



The Choice and the Route

An interview study with newly arrived
Syrians in Sweden

After more than four years of war, almost half of the Syrian population has fled. Between four and six per cent of the estimated four million Syrian refugees outside the country's borders have made their way to Europe. Many of these have aimed for Sweden. “The Choice and the Route” – a Delmi report by Emma Lundgren Jörum – examines escape routes and factors influencing the choice of Sweden as destination country.

Background

The refugee situation both in and around Syria is critical. Since the outbreak of the civil war, approximately eight million people are refugees within Syria, with more than four million having left the country. The legal routes into Europe are

few and circumscribed. For this reason, many refugees enlist the help of migrant smugglers. Few are able to travel by aeroplane and instead, the majority travel to Europe by sea – something which is fraught by great dangers. Drowning accidents are common, as are injuries and deaths among people in tightly packed spaces

during the long transport process over the Mediterranean Sea. The report focuses upon human smuggling in Europe and the asylum seeker's choice of destination country.

Objective and method

The aim of the report is to provide increased knowledge about choices of escape routes and destination countries, as well as about the operators who participate along the journey. The study offers insights into how the journey to the destination country can take place and contributes knowledge of why a large group of Syrians have headed towards Sweden. The report also provides an illustration of the expectations held by the asylum seekers before they arrived in Sweden and how they feel about their situation and their future outlook once in the country. The report is built upon interviews with 22 newly arrived Syrians in Sweden.

Results

There is limited empirical research regarding human smuggling networks. This study therefore provides an important contribution to the mapping of both smuggling routes and

procedures. The study focuses on large-scale smuggling where financial interests are involved. For Syrian citizens and stateless persons from Syria, legal routes into Europe are limited. Therefore, the majority of those interviewed in the study have enlisted smugglers for at least some part of the journey to Sweden. They have also used many different smuggling networks to reach Sweden. Three sea routes into Europe from Egypt, Libya and Turkey are highlighted in the study. Many boat exchanges take place on the Mediterranean Sea. The boat used for the final leg of the journey is often in very poor condition. The smugglers do not usually participate in the entire transport process over the Mediterranean. Instead they actively seek the attention of coast guard ships to let them “take over” the final leg of the journey. Thus, the smuggling routes over the seas are linked to great discomfort and risks for the asylum seekers. The comprehensive smuggling of refugees through Europe also gives rise to various criminal activities, such as trade in forged ID documents, passports and residence permits.

Most of those interviewed in this study had decided from the very beginning which country they were aiming for. In many cases, this country

was Sweden. Based upon the interviews that were conducted, three explanations for the choice of Sweden as a destination country stand out as particularly important.

To begin with, one fundamental explanation is Sweden's hitherto relatively generous asylum policy. Many people aim for countries where they believe they will be able to stay. Most of those interviewed state that their choice of Sweden as a destination country was influenced by its decision to grant permanent residence permits to all citizens or stateless persons seeking asylum from Syria. The right to permanent residency has been especially important, since many feel great uncertainty about the possibility of returning to Syria in the long run. The knowledge that they can apply for Swedish citizenship within a comparatively short period after being granted residency has also contributed to the choice of many to aim for Sweden in particular.

Secondly, the asylum seekers' perceptions of the different destination countries are of importance. Among the asylum seekers in this study, it is apparent that many view Sweden as a democratic and comparatively humane country

where good opportunities exist for building a new life, where children are given the chance to go to school and where new arrivals receive state support for integrating into society. These positive perceptions have no doubt influenced the asylum seekers' choices of Sweden as destination country.

Thirdly, family, relatives and friendship ties can influence the asylum seekers' choices of destination country. However, this explanation stands out as subordinate to the right of permanent residency and the perception of a safe and democratic Sweden, since many have family or relatives in other European countries and/or have lacked established contacts upon their arrival in Sweden.

Employment and accommodation constitute important conditions for becoming established in Sweden after arrival, but many feel that it is more difficult to become part of Swedish society than they had expected.

Many of those interviewed also experience significantly greater difficulties in arranging accommodation, finding a job or participating in education than they had expected before they

arrived in Sweden. The principal aim of the escape from Syria – i.e., being able to live in safety – has been achieved through the migrants' arrival in Sweden. Nevertheless, life in Sweden is not without its problems. As a rule, there are long waiting times for residence permits, which for many in practice mean periods of unemployment and frustration. It can often take a long time for families to be reunited, which is clearly a cause of anxiety. Many also express great apprehension about relatives in Syria, which affects their chances of (for example) focusing on their education in Sweden.

Policy implications

The study yields a number of policy recommendations intended to improve and streamline the reception of Syrian refugees in Sweden and counteract the negative consequences brought about by long waiting periods. If the circumstances surrounding the interviewed people can be viewed as generally applicable, these indicate that the measures suggested can reduce the negative consequences and increase the positive ones associated with refugee migration. The recommendations here are also supported by

previous research which has indicated similar problems elsewhere.

The asylum seekers that have come from Syria have hitherto been guaranteed permanent residency. Still, the waiting period for being granted a residence permit has increased substantially over the past year, with many waiting over twelve months for a decision. Attempting to reduce these waiting periods certainly appears to be difficult, but is nevertheless a pressing concern. It is also important that upon their arrival, the asylum seekers are given information about how long they can expect to wait for a decision.

Swedish language education is central to the ability to quickly enter into Swedish society. As asylum seekers from Syria have hitherto been guaranteed permanent residency, it is reasonable to begin Swedish language education already during the waiting period. Such courses should be compulsory and the state should assume the responsibility. The introduction plan currently drawn up by the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) once the decision for temporary or permanent residency has been reached, should also be

accelerated for the same reasons. This could include people with vocational education and training within sectors with labour shortages in Sweden having their grades, qualifications and work experience validated more quickly than before. Different fast-track methods can be implemented for this.

Already developing and initiating an introduction plan before the residence permit is granted should simultaneously reduce the ongoing trade in national registration addresses. It is also important for someone who has begun – but has yet to complete – their training within a sector

with labour shortages to be given clear and quick instructions about how their educational qualifications can best be complemented and completed. Naturally, the very core of such a policy approach also includes seeking solutions to the conflicts forcing people to flee, as well as helping those refugees currently close to conflict areas to support themselves, educate themselves and see a potential future in the region where they are located.

This is complicated and long-term work, requiring international cooperation that also includes the operators currently financing and otherwise contributing to the war in Syria.



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The whole report is available at www.delmi.se

