground responding to humanitarian crises, violent conflicts and economic collapse in more than 40 countries around the world. We have an extensive footprint in many refugee source countries. From Somalia to Afghanistan, our teams are living and working with displaced youth every day. We know who they are, we know first-hand the challenges they and host communities face. Our programs focus on empowering youth to recover from crisis, and on building trust and understanding between refugee and host communities. Our experience includes three years of work inside Syria, delivering lifesaving aid and support to millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom are now refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.

Critically, we know from experience in responding to complex displacement crises that fostering stability means purposefully embedding conflict mitigation and peaceful engagement efforts into everything we do. We have implemented more than 95 conflict management programs in more than 30 countries. These programs have had a measurable impact on promoting peace and stability in communities suffering from years of crisis.

METHODOLOGY

The author conducted 21 focus group interviews with 107 forced migrants arriving in Mytilene, Greece, in late September 2015. The goal was to better understand who they are, why they're afoot, and what they hope to find in Europe. Additional lessons in this brief are drawn from Mercy Corps' research and programs from around the world, but with a particular focus on Afghanistan, Somalia and in the countries affected by the Syria crisis.

Terminology:

The different terms used to describe the population of people migrating to Europe are complex and carry legal implications. In this paper, we use the term 'refugee crisis' and 'refugees' in recognition of the fact that many people travelling particularly from Syria have already been registered as holding refugee status. Equally, as outlined in the text, the large majority of asylum seekers from key countries including Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia are granted positive recognition once in the European Union. We recognize, however, that this is a complicated picture and the population of people travelling to Europe includes other kinds of displaced people and migrants whose legal status may be different or undetermined.



Karine Aigner for Mercy Corps

A DANGEROUS JOURNEY

“We are not terrorists,” Qhosay said. “We are running from the terrorists.”

Qhosay was emphatic: He knows something about terrorists. He is 25 and grew up in Mosul, in northern Iraq. He sat in a tent with five other young men — friends and cousins — on a sidewalk in Mytilene, the capital of the Greek island of Lesbos. Once, they were university students, but now they are all refugees. When the Islamic State (ISIS) conquered Mosul in 2014, ushering in a reign of terror, thousands fled, Qhosay and the others among them.

Mytilene is the EU's port of entry for many refugees coming from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In late September, 4,000 refugees were arriving from Turkey every day. On the Turkish beaches, smugglers crowd dozens onto inflatable, underpowered boats. The smugglers deputize one of the refugees as a pilot, pointing out a landmark on the distant Greek coast — a light or rock — and tell them to aim for that. Then the refugees are left to their fates. Not all make it. Many boats sink; drownings are a weekly occurrence. The rocky coast of Lesbos is littered with the flotsam of past voyages: orange life preservers and deflated rafts.

“Crossing is very dangerous,” said a Syrian youth from Hama. “But we are looking for a small dream.” Behind him, he said, his homeland is in ruins. “We had to escape.”

If the refugees are lucky, their fragile crafts reach the beaches of Lesbos. Those gathered in Mytilene form a portrait of woe and aspiration. This is just one stop on a long journey. In the port, a group of boys played soccer in the shadow of a looming Hellenic Seaways ferry. The refugees crowding the parking lot hope to secure ferry tickets to Athens. From there they will trek north, tracing the Balkans route through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary, if they can. Though most refugees are men, women do make the trip. Some are pregnant and give birth on the beaches. Babies just a week or two old are among those crowding the island. Stray dogs moved among the tents. A fourteen-year-old Syrian youth named Hammed crossed the lot on crutches. He'd lost his leg when a barrel bomb fell onto his school. Though he'd made it this far, he was scared of what came next: How could he walk, on crutches, hundreds of kilometers to Austria?

“When I get to Germany, my big plan is to continue my studies,” said another Syrian youth. He's 20, and, at the University of Damascus, had studied business. “But now I want to study politics,” he said. “So I can understand how this can happen.” He gestured at the tents crowding sidewalks and parking lots. Local volunteers handed out bags of bread and candy, but there wasn't enough to go around. “How can a thing like this happen?”

WHO ARE THESE YOUNG REFUGEES?: 7 KEY FINDINGS

As Europe and the world grapple with the refugee crisis, policies and programs must be informed by who these people are, what they need and what they offer. Based on Mercy Corps' long history of working with these populations, as well as ongoing research, here's what we know:

1. They are fleeing instability and violence at home.

The refugee crisis is the outcome of widespread violence, poor governance and the collapse of states. In Somalia, generations-long insecurity appears to be getting no better.

One young man from Mogadishu denounced his home as the “city of death.” In Afghanistan, new offensives by the Taliban, amidst the drawdown of Western forces, have rocked the Kabul government back on its heels. In 2014, conflict-related civilian casualties jumped 22 percent over the previous year, according to the UN.³ Tens of thousands of people have been displaced, adding to the more than 850,000 Afghans already forced to flee their homes.⁴ Youth risk being coerced to join the Taliban or other insurgent forces, including some claiming allegiance to ISIS. Many Afghans, rather than risk a life under the Islamists, are voting with their feet, making the dangerous trek across Iran and into Turkey.

In northwestern Iraq, the rise of ISIS displaced thousands. Meanwhile, in the south, widespread corruption, the weakness of the state and the rise of increasingly belligerent Shia militias is encouraging many youth that there is no future in Iraq.



Kathie Agner for Mercy Corps

“In Syria now there is only death.”

“Our government is like a gang,” said one Iraqi youth. “Everything is corrupt. It kept getting worse. You can't work. The militias are everywhere and the people are helpless.” His parents sent him away. He had begged them to come with him, but they were too old to make the trip.

“I don't know where I want to go,” he said. “But I want to save my dignity and my humanity. I want to find a place that is better than my country.”

But it is the Syria crisis that is providing the single largest bump to this year's refugee flows. Since 2011, 4 million Syrians have fled to neighboring states, mostly Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. They are crowded into towns and refugee camps. Many hoped an end to conflict would enable them to return home and rebuild. But now, nearly five years on, the civil war appears interminable. Many finally gave up hope and headed for Europe, trusting their lives to luck and to the smugglers.

Many mourn the country they've lost. One Syrian refugee remembered Aleppo: the ancient souk, the crowded stone streets, the minaret of the Umayyad mosque. “All that is gone,” he said. He will never go back. “In Syria now there is only death.”

3 “Afghanistan: Annual Report 2014 Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.” Human Rights Unit of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). 2014. Available online: <http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/2015/2014-Annual-Report-on-Protection-of-Civilians-Final.pdf>

4 Judith Sunderland, “The Mediterranean Migration Crisis: Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do,” Human Rights Watch. 2015. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do>

2. Until the push factors are addressed, they will not stop coming.

The past year witnessed a tipping point: According to UNHCR, 219,000 refugees and migrants hazarded the seas in 2014, up from 60,000 a year before. The tide shows no signs of abating. Last month, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 522,000 refugees had crossed into Europe so far this year.⁵

There is no long-term solution to the refugee crisis short of establishing peaceful, well-governed societies in the source countries.⁶ According to Francesco Ortega, immigration expert at the City University of New York, Europe will receive large flows of refugees and migrants so long as conflict and poverty persist.⁷ The war in Syria must end; chronic insecurity and poor governance in Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan and elsewhere must be addressed; an antidote to Somalia's decades-long chaos must be found. Failing all this, the youth of these countries will continue to flee, seeking a better life somewhere else.

*“We’ll take any risk,” said a young Syrian man. He is 19.
“You have to understand how bad it is back there. We have no alternative.
We have to get to Europe. If you were me, you would do the same.”*

Attempting to stem refugee flows – by fortifying the EU's external borders or attacking smuggling rings – acts to counter the symptoms of the crisis, not the sources. In some cases, such policies manufacture new risks. Smuggling networks, for instance, will not be easily squashed. They pop up to facilitate the market: where there is a demand for irregular population movements, individuals of dubious moral compass will step in to meet the need. Putting professional smugglers out of business, to the extent that's possible, may simply encourage amateurs to enter the market, making future crossings even more dangerous.

In many cases, however, border controls do not successfully stem population flows, but merely redirect them to different crossing points.⁸ Border controls may, however, raise smugglers' prices and encourage greater risk-taking.⁹ After all, for thousands of desperate refugees, heading to Europe is already a last-ditch move: they will not be deterred by the dangers of the journey.

Even if developed countries were able to stem flows – making pacts with transit states to seal off routes of passage, for instance – the ultimate drivers of the refugee crisis would not abate. The situation would simply continue to fester and find other ways to surface.

“We’ll take any risk,” said a young Syrian man. He is 19. “You have to understand how bad it is back there. We have no alternative. We have to get to Europe. If you were me, you would do the same.”

3. They are motivated by hope. They believe Europe is their last chance for a good life, and they will risk everything to get there.

The insecurity, poor governance and hopelessness that pushed many people to make the dangerous trip to Europe are intensified by the pull of imagined alternatives. Life in Europe is both an escape and a chance to redeem years of frustration. In focus groups in Mytilene, young refugees optimistically discussed the opportunities for work and education they hoped to find.

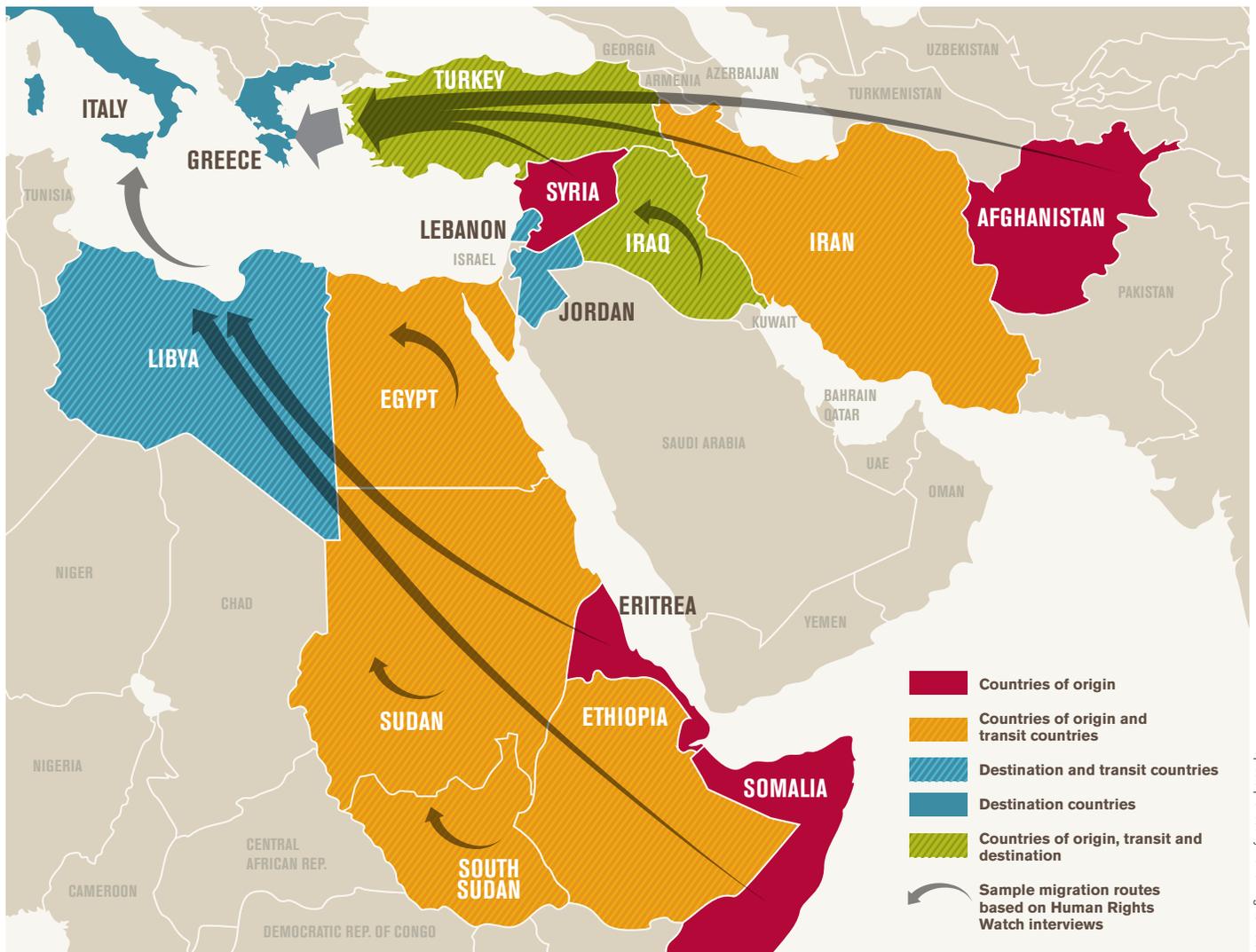
5 "Mediterranean Western Balkans Update - New Numbers from Italy, Greece, the FYROM" International Organization for Migration. 2015. Available online: <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-western-balkans-update-new-numbers-italy-greece-fyrom>

6 Arezo Malakooti, "Migration Trends Across the Mediterranean: Connecting the Dots," Altai Consulting. 2015. Available online: http://www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/migration/Altai_Migration_trends_accross_the_Mediterranean.pdf

7 Anastasia Moloney, "Political solution on Syria needed to stem migrant crisis in Mediterranean - EU official," Reuters. 2015.

8 "Mediterranean Western Balkans Update - New Numbers from Italy, Greece, the FYROM"

9 Hein de Haas, migration expert and professor at the University of Amsterdam, echoes this view. For example, see: <http://heindehaas.blogspot.com>.



Many of these dreams are given shape by word of mouth and by the Internet, the great facilitator of the refugee exodus. Practical issues can be worked out via the web – smugglers can be found online, routes can be mapped – but just as important is the Internet’s role in framing the envisioned outcomes. Most read about Germany or Sweden’s “open door” policies online, and social media is replete with examples of past years’ trailblazers. Facebook profiles of Somalis or Syrians living safely in Europe encourage many to roll the dice themselves. During interviews last year in northern Somalia, for instance, many youth who aspired to immigrate to Europe got the idea from social media.

“On Facebook we see other people who made it to Italy and other places and they are having a good life,” said one young woman. “We want to go, too.” She smiled. “I want to go to Sweden.”

However, as some EU Member States fortify their borders, erecting miles of fencing and razor wire, most refugees in Mytilene expressed the need to hurry up. In focus groups, there was a sense of desperation. “Europe is changing its mind,” one young man said. “It will now get harder.”

For these refugees, Europe is both lure and spur: an invitation to a better life that many fear is now being rescinded. This heightens the desperation to move quickly, and may raise the risks of future transits, particularly as winter approaches and the seas become more treacherous.



Sumaya Agha for Mercy Corps

4. They found life unlivable in under-funded refugee camps and crowded host communities.

“We could not live in the camps anymore,” said one Syrian youth. A month ago, he fled with his 15-year-old brother from a refugee camp in Turkey. “We want to live in a house.”

Refugees in the Middle East languish in conditions that many find unlivable. Refugees are victims of routine marginalization. They can't work. Many are forced to scrape by in informal labor markets for meager wages. Life, they say, is without dignity, and therefore without value.

It is a bleak environment in which to grow up. Fear for one's safety and social isolation are the lot of many youth: 37 percent of refugee youth in Jordan said they rarely interact with people from other communities.¹⁰ Available education is often inadequate. And for many refugees, the school itself is the site of routine bullying and discrimination. Meanwhile, as many adolescents are forced to support the family through informal labor, education has become an increasingly expensive luxury. In Jordan and Lebanon, a Mercy Corps survey found that many adolescents were not in school: 81 percent in Lebanon, and 43 percent in Jordan. Not surprisingly, the link between aspirations and outcomes has begun to fray. Many youth feel that gaining an education, as a refugee, is not meaningful, because it will not lead to a job or improve one's life.

At the heart of these challenges is the dismal lack of support from the international community. For camps and host communities, funding gaps abound. As of early October, only 46 percent of the funding needs of the Syria regional response had been met.¹¹ And that amount represents an improvement over previous months.

While host communities and governments have been mostly generous, years spent supporting hundreds of thousands of refugees has started to wear thin. In Jordan, more than 600,000 registered refugees crowd into the country's arid north, tapping its vanishing water supply and placing severe pressure on labor and housing markets.¹² Turkey's refugee population now stands above 2 million. And in tiny Lebanon, 1.1 million Syrian refugees have joined a preexisting population of Palestinians. Today in Lebanon one in four people is a refugee.

By comparison, if Germany were to accept the 800,000 refugees it expects this year, that would amount to only about 1 percent of its total population.

¹⁰ “Advancing the Next Generation: Keeping adolescents safe, learning and valued.” Mercy Corps. 2015.

¹¹ Information courtesy United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), accessed at <https://fts.unocha.org/>.

¹² For more, see Keith Proctor, “Tapped Out: Water Scarcity and Refugee Pressures in Jordan,” Mercy Corps. 2014. Available online: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/tapped-out-water-scarcity-and-refugee-pressures-jordan>.

5. They leave behind increasingly vulnerable family and friends.

While thousands of refugees are on their way to Europe, millions continue to languish in insecure places, many without proper housing, education or opportunities for work. These include wives, children and aged parents without the financial means to head to Europe.

In many cases, the young refugees arriving in Europe were sent by their families because the youth were most at risk of being forcibly recruited by armed groups in the home country: the Taliban, for instance,

or ISIS. But the male youth were also sent because they can better risk the trip than sisters or wives. Once established in Europe, they plan to send for their families. For most, that is unlikely to happen soon, if ever.

Meanwhile, many of those left behind are now more vulnerable than ever: the departure of a young breadwinner is a costly loss, and the expensive smuggling fees have depleted many families' dwindling assets. The minimum price refugees paid simply to cross from Turkey to Lesbos was USD 1,000. While a massive sum in and of itself, for most it is just a fraction of the total smuggling costs. According to one Somali youth, his parents spent their life savings to send him off on the long journey through Turkey: more than USD 4,000, he said. But he would have better luck crossing into Greece, they figured, than chancing the trip to Libya and the voyage across the Mediterranean, which Human Rights Watch deemed the "world's deadliest migration route."¹³

But whatever the risks, and they are great, the dangers of the journey pale compared to the risks of staying behind, according to refugees in Mytilene. Many expressed pity for those who couldn't raise the smuggling fees.

"The poor people stayed behind," said one Syrian youth. "Maybe they went to Turkey or Iraq. They have no options." He shook his head. "Mostly the poor people are dead."

6. They are optimistic and future-oriented, though many suffer from profound psychological stress.

It is striking that after years of conflict, most refugees are resilient and optimistic about the future. In Mercy Corps assessments in Jordan and Lebanon, we have repeatedly found that young refugees want to be a part of their communities, volunteer, finish school and find work. For many, the experience of war has spawned a deep desire to lead a better life, and build a better society.

This is not to say these young people are without scars. The psychological, social and emotional costs of war and long-term displacement can be severe, particularly among youth. Constant stress and shock over a long period of time can trap developing minds in survivor mode: sometimes referred to as "toxic stress." Many suffer from a detachment between thinking and feeling, impairing a youth's ability to assess risk or interact with others in healthy, constructive ways. As Mercy Corps has found working with refugees in the Middle East, the psychosocial needs are profound and require a long-term, comprehensive approach to help young people cope and reconnect to themselves, their peers, families and communities.



Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

13 "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis: Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do"

7. They are an opportunity for Europe – if European communities are willing to accept them.

The thousands of refugee youth landing every day in Greece and Italy are an opportunity for Europe.¹⁴ They are aspirational. They seek work and education. Many, in fact, are already skilled. According to Pierre Moscovici, European commissioner for economic and financial affairs, the refugees are an important human resource that must be empowered and engaged.¹⁵ If properly integrated, they may help stave off a dire demographic threat. An aging Europe is, according to the European Commission, among the bloc's most serious social and economic challenges.¹⁶ More than one-fifth of Europeans will be 65 or older by 2025.

Undoubtedly, the movement of thousands of people into Europe presents challenges. Giving each asylum seeker a full and fair hearing will sorely tax the capacity of EU Member States as they attempt to sort out who has a “well-founded fear of persecution” in the country they fled, who qualifies to remain on other grounds, and who does not.

That will be no easy task, and it is merely the first step. Welcoming foreigners is a fraught process, spanning legal, economic and sociocultural dimensions, as noted by UNHCR.¹⁷ As Mercy Corps has found working with host communities among Syria's neighbors, there is ample potential for frustration on both sides.

It is imperative that we build trust and social capital between refugee and host communities. This can be achieved through good programs and policies.

Happily, this is avoidable. It is imperative that we build trust and social capital between refugee and host communities. This can be achieved through good programs and policies. In the Middle East, Mercy Corps' programs created shared social spaces where refugees could meet and interact with their host community. We trained local and refugee leaders in dispute resolution. In Lebanon, we designed community projects and programs in partnership with refugee and host community leaders: It was important to enable these groups to take equal ownership. These programs consistently led to measurable declines in conflict.¹⁸ Where programs are thoughtfully designed to bridge differences or build social capital, they can reduce discrimination, mitigate tension, improve cooperation and help ensure a good outcome for the towns and cities that will welcome today's refugees.

14 For instance, migrants are a boon to labor markets and typically contribute more in taxes than they receive in social benefits. See “Is migration good for the economy?” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2014. Available online: <http://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/OECD%20Migration%20Policy%20Debates%20Numero%202.pdf>, and “The Fiscal Effects of Foreigners and Immigration on Germany,” Centre for European Economic Research. 2014. Available online: <http://www.zew.de/en/news/2817/the-fiscal-effects-of-foreigners-and-immigration-in-germany>

15 Holly Ellyatt, “Migrants could help solve Europe's aging problem,” CNBC. 2015. Available online: <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/11/migrants-could-help-solve-europes-aging-problem.html>

16 See European Commission analysis, available online: http://ec.europa.eu/health/ageing/policy/index_en.htm

17 “A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2013. Available online: <http://www.unhcr.org/52403d389.html>

18 For example, see “Seeking Stability: Evidence on Strategies for Reducing the Risk of Conflict in Northern Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees,” Mercy Corps. 2014. Available online: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/seeking-stability-evidence-strategies-reducing-risk-conflict-northern-jordanian>

CONCLUSION: TO TAKE THEM, OR NOT?

It would be disingenuous to downplay the challenge facing the EU. But the bloc's moral and legal obligations to the refugees are balanced, to a greater extent than elsewhere, by the capacity to do much. These refugees want desperately to build a new future and, in seeking an adoptive home, have perhaps more to offer over the long-term than they will cost in the short.¹⁹ For a generation of young people escaping war and deprivation, this crisis presents an opportunity to help them build a better future for themselves, for their families – and for Europe.

In Mytilene, a young Afghan father wrapped one of his children in a donated sleeping bag. It was cold and had started to rain. He was traveling with his entire family: ten people, including sisters, children, cousins and his wife. They had set up their tent under the awning of the port's customs building. The blue tent cost them 15 euros. When asked why come to Europe, the man tried to respond in broken English, but then simply turned and gestured emphatically at his four daughters, all close in age, ranging from 6 to perhaps 11. "For them," he said. "For them."

Later, a Greek police cruiser pulled up, lights flashing. Uniformed officers, one wielding a baton, told the family to vacate their shelter at the customs building. They would have to go somewhere else. The father started to gather the knotted plastic bags that held the family's things. His daughters stood at the corners of the tent and lifted it up. Carrying the tent between them, they stepped out into the street. A truck motored past. While their parents followed, the girls scanned the crowded sidewalks, faces wet from the rain, looking for a safe spot.



19 Scott Tong, "The cost of resettling refugees," NPR, 2015. Available online: <http://nashvillepublicradio.org/post/cost-resettling-refugees#stream/0>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings underscore a central reality: refugees will continue coming to Europe, and their numbers may well increase. However, this need not be a cause for alarm. While an immense challenge for Europe and the world, relocation and resettlement can succeed, and it can be positive, though success will require appropriate and serious measures by a range of stakeholders: from EU officials to local mayors and NGOs.

In devising a response to this crisis, one guiding principle stands out above all: ***we must choose engagement over isolation***. Empowering refugees and helping them build happier, more productive lives will benefit both those arriving and the communities who will host them.

To succeed in this effort, we recommend both short-term and long-term actions.

In the short term:

MEET THE PARTICULAR NEEDS OF YOUTH TO MAXIMIZE THIS OPPORTUNITY AND REDUCE THE RISK OF CONFLICT:

- **Local and national leaders in destination countries should adopt policies to enable the successful integration of young people into host communities.** While denounced as a security risk in some quarters, the young refugees arriving in Europe are an opportunity. Governments must move quickly to welcome them. If the door is opened and they have the chance to participate in their host communities, they will give far more than they take. But if they are pushed to the margins, the xenophobic premise of exclusionary policies will prove self-fulfilling. This should include steps to:
 - **Encourage informal education and skill training as a complement to compulsory formal education.** Informal education activities and skills training can enhance the economic and work readiness skills young people need to be productive members in their communities. At the same time, building these skills can help youth explore their interests—making them feel useful, on track, and valued in society. Informal and vocational education programs allow young people to develop practical skills and abilities that otherwise might not be learned in formal education settings.
 - **Invest in long-term integration programs.** Tensions between refugee and host communities are a given, but can be managed. However, it takes years to build community support, to encourage positive interactions between refugees and hosts and to develop robust mechanisms to prevent conflict. Donors are encouraged to see refugee integration as a longer-term endeavor and fund implementing agencies accordingly.
 - **Engage youth and parents or mentors to address the underpinnings of psychological stress.** Psychosocial support, goal-setting and recruiting positive mentors will be vital to helping young people overcome the long-standing, accumulated stress of many years of conflict and displacement. Parents, if present, should also be integrated into programming to ensure that they too understand the root causes and effects of psychological stress and can apply appropriate approaches within the home.
 - **Provide access to safe recreational spaces for host and refugee youth.** Creating safe spaces where host and refugee youth can interact will be important to helping younger generations bridge divides. Local government can support this effort by helping to identify and negotiate access to safe spaces—and promoting the use of the space for recreational activities and social events.

- **Establish community-based protection networks.** Local government should partner with an array of community actors and organizations to identify and engage young refugees at risk of isolation. From school directors to local non-government organizations, religious groups to employers, local government can coordinate communication among stakeholders to improve access to resources and services that respond to abuse or harassment based on stigmatization or prejudice.
- **Foster social capital via community impact projects.** Local government should collaborate with implementing agencies to convene community leaders from both the host community and refugee populations to jointly plan and carry out community projects. Young people can play a strong role in planning and implementation. These inter-group projects can help build trust between refugees and hosts, and foster partnerships across community lines.

In the longer term:

RESETTLE REFUGEES IN SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST, AND BETTER SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR DOING SO, TO REDUCE THE INFORMAL AND DANGEROUS JOURNEYS BEING MADE TO EUROPE:

- **World leaders from Europe, North America, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific should negotiate a Comprehensive Plan of Action for significantly increasing the numbers of refugees they collectively resettle from the Middle East.**²⁰
 - Only a scheme that offers refugees a legitimate hope of a reasonable life without having to travel independently to Europe will dissuade them from undertaking informal and dangerous journeys.
 - If under a comprehensive plan of action, more countries agreed to resettle refugees, particularly outside Europe, the number each country was required to take would reduce. Reducing the number of refugees in countries neighboring Syria would also make improving conditions in those countries more realistic.
- **European countries should facilitate a range of safe and legal routes for refugees** by granting humanitarian visas through their foreign embassies or other consular outposts in key locations.
 - For asylum seekers attempting to submit their claims, this will reduce high-risk sea crossing, disempower smuggling networks and reduce the adverse economic choices many families make to afford the trip to Europe.²¹
- **European countries and other countries resettling refugees** should send a clear message to refugee populations, including through social media, that a policy of accepting them is being established, will continue, and that there is no need to rush to Europe.
- **Countries receiving refugees should proactively help displaced people to reunite with relatives** already living safely in those countries. EU Member States should implement fully the Dublin III regulations to preserve family unity and reunite separated families.²²

20 For more, see Bidinger, Lang, Hites, Kuzmova and Nouredine, "Protecting Syrian Refugees: Laws, Policies and Global Responsibility Sharing," Boston University School of Law. 2014. Available online: <https://www.bu.edu/law/central/jd/programs/clinics/international-human-rights/documents/FINALFullReport.pdf>.

21 Alexander Betts, "Let Refugees Fly to Europe," The New York Times. 2015. Available online: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/25/opinion/let-refugees-fly-to-europe.html?_r=0

22 "The Refugee Crisis: A protection-based response," Refugee Council. 2015. Available online at: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/5658/Refugee_Council_briefing_-_The_Refugee_Crisis__a_protection_based_response_Sep_2015.pdf

ADDRESS THE PUSH FACTORS DRIVING REFUGEES OUT OF CAMPS AND HOST COMMUNITIES:

- **Governments in the Middle East, supported by donors, should improve conditions and the dignity of refugees in the Middle East, particularly by enabling them to work.** Many of the Syrian refugees making the dangerous trek to Europe are doing so because life in refugee camps and host communities in the Middle East is unsustainable. For the millions who have stayed behind, conditions must improve and humanitarian needs must be fully funded. Specifically:
 - **The governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey should prioritize refugee livelihoods, particularly the right to work.** This is not simply about survival; it is also about dignity. The social status of refugees in host communities is greatly diminished by their inability to participate in the formal labor market.
 - **Governments, donors and implementing agencies should prioritize youth and adolescent needs, particularly the provision of education** for refugees in camps and host communities. Young people ages 10-19 are often overlooked in programming, and they are often the most vulnerable to negative influences. When developing a call for proposals, donors should specifically prioritize adolescents and request implementing agencies to identify strategies to reach and engage adolescents in education, work readiness and community engagement.
 - **Donors and implementing agencies should prioritize the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations left behind,** particularly women, children and elderly who have sent their young men on to Europe.

ADDRESS THE ULTIMATE CAUSES OF THIS CRISIS:

- **World leaders should step up diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution to the Syria crisis.** Until a political solution to the Syria crisis is reached, Syrian refugees will continue to make the dangerous journey to Europe, if they can, or else suffer in sub-standard conditions in neighboring states.
- **Donor governments and development agencies should change the global approach to assisting fragile states.** The current refugee crisis is not solely driven by Syria. Other states, suffering from prolonged periods of violent conflict, are major contributors to the historic numbers of refugees and migrants seeking a better life elsewhere. This requires a dramatic reappraisal of how we do development in fragile states that suffer from chronic insecurity, poverty and weak governance. For more on Mercy Corps' stance on the future of development, please refer to our publication, "Cracking the Code: Enhancing Emergency Response & Resilience in Complex Crises."²³

23 Available online: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/cracking-code-enhancing-emergency-response-resilience-complex-crises>

ABOUT MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world's toughest places.

Poverty. Conflict. Disaster. In more than 40 countries, we partner with local people to put bold ideas into action, help them overcome adversity and build stronger communities. Now, and for the future.



GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS

45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204

888.842.0842
[mercycorps.org](https://www.mercycorps.org)

EUROPEAN HEADQUARTERS

40 Sciennes
Edinburgh, EH9 1NJ, UK

44 131 662 5160
[mercycorps.org](https://www.mercycorps.org)

CONTACT

KEITH PROCTOR

Senior Policy Researcher
Mercy Corps
kproctor@dc.mercycorps.org

BEN DEMPSEY

Director of Policy and Advocacy
Mercy Corps
bdempsey@uk.mercycorps.org