



FARSIGHT

# Irregular Migration to the European Union

*What's special about Afghans?*

September 2016

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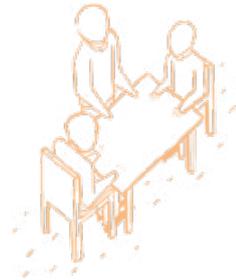
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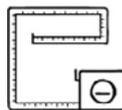
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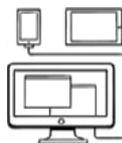
Program and fund design



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Implementing in tough environments



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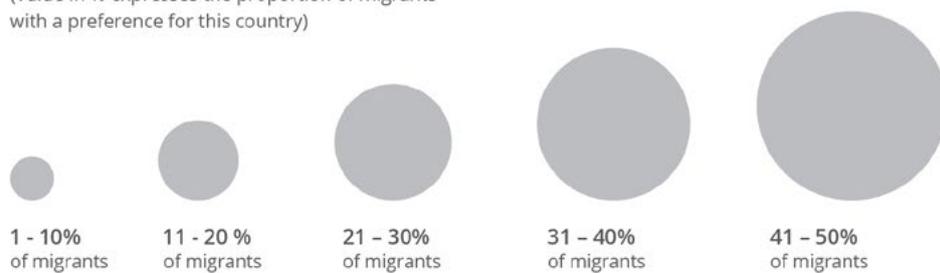
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Preferred destination



**Preferred destinations ranking**

(Value in % expresses the proportion of migrants with a preference for this country)



# INTRODUCTION

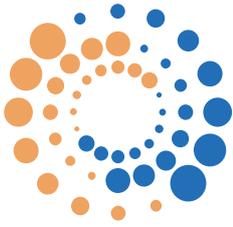
Emigration from Afghanistan has long concerned European (and Afghan) governments. Not comfortably fitting the profiles 'refugee' or 'economic migrant,' Afghan migrants have tended to prompt confusion among politicians and inconsistency in European asylum systems.

In this feature, we draw on over 10 years experience researching Afghan migration at origin, at destination, and in between, to analyse how the choices and preferences of irregular migrants from Afghanistan compare with others.<sup>1</sup> While care must always be taken generalising findings to migrants country-wide, the article provides a starting point for thinking more critically about irregular migration issues in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Compared to other people moving in mixed migration flows, we found that:

- Afghans are open to being persuaded not to leave. In a recent survey nearly 9 in 10 said they would abandon plans to migrate if their financial situation improved.
- Before departing, migrants do not always have a specific destination in mind. Some aim for 'Europe' writ large, while others pursue several possibilities to migrate to the 'West' at one time. Prior to departure, the UK is the most popular destination. The overwhelming popularity of Germany as measured by asylum applications shows that destinations change en route. The overriding concern once investments are made, is to maximise the chances of success of the journey.
- Afghans display the strongest orientation to a particular destination prior to departure. For comparison, it is more common for Eritreans to state a destination preference before departure and then choose a different destination while traveling.
- In the years following arrival, the majority of Afghans tend to be quite satisfied with outcomes. This level of satisfaction is similar to Syrians and Iranians, which is higher than Eritreans.
- The widespread employment of Afghans by foreign armed forces in Afghanistan has probably influenced Afghan preferences. Questions about the influence of foreign NGOs and development programs on migration outcomes are the subject of ongoing research.

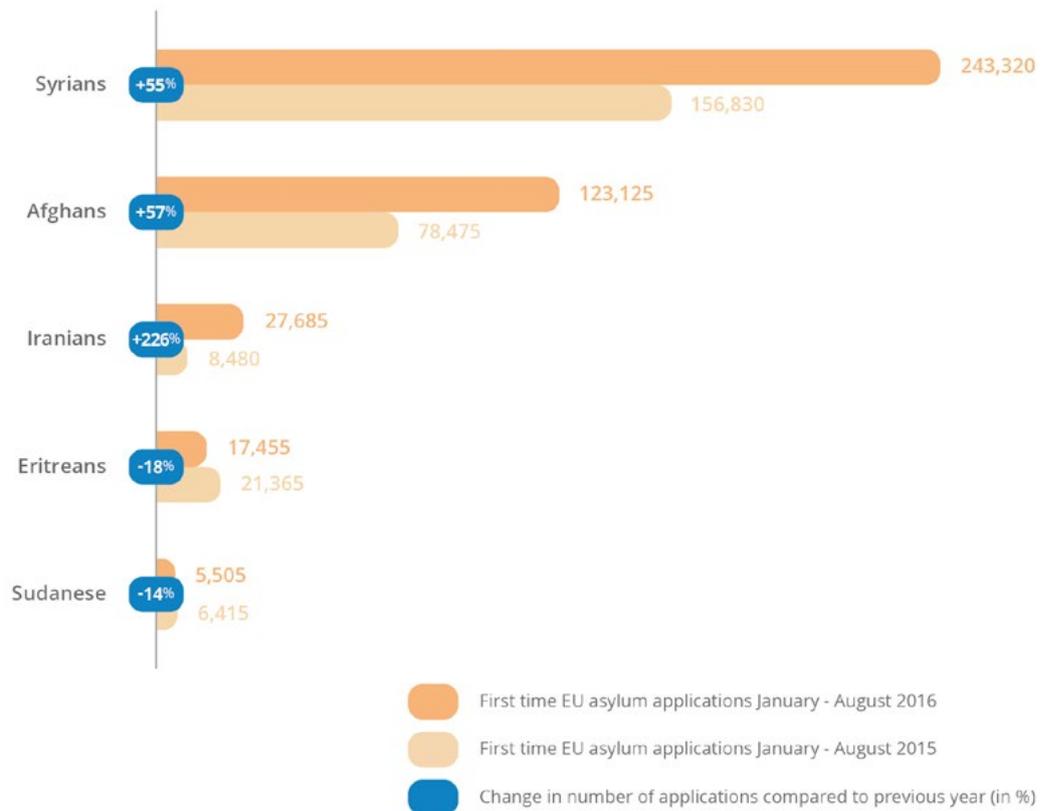
<sup>1</sup> Migrant' as umbrella term for refugee or economic migrant or asylum seeker etc. See Carling's informative blog post on refugee/migrant terminology, <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2015/09/refugees-are-also>



## STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

To adequately address present and future challenges, policymakers need to see beyond the 'crisis' of mass arrivals and identify more meaningful segments of the asylum seeking population. Despite an overall downward trend, asylum seeker arrivals to the European Union show stark divergences by nationality. In the first 8 months of 2016, Afghan and Syrian applications—the highest in absolute terms—were 55% higher than the same period the year before. Yet, they are dwarfed in relative terms by the increase in Iranian (+226%) and Iraqi (+114%) applications. In contrast, despite a deterioration in conditions in the Horn of Africa, fewer Eritreans (-18%) and Sudanese (-14%) are applying for asylum than last year.

Figure 1: First time applications - comparison of trends January-August 2016 and January-August 2015  
Source: Eurostat Database : <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>



The need to move beyond the narrative of undifferentiated mass extends to the length of the migration journey. Attempts to understand the drivers and 'root causes' of migration require a subtle and nuanced approach to analysing the perceptions, motivations, and behaviours of individuals making the journey. This article offers a starting point for such an approach.



## MIGRANTS AS MARKET ACTORS

A useful lens with which to look at migration trends is to view migrants as decision makers and market actors. Even in situations of duress, migrants often have some control over where they go, and how. This is a useful way to understand the differences between migrant motivations that are otherwise obscured by the policy categories of 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration.

How does this look in practice? We highlight five ways in which we can move towards a more useful way of categorising irregular migration:

1. **Opportunity cost:** A migrant must make a calculation between leaving and not leaving. Embarking on an irregular journey to Europe brings immediate physical and financial risks, but may promise long-term security of both. Not departing avoids those risks and allows migrants to invest in other opportunities. However, this may mean that the migrant no longer has the ability to depart if the situation deteriorates. What is clear, is that this calculation varies on an individual basis.
2. **Underemployment is understated:** Our surveys of Afghan and Iranian migrants in August 2016 suggest that Afghans are driven by a blend of economic and security concerns. When we looked closer, the absence of jobs does not explain fully motivations to leave: rather, migrants cite nepotism in getting a job, underemployment, and low wages as nuances behind decisions to depart. The quality matters as much as the quantity.
3. **Time:** How do we reconcile the short-term vision of urgent policy proposals with the long-term planning of irregular migrants? Many Iranians holding good jobs and enjoying relative stability lack confidence in the future. An immediate improvement to conditions is unlikely to dissuade them from migrating. Afghans are more mixed: many depart in reaction to the immediate difficulty of a situation, while others use improvements in their situation—such as a new job—to save for departure at a later date. From a research point of view, migrants' confidence in tomorrow is as difficult to evaluate as it is important: its high subjectivity and dynamism demands frequent monitoring.
4. **Place:** In the Horn of Africa, Eritrean refugees show the dynamic nature of decision-making and the importance of context. Motivating factors under the broad banners of security and income prompt departure from Eritrea, but in Sudan overriding concerns are dominated by safety and security. This is clear in Afghanistan too, where threats to lives and livelihoods can vary dramatically between provinces.
5. **Culture:** The culture of migration can tell us something about the extent to which irregular migration is a first thought or a last resort. In our research, around 10% of Afghans have an overall positive impression of migration; over a quarter have an outright negative view. This suggests that many Afghans migrate reluctantly and out of necessity. For one example, one man preparing to migrate told us "if I improve my income, I would be mad to leave this land..." but "what should we do, eat dirt?"

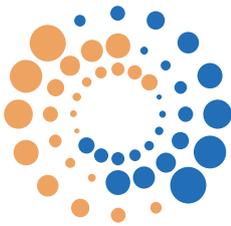
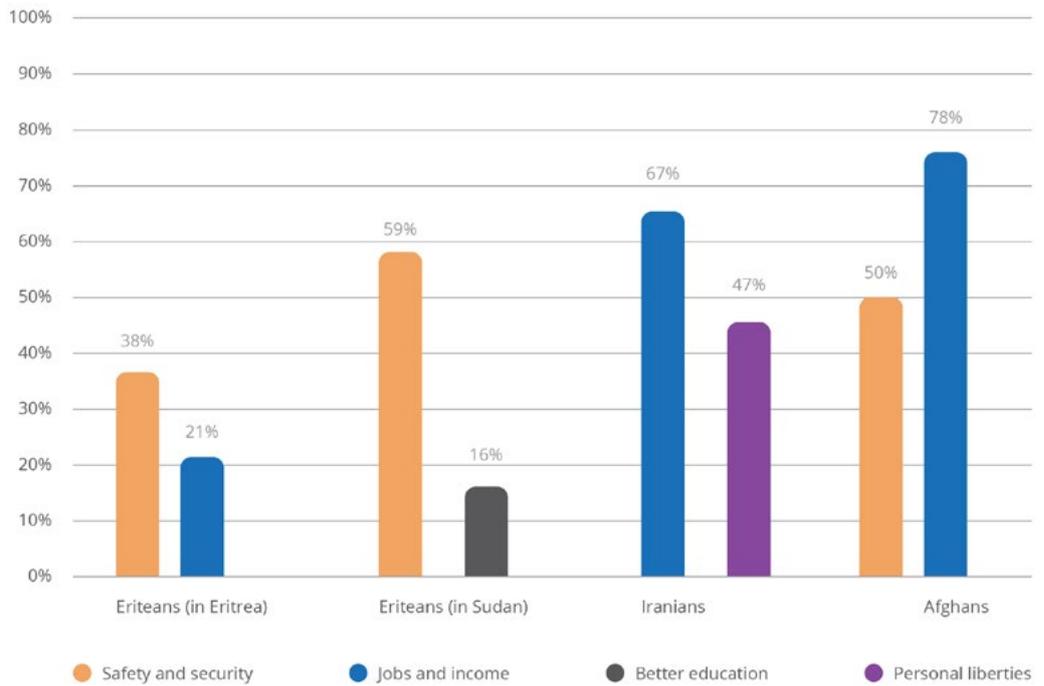


Figure 2: Motivations to migrate



What would persuade migrants to stay in Afghanistan? Many scholars have argued that irregular migration is inevitable, and that measures to reduce it simply displace the problem. Compared with other national groups, Afghans are open to being persuaded. We found in a recent survey that nearly 9 in 10 Afghans would abandon plans to migrate if their financial situation improved sufficiently. Surveys with Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan since the outbreak of conflict recorded a wide preference to stay near home, in the hope of returning. Inadequate humanitarian support made the choice untenable for many.

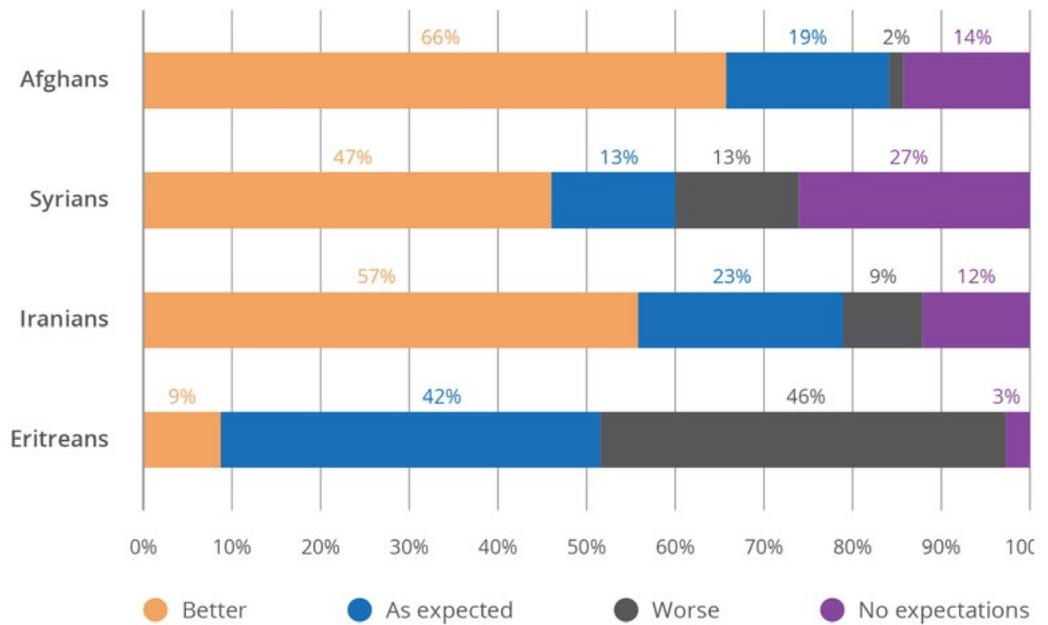


## KNOWLEDGE & MISCONCEPTIONS

As with many market interactions, however, imperfect information leads to market actors getting bad deals. Filling the information gap can help migrants make better decisions. One way to begin to understand where those gaps lie is to ask migrants with the full picture—those who have completed journeys to Europe—to reflect on their experience.

In countries of origin, transit, and destination migrants reflected on how their expectations matched the reality of their life after migrating. There are stark differences between the wholesale disappointment of Eritreans with life at destination and the relative satisfaction of Afghans, Syrians and Iranians.

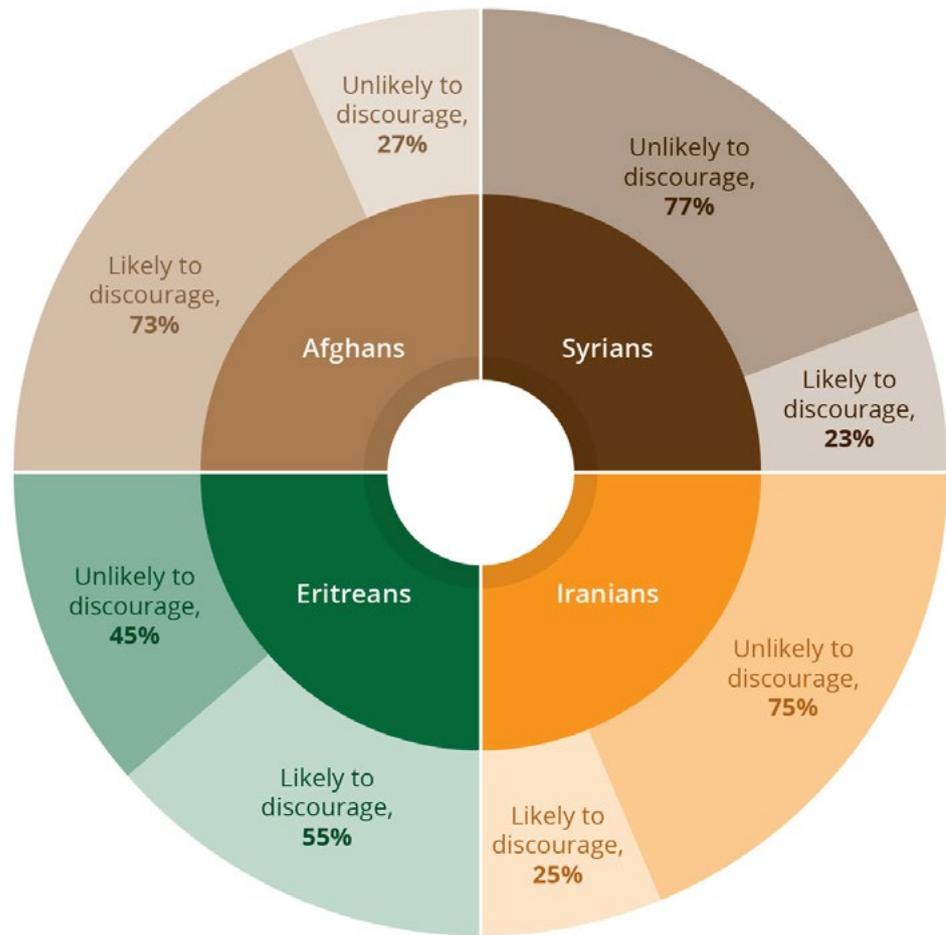
Figure 3: Estimated proportion of migrants who find life at destination met or exceeded expectations



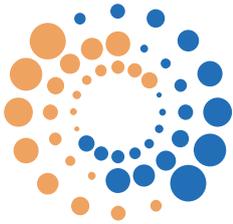
Yet, despite the favourable assessment of life at destination, most Afghans tell us that they would actively discourage others from migrating irregularly to the UK (figure 4). They perhaps did not find that improved opportunities merited the hardships faced during the journey. Eritreans were split on this issue: many did not think migration was worth it, perhaps suggesting a perception that there are few alternatives.



Figure 4: Overall likelihood that national groups would encourage others not to migrate.



Such data shows how satisfaction with the investments made can vary between migrant groups. Yet, research carried out at destination is limited by the migrant's memory of the journey and the human tendency for ex-poste rationalisation. More 'live' research is needed along migration routes to understand how perceptions and decisions change.



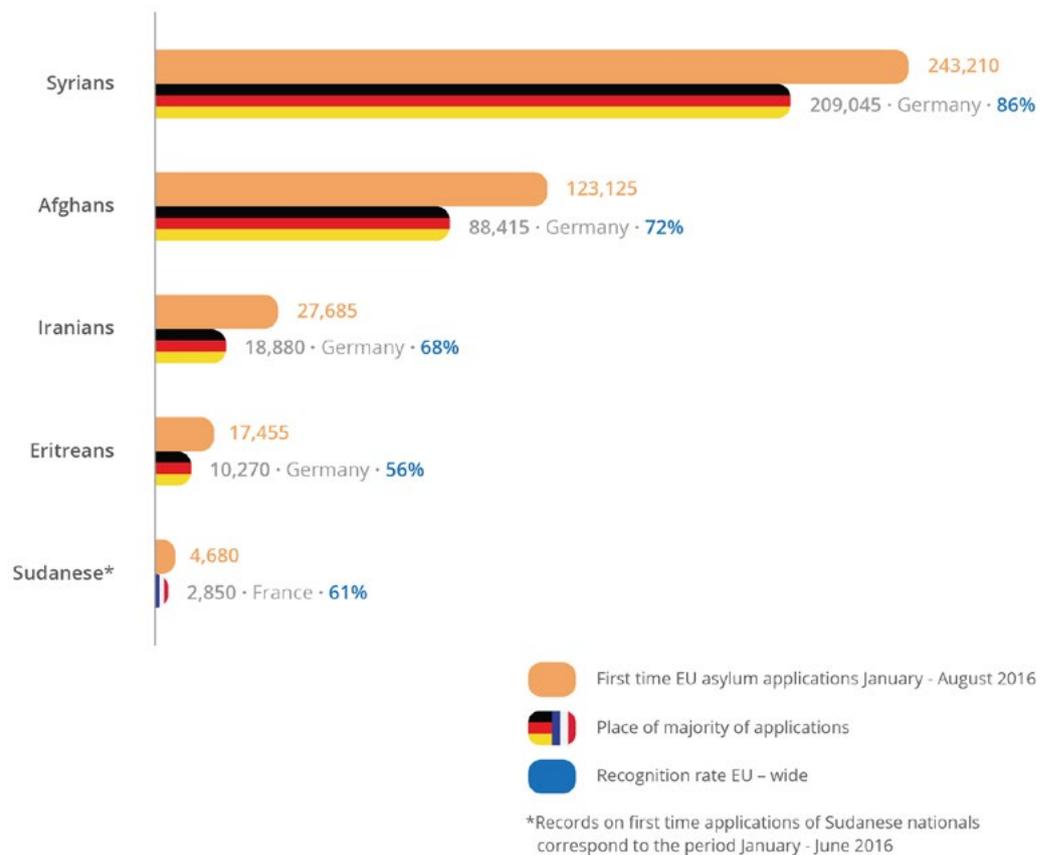
## DESTINATIONS: WHERE AND WHY?

Most refugees are hosted in the developing world, normally in countries neighbouring conflicts, suggesting that most migrants are either not able to make expensive journeys to the West or would prefer to stay in the region.

However, in regions containing conflict zones, the protection space seems to be closing. Hostile attitudes towards Afghans in Pakistan and Iran; the renewed vigour of border police in Sudan; Syrians facing discrimination and conflict in host communities; underemployment and living expense crises;<sup>2</sup> all work to make the journey to Europe seem more attractive. A 2015 Gallup poll found that half of Syrians still within Syria wanted to leave, 39% of whom preferred Europe.<sup>3</sup> A survey in Tunisia of Syrian and West African migrants found 71% were planning to move on, 24% of whom were planning to go to Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Most asylum seekers in the European Union apply for asylum in Germany: for every nationality examined here except Sudanese, the majority of application are in Germany.

Figure 5: Place of majority of applications and EU-wide recognition rate



<sup>2</sup> Data gathered by UNHCR in February 2016. See <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2016/2/56cc4b876/unhcr-survey-finds-afghan-syrian-refugees-arriving-greece-fleeing-conflict.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/186995/nearly-half-syrians-leave-syria.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Survey-Snapshot-Tunisia-June..pdf>

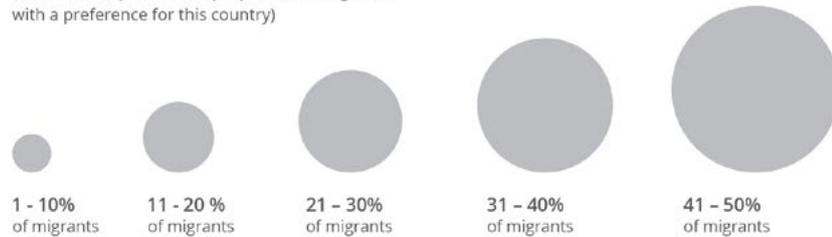


But all roads do not inevitably lead to Germany – or any other destination, in fact. Before departing, migrants do not always have a specific destination in mind at all. Some aim for ‘Europe’ writ large, while others pursue several possibilities to migrate to the ‘West’ at one time. Prior to departure, the UK is one of the most popular destinations.

Figure 6: Preferred destinations ranking, based on choices provided by migrants



**Preferred destinations ranking**  
 (Value in % expresses the proportion of migrants with a preference for this country)





Destinations depend on more than the preferences of migrants. There are three other elements which should be considered when interpreting the reliability of destination preferences:

1. **The smuggler business model:** Smuggling networks vary in connectivity, with some smugglers offering guarantees of reaching specific countries in Europe – most commonly from Afghanistan and Iran – and others offer only the next stage of the journey. For Eritreans, entering Sudan is very much a separate step from travelling to northern Libya and then on to Europe.
2. **Knowledge and information:** In our research, many Eritreans cannot describe accurately the route they expect to take. Migrants from Afghanistan and Iran are comparatively better informed, and most are able to describe the planned route in detail. It can be expected that migrants with less information are more likely to be ‘led’ to their destination by chance or smugglers.
3. **Destination expectations:** Eritrean migrants display a desperation to escape insecurity and uncertainty, and a less formed idea of what to expect in an often unknown destination. Iranian migrants’ strong sense of what would constitute a ‘good life’ sees them more able to articulate expectations at destination. Afghan migrants display high levels of certainty over what they will encounter. An Eritrean stated preference might thus be considered a less reliable predictor for the country concerned than an Afghan.

There is no hard and fast rule why some destinations are more popular than others, even within national groups. Our surveys with Iranian migrants showed that those wishing to travel to Australia had strong networks there, usually including family. But a sizeable diaspora in Sweden has not had the same pull. Rather, those selecting Europe (and Germany) have often lacked contacts there completely, and selected it in response to their perceived improved chances of successful arrival and legal status.

Prominent Reasons for Destination Preference	Pre-Departure Destination Preference			
	 Germany	 United Kingdom	 Other EU	 Australia
<b>Afghans</b>	Open to refugees	Networks Labour market	Germany is full	Positive perceptions of society <sup>5</sup>
<b>Iranians</b>	Open to refugees Historical connections	Civil liberties Work Labour market		Family and Networks
<b>Eritreans</b>		Easier to access job market and education	Greater financial support More generous family reunion	
<b>Sudanese</b>		Historical connections Diaspora		
<b>Syrians</b>	Open to refugees Jobs	Legal means (e.g. resettlement)		Legal means (e.g. resettlement)

The widespread employment of Afghans by foreign armed forces has clearly influenced Afghan preferences, and created controversy at the highest level in the UK, Australia, USA and Germany,

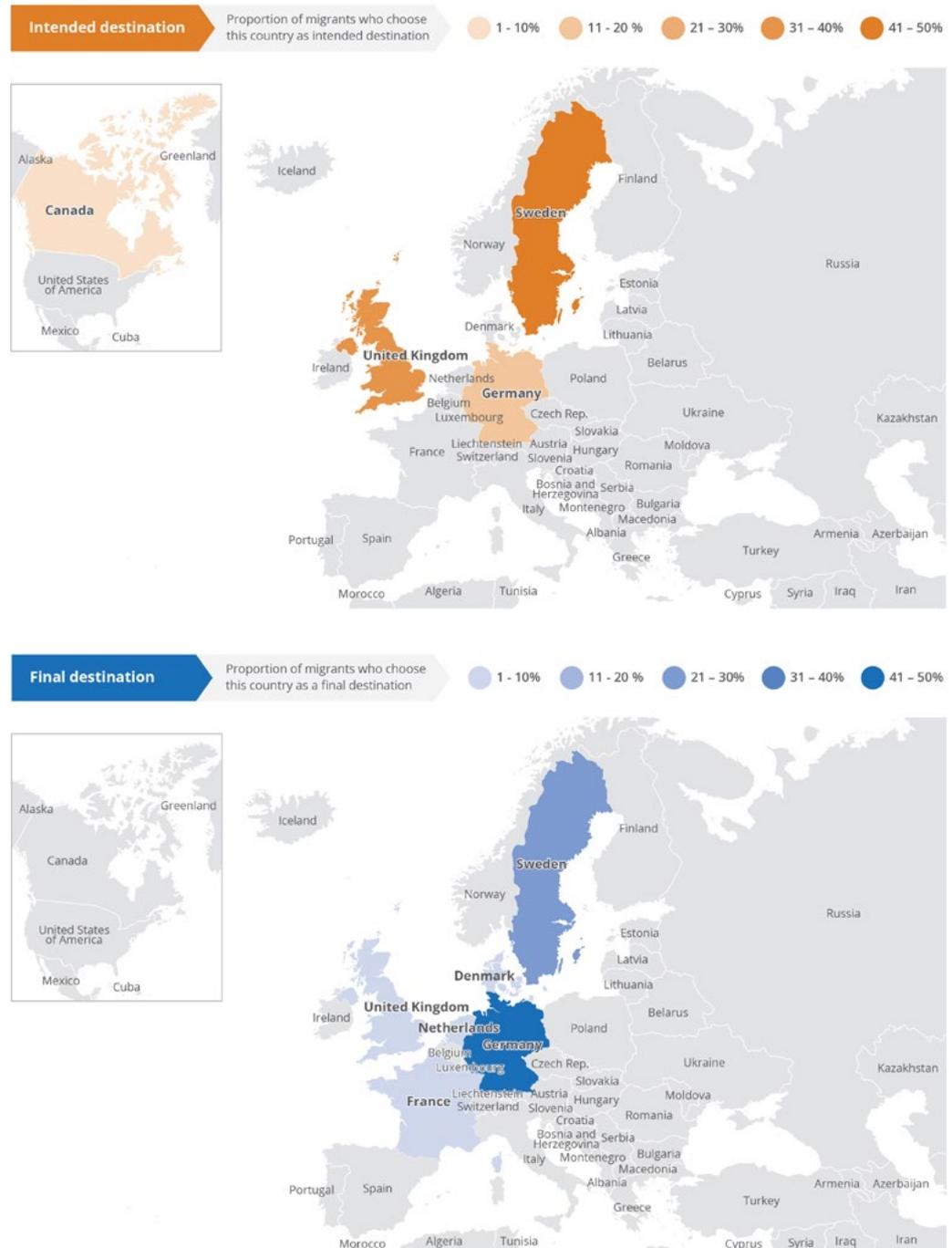
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.border.gov.au/.../views-irregular-migrant-decision-drivers-journey.pdf>



where protection has not been guaranteed to all. Yet, beyond this, anecdotal evidence suggests that the mere presence of foreign agencies can shape initial destination preferences. Further research is needed to establish how strong this effect may be.

Migration is dynamic – initial decisions often changed en route. In the summer of 2015, the tightening of asylum policies across Europe and the relative (perceived and real) openness of Germany and, to a more limited extent, Sweden, saw many switch destination preference. The overriding concern once investments are made, is to maximise the chances of success of the journey.

Figure 7: Irregular migration from Iran to Europe: intended versus final destinations





## BEYOND 'MASS ARRIVALS'

Humane policy that changes irregular migration dynamics and protects those in need is an attainable goal. Part of the challenge is in generating the right kind of information: too often, migrants are portrayed as an homogenous mass, moving at the behest of generic 'drivers' including poverty and insecurity. Such analyses trigger generic, and often blunt, policy responses. To effectively address the needs of irregular migrants, prevent migration casualties, and counter human smuggling, it is important to develop a specialised, contextual understanding of what makes migrants move.

### FOLLOW-UP

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