



Iranian Refugees

An exploration of irregular migration to the UK March 2016

A working paper based on research into irregular maritime arrivals to Australia and interviews with people in Iran preparing to migrate irregularly.

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BACKGROUND

2015 was a significant year for migration issues in the UK. Increases for both European Union (EU) citizens and non-EU migration saw the net migration figure for the year ending June 2015 reach the highest on record. Contributing to this overall increase was the surge in migrants claiming asylum in Europe and the UK during the European summer. Included in this was a large number of Iranian refugees. For the past 5 years Iran has consistently appeared in the top 10 asylum applicant producing countries to the UK.

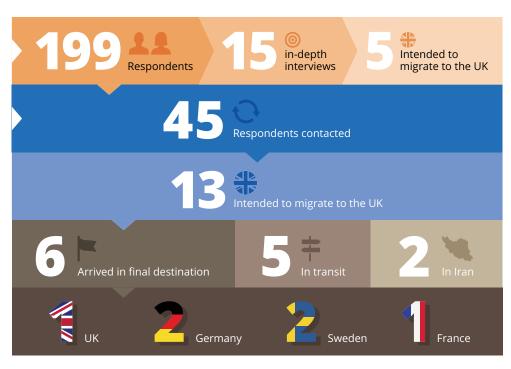
In December 2014 Farsight was inspired to interview 199 people in Iran preparing to emigrate (Wave 1). Of those interviewed, the UK was the most popular destination, with 51 of the 199 intending to travel irregularly to the UK. A key question in our research was whether this enthusiasm for migrating to the UK was likely to continue, and what the key motivators and expectations were of these individuals.

Following the surge in the number of migrants travelling to Europe in the summer of 2015, we reached out to a smaller group of people in December 2015 who had originally indicated an intention to migrate to the UK (Wave 2). In addition to understanding where these people were on their journey, a central question was to identify whether the surge impacted on their plans.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the respondents we engaged with for this research:

Figure 1: Migration journey of UK-bound Iranians





The numbers in this chart represent the number of individuals

¹ http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6286/Asylum_Statistics_Annual_Trends_Nov_2015.pdf



From this research we identified the following key findings:

- In December 2014, the UK was the most popular destination for Iranians intending to migrate.
- Most Iranians were looking to migrate because they believed their life was in danger in Iran. The second most common reason given for migrating was that respondents could not find a job in Iran.
- We spoke to 13 people in Wave 2 who originally wanted to migrate to the UK. Only one had arrived in the UK, a further 5 were in another destination country, 5 were in transit in and 2 had not left Iran.
- Migrants seem to have failed in their original ambition to reach the UK because of 2 key factors arising from the surge:
 - The immigration and asylum policies of countries such as Germany and Sweden; and
 - The November 2015 announcement by countries in the European refugee corridor that restricted the ability of Iranians to enter Europe.



THE IRANIAN DIASPORA IN THE UK

Iranians are a relatively small proportion of immigrants into the UK. In the 7 censuses the UK has conducted since 1951, Iran has never appeared in the top ten non-UK countries of birth.² For this reason, the Iranian community in Britain is a small one compared to other diaspora groups, for example those from Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

According to the 2011 Census the Iranian-born population living in the UK amounted to 1.1% of all non-UK born individuals.³ Of the 82,000 individuals included in the count, there were two peaks associated with their migration to the UK. The first peak was largely a result of the Iranian revolution, and 16% of the Iranian-born residents in 2011 had arrived between 1971-1980. A second peak can be identified in the 1990s, when 22% of Iranian-born residents in 2011 arrived. Their arrival followed the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1990.⁴ Most Iranian migrants are adults and members of the second generation are still young. There are relatively few adults of Iranian background born and raised in the UK.

In Farsight's sample, all prospective migrants reported having friends or family living abroad and a number reported relying on these groups as information sources in the migration process. Of the 49 (96%) respondents in Wave 1 intending to migrate to the UK with friends or family living abroad, 48 were in contact with their associates at least once per month. Of the 49 people with associates living abroad, they all believed that their associates were better off than they had been in Iran. Almost all of these associates were reported to have received residency status in their new country.

Of the 5 people Farsight re-contacted in January 2015 for in-depth follow-up who intended to migrate to the UK, all indicated they had friends or relatives who had resided in the UK or Europe. They said their associates were their primary means of obtaining information on migrating to the UK. One individual said "we have done lots of research about our destination, but the presence of my in-laws there is the main reason for our choice of destination." Another individual told us:

our information is provided mostly by friends and relatives in the UK. They are making us aware of the great opportunities- including receiving an official identity- which we have been deprived of in Iran.

These responses demonstrate the weight that migrants place on the advice of those in the diaspora. Travelers utilize these connections to collect information regarding opportunities and challenges, and sometimes on the important question of methods of obtaining asylum. Diaspora groups also serve as vital windows into the European society and changes in immigration legislation. People considering travel use diasporas as reference points on legislative changes and find their knowledge more persuasive, compared to media or other sources on asylum issues.

² http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_346219.pdf

³ Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census Analysis: Ethnicity and Religion of the Non-UK Born Population in England and Wales.

⁴ http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/immigration-patterns-and-characteristics-of-non-uk-born-population-groups-in-england-and-wales/story-on-immigration-patterns-of-non-uk-born-populations-in-england-and-wales-in-2011.html?format=print



IRANIAN REFUGEES

The number of individuals seeking asylum receives considerable media focus in many countries – a level of attention that is not proportionate to their share of migrants overall.⁵ In 2014, asylum seekers were around 4.1% of immigrants to the UK.⁶ Nevertheless, the heightened interest from the public and the media, the political repercussions of mishandling them and the humanitarian considerations associated with the group necessitates considerable government attention.

Iranians regularly demonstrate intent to migrate to the UK:

- In 2010 and 2011 Iran made the most asylum applications accounting for 13% of the total.
- In the year ending June 2012 there was a large proportionate increase in the number of grants to Iranian nationals. There were 1,127 grants of asylum or temporary protection, compared to 863 in the previous year.
- In 2013 Iran produced the second largest number of applications for asylum.
- In 2014 Iran produced the fourth highest number of asylum applicants in the UK and accounted for 8.1% of the total number of applicants.⁷

Figure 2 shows the trends in Iranian asylum applications to the UK since 2011.8

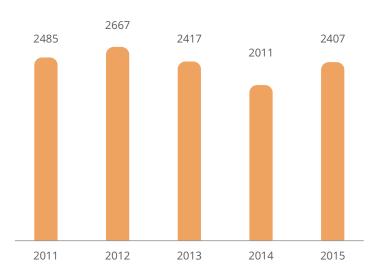


Figure 2: Number of asylum applications from Iranian nationals

⁵ This disproportionate focus by the world's media reflects the unique nature of this category of migrants.

⁶ http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01403

⁷ http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Briefing%20-%20Migration%20to%20the%20UK%20-%20Asylum_0.pdf

⁸ 2015 data represents the year-ending September 2015. It excludes those individuals who arrived in quarter 4 2015, and includes individuals who claimed asylum in quarter 4 2014 and who are already counted in the yearly figure for 2014.



CURRENT AND FUTURE DEMAND

The rising number of refugees and displaced persons globally, coupled with changing policies in developed countries towards refugees, inspired us to explore what impact these events have had on Iranian interest in irregular migration. Under Wave 1, conducted in December 2014 and January 2015, Farsight interviewed 199 people in southwestern Iran who declared an interest in leaving the country (68 females and 131 males). We then followed up with a smaller number of this group for longer discussions. Engaging people on these topics can be difficult, but we received seemingly candid information on plans and perspectives on irregular migration.



Farsight's survey indicated that in December 2014, the UK was the most popular destination for people preparing to migrate. This contrasts with the data on actual asylum applications, which show the UK below the EU average in terms of asylum applications per head. In the year ending September 2015, the UK ranked 17th among the 28 countries in the EU.9 This may suggest a disparity between migrants' aspirations and what they are able to achieve. At present not enough is known about why migrants change their final destination country, but Farsight's research identified key factors which impacted on the decisions of migrants in the past 12 months, discussed further below.

⁹ http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01403



Of the 755,000 asylum applications in the EU to the year ending June 2015, the UK had the seventh highest number of applications, having received 33,000.¹⁰ In the same period, Iran ranked as the fourth highest asylum applicant country of origin in the UK. This was an increase from the previous year. This upwards trend of Iranian asylum applications continued during 2015 and to the year-end September 2015, there was a 71% increase in the number of applications received from Iranian nationals for the preceding 12 months.¹¹ Figure 3 shows the top 5 countries of origin of asylum-seekers in the UK at September 2015.

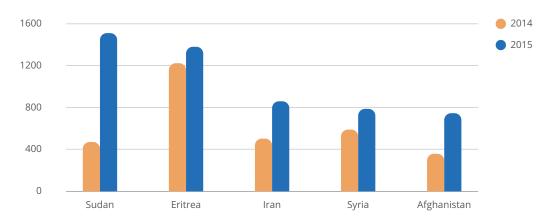


Figure 3: Top 5 asylum applications to the UK by nationality

The popularity of the UK as a migration destination for Iranians was identified in Wave 1 of Farsight's survey. Of the 51 of 199 respondents who indicated an intention to migrate to the UK, 46 indicated that had already invested money in their migration and 48 indicated they expected to leave in the next 6 months.

Farsight's data indicates that of those intending to travel to the UK, 19% were 18 – 24 years old, 15% were 25 – 34 years old, 42% were 35 – 45 years old, and 8% were 55 – 64 years old. We did not include dependents in our survey. Of this group, 38% were female, and 62% were male. For comparison, from 2013 to end-2015, 72.8% of asylum applicants were male and 27.1% were female, noting that this excludes dependents and covers all countries of origin, not just Iranians. We have insufficient available information to determine whether there is a demographic shift in asylum applicants more broadly. Figure 4 shows the breakdown from Farsight's data of travelers to the UK by age and gender.

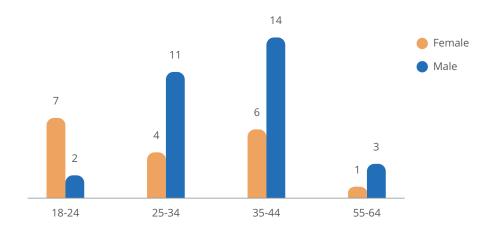


Figure 4: Age and gender of people intending to migrate (UK only)

¹⁰ https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2015/asylum

¹¹ http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_425188.pdf



The majority of Iranians Farsight spoke with were educated or skilled and were able to work. 33% had completed high school, while an additional 31% had received a bachelor's degree. A further 20% had received either trade/technical or vocational training. Our survey also found that 47% of respondents were either working or studying at the time of interview, and an additional 10% were looking for work. This suggests that the majority of respondents are likely to seek employment after migrating. This is supported by respondents' identified reasons for leaving Iran, as shown in Figure 5. While the most common response was that respondents believed their life was in danger in Iran, the second most common response was that respondents could not find a job in Iran.

Figure 5: What is your most important reason for leaving Iran? (UK only)



Of those 5 migrants re-contacted under Wave 1 who intended to migrate to the UK, all responded that they would like to secure employment in the UK. Their responses suggest they were cognizant of some of the challenges this would pose, but believed they had a better chance than in Iran. Most respondents indicated that they would need to pay back friends and relatives who had loaned them money to fund their migration journey.

Caution should be taken in interpreting this as migration for economic reasons. In a report published in December 2015 by the Overseas Development Institute titled "Why People Move", it was noted that the reasons why asylum seekers and economic migrants travel to Europe are often similar, and the need for secure livelihood options plays a central role. Attempts to categorize individuals into these two groups does not reflect the complex nature of individual motivators or the migration experience. A person may fit both categories at the same time. As Farsight has argued elsewhere, there is a vast gap between the perspective from destination country bureaucracies and the migrant's perspective on motivations and categorization. Our research was not focused on identifying an individual's claim to asylum, and we did not seek to understand their intentions on this matter. We did, however, obtain information on respondents' expectations on arrival.

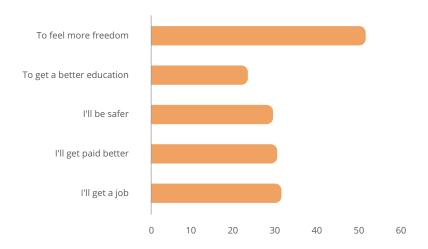
It is also important to explore the 33% of respondents motivated to migrate because their life was in danger. Clarification around the context of this response revealed that it reflects respondents' general lack of hope for the future. It encapsulates a concern that their children would grow up with social challenges, forced Islamic theology and lack of freedom as private citizens. Feeling that their life was in danger also encompassed concerns about environmental issues in Iran, which have contributed to serious health issues, and the high cost of living which limits healthcare, nutrition and the availability of food. It was not limited to fearing that their life was in immediate danger. This context assists in understanding why some respondents who feared for their life would not immediately leave Iran.



EXPECTATIONS ON ARRIVAL

Farsight asked migrants what their expectations were of life in the UK, and their responses are in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Expectation of life in the UK



Respondents were provided with 9 options to choose from and all of the respondents voiced positive expectations. None of the respondents selected the following:

- · I expect I will face discrimination
- · I expect I will struggle to find paid employment
- I expect I will struggle with my income
- I expect I will feel homesick

Given these are common difficulties for refugees, it may suggest some respondents from Wave 1 were being unrealistic, whether through determined optimism or poor information. Further discussion demonstrated that some respondents were aware they may face challenges in getting a job, but there was nonetheless an expectation that these challenges would be overcome.

I am sure getting a job will not be as easy, but I am sure once I am approved as a refugee I will receive equal job opportunities to support my family.

I am sure receiving a job will not be easy. I have to keep in mind that is the case all over the world at this time and many educated migrants in different countries are facing the challenge of unemployment. But I am sure there is a better and fairer chance of receiving a job than in Iran.

I have no I doubt I will have many challenges in getting a job considering the language barrier and my limited education. But I am more than willing to do any legal work in order to support my family to have a better future.



THE SUMMER 2015 MIGRANT SURGE

Following the surge in the number of migrants travelling to Europe in the summer of 2015, in December 2015 Farsight undertook Wave 2 of our research, in which we reconnected with 45 migrants from the original group of 199 to determine where they were on their migration journey. All those who had left Iran had used service providers to facilitate their journey. The majority of people used a smuggler (22 respondents), 13 used a friend or relative to arrange their journey, 2 engaged the services of a corrupt official while another used a businessman.¹² Services provided included travel arrangements, accommodation in transit, and 12 migrants reported securing fraudulent travel documentation from their service provider.

THE UK AS A DESTINATION

13 of the 45 respondents in Wave 2 had originally indicated an intention to travel to the UK. The following chart shows where these individuals were on their journey.

Figure 7: Location of intended UK-bound migrants in December 2015



the number of individuals.

Of the 6 who had arrived in a destination country, only one had arrived in the UK. 2 were in Germany, 2 in Sweden, and another in France. For the migrant who had arrived in the UK, they left Iran around April 2015 and waited in transit approximately 2 months before arriving in the UK. A people smuggler was used to arrange the journey, and the assistance provided included facilitating the journey, accommodation in transit countries and arranging for an illegal passport for the individual's son to enable him to depart Iran.

On arrival in the UK the migrant received government-funded housing, and was earning an income. They described the income as "pocket money" and said it was "much lower than what I was receiving in Iran, but we are willing to deal with the challenges for the hope of a better future".

At the time of the survey, the individual had been in the UK for approximately 6 months. They believed their situation to be better than in Iran and said "we feel free and respected, and we have not experienced any discrimination towards us as an ethnic minority". Asked whether he would encourage friends or family to make a similar journey, the respondent said "I definitely would encourage my friends and family members who care about the future

¹²Respondents were asked to select the best response to describe their relationship with their service provider.



of their children and who are also looking for equal opportunities without discrimination".

SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS ON THE MIGRANT JOURNEY

Farsight's research demonstrated that there were two key factors arising from the migrant surge over summer that impacted on our respondents' decisions and experiences:

- The immigration and asylum policies of countries such as Germany and Sweden; and
- The November 2015 announcement by countries in the European refugee corridor that migrants from war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq would have greater freedom of passage than other migrants.

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM POLICIES

13 people interviewed in Wave 2 indicated an interest in migrating to the UK. Only one had successfully arrived and another two had unsuccessfully attempted the journey. The data suggests that the change in migration policies by some governments in Western Europe, including Sweden and Germany, likely impacted on the decision of some of these remaining individuals. 4 of the 6 interviewees who originally preferred the UK as a destination, and who successfully migrated, travelled to Germany or Sweden. This trend reflects the popularity of Germany and Sweden as destination countries among the broader group of respondents. Of the 45 people interviewed in Wave 2, 21 (47%) had reached their final destination country, with 10 in Germany and 6 in Sweden. The remaining 5 people were in the UK, Austria, Holland, Denmark and France.

Respondents tended to highlight a link between German policy and Iranians' decisions:

Actually the support of the German government for the new migrants in the past few months has given more reason for many to finalize their decisions for migration.

We are all witnessing the assistance and the support of the German government. This is the main reason I chose Germany as my final destination.

The response by the German government inspired thousands of Iranians to migrate, many of whom had no previous plans for migration.

BORDER RESTRICTIONS FOR IRANIANS

People still in Iran and those in transit suggest that border policies aimed at restricting the migration of Iranians into Europe were effective. As shown in .

Figure 8, of the 24 respondents in Wave 2 who had not reached their final destination, 13 (52%) said the current border restrictions for Iranians was the reason they had not migrated.

Figure 8: Why have you not reached your final destination country? (All respondents)





A typical set of answers shown here demonstrates the impact that the border policies had on the migrants' journey:

The change of policies against the migrants from Iran -considered to be economic migrants- is the challenge. We have no idea when to continue our journey.

The recent border controls against the Iranian nationals is becoming a serious concern for many and I hope the policy will only be temporary.

I did not want to risk our safety and our health at the borders with no proper facilities [following the closure of the borders].

We preferred to come back home instead of staying at the borders with no proper services and accommodation for families.

THE ROLE OF THE SMUGGLER

A review of the qualitative data collected in Wave 2 suggests the quantitative data understates the significance of the smuggler in the migrant's journey. Figure 6 above suggests that only 4% of respondents attributed their lack of successful migration journey to the actions of a smuggler. However, many of the comments made by the respondents suggest that the smuggler played a more significant role than this.

The following comments made by those who had reached their destination country describe the useful role that the smuggler played in their journey:

[The smuggler] was very helpful in providing proper accommodation, facilitating a safe journey and supporting us with food, water and other medical supplies.

[The smuggler] provided us with safe accommodation in Turkey and used his great connections with the Turkish police to make sure we were not arrested or harassed for bribes. He then led us safely to Greece by boat and then on the road to the border.

[The smuggler] assisted more than 15 members of my family and also a few other friends during the same journey. He provided us with very good accommodation in Turkey, a safe boat to Greece and also accommodation in Greece prior to our journey to the borders.

The following comments are made by those who had not yet reached their final destination and describe the impact that an unhelpful smuggler had on a migrant's journey:

He is the only reason for our unsuccessful journey.

[The smuggler] is the only reason for us being back in Iran with total embarrassment in the community.

[The smuggler] made fake promises about the journey being safe, but it turned out that he was only making up lies to collect my money.

[The smuggler] had an important role in making us believe the [border] restrictions are only temporary and made us believe will be able to cross the borders. He collected full payment from us.

These comments suggest that some smugglers provided false information to travelers on the risks associated with the journey and the practical implications of the border restrictions. In addition, it appears there have been instances in which smugglers did not provide the services they indicated they would:

[The smugglers] promised to provide me with a safe journey from Turkey and Greece to Eastern Europe and accommodation during the journey. But unfortunately he did not deliver



on these promises and I lost more than \$8,000 so far for my dream to reach Europe.

The first smuggler out of Iran cheated us of our money and was not able to assist us to complete the journey as promised. We had to find a new smuggler while staying in Turkey which cost us so much money for the accommodation and more money to the new smuggler.

ATTEMPTED TRAVEL TO THE UK

Restrictive border policies were also discussed by 1 of the 2 people who had attempted to travel to the UK but had to return to Iran before completing their journey. They summarized their reasons for return as follows:

- Person A: I become aware of the risks during the journey. I had never realized the reality in the danger of illegal migration and while staying in Turkey, became aware of this.
- Person B: We left in approximately October 2015 for Turkey but the changes in the border policies against Iranian migrants forced us to return to Iran.

Both respondents said they were provided false information by the migrant smugglers they used regarding the safety of the journey and the openness of the borders in Western Europe. They both added that the increase in the number of migrants traveling over summer gave them more courage, ambition and "false hope". One individual said "it gave me the false hope that it was the best time to migrate and reach Europe", while the other said "the surge gave us more reasons than ever to finalize our plans. I wish I did not face the financial difficulties to pay off the people smuggler...we lost our best chance in a lifetime to start a new life".

Both respondents indicated an interest in attempting to migrate again. Person A indicated a preference for legal migration, while person B suggested they would seek to travel as soon as the border policies in Western Europe were no longer restrictive towards Iranians. This was a reference to the tightening of border restrictions by some Balkan countries in November 2015 in which these countries indicated they would only accept refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, effectively denying entry to Iranian migrants.

There were an additional 2 people who originally indicated an intention to travel to the UK, and who have not departed Iran. Their reasons for not travelling included the changes in border policies for Iranian nationals, and personal circumstances. Both expressed regret they had not sought to travel to Western Europe at the beginning or height of the surge of migrants. While the border policies targeting Iranians was a key concern for both respondents, they indicated they intended to make the journey and would seek to migrate irregularly.

This research indicates that the restrictive border policies for entry into Europe have impacted on the ability of migrants to reach Europe. However, the policies appear only to have temporarily deterred travel, and the intention of the people we spoke with was to migrate once the policies were eased.



CONCLUSIONS

Based on Farsight's research, it is possible to identify two core variables which will likely continue to impact on the journey of Iranian migrants into Europe and shape future migration patterns. These are:

- Demand for movement
- · Practical hurdles preventing demand for migration becoming a successful journey

DEMAND FOR MOVEMENT

The demand for movement is shaped by the interplay between the policies and approach of the destination country and trends in the country of origin. Our research shows that the liberal policies of Germany and Sweden to refugee resettlement over the European summer impacted on migrants' choice of final destination. Some respondents commented that Germany's actions in increasing the refugee intake inspired their journey and shaped their final destination country. The majority of respondents in Wave 2 who were still in Iran identified Germany or Sweden as their primary destination countries. As long as these countries continue to offer migrants a greater likelihood for settlement, migrants will be more likely to travel to these countries than the UK.

Conditions and trends in Iran have a greater impact on migrants' decision-making processes where these conditions are negative. A deterioration of conditions is likely to act as an impetus for individuals to depart, whereas positive changes would likely need to be more dramatic to reverse a migrant's decision. Furthermore, *general* negative trends can be powerful, while *general* positive trends are less so. For positive trends to reduce desire for emigration, they need to affect a migrant personally.

Recent developments in Iran provide a contrasting picture of the potential for positive change. The lifting of sanctions is expected to have some positive impact on the economy, which may include expanded job opportunities. However, for a country which has experienced inflation and high unemployment in recent years, it is unlikely any immediate economic advancements will be significant enough to impact on the intentions of committed migrants. Iran continues to receive criticism for the curtailment of the human rights of its citizens and there are no indications that this situation will improve soon, especially not in the perception of people who anyway feel alienated from their government.

PRACTICAL HURDLES

Our research suggests that the principal hurdle in a migrant's journey has been the border policies announced by countries in the European refugee corridor in November 2015. These policies effectively restrict the ability of Iranians to migrate to the UK, and Western Europe more broadly and were the primary reason identified by our respondents for not having reached their final destination. Our survey indicates that these border policies have limited the ability of people to migrate, but have not affected the migrants' intention to leave Iran. For this reason, we expect that if these current restrictions are lifted, the number of migrants entering Europe, and possibly the UK, would likely increase. Some respondents who had not left Iran commented that because of their inability to migrate earlier, they feared they had missed the most opportune time to enter Europe. It is possible that if these restrictions are lifted, it may inspire other 'on-the-fence' migrants to capitalize on the opportunity, for fear of further restrictions.

Our research also identified that the devaluation of the Iranian rial against the US dollar, the currency in which migration costs are paid, impacted on the migrant journey. It was cited as a reason for the delay by some respondents. Following the lifting of the sanctions and the expectation that the rial will lift in value, it may help some people to accelerate their plans.



Farsight's research has not produced any evidence to suggest that the interest of Iranians in migrating to Europe will wane in the near future. If border policies restricting their passage are removed, there will likely be an increase in the number of migrants travelling. However, while the more liberal policies of countries such as Germany and Sweden remain in place, migrants may be more likely to travel to these countries than the UK. If these policies are tightened, and the difference between settlement opportunities decreases, there may be an increase in the number of Iranians migrating to the UK.

Farsight will continue our research based on this existing data to understand the motivations, experiences and expectations of migrants travelling to Western Europe more broadly, and Germany and Sweden specifically. This research will be published in summer 2016.

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