

Protection challenges of mobility

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It is easy to say that people fleeing Syria should stay in camps or satellite cities but people move on for a variety of reasons, and programmes and services must adapt to assist them.

The scale of displacement from the Syrian crisis is compounded by its geographic spread and its prolonged nature. Syrians have been forced from their homes to neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, while others have fled to Egypt, Libya

and beyond; Syrian refugees are also moving on through irregular means to Europe. At the start, people's intention was often to find a suitable place where they could wait in safety with their families until return became possible. With the conflict now in

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Adiyaman refugee camp, Turkey, 2013.

its third year, people's intentions and plans are changing and they are being forced to re-consider what the future holds. Some are moving on again, adding greater complexity to the profile of Syrian displacement and to the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Turkey

While Turkey has taken many positive strides in recent years to improve conditions and legislative arrangements for its population of refugees and asylum seekers, that population has now increased considerably. Turkey's position at the frontier of 'Fortress Europe' and adjoining countries in crisis such as Syria has resulted in efforts being made by the government to contain refugee populations that have not been matched with similar attention to discussions about local integration and conditions for urban refugees in particular.

The unofficial number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, including non-registered populations, is estimated to be close to one million, although official figures of registered refugees are around 750,000. Most international organisations are concentrated in southern parts of Turkey, near the border

with Syria. Working in cooperation and with the Turkish government, they have provided protection assistance to people in camps and satellite cities. However, there is a growing trend of people moving on: first, to urban areas of Turkey in search of employment and, second, towards the European Union either by land or sea routes.

Informal estimates by actors on the ground suggest that there could be close to 100,000 Syrians living in Istanbul in insecure housing and working informally. Others may commute to Istanbul daily or weekly to work and then return to the areas they are

registered in. Unknown numbers of Syrians are travelling further north, far from the eye of international organisations and advocates, in an attempt to cross the land border between Turkey and Bulgaria. There has been a 600% increase in detection rates of so-called 'illegal' border crossings in Bulgaria in 2013 compared to a year previously, mainly of Syrians.¹ This sizeable increase could partly be attributed to increased surveillance and deterrence methods on the Greek-Turkish border since Greece launched Operation *Aspida* ('Shield') in 2012. As is known from other places, irregular movements that are obstructed simply shift rather than stop, and there has also been a concomitant rise in people trying to reach Greece by sea.

Yet there has been a significant delay in reacting and responding to the mobility of Syrians. Gaps include a lack of protection actors in northern Turkey, no cross-border monitoring on the Syrian-Turkish border and service providers overwhelmed by the needs of refugees. Yet without a clearer picture and understanding of mobility patterns and trends, including decision-making patterns and intentions, future services cannot hope to respond to the realities on the ground.

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Libya

Libya is itself a country that has been undergoing political transition since its revolution in 2011. Migration in Libya was an extremely sensitive issue under the previous regime, connected to broader concerns about identity and nationality. This was further complicated by the external actions of countries like Italy that resulted in the interception and return of asylum seekers and migrants taking boats across the Mediterranean in the hope of reaching Europe. Libya has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention nor does it have a formal agreement with UNHCR, which leaves little common ground for discussions about refugee protection.

Like Turkey, Libya is both a destination and a transit point for Syrians fleeing the crisis. In early March 2014 there were close to 18,000 Syrians registered in Libya, with more thought to be living in cities but not registered. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has been working there with displaced people on the move through its mixed migration programme. Underpinning this work has been a recognition that some, but not all, refugees and asylum seekers will seek to move on to other locations in the absence of local integration possibilities or refugee resettlement. For instance, DRC has encountered Syrians who have flown to Egypt, then travelled by land across the border to Libya with the express purpose of securing a place on a boat for Europe.² Others have lived and worked in Tripoli for years but find that the diminishing security environment and the condition of basic services such as health and education force them to consider other options, including moving on again.

The lens of mixed migration – recognising that different ‘categories’ of people move in mixed flows and that their status may change en route – has proved an important entry point when providing assistance to vulnerable people in Libya.³ This has become even more critical as Libya grows in importance as a transit site to Europe,

with Syrians now the second-biggest group leaving Libya by boat after Eritreans. DRC’s protection programmes in Libya are informed by research with beneficiaries⁴ as it is essential that the support provided is based on contextual knowledge, analysis and research to understand the fast-changing nature of displaced and host-community dynamics and decision making. Based on this research, DRC has developed modes of working such as outreach to people’s houses, a drop-in centre and a network of community mobilisers who offer protection assistance including protection monitoring, reporting on urgent issues and alerting DRC to vulnerable cases in challenging and sensitive locations.

Implications

How and through what modalities can actors then provide protection to highly mobile displaced persons in a fast-changing environment? The answer includes outreach, especially through host communities, and working with refugee community associations and places of worship.

Authorities too have a critical role to play in transit sites, hosting countries and destinations, in that they have the primary role in ensuring the protection of displaced persons’ rights. Partnership between local NGOs, authorities and international organisations around training have proven very successful in Libya. For instance, UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs responded to a request from the Department for Combatting Illegal Migration – the Ministry of Interior directorate responsible for the day-to-day management of detention centres – for training on refugee law, detention guidelines and best practice in health and hygiene. A series of training sessions has now taken place in and around Tripoli, focusing on centre managers and guards. Additionally, local NGOs have received training in alternatives to detention through the International Detention Coalition. It is hoped this might lead to a system whereby vulnerable groups such as women and children can be released from detention and might improve referral mechanisms until such time as

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broader policy and legislative reform can be achieved in the asylum and migration area.

The lack of quantitative border-monitoring programmes in countries like Libya and Turkey is a serious gap that needs to be addressed in order to provide data on people on the move – and can be complemented by research on protection issues en route. Because of a tendency to assume that providing services in urban areas will attract or encourage people to move there, there is a paucity of funded services in urban areas to assist people. Working with civil society groups is vital in this case as they have the potential to provide support over a longer duration and to engage with host governments and communities to ensure public support for refugee communities. Finally, we must all constantly re-examine the assumptions on which our assistance towards Syrians refugees is based and

ensure that the assistance also responds to the needs of highly mobile populations.

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1. Frontex (2013) *FRAN Quarterly*, Q3, July-September http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/FRAN_Q3_2013.pdf
2. See Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (2014) *Going West: contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe* <http://tinyurl.com/RMMS-Going-West-2014>
3. See also Kumin J (2014) 'The challenge of mixed migration by sea', FMR 45 www.fmreview.org/crisis/kumin
4. See DRC (2014) *"We risk our lives for our daily bread": findings of the Danish Refugee Council study on mixed migration in Libya* <http://tinyurl.com/DRC-Mixed-Migrants-Libya-2014>