No option but Europe

Asylum seekers arriving in Europe are often seen as part of an undifferentiated mass, and the complex stories of how they arrived are often submerged in the effort to control or manage migration. However, many of them are driven to seek protection in Europe only after seeking and failing to find safety elsewhere.

Arriving on the shores of the EU they have crossed a number of countries on their way. Authorities in receiving countries tend to interpret such long journeys as ones in which asylum seekers have had many opportunities to choose, presumably on the grounds that the longer the journey, the more opportunistic and the less justified it becomes.

However, the experiences of the asylum seekers we met, making their way through numerous countries, show that this is not necessarily true; rather than journeys in which many open doors were passed by and opportunities were forsaken, they were journeys in which asylum seekers were bounced from slammed door to slammed door, with opportunities diminishing at every turn, leaving these individuals increasingly desperate to do anything that they can to find a modicum of safety and stability. Their stories point to the need for effective protection for refugees and to facilitate greater opportunities to access it, both within Europe and beyond.

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1. IRRI (2015) “I was left with nothing”: “Voluntary” departures of asylum seekers from Israel to Rwanda and Uganda www.refugee-rights.org/Publications/Papers/2015/IWasLeftWithNothing.pdf

Iraqi refugee households in Jordan: the active search for solutions

Mirjam A Twigt

For Iraqi refugees in Jordan the decision to leave for Europe is very much influenced by the experience of waiting in the region.

At the beginning of August 2015, 37 Iraqi refugee families left my neighbourhood in East Amman, Jordan, in order to travel to Europe. After years of waiting for resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) they decided to take their future into their own hands. Their former neighbours showed me their pictures on Facebook: there they are, their friends on rubber boats, arriving on the shores of Greece. European-mediated representations of refugees find their ways into the refugees’ homes. The ‘Mediterranean migrant crisis’ is their neighbours, friends, sisters and brothers.

The media discourse and the policy responses within and beyond the European Union are warped; building higher fences will not stop people from searching for a safe future. While Iraqi refugees in Jordan are granted protection, they are denied the right to work, and obtaining Jordanian citizenship is almost impossible. Instead they live in limbo, waiting for something to happen and at the same time actively searching for a solution elsewhere. The overarching idea is that there is no future for them in Jordan and no possibility for peace in (and hence return to) Iraq.

Unable to work, they spend much of their time in front of the television and on their smartphones. What might seem a luxury item for life in displacement is in fact essential since these digital technologies enable them to remain connected as families are dispersed. Iraqi refugee families continuously gather