

THE REFUGEE EXPLOSION

How europe treats refugees
fleeing explosive violence

No one leaves
Home unless
Home is the mouth
of a Shark



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Cover illustration

On a warehouse in Belgrade, Serbia:

“No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rising use of explosive weapons in conflict zones around the world – particularly in those wars that have brought misery to vast swathes of the Middle East and Africa – has destroyed urban landscapes, terrorised populations and driven scores of people from their homes. This is, sadly, of little surprise.

As Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) has repeatedly shown, over 90% of those who are killed or injured when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, are civilians.¹ Many of those who survive the barrage of explosive violence, remain displaced within their own countries, whilst others have been forced to flee bombs and bullets by cross-ing international borders, to seek asylum or humanitarian protection elsewhere.

While the global impact of explosive violence is relatively well known, what has been less the subject of debate is how that impact has caused refugees the world over.

At the end of 2015, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that a record total of 65.3 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, representing an increase of 5.8 million over the previous year. This total includes 21.3 million refugees in addition to another 40.8 million internally displaced persons. It means that one in every 113 people on earth has been displaced.²

AOAV has been recording the impact of explosive violence since 2011. Since then, AOAV has recorded a consistent increase in civilian harm from such weaponry – between 2011 and 2015, year on year civilian deaths and injuries from explosive violence rose by some 54%.³ Hand in hand with this increase in explosive violence, Europe has seen what has been termed a ‘refugee/migrant crisis’, the massive displacement of millions of civilians due to conflicts, primarily from the Middle East and Africa.

The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) – of which AOAV is a founding member – has stated that bombing in towns and cities is likely to be

a ‘significant factor in the current unprecedented levels of mass displacement caused by conflict, both within and between countries.’⁴ This strongly suggests that the rising incidence of explosive violence in the Middle East has been a key driver of the refugee crisis that has engulfed Europe from the summer of 2015 onwards.

This report – *The Refugee Explosion* – sets out to examine the links between explosive violence and the mass influx of refugees into Europe, as well as to look at the impact this has had on EU nations, and to understand what protection and support in Europe is offered to those particularly fleeing explosive violence.

Three case study countries – Germany, the UK, and Greece – are explored in greater detail. The choice of these countries was made based on the variety of situations relating to refugees that they presented. Germany has opened its borders and provided generous refuge to the greatest number of applicants. In comparison, the UK has taken on significantly fewer refugees and, at the same time, has seen anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment rise in recent years.

Greece has had little choice in its role in the crisis – due to its location it has been the arrival destination for thousands of refugees fleeing the Middle East and North Africa, and at times has been overwhelmed by this reality.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

For this report, AOAV spoke to over 250 refugees/asylum seekers across the three case studies – Germany, Greece and the UK. The research took place between October 2016 and February 2017 and consisted of:

- 259 individual questionnaires: 102 completed in Germany, 106 completed in Greece, and 51 completed in the UK.⁵
- 14 more in-depth interviews with refugees and asylum seekers: 7 in Germany, 4 in Greece, and 3 in the UK.
- 10 interviews with legal advocates, social workers and aid workers in Germany, Greece and the UK.

The research in Germany took place across four main locations: Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne and Munich. The research in the UK took place in London and Brighton. And the research in Greece was predominantly focused on Athens and the surrounding areas.

The questions asked refugees what violence, if any, they had witnessed. In order to prevent innate bias in self-reporting, those questioned had the options of choosing any or none of a variety of weapon types including gunfire, or explaining the type of violence they had witnessed under the title ‘other’. Some used this choice to explain they were subject to police violence or torture.

Of the 259 refugees and asylum seekers who AOAV spoke to 128 were from Syria, 60 from Afghanistan, 31 from Iraq, nine from Nigeria, eight from Pakistan, six from Iran, two from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Eritrea, and Egypt, and one from Senegal, El Salvador, Serbia, Uganda, India, Palestine, Yemen, Mali, and Morocco.

1.2 LIMITATIONS

AOAV corroborated the stories of the refugees where they could. However, for the most part, asylum seekers and refugees were trusted on their word. AOAV explained to those who filled in the questionnaire that they were anonymous, their answers could in no way be associated with them as individuals, and in the case of asylum seekers, the answers would have no bearing on the asylum process.

Some readers of this report may express concerns about the validity of the claims made by the refugees and asylum seekers that AOAV spoke to. Whilst we note this concern we feel that the anonymity of the questionnaires, the fact that we stressed their responses would have no impact on their asylum process, and the open-questions offered in our questionnaires meant that, where possible, we tried to prevent bias or situations whereby people answered in a way they

thought we wanted them to. We told the refugees answering the questionnaires that AOAV were doing a report on how refugees were treated in Europe, and did not stress that AOAV’s interest lay in the impact of explosive violence on refugees and the processes they go through.

1.3 KEY TERMS

Explosive violence: Explosive violence refers to the use of explosive weapons in armed violence. It includes, but is not limited to, the use of: air strikes, air-dropped bombs, missiles, rockets, shelling, artillery shells, mortars, tank shells, grenades, and IEDs.

IDP: An internally displaced person is someone who is forced to flee their home but they remain within their own country’s borders.

Refugees: The use of refugees within the report is complex – in the field research it describes those who self-describe as refugees which may include those who are still seeking asylum. However, where it is referred to in the context of laws and policy, the term identifies those who have been granted asylum.

Asylum seekers: Asylum seekers are those who are seeking refuge in a state that is not the country of origin.

Air strike: Broadly speaking, this term is used to refer to incidents where explosive weapons have been air-launched without specifying the munition used.

Shelling: Is used to refer to reports of the use of explosive ground-launched shells including mortars, rockets, artillery, or tank shells.

IEDs: Improvised explosive devices. In the questionnaire types of IEDs were limited to car bombs (including those using trucks), suicide attacks, and roadside bombs.

2. KEY FINDINGS OF THE REFUGEE EXPLOSION

Explosive violence suffered by refugees

- **85%** of all refugees AOA V spoke to in Greece, Germany and the UK had witnessed explosive violence.
- **61%** had witnessed airstrikes.
- **69%** had witnessed shelling.
- **58%** had witnessed IED attacks.
- **39%** had witnessed suicide attacks.
- **69%** said that they or their family had been directly impacted by explosive violence.
- **90%** of those from Iraq had been directly impacted.
- **92%** of those from Afghanistan had been directly impacted.
- **44%** said that their homes had been destroyed by explosive violence.

States' response to refugees fleeing explosive violence

- Despite the substantial threat from explosive violence, only **12%** of applicants from Iraq were granted asylum in the UK in 2016.
- The number of Syrian nationals applying for protection in Germany skyrocketed from **2,634** in 2011 to **266,250** in 2015. That year, **96%** of Syrian applicants were granted asylum.
- The proportion of refugees from Syria arriving in Greece rose from **29%** in 2015 to **47%** in 2016. Of these Syrians questioned, **53%** had their homes destroyed.

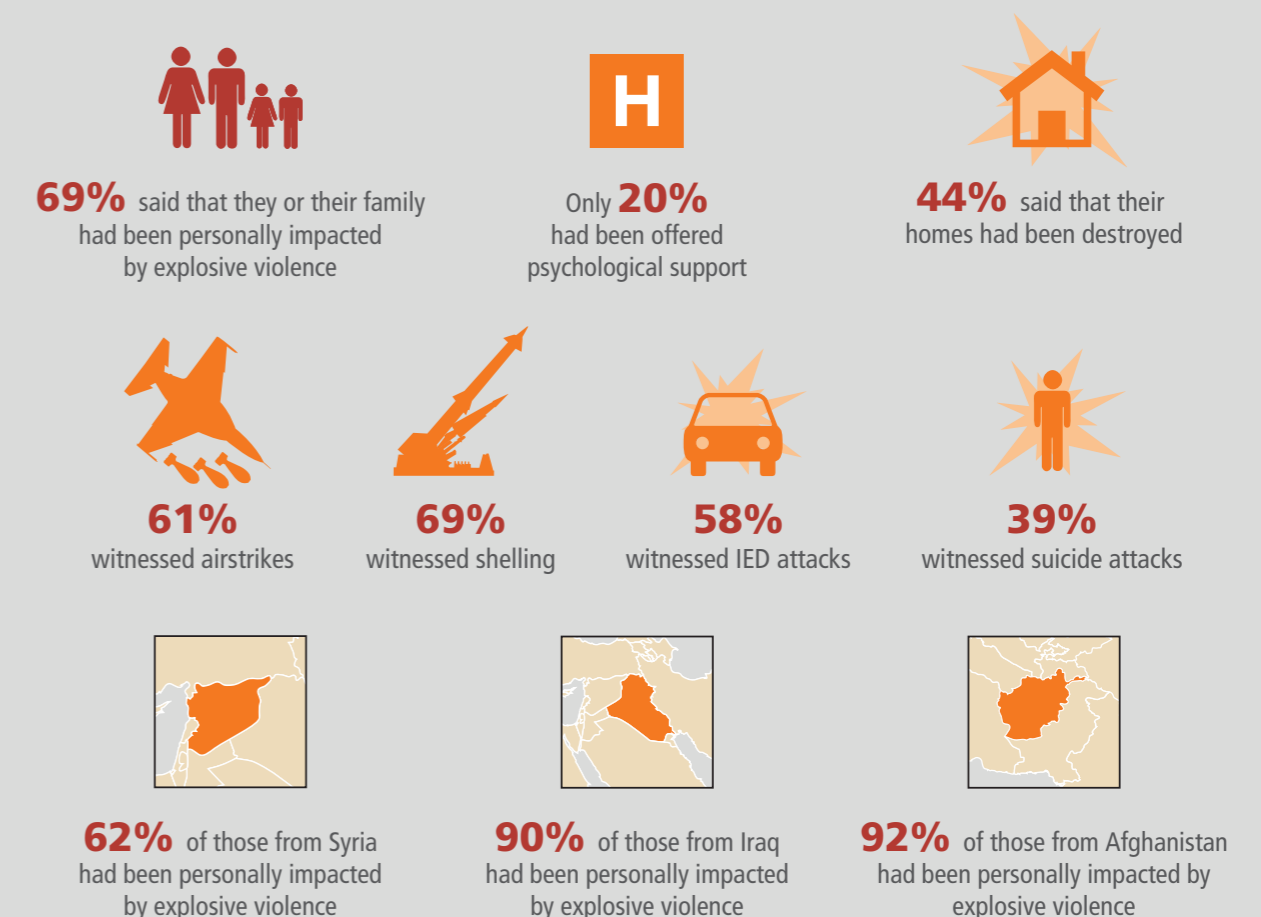
Psychological support

- Only **20%** of all refugees questioned had been offered psychological support.
- European states were ill-prepared to cope with the exceptional psychological needs of refugees from war zones.

Explosive violence and refugees in the law

- The link between explosive weapons and refugees is not properly addressed in the legal framework of asylum law.
- There were significant variances by country on their implementation of international law in regard to refugees and explosive violence.
- The EU's response to the refugee crisis is hampered by its inadequate response to the underlying drivers of the crisis, including addressing the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Deportations to Iraq and Afghanistan made by some EU member countries often fail to properly address fact that these countries remain amongst the worst-impacted by explosive violence.

Of the refugees AOA V interviewed:



3. EXPLOSIVE VIOLENCE AND REFUGEES

Between 2011 and 2016, AOA V recorded at least 233,949 deaths and injuries from explosive violence globally, of which 76% were civilians. The six most impacted countries were: Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Nigeria. Unsurprisingly these countries are also among the countries seeing the most displacement of peoples within these years.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is forcing people from their homes, and preventing their return as their neighbourhoods lie in ruins. Repeated bombing and bombardment causes not only death and injury, but also fear and intense psychological distress, increasing the urgency and desire of those affected to flee the area.⁶ The extent of this problem is underpinned by the fact that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, 92% of casualties (between 2011 and 2016) were civilians.

Current research

AOAV's work is supported by other valuable research. In *Areas of Harm*, a recent report by PAX and Article 36, the researchers concluded that for civilians living in conflict zones, even when force is specifically directed at military targets, explosive weapons used kill and injure civilians, prevent access to basic services and force the displacement of populations.⁷

Even after fleeing the immediate threat, evidence suggests a common pattern of 'multiple' or 'repeated' displacement of civilians, often due to the widespread threat from explosive weapons across large swathes of territory. In some countries – such as Syria and Iraq – the threat of explosive violence is present in almost every urban area.

AOAV's report *Syria's Shockwaves* (2014) uncovered evidence of this trend, with a quarter of refugees interviewed telling of having been displaced inside Syria on more than one occasion, with one-third of refugees reporting being bombed or shelled as they fled.⁸

Displaced persons are particularly vulnerable to explosive weapons when on the move, often reinforcing their decision to flee across international borders rather than attempting to remain within their country of origin.

In Syria, since the civil war broke-out after protests against the Assad regime in 2011, 10.9 million people have been displaced – with 4.9 million fleeing across the border as refugees and another 6.6 million remaining displaced inside the country.⁹ In total, more than half of Syria's pre-war population have been forced to flee their homes since 2011, surpassing even post-WWII numbers.¹⁰ Between 2011-2016, AOA V has recorded 51,836 deaths and injuries in Syria caused by explosive violence; with 86% of these being civilians.

“Some days would be quiet or would only see a little violence and then suddenly your area would be targeted. The problem was that you never knew when your area would be targeted but it would only be a matter of time.”

Safi, a Syrian refugee seeking asylum in Greece.

Handicap International's 2016 report, *Escaping the Bombing*,¹¹ based on interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan, found that whilst the causes of displacement were multiple, the sentiment was universal among those interviewed that the threat of explosive weapons was the primary, overriding factor influencing their decision to flee.

The findings of this report – *The Refugee Explosion* – reiterate Handicap International's findings. Both reports find that there is a strong correlation between forced displacement and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, with 53% of those interviewed by AOA V citing war or conflict as their main motivation for fleeing.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS

Whilst the threat of physical injury from explosive violence is clear, what is often less recognised are the long-term psychological and mental health impacts of explosive weapons on refugee populations – particularly those who have experienced the effects of explosive weapons first-hand, in places such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Beyond their initial impact, explosive weapons can cause long-lasting psychological trauma and a multitude of mental health issues. Clinically speaking, an event is most likely to be traumatic if it happens unexpectedly, repeatedly or involves intentional cruelty.¹² Explosive violence is virtually always unexpected, such as the sudden detonation of a car bomb, a drone strike or a suicide attack. Other forms, which are more expected, tend to occur repeatedly, such as artillery shelling or the use of hand grenades.

80% of people injured by explosive weapons exhibit symptoms of severe psychological stress, not to mention the psychological trauma inflicted on the wider population who have had to live through the everyday fear of bombardment or IED strike.¹³ In addition, 66% of those surveyed were unable to carry out essential daily activities due to persistent feelings of fear, anger, disinterest and hopelessness.¹⁴

Even for a person only indirectly impacted by the explosion (for instance a witness), the experience can be traumatic. AOA V's report *Anatomy of a Suicide Bomber*, which investigated the impacts of the Moon Market bombings in Lahore, Pakistan, found that those that witnessed the horrific attack have gone on to suffer a variety of mental health issues, including many of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).¹⁵ Many had flashbacks of the events, others were easily distressed or suffered unending headaches. *Blood on the Streets of Boston* also confirmed these findings, with witnesses also reporting PTSD symptoms.¹⁶

The repeated use of explosive weapons in heavily-populated areas leaves residents having to deal with heightened levels of fear, distress, anxiety and uncertainty on a daily basis; feelings which manifest themselves in various ways in different individuals. Some may experience difficulty sleeping or carrying-out daily tasks, whilst others may fall into a state of depression and social withdrawal. These feelings often remain present long after a person has fled the conflict zone, and may have a lasting impact far into their lives. A disproportionately high number of refugees are known to suffer from PTSD, in comparison to those who have not experienced life in war-torn areas.¹⁷

In the first study of its kind, Save the Children examined the psychological impact of explosive violence on children in Syria. The study, *Invisible Wounds*, published in March 2017, found that almost all children and 84% of adults reported that bombing and shelling was the number one cause of psychological stress for children.¹⁸ 71% of interviewees said children were increasingly suffering from symptoms of toxic stress and PTSD.

Refugees may also face additional stresses as a result of physical injuries obtained from explosive weapons, with many facing a range of temporary or permanent impairments. Some have undergone dramatic changes in appearance or experienced the traumatic amputation of a limb, whilst many others have life-changing injuries such as loss of hearing or sight. As a result, affected persons may feel that their independence has been taken away, and that they no longer could play a useful part in family or community life, leading to feelings of detachment, withdrawal and hopelessness.

“The nightmares would be of the destruction of my home, about being hunted by the regime, the deaths of relatives and friends, being tortured, even my own death. Ther were very surreal and emotional. It was very difficult to handle”

Yazan, a Syrian refugee interviewed by AOA V in London.

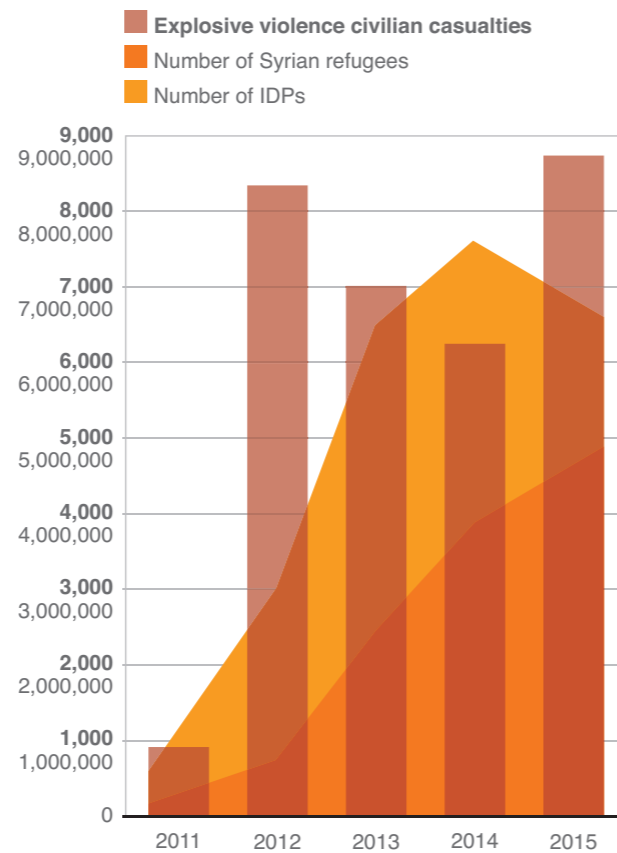
In *Syria's Shockwaves*, AOA V stated that 'lost in the endless news-cycle of deaths are the people who survived.'¹⁹ In this sense, the long-term suffering of refugee populations who have lived through the effects of explosive violence, often goes unreported and unrecognised.

UNHCR, along with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Mental Health and Psychological Support Network (MHPSS), have recently issued a multi-agency guidance note to humanitarian organisations working with refugees in Europe, providing details on best practice for ensuring adequate, appropriate and culturally-sensitive mental health support.²⁰ It is the hope of this report that AOA V's recommendations help highlight the urgent need for these best practises to be put into action.

DATA TRENDS FOR EXPLOSIVE VIOLENCE AND DISPLACEMENT

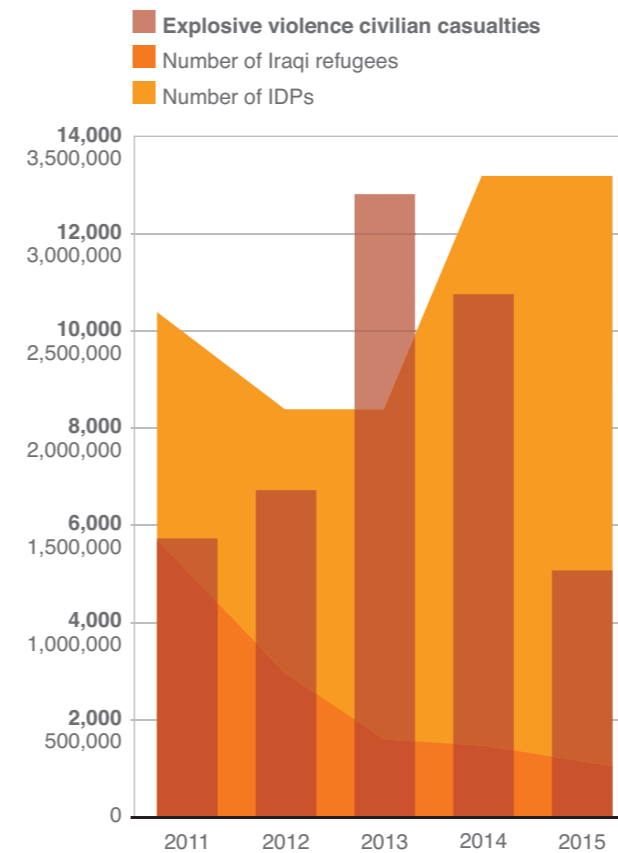
As expected, AOA V found a clear trend in the levels of explosive violence and the levels of IDPs and refugees fleeing from the most impacted countries. We acknowledged, however, that there are other factors that can influence the level of refugees and IDPs – such as ethnic violence or the state response – but explosive violence is consistently shown to be a significant cause of refugees. To the right you can see the figures of casualties, refugees and IDPs from five of the six most impacted countries from explosive violence between 2011-2015.²¹

Fig 1 Syrian explosive violence casualties v refugees and IDPs 2011-2015



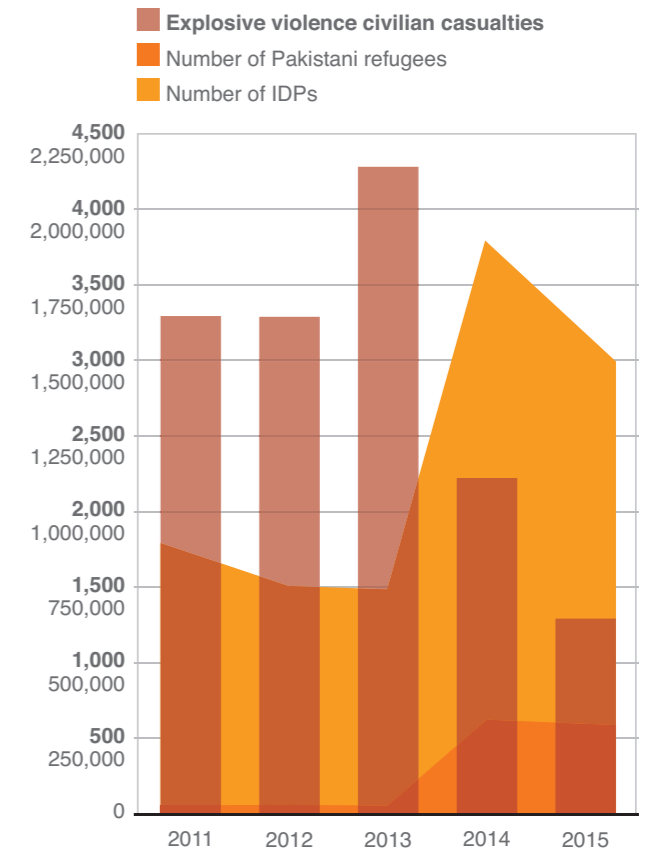
Syria: overall it can be said that as levels of explosive violence in Syria have increased from 2011-2015, so too have the number of Syrians living outside of the country's borders. The widespread threat of explosive violence has also led to large numbers of people being internally displaced, some of them on multiple occasions.

Fig 2 Iraqi explosive violence casualties v refugees and IDPs 2011-2015



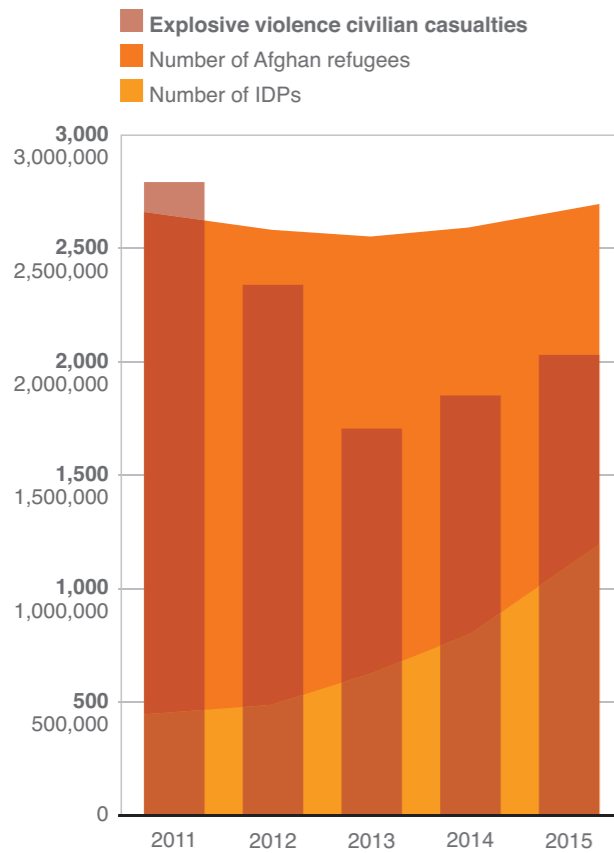
Iraq: the direct correlation between explosive violence levels and the number of refugees from Iraq is not as strong. A correlation, though, between explosive violence and displacement does still seem to be the case, although not as clear as in other affected countries. This is perhaps due to the fact that Iraq has been in a state of insecurity and conflict for many years, meaning that population displacement is sadly well entrenched and current displacement is driven by a variety of factors that are often related to changing dynamics within the country.

Fig 3 Pakistani explosive violence casualties v refugees and IDPs 2011-2015



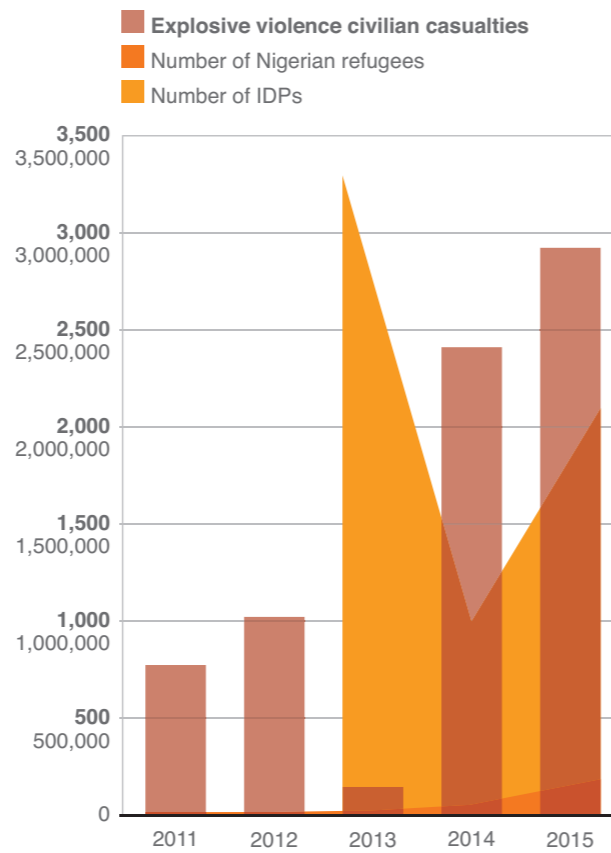
Pakistan: a comparison between explosive violence and population displacement in Pakistan shows a convincing pattern of correlation. This correlation was notably apparent between 2011-2012, when explosive violence levels went unchanged, something matched by an almost unchanged number of displaced persons.

Fig 4 Afghan explosive violence casualties v refugees and IDPs 2011-2015



Afghanistan: in Afghanistan, from 2011-2015, a persistently high level of explosive violence has been matched by a consistently high number of Afghan refugees, with Afghanistan maintaining its status as being historically one of the largest producers of refugees.

Fig 5 Nigerian explosive violence casualties v refugees and IDPs 2011-2015



Nigeria: In Nigeria, there appears to be a clear link between the level of explosive violence and the number of people fleeing the country. There are also huge numbers of internally displaced persons in Nigeria, with 2.1 million IDPs in 2015. However, data on IDPs in Nigeria was not available prior to 2013, making it difficult to establish a long-term trend.

4. REFUGEE DESTINATIONS

By the end of 2015, the UN reported that a record 65 million people around the world were displaced from their homes. In its annual *Global Trends* study, the UNHCR said the total figure included 21.3 million refugees and 3.2 million people awaiting asylum decisions, in addition to another 40.8 million internally displaced persons.²²

Conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have been the primary cause of displacement in recent years. Syria's civil war has created 4.9 million refugees and a further 6.6 million IDPs, whilst instability in Iraq has resulted in 250,000 refugees and 4.4 million IDPs.²³ Numerous other on-going conflicts in Libya, Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and the Central African Republic have only added to the global picture of mass displacement.

GLOBALLY

Internal displacement has been rising at a particularly fast rate globally, with 2015 seeing 8.6 million people newly-displaced within the borders of their own countries due to conflict and violence. This trend was particularly noticeable in Yemen, where more than 2.5 million people were displaced in 2015. However, the total number of IDPs in Syria declined from 7.6 million in 2014 to 6.6 million a year later, due to large numbers of already-displaced people fleeing across international borders and becoming refugees, highlighting the trend of 'multiple displacement'.²⁴

The majority (86%) of refugees under the UNHCR's mandate reside in low- and middle-income countries in relatively close proximity to the conflict zones from which they have fled. Turkey is home to at least three million refugees – mostly from neighbouring Syria – whilst Pakistan hosts 1.6 million, Lebanon hosts 1.1 million, and Jordan hosts in excess of 660,000.²⁵ Despite these countries retaining the dominant share of the burden, asylum applications to the European Union (EU) have also increased dramatically.

EUROPE

The total numbers of asylum seekers arrived to Europe has risen significantly since 2012.²⁶ In 2013, the EU-28 saw approximately 433,000 applicants, by 2015 this number had risen by over 200% to 1.3 million. Accord-

ing to Eurostat reports, between 2011 and 2016, Europe saw over 4.2 million asylum seekers. This huge influx of refugees has caused considerable debate among the EU member states as to how and where such numbers would be accommodated.

In 2015, the EU accepted approximately 300,000 refugees. This number swelled by 100% to 670,000 in 2016. In other words, EU member states increased their share of the responsibility.²⁷

Applicants

Germany saw the most asylum applicants in the EU in 2016, where authorities registered 745,155 applications. Italy had the second highest number with 122,960 applications in 2016, followed by France with 83,485 and Greece, where 51,110 refugees applied for protection. The UK ranks 5th with 38,785 applications.

Put in relation to a country's population size, the numbers change slightly. For example in the last quarter of 2016, Greece had the highest number of applications for asylum with 1,911 per million population, followed by Malta with 1,222, Cyprus with 1,202 and Luxembourg with 1,149. Germany ranks 5th as there were 1,005 applications per million population. The UK is on place 18 with 143 applications per million inhabitants.²⁸

Accepted

Germany accepted the most refugees with 140,910 positive decisions in 2015 and 433,905 accepted applications in 2016.²⁹ Sweden ranks second, with 32,215 positive decisions in 2015 and 66,340 in 2016, followed by Italy which accepted 29,615 refugees 2015 and 35,405 in 2016.³⁰

This does not necessarily mean Germany had the highest rates per application, statistically speaking. For example, in 2015, Bulgaria led the list of EU countries with positive asylum decisions with 91%, followed by Malta (83%), Denmark (81%), the Netherlands (80%) and Cyprus (77%). Germany ranked 10th, with an overall acceptance rate of 56%, Greece can be found at 16th with 41% and the UK at 18th with 37%.³¹

Applicants' countries of origin

In 2015,³² Europe saw the highest levels of asylum seekers from Syria (362,775), which accounted for 29% of all asylum applicants to Europe. Syria was followed by Afghanistan (178,230 or 14%), and Iraq (121,535 or 10%). Combined, asylum seekers from these three countries accounted for 53% of all asylum seeker applicants in Europe. Other countries in the top ten include: Kosovo, Albania, Pakistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Iran, and Ukraine.³³

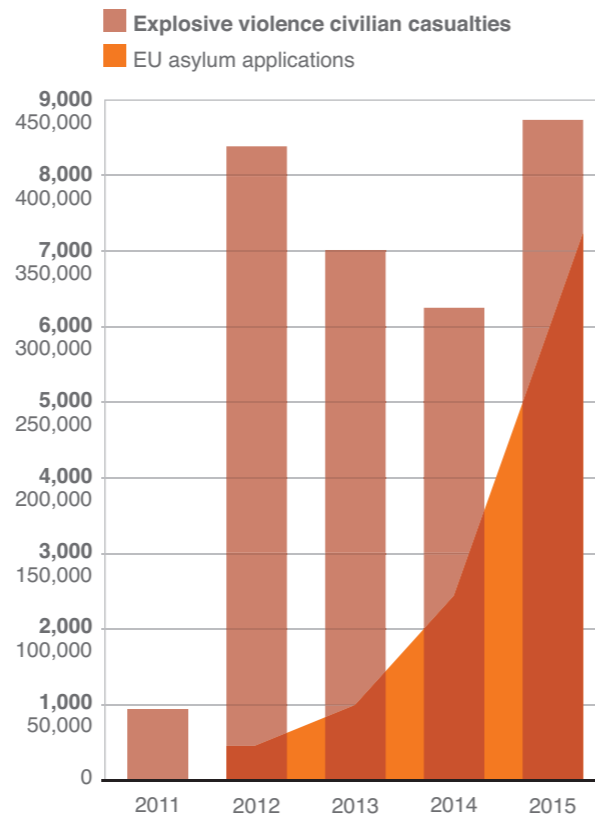
In the first three quarters of 2016, the trends remained largely the same but with increasing numbers from those countries most impacted by explosive violence.³⁴ Between 2014-2015 applicants from Syria increased by 302%, those from Iraq increased by 683%, and those from Afghanistan by 447%.³⁵

Accepted applicants' countries of origin

Over the past 4 years over which the full data is available, each of the five countries worst-impacted by explosive violence has displayed a year-on-year increase in asylum applicants from its citizens to the EU. In general, this correlates with a rising number of civilian casualties from explosive violence; however, there are huge variants in the likelihood of being accepted in Europe dependent on your country of origin. This section compares the AOV casualty statistics for Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria, with the EU recognition rates for asylum seekers from these countries, from 2011-2015.

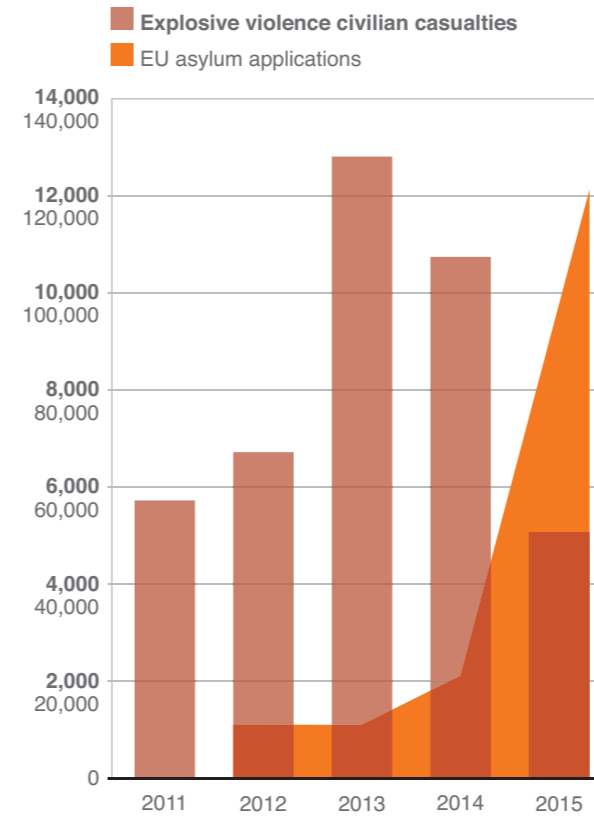
The tables and diagrams to the right, show the level of recognition in the EU – in percentage terms – for each of the five countries for the years from 2011-2015.³⁶

Fig 6 Syrian explosive violence casualties v EU asylum applications 2011-2015



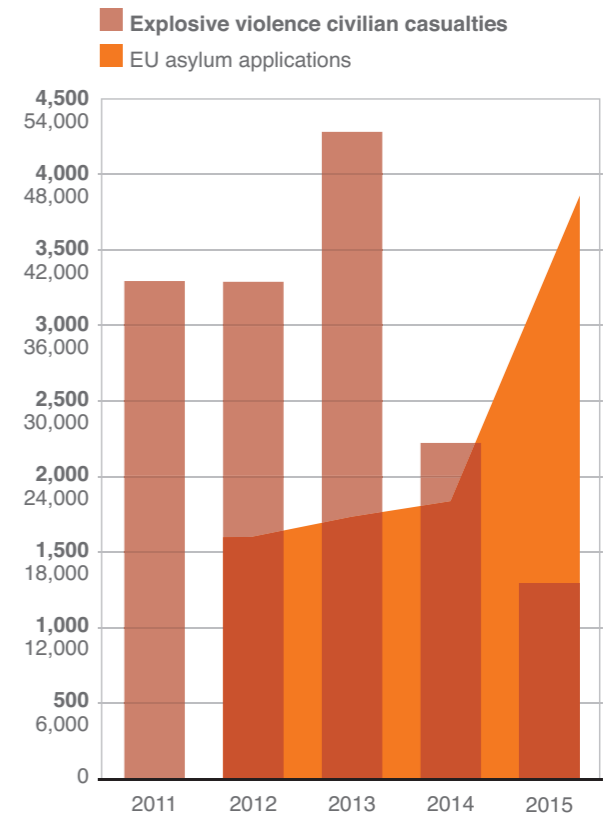
Syria: between 2012-2015 Syria has seen high levels of civilian casualties from explosive violence, which has corresponded with an increase in the recognition rate to over 90%. The recognition rate has not dropped below this level for the past four years, and at the time of writing stands remains 98%,³⁷ demonstrating a high level of recognition of the effects of explosive violence in Syria.

Fig 7 Iraqi explosive violence casualties v EU asylum applications 2011-2015



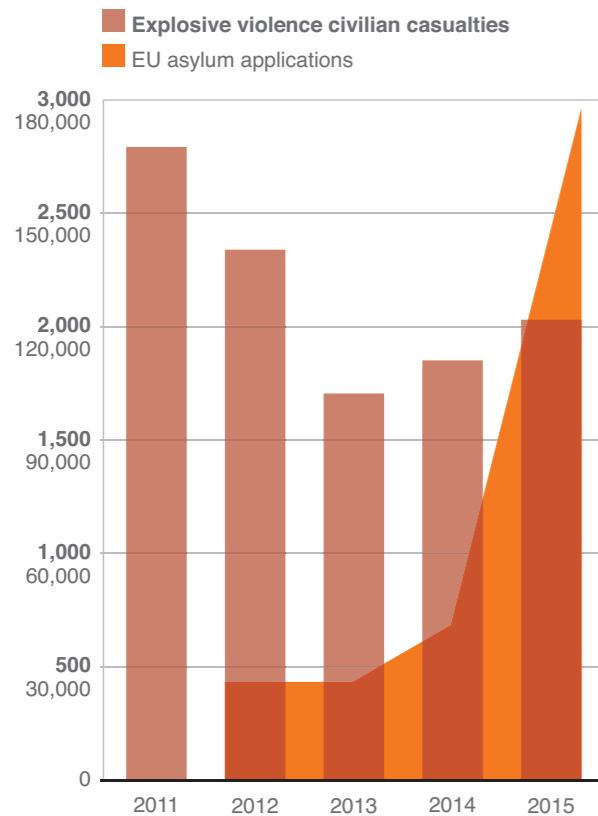
Iraq: The recognition rate for asylum seekers from Iraq has also increased over the last five years – from just 52% in 2011, to 85% in 2015. However, as the level of explosive violence has fluctuated considerably in Iraq and is not spread geographically evenly, a clear link cannot be established. Though, the increasing recognition rate likely reflects the increase in conflict and violence in Iraq more generally, of which explosive violence has been a dominant feature. Therefore, as one of the countries with amongst the highest levels of explosive violence, the recognition rate does to some extent reflect this threat, despite the absence of a clear correlation.

Fig 8 Pakistani explosive violence casualties v EU asylum applications 2011-2015



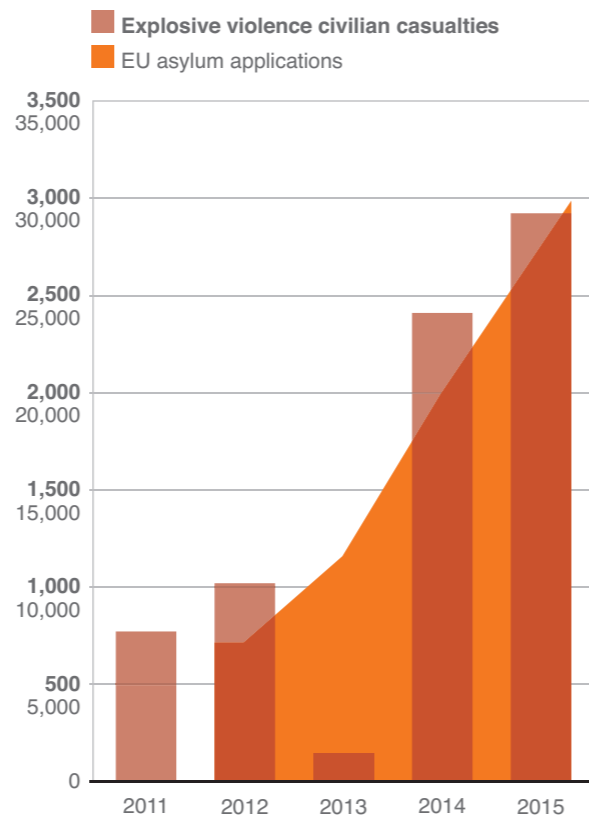
Pakistan: in Pakistan, increasing levels of explosive violence from 2011-2013 were reflected by a gradually increasing recognition rate, from 12% in 2011 to 27% by 2014. In the past two years, the recognition rate has remained constant despite decreasing levels of explosive violence. However, considering the high threat from explosive violence in the country, 27% is considerably lower than the rate of recognition in some of the other countries worst-affected by explosive violence – such as Iraq, and seen below, Afghanistan.

Fig 9 Afghan explosive violence casualties v EU asylum applications 2011-2015



Afghanistan: in Afghanistan, the increasing number of civilian casualties from explosive violence from 2013-2015 has been reflected by a gradual increase in the recognition rate for Afghan asylum seekers – the rate increased from 47% in 2012 to 65% in 2015. Therefore, it is possible that explosive violence, and the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan in recent times, have had an impact on decision-makers in Europe when it comes to granting protection status from people fleeing there. However, the rate of acceptance is still considerably lower than that for applicants from Syria and Iraq.

Fig 10 Nigerian explosive violence casualties v EU asylum applications 2011-2015



Nigeria: the recognition rate for Nigerian applicants increased steadily from 9% in 2011 to 30% in 2014, reflecting the rising levels of explosive violence in the country. However, the rate of recognition dipped slightly to 25% in 2015, despite an increase in the level of explosive violence. Overall, recognition rates for Nigeria have remained low in spite of rising levels of harm to civilians from explosive weapons. This is likely due to the location of the violence being restricted to only a few regions of Nigeria – making internal relocation a likely reason for rejecting applicants.

5. ASYLUM LAW IN EUROPE

INTERNATIONAL LAW

The 1951 Refugee Convention – formally known as the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees – is grounded in Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries.³⁸ Six decades on, the Refugee Convention remains the centrepiece of international refugee protection, and is the key reference document that guides the refugee policies of signatory states. It has seen only one amendment, the 1967 Protocol, which removed the geographic limitations, giving the Convention universal coverage.³⁹

The Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who, ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country.’⁴⁰ The Convention states that such persons should be granted refugee status, and should not be returned to their country of origin. However, the declaration is not legally binding and it remains up to the host country to decide whether or not they will grant asylum.

This definition takes the identity, beliefs and circumstances of the asylum-seeker into account, as the Convention was written shortly after World War II and in the context of fascist and communist persecutions. However, modern warfare and present reasons for displacement differ significantly from the situation of the mid-twentieth century.

From the Refugee Convention alone it would appear that explosive violence that is used indiscriminately is not considered under the 1951 Refugee Convention, as the definition is based on an individual threat. However, as the cause of refugee movements has changed, the law has tried to adapt.

Efforts to address this include the concept of complementary protection, which is based on a state’s human rights obligations rather than under the Refugee Convention.⁴¹ While there is no universally accepted definition of complimentary protection, it is generally considered that complementary protection attempts

to ensure protection to those who fall outside the 1951 refugee definition, through extending the principle of non-refoulement – the obligation not to return an individual to a place where they will suffer serious harm. This is particularly applied to those fleeing conflict, civil war and generalised violence.

These concerns have also been addressed by the UNHCR as they encourage states to widen the parameters of what may be defined as ‘persecution’ and an ‘individual’ threat. The most recent guidance on refugee status and armed conflict, *Guidelines on International Protection No. 12*,⁴² released by the UNHCR in December 2016, attempts to provide clarity on how armed conflict and violence are considered within the international legal framework.

The guidelines clarify that entire groups or populations may be at risk of persecution, which leaves each member at risk. An individual must just prove their fear of being persecuted is well-founded. The guidelines specifies that where communities are at risk from explosive violence⁴³ as well as other forms of indiscriminate violence amount to persecution under Article 1A(2) of the Refugee Convention.

The December 2016 guidelines of asylum and armed conflict explain that only when the armed conflict and violence and its impacts are geographically limited and confined to a specific part of the country would it be relevant to assess whether an internal flight or relocation alternative exists. In conflicts such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is clear this is often not the case. However, it remains that there is an absence of a binding international agreement on complementary protection, and therefore it remains largely at the discretion of state decision-makers.

EUROPEAN LAW

The EU directive on ‘standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection’, last amended in 2011, aims to ensure that the EU’s member states ‘apply common criteria for the identification of persons genuinely in need of international protection.’⁴⁴ The directive also aims to lay down standards upon which international protection should be granted in individual cases.

The directive defines ‘International Protection’, as encompassing both those who are refugees under the terms of the Refugee Convention, and those who alternatively qualify for complementary protection – or ‘Humanitarian Protection’ or ‘Subsidiary Protection’ as it is known in some countries. In this sense, those in need of international protection are defined as those who face ‘a well-founded fear of being persecuted or a real risk of suffering serious harm’ in their country of origin, from either state or non-state actors.

The directive states that those who have fled from the risk of persecution – on the grounds identified in the Refugee Convention – should be granted refugee status. Alternatively, subsidiary protection should be granted to those who have fled from the risk of serious harm. Article 15 defines what ‘serious harm’ may consist. Article 15 (a) and (b) cover execution and torture

or degrading treatment respectively. Whilst Article 15 (c), stipulates that serious harm may include ‘serious and individual threat to a civilian’s life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence, in situations of international or internal armed conflict.’

The armed conflict must then cause ‘indiscriminate violence at such a high level that... a civilian, if returned to the relevant country or, as the case may be, to the relevant region, would – solely on account of his presence in the territory of that country or region – face a real risk of being subject to that threat’, to invoke Article 15(c).⁴⁵

Explosive violence, such as that caused by IEDs, air strikes and ground launched explosive weapons, particularly in populated areas, would – it is this reports’ contention - be included in this definition,

as it is by its nature indiscriminate and often unpredictable.

Restrictions to the applicability of the indiscriminate-violence-clause are made in preamble 35, however. This states that ‘risks to which a population of a country or a section of the population is generally exposed do normally not create in themselves an individual threat which would qualify as serious harm.’⁴⁶ This complicates the ability to define a country plagued by explosive violence as a place where a person could face indiscriminate violence. According to this preamble, the violence has to pose an ‘individual threat’ instead of a ‘general exposure’.

The directive specifies that as part of the threat assessment in individual cases, it should be determined if internal relocation – within the country of origin – is possible to an area where the person would not face the risk of serious harm from which they initially fled in another part of the country.⁴⁷ In this sense, the level of threat across the whole country must be determined, and it must be ascertained whether the applicant is able to safely and legally travel to a safe area.

Art. 30 of the directive guarantees refugees, and persons eligible for subsidiary protection, access to healthcare under the same eligibility conditions

as nationals of the Member State. It further states that the healthcare must be adequate and should include the treatment of mental disorders. However, it remains under state discretion to decide what qualifies as a mental disorder worth treating.

The EU directive on ‘common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection’, last amended in 2013, provides additional insight into asylum policy and desired norms across the EU. The directive states that the EU aims to forge a ‘common policy on asylum’ leading towards the development of a ‘Common European Asylum System’,⁴⁸ for the benefit of those who, ‘forced by circumstances, legitimately seek protection in the Union.’ It is remarked that such a policy should be governed by the principles of solidarity and responsibility-sharing between member states, including sharing the financial burden of dealing with refugee issues.

EU Regulation No. 604/2013, often referred to as “Dublin III” or the “Dublin regulation”, determines that the Member State through which an asylum-seeker first entered the EU has to process this person’s application.⁴⁹ This has meant that Greece, Italy and Malta carry the political and economic burden of refugees arriving in Europe – northern countries have “outsourced” their border controls.⁵⁰



A mother and her children at the Berkasavo border crossing between Serbia and Croatia, October 2015, Trocaire IMG_4720.

6. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

The refugee crisis has had significant impact on European states and Europe as a whole. The huge influx of refugees to Europe has seen major shifts in policy and regulations. A few attempts have been made – to varying levels of success – to try and ease the burden that the crisis has placed on the member states most impacted, some of which were facing pre-existing strains on their economy.

EU-TURKEY DEAL

On March 18th 2016, the EU and Turkey attempted to end irregular migration from Turkey to Greece. The deal required Turkey to reduce illegal migration to Europe and accept refugees returned from Greece to Turkey. In exchange, the EU agreed to accept one Syrian from Turkey for every Syrian returned, lift visa restrictions for Turkish citizen entering the EU and to pay €3bn to Turkey as well as an extra €3bn at the end of 2018.⁵¹

“Bombs targeted the camp where I worked, fortunately I had already left work to go home. The suicide car bomb destroyed the camp, but the Army camp has been rebuilt. There are many attacks in Kabul, but if they can they rebuild and continue as it is the only way to live there. You are constantly in fear of the next bomb and you cannot know if you will make it home alive.”

Ahmad, an Afghan refugee in Greece.

Whilst refugees did continue to cross to Greece, the deal drastically reduced the number of arrivals compared to the previous year.⁵² However, it also changed power relations between the EU and Turkey as the EU became dependent on Turkey’s adherence to the agreed pact – Turkey threatened to terminate the agreement multiple times.⁵³

Consequently, Turkey’s human rights violations such as the crackdown on critical media, the purges after

the attempted coup on 15 June 2016, and their repeated shelling of Kurdish forces, have not been widely challenged by Europe’s leaders. Moreover, the deal was criticised for undermining the constitutional values of the EU, as it was concluded without consulting the European Parliament or asking the ECJ to give an opinion, and the agreement potentially breaches the principle of non-refoulement.⁵⁴

It is also questionable whether Turkey can be considered a safe or legal country to return refugees to – both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch found that Turkey was neither.⁵⁵ No Syrian, Afghan or Iraqi could request refugee status there, as Turkey excludes non-Europeans from qualifying for refugee status.

SECURITISATION

In the wake of a number of terror attacks in the EU, European states have started to securitise⁵⁶ the issue of migration and refugees, stating that terrorists could abuse Europe’s asylum regime and that an external population constitutes the greatest security threat to Europe. Securitisation speech related to refugees and migrants have increased in EU policies⁵⁷ and external European borders have hardened.⁵⁸

During the refugee crisis’ peak, seven European countries re-introduced border controls. In July 2015, Hungary built barbed-wire barriers at its border to Serbia to fence off illegal immigration, followed by a close down of borders between Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia, as well as between Scandinavian countries and Germany and Denmark.⁵⁹

According to EU treaties however, border controls are only permissible if they are a timely response and do not exceed a period of two months in duration.⁶⁰ In November 2016, European trade ministers decided to prolong border controls, notably Germany, Austria and Scandinavian countries would keep up their controls for at least three more months.⁶¹ In February 2017 these were extended for another three months.⁶²

Greater securitisation has also seen new emergency state laws, infringements on the principle of legality, the freedom of expression, right to liberty, freedom of movement and stripping of nationality, as well

as violations of the principle of non-refoulement and deeper surveillance. The exact changes vary between countries; while Poland, Hungary, Belgium, the UK and France have moved towards a restriction of citizens’ rights in the wake of the Paris attacks in November 2015, other states have infringed on freedoms and rights only marginally – such as Germany, Denmark and Austria – or not at all such as Sweden, Italy, Malta and Finland.⁶³

In this sense, explosive violence has been a major cause of the securitisation process in Europe, both in the shape of a perceived threat of terrorist attacks and through the mass influx of refugees from countries that are heavily plagued by explosive violence.

CRISIS COSTS

The exact costs of the refugee crisis are hard to calculate and range from €10bn for Germany⁶⁴, around €8bn for Sweden⁶⁵ and €2bn for Austria⁶⁶ in 2015 alone.

In March 2016, the European Commission set up a plan to relocate €700m extra aid to first-arrival countries, notably Greece.⁶⁷ These funds are unlikely to fully cover the expenditures created by the mass influx of refugees.

ANTI-IMMIGRATION SENTIMENT IN EUROPE

The Euro-crisis, continuous economic stagnation, immigration and, of course, the refugee crisis have all contributed to a political shift to the right. Although it is hard to measure which factor played what role, the refugee crisis appears to be a driving factor behind the right’s success, as their campaigns contain anti-immigration, anti-asylum and, often, anti-Islamic rhetoric.

In recent and upcoming elections, anti-immigration parties have seen increasing influence, including, Marine Le Pen of the *Front National* in France, Geert Wilder’s of the *PVV* and the *AfD* in Germany. All have promised to crack down on ‘illegal’ immigration. *AfD*’s leader Frauke Petry even suggested that officers should shoot at refugees entering the country illegally.⁶⁸ Sweden and Austria’s recent elections, also saw right-wing parties gain significant ground.

Sweden Democrats, the Swedish anti-immigration and nationalist party, won 13% in the 2014 general

elections, up from 5.7% in 2010.⁶⁹ FPÖ presidential candidate Norbert Hofer, who campaigned for Austria’s populist, anti-immigration party, was only narrowly defeated during elections in 2016. His opponent Alexander Van der Bellen won with 50.7% of the votes.⁷⁰ Both countries have the highest refugee acceptance per capita rates.

In the UK, the far-right UKIP drew upon anti-immigration sentiment during the debate to decide whether the UK should leave the EU (Brexit). Immigration was brought up in every debate with the Leave campaign insisting that the UK must be in complete control of its own borders. Farage warned of immigrant criminals,⁷¹ Muslims’ failure to integrate,⁷² and extremists among refugees.⁷³ As the vote approached polls showed growing concern among the UK public about the levels of immigration.⁷⁴ In the end it was shown that a key motivator for leave voters was ‘for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders’.⁷⁵

While the driving factors for the rise of right-wing sentiment and nationalism across the EU cannot be laid entirely at the door of refugees, it is clear that the media’s often critical reporting of the refugee crisis, the way in which the terms ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ have become interchangeable as a means to describe even those fleeing explosive violence, and the often lack of balanced debate about the moral and legal responsibilities there is for handling those being forced to leave war zones, have all contributed to the rise of polarised debate and inflammatory political posturing.



Crossing a border in Hungary in August 2015, Gémes Sándor/SzomSzed.

7. THE CASE STUDIES: GERMANY, THE UK, AND GREECE

AOAV identified three countries that have presented very different reactions to the crisis, as well as situations for the refugees and asylum seekers that inhabit their borders. AOAV sent field researchers to investigate how each country is responding to the refugee crisis. Refugees and asylum seekers in Greece, Germany and the UK were interviewed about their experiences in the host country as well as their reasons for seeking refuge. In total, over 250 filled in a questionnaire on such issues across the three countries. Below are AOAV's findings from each case study.

7.1 CASE STUDY: REFUGEES IN GERMANY REFUGEE DATA

In 2015, according to Germany's own refugee agency data, Germany registered a historic peak of 1,091,894 asylum seekers, the highest number of refugees arriving in a Western country since World War II. While 53,347 refugees applied for asylum in Germany 2011, that number rose by almost 400% within three years and by 2014, Germany was to receive some 202,843 applications. In the following year, this number soared further by 235% to 476,649 and reached its peak in 2016 with 745,545 applications.⁷⁶

This upwards trend was mainly caused by a surging number of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, all of which rank among AOAV's top six countries worst affected by explosive violence 2011 to 2016.⁷⁷ The number of Syrian nationals who applied for protection in Germany skyrocketed by 10,108%, from 2,634 in 2011 to 266,250 in 2016. 7,767 Afghan nationals applied for protection in Germany 2011, which increased by 1,635% to 127,012 in 2016. Applications from Iraqi nationals rose by 1,648% from 5,831 in 2011 to 96,116 in 2016.⁷⁸

The same three countries stand out as the countries whose nationals' applications have the highest acceptance rates. In 2015, 95.8% of Syrian applicants were granted protection⁷⁹, 85.5% of Iraqis and 27.8% of Afghans. Applicants from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Macedonia are consistently rejected with acceptance rates below 1%.⁸⁰

Germany's refugee policy follows four patterns; first, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan constantly rank among the top countries of origin, the top countries for positive

asylum outcomes and are also among those most heavily affected by explosive violence. Secondly, refugees from Balkan countries are not affected by explosive violence and rejected with little exception. Thirdly, applicants from Nigeria, Yemen and Pakistan are predominantly rejected as well, although all three countries rank among the AOAV's list of countries worst affected by explosive violence.⁸¹ Iran and Eritrea, where refugees are often persecuted according to the UN definition of a refugee, have a consistent acceptance rate of approximately 40%.⁸²

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

On August 25th 2015, Berlin suspended the Dublin III regulation for Syrian nationals, thereby allowing them to apply for asylum in Germany even if they entered another EU Member State first. The step refuelled the debate of refugees in Germany – with politicians seeking to separate between 'economic migrants', people who come to Germany seeking personal economic betterment, and refugees who are forced to flee war and persecution.

Domestically, the arrival of refugees appears to have fuelled the rising popularity of right wing parties. Ten of the sixteen *Länder*⁸³ in Germany had elections for their state parliaments from 2014 onwards. In all ten, the German neo-conservative right wing party 'Alternative for Germany' (*Alternative für Deutschland – AfD*)⁸⁴ moved into parliament. Their presence is strong in Saxony Anhalt with 28% (25 of 87 seats), Mecklenburg-Vorpommern with 25% (18 of 71 seats) and Berlin with 15% (24 of 160 seats). In such a way, then, it is fair to surmise that explosive violence has been the main factor in propelling refugees to Germany and that concern over refugees in Germany has helped caused the rise of right wing parties there.

Such political changes have happened despite a relative absence of refugees being portrayed badly in the media. According to one media analysis, out of 34,000 examined articles from 2009 to 2015 in the German language media, 82% drew a positive picture of refugees, 12% were neutral and 6% were negative.⁸⁵

Furthermore, when the Dublin regulation was suspended for Syrian nationals, all the main German newspapers – FAZ, SZ and the tabloid paper Bild – backed

Merkel's decision. The reasons for this support can be partly found in Germany's history.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung, 'coming to terms with the past', plays a dominant role in the German political discourse. The collective guilt of the Holocaust, linked to the notion that Germany has learnt from its past contributed to the responsible media coverage and a widely positive reaction towards refugees who flee from war and violence.

Furthermore, the refugee crisis has been seen to many to constitute a massive economic stimulus programme for Germany. Estimated costs of the refugee crisis range between 20 and 30 billion Euros. This has boosted SME growth and created employment, despite the common perception of "foreigners stealing jobs".⁸⁶

ASYLUM LAW AND POLICY

All applications for asylum in Germany are processed by the Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees (BAMF).⁸⁷ This agency decides which type of protection the German state offers to an asylum seeker. Such an application can have five potential outcomes; an applicant is awarded refugee protection (*Flüchtlingsschutz*); entitlement to asylum (*Asylberechtigung*);

subsidiary protection (*subsidiärer Schutz*); a national ban on deportation (*nationales Abschiebungsverbot*); or the applicant is rejected (*abgelehnt*).⁸⁸

From a legal perspective, refugee protection and entitlement to asylum are different in Germany as asylum constitutes a constitutional right, whereas refugee protection is a status defined under international law. De facto, a person granted refugee protection receives the same rights and benefits as a person entitled to asylum.

The right to asylum is based on Article 16a para. 1 of the Basic Law and is granted to a person who is persecuted on political grounds. A person entitled to asylum receives a residence permit for three years, is entitled to privileged family reunification, unrestricted access to the labour market and can apply for citizenship after three years, if sufficient knowledge of German language and a stable income can be shown.⁸⁹ Refugees are granted the same rights.

Section 3 subs. 1 of the Asylum Act transposes the UNCRSR provisions into German law. Accordingly, refugee status is awarded in Germany following the definition from 1951.⁹⁰

Of the refugees and asylum seekers AOAV spoke to in Germany:



67% were impacted by explosive violence



22% were offered psychological support



40% said their home had been destroyed



47% witnessed airstrikes



57% witnessed shelling



50% witnessed IED attacks

Section 4 subs. 1 of the Asylum Act transposes the EU Directive's targets into German national law. German law uses the exact wording of the Directive on serious harm. Although the provisions of preamble 35 2011/95/EU are not included in the German Asylum Act,

serious harm has to exist in the form of an 'individual threat'. Legally speaking, this excludes many types of explosive violence, as its indiscriminate nature does not intentionally target individuals. Civilian casualties are termed a 'by-product'.⁹¹

According to AOA's field research, the 'individual threat' lies at the heart of Germany's asylum decision-making. Refugees must prove that the threat they face is more than a general exposure to war and violence, except for Syrian nationals who arrived between 25th August 2015 and 20th March 2016. Authorities scrutinise the evidence meticulously; refugees are obliged to present written evidence, show pictorial evidence and describe situations in full detail in order to prove their origin and story.



Refugee camp in Hamburg, Germany.

Bans on deportation

Bans on deportation are issued when an applicant is rejected but where a return to the home country would breach Germany's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), or if the 'foreigner faces a substantial concrete danger to his or her life and limb or liberty' (Section 60 subs. 5, subs. 7 Residence Act).

Though these bans are a 'method of last resort', issued when the court judges the situation too dangerous for the applicant to return, critics say that they cause stress, fear and uncertainty as the situation is reassessed every six months, leaving the individual in a state of permanent insecurity as to their future.

Most recent bans on deportation have been issued for Afghan nationals: 19% of all applications from Afghan nationals in 2015 and 18.9% in 2014.⁹² These high numbers indicate that explosive violence may well be considered a reason for a ban on deportation. Nonetheless, Germany began to deport rejected asylum-seekers to Afghanistan in December 2016.⁹³

SUPPORT

According to the German Federal Chamber of psychotherapists (BPTK)⁹⁴, between 40 and 50% of refugees in Germany suffer from PTSD and around 50% show signs of depression. Approximately 40% of those with a psychological illness were reported to have plans to commit suicide or had tried to do so. However, only 4% of refugees of those suffering from PTSD had access to therapy.⁹⁵

German law (Directive 2013/33/EU was transposed into national law) only grants psychological assistance to unaccompanied refugee minors, and to victims of torture, rape or other forms of serious psychological, sexual or physical violence. Explosive violence does not constitute a reason for treatment.

Usually, authorities determine whether an asylum seeker is to be granted access to therapy in the first 15 months of the application process. Problems often lie in such decision-making; officials or doctors are often responsible for determining the extent of psychological wounds, not qualified psychologists. Additionally, psychological illness is often judged as non-urgent or treated solely with medication.⁹⁶ After 15 months, refugees have the same access to public healthcare as German nationals.

AOA's research found that many refugees in Germany are not informed as to how to access psychological support. Moreover, psychological problems are not recognised as a medical problem in the cultures of some of the refugees, hence seeking such support is

often stigmatised. Most importantly, refugees are often too traumatised to leave their camps to seek support; flashbacks, the unknown environment and even open racism on the streets can, it was said by some, become an insurmountable barrier.⁹⁷

AOAV FIELD RESEARCH

102 questionnaires were completed in Germany. Of those who filled in the questionnaire, the three main countries of origin were Syria (with 51), Afghanistan (18), and Iraq (13).

Experience of explosive violence

According to AOA's field research in Germany, 67% of refugees interviewed said that they were personally impacted by explosive violence. 55% of Syrians said that they were directly affected by or exposed to explosive violence, compared to 92% of Iraqis and 100% of Afghans.

47% reported witnessing the use of airstrikes, 57% saw shelling and 50% had seen an IED attack (including roadside bomb, suicide attack, and car bomb) – all of which fulfil the criteria to most likely cause trauma, as they are unexpected, repetitive and/or intentionally cruel.

Reasons for fleeing

51% said that they were fleeing from war, whilst an additional 13% cited safety as their main reason for fleeing.

40% of the refugees reported that their homes were destroyed, while 29% did not know what happened to their homes.

Support

22% of refugees that AOA spoke to in Germany said they had been offered psychological assistance. It must be noted, however, that highly traumatised refugees may not leave the confines of the camps or agree to be interviewed, so this number is unlikely to represent the exact situation.

FINDINGS

Germany showed an impressive dedication to human rights when it symbolically opened the doors for refugees from Syria on 25th August 2015. Seven

months later, the doors were closed. The EU-Turkey deal, largely negotiated by Merkel after she came under pressure from the right, was a step back from this position.

AOA interviewed many refugees who lived in Turkey before they travelled to Europe, and all agreed that Turkey is increasingly becoming autocratic, civil rights are being eroded, refugees struggle to find paid work, and support is limited to their most basic needs. Accordingly, the EU-Turkey deal should be subject to greater scrutiny, and re-evaluated so that the needs and safety of refugees are held above all else, with parallel support from EU states to ensure these provisions are met in Turkey.

Germany's deportation of refugees back to Afghanistan should be done with extreme caution. Afghanistan has been plagued by explosive violence for decades and consistently ranks among the top five countries worst affected by explosive violence on AOA's Explosive Violence Monitor. Many refugees from Afghanistan that AOA spoke to were deeply fearful of deportation – there have been reports of Afghan returnees from Pakistan and Europe who have been killed when they were returned and others who committed suicide after being told they were being deported.⁹⁸

Whilst Germany for the most part provides adequate living situations for refugees, the main problems are for those who must reside in mass shelters in which more than 100 people live in a single space. Mass shelters can be an extremely stressful environment, particularly for pregnant women, children and those who suffer from psychological distress. Germany should avoid the use of such shelters and seek move those residing in these shelters to somewhere more adequate.

Psychological support is essential for many refugees and may be necessary to help integration. The free psychological care that was provided to some was said to be incredibly helpful to those that AOA interviewed. However, those in most need often do not receive such support, as many are either unaware the support exists or do not know how to access these services. AOA found repeatedly that those who witnessed explosive violence experienced mental

suffering, however support was rarely offered. More efficient screening and extending psychological assistance to more refugees is considered likely to have a positive effect on refugees and German society as a whole.

“After a few sessions of therapy my life started to feel more normal and manageable. Even the nightmares started to subside and I began to sleep normally again.”

Fareshta, an Afghan refugee AOV spoke to in Germany.

Germany’s asylum law requires the asylum-seeker to define the ‘individual threat’ he or she faces at home. Such specific issues require professional translations; however, these are often not available. As Afghans do not enjoy the high acceptance rates of Syrians and often do not fall into the Refugee Convention category of a refugee, they must meticulously describe the threat they face at home. For such complex topics, interpreters and translations need to be well-trained and under oath. Inadvertent mistakes could lead to the deportation of a whole family.

7.2 CASE STUDY: REFUGEES IN THE UK REFUGEE DATA

According to Home Office data, there were 30,603 applications for asylum in the UK in 2016. Since 2011, such asylum applications have increased by 54%. Compared to the previous year (2015), however, 2016’s figures represent a decrease of 7%, and a substantive decrease from the highs of 1999 to 2002. 2002, for instance, saw 84,132 applications for asylum.

8,466 people saw their asylum applications granted in the UK in 2016, with an average acceptance rate of 34%. Whilst asylum acceptance rates had been increasing in the last five years – with a rise to 41% of all cases in 2014 – 2016 marked a return to the lower levels seen in 2011.

Countries of origin

In 2016, there were 1,859 decisions made on Syrian applications; of these, 86% (1,591) were granted. Throughout the entire EU the recognition rate of Syrian refugees was 96% in 2015.⁹⁹

In 2015, only 20% of Iraqis seeking asylum in the UK were allowed to do so, with 216 being granted protection. The overall EU recognition rate for Iraqi refugees was 85%. In 2016, UK acceptance levels sunk lower, with just 12% of decisions on applications from Iraqis being granted. Though the levels of explosive violence decreased in 2015, civilian deaths and injuries from such violence were still so severe that Iraq was still the third-most impacted state by explosive violence in the world that year.

On the other hand, there were 346 asylum applications granted to Albanians in 2015 – 24% of all asylum decisions for Albanian applicants. This is not to say that the Albanians granted asylum were undeserving, but to question as to why the levels of Iraqis being granted asylum was lower, given the greater threat explosive violence plays in Iraq.



Figure 11 Katie Hopkins column in The Sun.



Figure 12 Daily Mail cartoon by Mac.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Some of the UK’s most popular newspapers have been regularly accused of virulent anti-refugee sentiment, and are linked with the rise of anti-immigration sentiment across the UK. The most popular perpetrators of such rhetoric are the Daily Mail, the Daily Express and the Sun.¹⁰⁰ Between September 2015 and September 2016, the Daily Express had 62 front page news stories of their print edition on immigration, whilst the Daily Mail had 60, and the Sun, 23.¹⁰¹

Working then as a columnist in the Sun, Katie Hopkins, has described refugees as a ‘plague’, ‘feral’, and ‘cockroaches’, amongst other slurs. Her column also advocated threatening refugees with violence and using gunboats to stop them crossing the Mediterranean. The column was condemned as inciting racial hatred, and the UN Human Rights Chief encouraged the UK to take steps to ‘curb incitement to hatred by British tabloid newspapers’.¹⁰² Hopkin’s language has been compared to that used in the run up to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and in Nazi propaganda.¹⁰³

The Daily Mail has also provoked complaints for its portrayal of refugees. In a cartoon, published in the Mail in November 2015, rats were depicted alongside armed men crossing across the ‘open borders’ of Europe. Many have drawn parallels between that image and those that were used to represent Jews in Nazi propaganda.

These examples are extreme but the fact that such papers feel they can, and should, publish such hatred



„Wie mühte man uns draußen sein, daß wir diese herrlichen Kulturträger freigeben und der anderen Welt zur Verfügung stellen.“

Figure 13 Nazi Europe propaganda published in Viennese newspaper 'Das Kleine Blatt' in 1939.

is problematic. Figure 14, highlights some of the more prevalent news stories on immigration in these papers.

What is particularly concerning is the conflation between refugees and economic migrants. Those who are anti-immigrant in the UK rarely refer to refugees as refugees, instead preferring to call them migrants so no distinction is made between those fleeing because of war, persecution or humanitarian reasons and those seeking a better life. As Katie Hopkins recently wrote in the Daily Mail: “I don’t care if you want to call them migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. All semantics to me.”¹⁰⁴

Such rhetoric is not only prevalent in the tabloid press, but is also becoming increasingly common in politics, with politicians, particularly from the far-right party United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), drawing on such expressions. UKIP’s former leader, Nigel Farage, notoriously campaigned in front of a poster showing a long queue of refugees, claiming that the UK was at ‘breaking point’.



Figure 14 Composition by Liz Gerard from SubScribe, <http://www.sub-scribe.co.uk/2016/09/the-press-and-immigration-reporting.html>

Much of the Leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum was fuelled by such anti-immigrant sentiment. A key motivator for Leave voters was ‘for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders’.¹⁰⁵ Since the decision to leave the EU was made, there has been a rise in racism and hate incidences; in some areas this has been by as much as 100%.¹⁰⁶ This violence has been targeted both at European and non-European immigrants.

The latest political development in regard to the refugee crisis in Europe has seen the UK government terminate its efforts under the Dubs agreement. The Dubs agreement was meant to see the UK commit to resettling 3,000 unaccompanied minors in the UK – instead the UK is taking 350.

Conservative MP, Pauline Latham argued that it was not Britain’s responsibility to take in refugees and that it is not the UK’s fault if refugee children live in unsafe and inhumane condition elsewhere in Europe and the UK does not intervene.¹⁰⁷ Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, called the scheme a magnet for people traffickers and an incentive for migrants.¹⁰⁸

ASYLUM LAW AND POLICY

The UK Home Office currently operates three refugee resettlement programmes through the UNHCR:

- The Gateway Protection Programme for refugees with pressing humanitarian or security needs and those unable to return to their countries of origin or integrate locally (quota of 750 people per year);
- The Mandate Refugee Scheme for refugees with close ties to the UK (just eight arrived under this route last year);
- The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme for Syrian nationals currently living in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt or Iraq with specific vulnerabilities (quota of 20,000 people over five years 2015 - 2020 – in the first two years 5,706 were received).¹⁰⁹

Most asylum procedure occurs through asylum claims. In the UK, the guiding principles and obligations under the Refugee Convention are laid out in a document titled ‘UK Asylum Policy Instruction: Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status’.¹¹⁰ A separate document outlines the UK’s ‘Guidelines on Humanitarian Protection’.

The UK’s guidelines on assessing credibility and refugee status, are based upon three areas of relevant legislation: the 1951 Refugee Convention, the EU’s Asylum Directives, and part 11 of the UK Immigration Rules.

The *Guidelines on HP* detail the specific nature of ‘serious harm’ and ‘indiscriminate violence’ which may be faced in the applicant’s country of origin. The guidelines ask caseworkers to take into account ‘general levels of violence and other severe humanitarian conditions’ when deciding whether to grant humanitarian protection, specifying situations in which ‘civilians are at real risk of random injury or death... for example, by indiscriminate shelling or bombing of civilian areas.’ Decision makers should consider additional factors such as whether ‘hospitals are coming under fire’; whether conflict has caused ‘dire humanitarian conditions’; or instances in which parties to the conflict are using ‘indiscriminate methods of warfare in densely populated urban areas, with no regard for the safety of the civilian population.’¹¹¹

Caseworkers must also consider if internal relocation (within the country of origin) is a possibility. This requires full consideration of the situation in the country of origin.



A view of Calais Jungle, July 2016, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/67570481@N04/24369972720/> malachybrowne.

The UK’s asylum regulations also state that caseworkers must provide a safe and open environment to facilitate the disclosure of information, and must assess the claimant’s oral testimony and written evidence, against the background of detailed information about the situation in the origin country. A successful application is said to require a relatively low standard of proof, with caseworkers told to assess to what extent

the evidence presented can be considered accurate to a ‘reasonable degree of likelihood’.¹¹²

Despite this, many refugees interviewed in the UK still reported to AOVV that the process felt like an interrogation, in which they felt dehumanised and where they were treated with rudeness and aggressiveness – they expressed concern for those going through the process who were vulnerable.

Country of Origin Information and explosive violence in UK Law

According to government procedures, Country Guidance (CG) can be used by case owners to gauge the level of explosive violence in origin countries. However, CG reports can be unreliable and difficult to use.¹¹³ CG reports on the security situation of a particular country is generally only used when an asylum seeker does not qualify for asylum under the Refugee Convention, or the ECHR.¹¹⁴ If claims are successful under these avenues then it is highly likely that the success of the claims was not based on the level of explosive violence in a country but rather on the ‘individual threat’ of persecution faced by the applicant in their country of origin.

If claims are not successful under these avenues, then civilians¹¹⁵ may be successful under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive, which allows asylum applicants, if successful, to be granted subsidiary protection.¹¹⁶ The UK Upper Tribunal (UKUT) has stated that the Article 15(c) definition of indiscriminate violence encompasses bombings (or shootings) in which populated areas are targeted or where civilian casualties are likely to result, as being ‘collateral’.

In assessing whether country violence is enough to pose indiscriminate risk to civilians, certain criteria has been adopted. This includes whether the warfare used: targets civilians, or increased the risk of such casualties, how common this warfare is amongst the parties to the conflict, whether fighting was localised or widespread, and the number of civilians killed, injured, or displaced.

For example, the UK appears to recognise the threat of indiscriminate violence, including explosive weapons, faced in Iraq as part of their Country Guidance on asylum applications for Iraqi nationals.¹¹⁷ The Country

Guidance in [2015] UKUT 00544 highlights the risk of indiscriminate violence in ‘certain parts of Iraq’, and specifically lists the governorates of Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewah, and Salah Al-din. The document further expresses that: ‘there are substantial grounds for believing that any civilian returned there, solely on account of his or her presence there, faces a real risk of being subjected to indiscriminate violence amounting to serious harm within the scope of Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive.’ Since this CG report was given however, the UK has recorded a decrease in harm in Diyala, Kirkuk and Salal Al-din so they no longer reach the threshold to invoke Article 15(c).¹¹⁸

“They rejected my asylum application because they believed I could move to another area in Iraq. They don’t understand that there is nowhere I could move to in Iraq where I would be safe.”

Ahmad, an Iraqi refugee in London, UK.

The guidance also highlights harm in ‘parts of the “Baghdad belts”’, though this largely ignores the fact that over half of all civilian deaths and injuries from explosive violence recorded throughout Iraq in 2015 took place in Baghdad city. The guidance goes so far as to say that the ‘degree of armed conflict in the remainder of Iraq (including Baghdad City) is not such as to give rise to indiscriminate violence amounting to such serious harm to civilians, irrespective of their individual characteristics, so as to engage Article 15(c).’ The guidance further states that Iraqi nationals – or at least the individual subject of the case referred to – could relocate to Baghdad City.

According to the Home Offices’ own data, the levels of fatalities and injuries in Baghdad are significantly higher than in the contested areas.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, whilst most of the violence in the contested areas is carried out through shooting – a more targeted form of killing – the majority in Baghdad are caused by explosive weapons, most significantly, IEDs – which are far more indiscriminate and kill or injured far more people with each incident.¹²⁰

When examining the situation in Baghdad City in more detail, the Country Report finds that given the large population in Baghdad City, the proportional level of civilian deaths and injuries are not indicative of sufficient indiscriminate violence so as to engage Article 15(c). The country report does, however, recommend that a Baghdad City resident wishing to avoid such violence could avoid ‘busy public places’, as these are one of the primary targets for attacks. From AOA’s research, these ‘busy public areas’ are the ones that are most impacted by explosive violence in Baghdad City, and include markets, shops, restaurants/cafes, checkpoints, mosques and residential areas – they are also areas that are generally considered necessary places to visit in order to conduct a normal life.

To this end, it appears highly likely that levels of explosive violence faced by an asylum seeker back in their home country are not given enough weight in the UK’s consideration of indiscriminate violence. Particularly, at least in the case of Iraq, the UK government does ‘not find that the level of violence in Baghdad city, or in Baghdad governorate as a whole, comes even close to crossing the Article 15(c) threshold.’

Of the 7,756 killed and injured by explosive violence in Iraq in 2015, 65% (5,047) were civilians. 54% of civilian deaths and injuries occurred in Baghdad City. As such, there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that civilians in Baghdad face enough of a risk of serious harm so as to engage Article 15(c).¹²¹

Furthermore, the UNHCR advises that it would not be appropriate for States ‘to deny persons from Iraq international protection on the basis of applicability of an internal flight alternative or relocation alternative.’¹²² In comparison, the CG report for case owners on Yemen recognises that the use of indiscriminate violence is ‘likely to be at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that a person, solely by being present there, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person.’¹²³ Internal relocation is also not seen as a viable option, despite the huge levels of IDPs across Yemen. Yemenis, it should be noted, seldom seek refuge in the UK.

What is significant about the UK’s CG report on Yemen is that it refers to the harm caused not only

by non-state actors, but also from the use of cluster bombs and airstrikes on civilian areas, as part of the indiscriminate violence faced by civilians. Airstrikes and cluster bombs are perpetrated by the Saudi-led coalition, whom the UK government not only assist with intelligence but also provide weaponry to, including cluster bombs.¹²⁴ AOA has found that 85% of the civilians killed and injured in airstrikes in Yemen, throughout 2015 and 2016, were in populated areas, such as schools, homes, markets, and hospitals. In 2015, Yemen saw more civilian deaths and injuries from air-dropped bombs than anywhere else in the world. UK supplied weapons have even been found at the sites of unlawful attacks.¹²⁵

It is also worth noting that, in general, asylum seekers in the UK are entitled to free legal support but as there is a ‘serious shortage of providers’, likely due to the poor pay for such work, meaning that those that do provide this service are often over-stretched.¹²⁶ This has meant that some asylum seekers face significant difficulties finding a solicitor that will take on their case.

SUPPORT

All refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to free access to healthcare and free or concessionary trans-

port to help them attend appointments.¹²⁷ Those with healthcare needs should also be provided with suitable housing by local authorities – this is not always the case.¹²⁸

In October 2016, the UK government decided not to appeal against a decision that meant disabled refugees could access disability support in the UK, lifting a two-year restriction on accessing such support, after a court found this to be discriminatory.¹²⁹

However, the government has been refusing to consider applications under the resettlement scheme from people with disabilities since January 2017. In February 2017, it was revealed that the UK has stopped accepting disabled child refugees, as they believe that the UK cannot cope with their needs.¹³⁰ Given that most refugees are fleeing explosive violence and explosive violence is a major cause of disability, this decision is a heavy blow to those minors seeking to flee violence.

It has also been reported by the Refugee Council that ‘there is an urgent need for accessible accommodation’ for refugees.¹³¹ A more general issue with refugee housing was also reported by those AOA spoke to in the UK.

Of the refugees and asylum seekers AOA spoke to in the UK:



59% were impacted by explosive violence



18% were offered psychological support



35% said their home had been destroyed



59% witnessed airstrikes



63% witnessed shelling



51% witnessed IED attacks

Depression and PTSD are considered disabilities, and counselling and mental healthcare should also be provided for free to disabled refugees.¹³² However, there is often deep stigmatisation around mental health in many refugee communities, as confirmed by many of the refugees AOA V talked to. Possibly partly because of this, very few of the refugees AOA V spoke to were offered psychological support. One even suggested that due to the ill treatment encountered during the rest of the asylum process, they would be unlikely to accept anything offered by the government, unless there would be assurance that the support offered would be conducted by someone with similar experiences. This was due to the considerable lack of empathy he had previously witnessed.

“We were just hoping and praying that the bombs would not hit our building. But, we also knew that if it is not ours, it is someone else’s. There was a constant bombardment throughout the night.”

a Syrian refugee interviewed in the UK.

UK’s refugees are also likely to experience language barriers when seeking assistance at all levels.¹³³ This can be particularly detrimental for medical assistance due to the specific nature of the language alongside any cultural barriers on physical and mental health.

REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

In the UK, refugees and asylum seekers completed 51 questionnaires. AOA V faced difficulties in reaching out to asylum seekers in the UK, as they are far more dispersed and in smaller numbers than in Greece or Germany. The UK also saw a wider range of country or origins from those talked to. Of the 51 refugees and asylum seekers AOA V spoke to 27 were from Syria, four from Pakistan, three from Afghanistan and Iraq, two from Eritrea, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Nigeria and Iran, and one from Mali and India.

Experience of explosive violence

76% of the refugees and asylum seekers who answered the questionnaire had witnessed explosive violence in their country of origin. 59% had witnessed airstrikes, 63% had witnessed shelling, and 51% had witnessed IED attacks.

Those from Syria accounted for 53% of respondents. Of those from Syria, 93% had witnessed explosive violence.

59% of those refugees from Syria told AOA V that their home had been destroyed. Others reported looting, or their homes having been taken over by one of the rebel groups operating in Syria.

59% said they were directly impacted by the explosive violence they witnessed. Many had family members killed or severely injured, or were injured themselves.

Reasons for fleeing

When respondents in the UK were asked why they fled their country of origin, 24% said they fled due to war. Another 24% cited safety as their main reason. Of those from Syria, the numbers were largely the same: 19% cited war and 37% cited safety. Other reasons included political persecution.

Support

18% of the respondents said they had been offered psychological support. Of those from Syria this was 15%.

One respondent told AOA V that they had been offered psychological support but this was due to domestic violence suffered in their home country. The respondent also explained to AOA V that though she was offered psychological support it was very hard for her to take-up the offer as she had to travel to London if she wished to receive the support offered – she lives in Brighton and said she could not afford the expense or time whilst looking after her toddler. Another who had been offered support due to the torture they suffered, reported that their costs for travel to receive support were not covered.

FINDINGS

It was clear from AOA V’s research that one of the main hindrances to someone seeking refuge from explosive violence in the UK is the application of the law. Whilst explosive violence in the country of origin is considered from those fleeing such countries worst impacted by explosive violence, such consideration lacks consistency and logical explanation. The evidence provided in the country of origin advice was often contradictory to the advice given, as shown. Furthermore, whilst the information is said to rely on expert findings, the advice of UNHCR experts was often ignored.

This shows a failure to adequately address the consequences of explosive violence under the UK’s asylum law, despite a strong recognition of the role such violence plays in an asylum seekers decision to leave their home.

Not only was the law itself confused but the asylum process itself was reported to be traumatic – a place where empathy was rarely shown and where those trying to navigate the process felt dehumanised. Many of the respondents spoke English fairly well and were not otherwise vulnerable, but they expressed particular concern for others that were vulnerable who would have to navigate the same process.

“In May 2016 my home town, Salamiyah, was bombed. There were also many suicide attacks across the city centre and even the coastal areas, which were considered safe. My sister sent me a message – it said ‘don’t come back’.”

Riam, a Syrian refugee who was studying in Brighton UK.

The UK’s media and political voice also present difficulties for those fleeing explosive violence. Again, there is the same pattern of dehumanisation and a lack of empathy. That the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) felt this was an area to comment on in their report on

the UK shows the gravity of the problem. Such sentiments should be better addressed, particularly when such opinions seem to be giving rise to an increase in hate crime and racism.

The UK’s failures at a national level reflect their inaction at a regional level. In comparison to some other European leaders, the UK is doing little in the face of the refugee crisis, with the apparent hope to do even less. The UK must join those other leaders in Europe trying to make at least some attempts to fairly address the refugee crisis– fairness for both the countries currently under the most strain and the refugees.

7.3 CASE STUDY: REFUGEES IN GREECE REFUGEE DATA

Applicants

Greece saw 171,785 arrivals by sea alone between January and November 2016, according to the UNHCR.¹³⁴ The high number reflects the fact that the Turkey-Greece route is one of the two corridors into Europe. Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis refugees are known to generally travel overland using this route. Eritreans, Nigerians, Somalis, and others from Sub-Saharan Africa mostly use the Libya-Italy route. Despite this, as noted above, the EU-Turkey deal has seen the number arriving through the Greek route drastically decline.

Greece saw 11,360 first time asylum applications in 2015. In 2016, there was a significant rise in first-time asylum applicants, likely due to the border closure, blocking travel beyond Greece. In 2016, Greece registered 49,875 first-time asylum applicants. Compared to the same period in 2015, this signifies a rise of over 300%.

Accepted

In 2015 Greece gave a positive response to approximately 4,025 asylum seekers, amounting to 41% of all decisions – the remainder were rejected. The number of asylum seekers that received a positive decision in 2015 reflected an increase of over 100% since 2014, or an increase of over 4000% since 2012.

In 2016 however, the number of positive decisions decreased significantly. This period saw only 2,710 positive asylum decisions, with an overall recognition

rate that dropped to 24%. Compared to the same period the previous year, this was a decrease of 33%.

Countries of origin

Of the first-time asylum applicants to Greece in 2015, 29% were from Syria, 14% from Afghanistan and 13% from Pakistan. Of the arrivals to Greece in 2016, 47% were from Syria, 24% from Afghanistan, 15% from Iraq, and 5% from Pakistan.

Since the EU-Turkey deal, Syrian applications for asylum are prioritised but if it is found that they could have applied to Turkey for asylum they are inadmissible, and may be returned to Turkey under the EU-Turkey deal. The applicants from countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are prioritised next, as they are often considered to be economic migrants. The Afghan, Iraqis and Iranians often have to wait months in poor conditions for an answer, as these cases are considered more complex.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The ‘financial crisis’ that has blighted Greece has greatly impacted the way in which refugees are seen by many. Many Greeks were impoverished and made homeless – one third of the population are now said to be living in poverty¹³⁵ – and from this wreckage an animosity between people in general has arisen, with a loss of social and community structure and a prioritisation of familial survival.¹³⁶ This context is needed in explaining the rise of the right in Greece.

Golden Dawn is Greece’s most prominent far-right neo-Nazi group, with some of its members currently facing trial for constituting a criminal organisation, and others being held responsible for violent attacks, including the murder of rapper Pavlos Fyssas in September 2013 and the stabbings of anarchist group members in June 2008. It is now the country’s third-largest political party and represents about 10% of the popular vote.¹³⁷ The party often speaks out against the ‘illegal immigrants’ in the country.

Golden Dawn supporters have violently targeted refugees and refugee camps. In November 2016, concerted attacks took place at the Souda refugee camp on the island of Chios. Attacks saw rocks and Molotov cocktails being thrown into the camp. Tents

were burnt down and at least two refugees were injured.¹³⁸ Many of the squats¹³⁹ housing refugees in Athens have also been subjected to such attacks, again using Molotovs and gas bombs, causing fires and significant damage to the squats.¹⁴⁰

Golden Dawn supporters have also enacted violence against those supporting refugees. In January of this year, a Golden Dawn MP and others stormed a school providing education to refugee children. They were accused of verbally and physically attacking parents and teachers present.¹⁴¹ Journalists covering protests have also been attacked.¹⁴²



A child asylum seeker allegedly beaten by police and handcuffed to a chair for four days. Photos taken by Advocates Abroad, on Samos.

Another recurring theme in these attacks is that the police stand by and often only intervene once the trouble is over. There have even been accusations of police complicity in these events,¹⁴³ and police brutality to asylum seekers.¹⁴⁴

But all is not bleak. Whilst many have mobilised in support of the far-right, there has also been a respondent surge in anti-racism and refugee solidarity groups. These have sought to bridge divisions between local Greeks and refugees, and have also provided shelter through squats to many refugees, such as in the City Plaza Hotel in Athens. Despite the hardships most Greeks face, many citizens are engaged in assisting the refugees – at camps and donation centres aid from Greek citizens constantly flows in. Such small acts of

human kindness are often omitted from reporters’ notebooks.

ASYLUM LAW AND POLICY

Asylum seekers in Greece have different options dependent on whether they arrived in Greece and registered with the Greek Asylum Service on, before, or after March 20th 2016 – the date of the EU-Turkey deal.¹⁴⁵

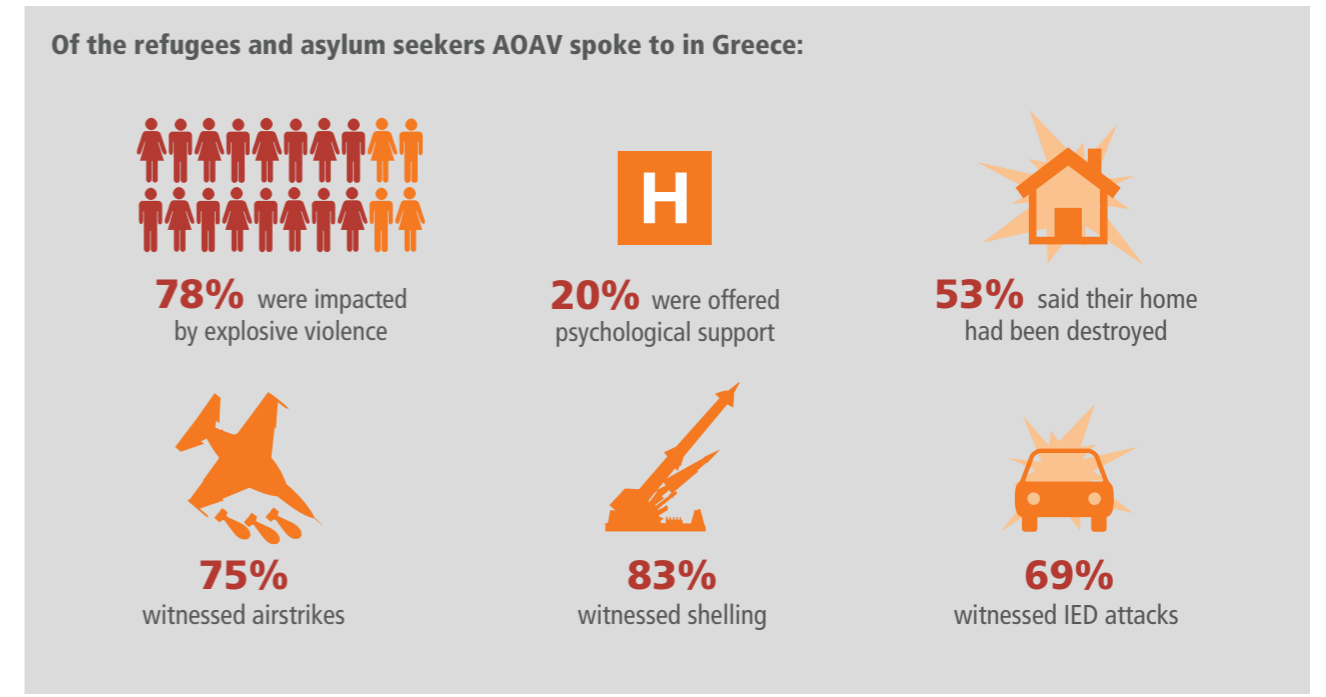
Asylum seekers who arrived and registered before March 20th had the option of relocation as well as seeking asylum in Greece, being reunified with their families or being granted assisted voluntary return. Syrians, or Palestinians from Syria, were entered into the Syria Fast Track procedure for asylum.¹⁴⁶

To make an application for asylum an asylum-seeker must personally lodge an application before the Asylum Office. This can be done in many areas around Greece and on the islands, as well as in the detention centres. At the Asylum Office they are asked for their personal data and some questions on their origin, journey and reason for leaving. An international protection seeker’s card is then issued that is valid for six months. During this process, asylum-seekers are also given the date of their interview. Assistance for interviews can be sought only through non-governmental organisations.

If an asylum-seeker’s reason for fleeing their country is due to a serious and individual threat to their life or person by means of indiscriminate violence in international or internal armed conflict, then they are considered eligible for subsidiary protection. If, however, there is fear that their life was in danger due to their religion, ethnic group, nationality, social group, gender, sexual orientation or political views, then there is considered due reason to grant refugee status.

In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and the Court of Justice of the EU declared that the asylum system in Greece suffered from ‘systemic deficiencies,’ including a lack of reception centres, poor detention conditions, and the lack of an effective remedy.¹⁴⁷ Whilst much has changed since this declaration, the asylum system in Greece is still stretched beyond capacity, particularly given the country’s financial situation since the Euro-crisis.

Whilst no procedure is meant to last longer than six months, except in special circumstances, it has been reported by those in the field that such processes usually last around nine to ten months, and there have been cases where they have lasted a lot longer. This leaves the refugees in a protracted limbo, often in ‘horrifying’ conditions for those on the islands.¹⁴⁸



Changes in law

Plans afoot to reinvoke the Dublin rule and to return refugees to their first EU port of call could place even greater burden on those member states where migrants first arrive, placing Greece particularly under further pressure. Additionally, as of January 2017, less than 1,000 asylum seekers had been returned to Turkey under the EU-Turkey deal, though a slightly higher number have been returned under a bilateral Greece-Turkey deal – over 1,000 crossed the sea to Greece in January 2017 alone. The existing deal does not seem to be working.

SUPPORT

Provisions of support are very different in Greece compared to those provided in other European countries. This is primarily due to Greece's position as an arrival point for refugees fleeing to Europe, but often not the final destination. Many are spread through refugee camps or housed in temporary accommodation. The conditions these refugees are living in has been widely reported on by NGOs working there, such as MSF, and by journalists.¹⁴⁹ The lack of food, sanitation, medicine, warmth and space are common observations.

Someone seeking political asylum in Greece should be able to access free medical care and treatment in Greek public hospitals. However, it has been reported that though refugees are sent to hospital if there is a need, there are very often no translators available, making treatment difficult. Free treatment for refugees has also caused tension in Greece where many Greeks have lost healthcare coverage and have seen hospitals operating at dangerous levels.¹⁵⁰

As well as physical health struggles for refugees in Greece, such as deaths from hypothermia, Greece has also seen a number of suicide attempts by refugees – particularly in the island camps. The process for applying for asylum and the uncertainty and monotony this involves, has been reported by many to lead to feelings of exasperation and hopelessness. This, alongside the trauma many have already suffered and the poor conditions many refugees live in, is thought to exacerbate psychological trauma and mental instability.¹⁵¹

Whilst psychological assessment and assistance is offered through Greek NGOs, *Medicine Sans Frontieres* and the Greek Refugee Council, this is primarily only offered to victims of torture and similar violence.



Elliniko refugee camp at the old airport base near Athens.



Mansour, an Afghan refugee, talks to AOA outside the Elliniko camp, Greece.

Others may ask for psychological support. However, due to the cultural taboo surrounding such assistance as seen by many refugees, this is not something that is often sought, or if it is, may be subject to long waiting lists.¹⁵² Psychological evaluations for asylum seekers who have experienced torture or rape see refugees waiting up to a month.¹⁵³

Volunteers and NGO employees in the Greek camps state that many refugees suffer from intense PTSD, but despite this need, trauma and psychosocial support workers are 'few and far between'. There is little state-sponsored support and often psychosocial volunteers must be relied upon. While these volunteers are more accessible, they can often only stay for a short duration and are extremely busy when there.

It is also believed that, as Greece is often not a final destination and more a place of transit, many refugees that might need psychological support are not ready to seek such help. They are still in 'survival mode' and do not yet have the stability needed to thoroughly address the trauma they have suffered. It should be noted that some NGOs have started providing psychological support to those reliving difficult memories

and experiences. The NGO Advocates Abroad, in particular, has begun to roll out this support alongside their advocacy work, recognising the desperate need for this kind of assistance in the asylum process.

REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Experience of explosive violence

Asylum seekers and refugees filled out 106 questionnaires in Greece. They came from Syria (50), Afghanistan (39), Iraq (15) and Iran (2). 92% of refugees interviewed had witnessed explosive violence in their home country. Of these, 75% had witnessed air strikes, 83% had seen shelling, and 69% had IED attacks (including suicide attacks, car bombs, and roadside bombs).

Of the Syrian refugees, 96% had witnessed explosive violence in their home country and 70% had been impacted by the violence. The most common explosive violence witnessed by Syrians was shelling at 88%. 80% had also witnessed airstrikes and barrel bombs. Forms of violence generally perpetrated by only non-state actors had been witnessed by far fewer – 16% had seen suicide attacks, 26% for roadside bombs, though 42% had witnessed car bombs.

68% of Syrians said their home was destroyed by the violence. Most (84%) had made attempts to relocate internally before leaving Syria.

Of the Iraqis questioned, 100% had witnessed explosive violence. However, the data here is slightly skewed given that a disproportionate amount were from a group fleeing from the violence perpetrated in Sinjar in 2015 – the Sinjar massacre.

“When we were attacked in the camp, many of the Yazidi's experienced flashbacks to the violence of Sinjar – many are affected by the violence and it takes time to process the horror we witnessed.”

Abdullah, a Yazidi refugee in Greece.

95% of those from Afghanistan had witnessed some form of explosive violence. 69% had seen airstrikes, 74% had seen shelling, 90% had witnessed IED attacks.

Reasons for fleeing

Refugees were asked to explain why they had fled their country of origin. Of all those who answered the questionnaire, 70% cited the war in their country as their reason for fleeing. 14% said they fled due to specific non-state groups, such as the Taliban or ISIS.

All the Syrians that responded cited the war as their reason for fleeing Syria. Some also gave additional reasons; 12% explained they needed to flee Syria to seek medical treatment for their child/children; an additional 14%, alongside war, said they were seeking a better future. Of those from Afghanistan, 49% cited war as a reason for leaving Afghanistan. Other reasons given by the refugees included seeking safety, and escaping the Taliban or ISIS.

Of the Iraqi refugees, 100% cited either ISIS or war as their reason for fleeing.

Support

20% of all applicants had been offered psychological support. When broken down by refugee's country of origin AOA found similar results.

FINDINGS

The situation for refugees in Greece is far from ideal. Many of the refugees that AOA spoke to reported knowing people who wanted to return home, even to Syria, because of the situation in Greece. As one refugee put it: 'better to die in the ashes in Syria, than live with no hope in Greece'.

The conditions in the camps have been widely reported but what is reported on less, is the frustration and loss of hope many refugees described. Numerous reported depression amongst their friends and family because their futures were so uncertain. They sought refuge in Europe and found a situation that, for some, exacerbated the trauma they had already suffered.

It was clear from AOA's findings that the majority of those arriving in Greece were from countries highly impacted by explosive violence. This was a likely finding

given that crossing the Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece is the main route for those fleeing Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite the trauma such indiscriminate violence causes to individuals, very little psychological support is given to those who have experienced high levels of explosive violence.

It is evident many aspects of the refugee process in Greece operate poorly; from the camp conditions to the asylum process itself. Whilst there have been improvements, Greece continues to receive little support accommodating so many refugees. Though funding and other assistance have been provided, Greece – and Italy – are still overwhelmingly burdened the most by this crisis, while many countries across Europe do very little.

For example, by December 2016, the EU had only met 5% of its relocation goals. Hungary and Poland had not taken any asylum seekers from Greece or Italy. Slovakia had taken nine, and the Czech Republic had taken 12. The UK and Denmark chose not to participate in the scheme. The EU had also only delivered €677m of the €3bn promised for Syrian refugees in Turkey by the end of 2017.¹⁵⁴



Skaramagas refugee camp, Skaramagas port, Greece.

8. REPORT FINDINGS

The report found that 85% of all refugees AOA spoke to had experienced explosive violence. 69% said that they or their family had been personally impacted by the explosive violence.

53% cited war as their reason for fleeing their home country – an additional 8% that had been impacted by explosive violence, cited safety as their reason for fleeing.

Whilst the level of psychological support offered varied by country, overall, 20% reported being offered such assistance.

It is clear that decade-long insecurity, brutal air campaigns, ruthless military commanders and frequent suicide attacks have been a significant cause for millions of people to leave their homes and families in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and many other countries. Civilians have consistently borne the majority of this violence – when explosive violence is used in populated areas, 92% of the casualties are likely to be civilians.

However, the link between explosive weapons and refugees is poorly considered across states and their implementation of international and regional law. In the light of ever-increasing refugee numbers fleeing explosive violence, the standardised international legal definition of a refugee needs to be adapted to the realities of 21st-century warfare, or greater efforts need to be made to ensure the rights of those fleeing indiscriminate violence.

The lack of clear, consistent mechanisms granting refuge to those in dire need has led to widespread and significant distress among those legitimately fleeing harm. The EU-Turkey deal allows refugees to be returned to a country in which they cannot be guaranteed adequate protection and likely in contradiction of the non-refoulement principle. It has also seen refugees in camps on the Greek islands remain for considerable time in often degrading or unsafe conditions. Deportations to Afghanistan and Iraq by some countries in Europe over the last few years, raises questions about the importance of refugees' safety in such circumstances and seems to be a response to the prioritisation of national politics over the lives of vulnerable refugees.

Throughout AOA's research, Afghans were found, particularly, to face harsh circumstances in most of the countries examined. They were often left the longest in poor conditions and were also highly likely to face deportation across all the case study countries examined. More focus should be given to, and evidence provided for, the decisions as to whether such countries are, indeed, 'safe' to deport to.

The reverberating impacts of explosive violence are also far less understood than its immediate horror; from the psychological impacts to the political impacts on the countries that provide refuge to those fleeing such violence, more research needs to be done and more engagement on a policy levels needs to be undertaken. The UK, Germany and Greece, together with most European countries, have seen sharp increases of anti-immigrant sentiment and hate crimes. It is the governments' responsibility to do everything in their power to punish hate and race crime perpetrators and stigmatise such sentiment within politics and the press; all too often governments reinforce such sentiments through speech and securitisation actions.

AOA found that despite the trauma many refugees had already faced, they were forced to endure further stress when they reached Europe. Many refugees are forced to live in poor condition and face the frustration of waiting for their responses for years that, after having witnessed the effects of brutal violence and war, exacerbates mental conditions. Refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan already suffer from collective, trans-generational trauma and are in dire need of support.

Psychological assistance plays a crucial role in rehabilitating refugees. Therapy sessions can enable refugees who suffer from insomnia, lethargy, nightmares, depression or PTSD, to start living a normal life. However, the infrastructure of public health systems in Europe are ill-prepared to cope with the exceptional psychological needs of refugees from war zones. Moreover, the level of psychological distress caused by explosive violence was not adequately recognised and very little support was offered.

There is a pressing need for further research to be conducted into the extent of psychological issues

“One problem is that, whilst every Syrian, particularly those that have seen some of the most recent escalations of conflict in Syria, probably needs psychological support because of the trauma they have suffered, because of our culture, most are unlikely to seek such support.”

a Syrian refugee in Greece.

amongst the recent influx of refugees to the EU from Syria and multiple other conflict zones, and into the extent of mental health support already available for traumatised refugee populations.

The EU as whole has been overwhelmed by the levels of those seeking refuge in Europe. However, many EU states have done little to split the responsibilities evenly, leaving states such as Italy and Greece to bear much of the burden. Germany is a notable exception to this.

Whilst these states suffer, with infrastructure unable to cope and rising right-wing or anti-immigration sentiment, it is the refugees who suffer the most and whose needs are often the least considered among the deals and bureaucracy.

Germany’s decision to suspend the Dublin III regulation for Syrian nationals and open its doors demonstrated commitment to humanitarian values and the principle of burden sharing in the EU. Although the EU-Turkey deal closed these doors seven months later, more than half a million Syrians found refuge in the country since.

Other European countries have, in respect to their population size and economic resources, poorly responded to the refugee crisis. Many wealthy European nations including the United Kingdom and France have done comparatively little in comparison.

The Dublin decision publicly demonstrated that explosive violence can be a reason for displacement. The omnipresent images and reports of the war in Syria gradually made it impossible to ignore the human suffering, even though from a legal point of view, many Syrians do not fall into the category of a refugee under the Refugee Convention.

Germany also proved that, despite time limitations, infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of refugees can be efficient and adequate. While mass shelters remain a troublesome issue, the camps that AOA V visited in Germany were well-equipped, clean and allowed the occupants to live a life in dignity.

Hamburg and Bremen particularly, stood out as two federal states where organisational approaches to refugee housing, integration of refugees into the labour market and healthcare were outstanding. Many EU states would do well to look to Germany’s example as a responsible reaction to the refugee crisis.

The inadequate response by the majority of EU members, however, is far from the only problem, as it has followed-on from an equally inadequate response to its underlying drivers – including the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. There is a clear and urgent need for a more co-ordinated international approach – not just to tackle the refugee crisis, but also to confront one of its core drivers – explosive violence in populated areas.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- AOA V calls on States and other actors to politically commit to refraining from using explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.
- States and users of explosive weapons should work towards the full realisation of the rights of victims, including those killed and injured, their families, and affected communities. They should strive to ensure the timely and adequate provision of needed services for the recovery, rehabilitation, and inclusion of victims of explosive violence, without discrimination.
- States and international organisations should seek to update the standardised definition of a refugee in a way that recognises the progress through international law guidelines and complementary law.
- More research is needed to better understand the long-term harm from the use of explosive violence; including the psychological impacts, the harm to infrastructure and services, public health, economic livelihoods, and environmental contamination that such violence brings.
- Efforts should be made to reduce the stigma amongst some refugee communities on psychological support. Such efforts should be constructed in dialogue with the impacted communities and victims therein.
- States should increase the scope of psychological support so it routinely covers those who have experienced a high level of explosive violence. Greater efforts should be made to recognise and address the psychological distress that such violence can cause.
- More should be done to distribute evenly the EU responsibility for refugees so as to reduce the burden on first-arrival countries, including greater financial provisions to these countries and a further relaxing of the Dublin rule.
- Greater attention should be paid to the incitement of hatred against refugees. Governments must not be party to such sentiments and must properly penalise those who incite hatred or commit hate crimes.

“These upsetting figures help to explain why so many people are forced to flee their homelands and seek sanctuary in other countries. Armed conflict and violence from explosive devices in the Middle East and beyond has created a global refugee crisis. These people are not fleeing out of choice, they are doing what any of us would do if we and our families were living with armed violence raining down danger and terror on our homes – they are trying to get away to a safe place.

I believe that most people in the world will understand this and call on our government to do more to help protect refugees fleeing explosive violence.”

Thangam Debbonaire MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees.

10. APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

UK



Yazan, a refugee from Syria, who AOA V met and interviewed in London.

Name: Yazan
Area/country of origin: Idlib, Syria
Current residence: London, UK
Interview date: 07/02/2017

Yazan fled to Turkey, from Syria because of the rising violence and as he was a vocal critic of the regime. Whilst his home town in Idlib was under regime control it had been too dangerous for Yazan to go, as he had spoken out against the regime. However, as soon as Idlib came under rebel control he travelled back to visit his family.

The family home had been under constant bombardment for the previous ten days, so when he arrived they all immediately went down into the basement. When they went up to the apartment and assessed the damage the rooms were covered in debris – they decided to sleep in the basement. The bombing continued overnight, and they just hoped the bombs would not hit their building – Yazan explained the guilt he felt though at knowing if it was not their home being hit by the bombs then it was highly likely to be hitting the home of someone else.

In the morning it was quieter, so Yazan went to search for assistance to help get his family out of danger. His mother went with him as she did not want him on his own. When they heard heavy bombing begin again in the distance they decided to return home. They saw many others packing to leave.

Whilst Yazan and his family were unharmed physically, the events still took a psychological toll due to the danger, fear and destruction. Yazan was balancing normal concerns, such as his scholarship and marriage arrangements, alongside those caused by the conflict, such as moving his family out.

Yazan started to experience nightmares, which continued with him for at least the first two months he spent in the UK, they gradually improved but even now he infrequently experiences them. The nightmares would show the destruction of his home, being hunted by the regime, the deaths of friends and relatives, his own death. Yazan learnt to suppress his emotions about Syria, so he was able to continue with daily tasks in the UK.

Yazan has never been offered psychological support. He also explained that due to his treatment during the asylum process he would be unlikely to have taken any offered during the process. He witnessed a severe lack of empathy and compassion throughout the process in the treatment shown to him and others.

At one point, he tells AOA V, he was forced to sign a paper he says he was not allowed to read. Yazan said the process was dehumanising, and he was treated like a subject to be interrogated – his friends that have gone through the process feel the same.

UK



Ahmad, a refugee from Iraq, who AOA V met and interviewed in London.

Name: Ahmad
Area/country of origin: Tikrit, Iraq
Current residence: London, UK
Date of interview: 25/02/2017

Ahmad had witnessed many forms of explosive violence in Iraq and his two brothers had been killed in the violence. The main threat to Ahmad was from the militias. He explained that there were many militia groups in Iraq and some of the most violent are state-sponsored. He thinks that, perhaps, they feel more entitled to kill and can get away with it. In some respects, Ahmad explained, these groups are worse than ISIS, as there are no areas you can go to escape them.

As the violence increased Ahmad decided to leave Iraq, like many others. He travelled across Iraq, Syria, Turkey and into Europe. From Greece, he travelled across Europe with the hope of joining his uncle in the UK. When he was in Calais he managed to come across the channel in the back of a truck. The journey was very dangerous, but in the UK, he would be safe and with family.

Ahmad arrived in the UK in mid-2016. His asylum application was rejected, because the UK believed

he could relocate to another area in Iraq. He is now waiting to make his appeal. Ahmad explains that there is danger everywhere he could go in Iraq – from ISIS, from militia groups.

Some of the violence is experienced both in Syria and Iraq, Ahmad explains, and the violence in Iraq has been occurring for over a decade. Ahmad believes that the violence in Iraq has become so normalised that sometimes 10 might be killed in a car bomb and it may not make the news. The violence has also been getting deadlier; with IEDs becoming increasingly lethal.

Ahmad believes the huge disparity in treatment and acceptance rates between the Syrians and Iraqis is unfair and appears to be dependent on politics rather than the dangers faced – else the treatment would be similar.

Ahmad explains that Iraq is his home and when it is safe he would want to return.

GERMANY



Name: Edrees
Area/country of origin: Tajik, Afghanistan
Current residence: Hamburg, Germany
Date of interview: 26/01/2017

Edrees is a refugee from Afghanistan that is now living in Germany, where AOA V met him.

Edrees is a 27-year-old refugee from Afghanistan. He arrived in Germany in 2014 and was finally granted entitlement to asylum in 2016. AOA V met him in Hamburg on 26th January 2017.

Edrees explained that he saw explosive violence throughout all his life. He witnessed bomb attacks during the civil war in the 90s, several NATO air campaigns and grew up with the constant fear of hidden mines or explosive remnants of war (ERW).

Additionally, he worked with a group in Afghanistan which challenges the Pashto-dominance in the country and accuses the Afghan government of corruption and collaboration with the Taliban. He told AOA V, that as a consequence, his family's house was attacked one day.

He and his family had 60 seconds to hide in their basement – before a rocket destroyed their house. The family survived but decided to relocate to Kabul, however had to flee again after several months.

While his family stayed in Afghanistan, Edrees began the long journey to Europe in 2014.

After his arrival, he lived for six months in a mass shelter. In the mass shelter, his nightmares and anxieties started and he had troubles sleeping and eating. Without giving a reason, his first application was rejected, however a lawyer recommended he appeal. He used the time between the applications to learn German and in his second interview, he presented his case by himself.

He was granted asylum, which, in the German law, means that the persecution he faces due to membership in a political organisation determined his application, not the decades-long experience of war and violence.

Until this day, he has never spoken to a therapist. He is currently training to become a translator, as most Persian-German translators are Iranians, not Afghans. The difference between the two countries' dialects was the reason why his first application was rejected.

GERMANY



Name: Fareshta
Area/country of origin: Herat, Afghanistan
Current residence: Hamburg, Germany
Date of interview: 27/01/2017

AOA V met Fareshta in Hamburg where she told AOA V about her experiences in Afghanistan.

Fareshta is a 26-year-old woman from Afghanistan who came to Germany in 2014. She lives in Hamburg now, where she trains to become a qualified social education worker. AOA V interviewed her on 27th January 2017 in Hamburg.

She was in Afghanistan during the civil war and the American invasion and witnessed several bombing campaigns and repeated artillery shelling. Her father fought the Taliban as well and was kidnapped and killed. His head was sent to the family.

Her grandfather, she told AOA V, was killed during a suicide attack on a market in Herat. She further explained how the UN ran mine protection programmes in which they taught children never to pick up toys on the streets. One unfortunate day, Fareshta's friend picked up a teddy-bear from the road and lost a leg. She was 13.

Fareshta was forced to flee from Afghanistan when a local Mullah accused her of spreading Shia propaganda, after she accidentally distributed books at the school where she worked that contained Shia teachings. She was sentenced to a life-long house arrest. Both the confrontation with the Mullah and the endless explosive violence strengthened her decision to leave Afghanistan for good.

Fareshta said that when she arrived in Germany, she couldn't sleep, had nightmares continuously and worried about her future. She was lucky enough to receive therapy quickly and after several meetings, her life and sleep rhythm normalised.

At the same time, her positive asylum decision arrived and she attended German classes. 2016, she started to work in a kindergarten and studies for the official qualification as a social education worker. She stressed how important the therapy was for her future ability to become a part of society.

GREECE



Name: Safi
Area/country of origin: Aleppo, Syria
Current residence: Athens, Greece
Interview date: 16/02/2017

Safi, a refugee from Syria, who AOAV met and interviewed in Greece.

Safi saw 'everything' in Syria – airstrikes, sniper, barrel bombs. Cluster bombs he tells AOAV were hugely dangerous and part of the reason he left. Living there just became too dangerous for his family. Safi and his family tried moving to other areas but the situation was the same eventually. Safi explains that some days it would be quiet and he would think he was safe and then suddenly that area is targeted – it would only be a matter of time.

Even the villages around Aleppo were not safe, Safi says: 'When I went to visit my family in a village about 20km north of Aleppo in 2013, there were rocket attacks. We were very fortunate that it landed on the farmland. The next day many were leaving the village as so many could easily have been killed.'

Safi was also targeted by ISIS and the Syrian regime because he was known to be part of the revolution. When he was taking tests at school there was already a fear he would be targeted – other students had been captured from their seats. Even if a student was not part of the demonstrations they would still be interrogated about others.

Safi's friend at the university was captured and sent to prison. Students also had their permits, that exempted them from having to join the army, torn up.

Safi arrived to Greece the day before the EU-Turkey deal. In Athens, he stayed in a squat. His other option was to live in Piraeus camp but he had heard so many bad stories about the conditions his family decided the squat would be safer. Safi and his family have since been moved into an apartment until they have received their asylum decision. They were rejected from the relocation programme.

Safi is now waiting for the interview. He says that no support, other than the housing, has been offered. Many feel lost, and worry about their future. Safi explains that the refugees have no certainty or stability: 'your future is not in your hands.' He does not worry for himself, but for his family, who find life here difficult. Safi tells AOAV that he thinks Syria will not be safe for very long time, and if the regime is in power it will not be safe for anyone that was part of the revolution. He would also not want to live under a regime that killed so many Syrians.

GREECE



Name: Ahmad
Area/country of origin: Kabul, Afghanistan
Current residence: Athens, Greece
Interview date: 15/02/2017

AOAV met Ahmad in Athens where he talked to AOAV about his reasons for fleeing Afghanistan.

Ahmad had worked in Kabul helping the US Army for three years. For this, Ahmad and his family were targeted by the Taliban. They were blackmailed and once Ahmad was kidnapped – fortunately a tracker in his phone meant he was rescued.

The bases where Ahmad worked were also regularly attacked and eventually it became too dangerous. Once, soon after Ahmad had left work to go home he heard a huge blast. A suicide car bomb had destroyed the camp where he worked – the Army just rebuilt and continued.

He tried to change area a couple of times but Ahmad says that outside of Kabul he would face more danger because the Taliban is present everywhere and Kabul, at least, has some security. Some areas also face the additional threat of ISIS, or airstrikes. A new system, Ahmad explains, now means that you must go to the government to register to change where you live. Ahmad, worries about this new system – he explains that not only does this mean the process takes a long time but he believes that through this system the Taliban can find you as he believes that they threaten and blackmail officials to access the records.

After Ahmad undertook the journey to Greece, he was moved to Malakasa camp [40km from Athens city centre]. The conditions were very bad and there was also a lot of fighting between different groups. Ahmad told AOAV, that the security would just watch the fights. Adults would have to take it in turns to stay up to pro-

tect the others in the tents. Some Afghans are said to have returned home. They say they would rather die in a bomb attack than live how they must here.

Fortunately, Ahmad, his fiancée and her mother have recently been moved by the UNHCR into a hotel in Athens. He is happier there, many in the camp suffer depression but there is very little help – even if you are sent to the hospital in an emergency you have no translator. He is learning Greek and he teaches English to Farsi speakers. However, he is still waiting for his asylum interview – he has been waiting eight months. Ahmad was meant to have the interview the day before he met with AOAV but he tells us that they cancelled it, and he must wait another two months. He will have been waiting ten months. Ahmad explains that he had to lie to his family about it as he did not want them to lose hope – they are still in Afghanistan and face the same dangers Ahmad faced there. Ahmad hopes his family will be able to join him. He messages his mother every morning to check his family are OK and still alive.

He feels that the different treatment between the Afghans and the Syrians is unfair. Though the Syrians do need this support, Ahmad believes that the situation Afghans face must be respected too. Many Afghans are deported and some have been killed shortly after they returned – others have committed suicide before they are deported. Ahmad says that, he will be happy in Greece because he is safe here – it is not safe in Afghanistan.

GREECE



Abdullah, a refugee from Iraq, who AOA met and interviewed in Greece.

Name: Abdullah¹⁵⁵

Area/country of origin: Sinjar, Iraq

Current residence: Skaramagas, Greece

Interview date: 15/02/2017

Abdullah was a refugee staying at the Skaramagas refugee camp, about 13km from the centre of Athens. He had recently been accepted to go to Germany through the resettlement programme and would leave for there in a couple of months. As a survivor of the Sinjar massacre, Abdullah explained, Germany accepted him without too many complications.

Abdullah told AOA about the Sinjar massacre, where ISIS conquered in August 2014. They sent in trucks full of explosive to break enemy lines, followed by waves of inghamasi fighters [*decentralised, quick units that are sent to cause havoc. Inghamasi fighters are equipped with suicide belts which they eventually blow off. Their psychological effect after a wave of truck bombings is devastating.*] After this the main army charged.

ISIS pillaged and murdered thousands of Yazidis across Sinjar. Men, women and children, were executed, tortured and made sex slaves. [*Abdullah showed AOA pictures on his phone of mass graves, children hung with cables, naked, executed women and tortured bodies*]. ISIS fighters came and gathered the men outside, then they started to shoot at them arbitrarily.

Abdullah, like many others, fled to the mountains where he managed to survive. He explains that there was little food or water and many that left in search of food were found and executed by ISIS. Eventually the PKK rescued those in Abdullah's group. Abdullah fled to Turkey and then to Greece.

Abdullah hopes he will be safe in Germany – he had thought he would be in Greece but he explains that he is not safe in the camp. Abdullah was attacked by another man in the camp when a mob gathered to attack the Yazidis there. The Yazidis are called kuffar [*infidels*] by some of the Sunni Muslims and they must be kept separated from them in the camp. When the attacks happened many had flashbacks of the attack on Sinjar.

Abdullah explains that he never used to fear any Muslims, and though he still has Muslim friends in the camp, he is afraid because of the events in Sinjar. He often has nightmares but he has not been offered psychological treatment. He tells AOA that he does not know if this support is provided in the camp but if it was he would not take up their time: 'there are many in far more desperate need than me.'

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