SEEFAR

Who Dares Wins

Understanding the decision-making of irregular migrants from Iran

July 2016

ABOUT US

Our vision is for a world in which vulnerable people have more opportunities to advance themselves.

The purpose of our social enterprise is to work with those people to build a better future.

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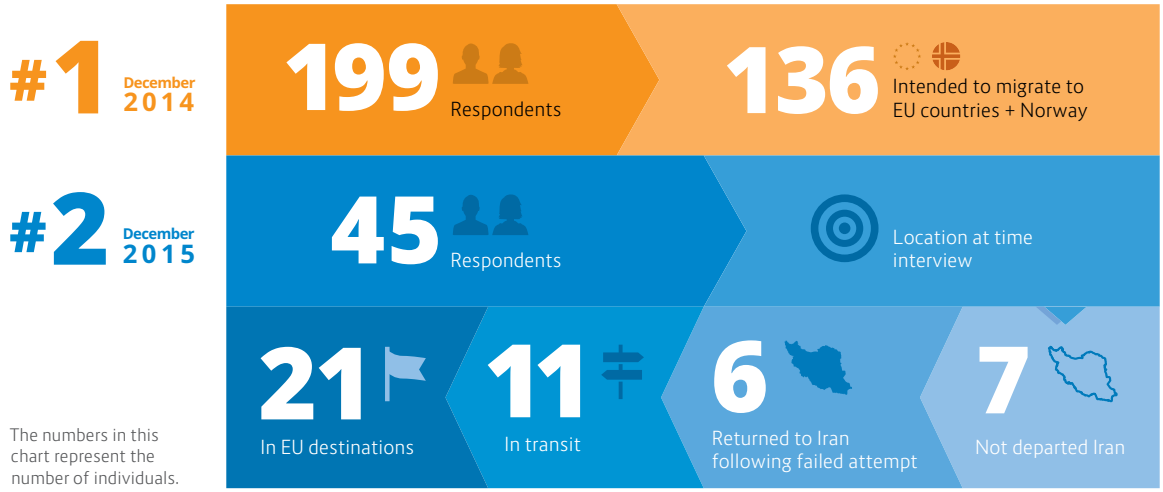
BACKGROUND

In 2015, over one million migrants arrived irregularly in the European Union (EU). They contributed to the 1.2 million claims for asylum submitted to Member States in the same year, 62% in Germany, Hungary, and Sweden alone. Spontaneous and surprising to EU governments, the arrivals marked the culmination of an often lengthy and considered decision-making process. Dominating the flows and the accompanying media commentary were Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, and nationals of a range of Sub-Saharan African nations. Less attention has been paid to Iranians. Yet, in the final quarter of 2015, Iranians were among the top five nationalities applying for asylum in ten EU Member States, and from May to October 2015 the number of Iranians seeking asylum in the European Union more than quadrupled. Iranians were recognized as in need of protection in more than half of EU first instance asylum decisions of the same year.

The factors driving departures from Iran towards high income destinations, including the European Union, are among the least visible and least well understood. Seefar was therefore inspired to build on its existing survey data with other source countries, to deepen its understanding of Iranian asylum seeker flows specifically. In December 2014, Seefar conducted the first wave of surveys (n=199) with Iranians preparing to emigrate to high income countries, 81% of whom named an EU country as their first preferred destination.

Figure 1: Key characteristics



A second wave of interviews was carried out in December 2015 with a selection (n=45) of wave 1 respondents, distinguishing between those who had arrived in the European Union, were still in transit, had returned to Iran, or who had not (yet) departed. Two more waves are envisaged in 2016 and 2017; this report therefore marks the midway point of a four-part longitudinal study tracking the progress of potential and active migrants.

[1] 'irregular migrant' is used throughout the report as an umbrella term for all those moving from their home country to another country, with a view to settlement, but outside of official migration channels. This includes de facto refugees, asylum seekers, and other legal categories of migrant.

[2] https://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=475

[3] Eurostat, first time applicants, Monthly data, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database

[4] EU Member States in which Iranian migrants featured in the top five applicant nationalities in the fourth quarter of 2015 (rank): the UK (1), Denmark (1), Finland (4), Luxembourg (4), Sweden (5), Slovenia (5), Netherlands (5), Austria (5), Bulgaria (5), Belgium (5) - http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report

[5] Eurostat, first time applicants, Monthly data, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database

[6] Meaning that, to varying degrees, a greater proportion were recognised as in need of protection following completion of the appeals process.

Central to the research were the:

- factors influencing destination choice,
- process by which the aspiration to migrate resulted in actual departure,
- emergence of migration, and decision-making patterns.

Seefar found that an existing network of family and friends in an EU destination country was much less important as a factor determining the EU destination country than other countries, notably Australia. Meanwhile, the migration 'surge' in the summer of 2015[7] itself encouraged an acceleration of plans to migrate. However, it was ultimately longer-term factors, namely difficuties in securing a livelihood in harsh political and economic conditions, that most motivated Iranians to form plans to depart.

[7] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-33972632

KEY FINDINGS

Seefar made the following key findings:

Jobs and Education

1. The primary motivations for migration cited by respondents were the difficulty in finding a job in Iran and—for students especially—poor education opportunities.

The Surge as a Pull Factor

2. The 'surge' of migrants arriving in Europe in 2015 played a dual role. First it encouraged those already considering migration to bring forward their departure. Second, it prompted some who had not previously considered migration to seriously contemplate it as an option.

Friends and Family Influencing Destination Decisions

3. A majority of respondents choosing destinations in the EU did not already know somebody living there. This is at odds with respondents preferring Australia, all of whom already had established networks in the country. This finding was particularly pronounced in the UK and Germany—where only 37% and 26% of respondents respectively knew people who had migrated previously—but less so in Sweden, where 54% reported no existing contacts.

Destination Changes

4. There was strong evidence of respondents switching their preferred destination while en route.

5. While news of successful arrivals encouraged migrants, asylum recognition rates in EU countries are unlikely to have directly influenced destination choice.

Positive Outlook

6. All respondents, including those who had tried and failed, were positive about the merits of migration, and would recommend others to make the investment. All respondents unsuccesful in their migration attempt intended to try again, although timeframes were not fixed.

Routes

7. The majority of migrants Iran followed/intended to follow the Iran-Turkey-Greece route into the EU. Many respondents were able to fly to Istanbul. Others (e.g. those with compulsory military service outstanding) required the services of smugglers to exit Iran. At least one respondent is likely to have entered the EU with a Schengen visa.

Risk Reward Calculation

8. Respondents were generally well-informed of the risks and dangers posed by irregular migration. However, frequent reports of the successful arrival of compatriots resulted in most calculating that the risks inherent in the migration journey were worth the reward.

Smuggling

9. Smuggling networks were loose. Many respondents reported knowing smugglers through family, friends or ethnic communities. Local agents were often reported to be acting on behalf of smugglers based in Tehran, who would utilize contacts in Turkey to facilitate later stages in the journey. Some respondents expressed surprise at the ease of making independent arrangements in Turkey for onward travel to Greece.

Success Factors

10. Success in reaching a destination within the EU appears to be determined principally by the timing of the

journey. The majority of successful respondents left before September 2015, while the majority of those still in transit or that have returned to Iran had left later in the year. The integrity of the service provider was dominant among respondents' own explanations for the outcome, whether successful or not.

IRANIAN MIGRATION TO EUROPE

BLEAK PROSPECTS AND A CULTURE OF MIGRATION: WHY IRANIANS LEAVE HOME

Successive waves of emigration have reinforced a 'culture of migration'[8] in Iran. The precedent set by expatriates and the continuing economic woes for much of the country's population has seen an increasing number of residents resolve to leave and begin preparations for eventual departure. The migration 'surge' in the summer of 2015 seems to have encouraged many of these indeterminate plans to crystallize, resulting a spike in the number of migrants actually departing. A number who had 'never even considered the idea of migration' were encouraged by the accumulated successes of Iranian migrants reaching their destination to seriously entertain the idea.

Respondents referred to historical events as catalysts for the rise of migration in community consciousness, including the:

1. Iranian revolution in 1979,
2. Iran-Iraq wars in the 1980s, and
3. US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Iran's status as a destination, origin and transit country of migration[9] has made migration a prominent feature of life, even in the lives of those without direct experience of migration. Respondents were drawn from the province of Khuzestan, an oil-rich, income-poor coastal region bordering Iraq, with strong regional ties and a history of labour migration to the United Arab Emirates. Khuzestan's geostrategic importance and non-Persian majority population, meanwhile, has seen central government adopt policies oriented towards control. These have ranged from economic marginalisation to more explicit measures targeting alleged dissidence among the minority population. The overlapping political and economic challenges are reflected in the mixed motives for migration stated by respondents.

Respondents displayed an awareness of the macro-economic challenges facing the country. They linked these to their personal situation, both in immediate terms ('the economic situation is a daily challenge') and in terms of their longer-term outlook ('for the better future of our children').

The 42% who did not highlight their potential for higher incomes at destination suggests that respondents had some awareness of the difficulties of integration at destination.

Respondents' expectations from their chosen destination country most commonly reflected a desire for 'more freedom' than was possible in Iran (95% of respondents).This is a notably higher proportion than the next most common expectation that incomes would increase (58%). The 42% who did not highlight their potential for higher incomes at destination suggests that respondents had some awareness of the difficulties of integration at destination, and the problems with labelling migration purely economic.

Despite the mixed nature of motivations for migrating, the difficulty of getting a job was a dominant factor in the decision to leave. For ethnic Persian respondents this tended to be articulated in terms of the challenges of youth unemployment, while Arab respondents emphasised the discrimination faced as a minority group. Interestingly, overall, 65% of respondents who said they were unable to find a job, were actually in paid employment. This suggests a problem of dissatisfaction with work and/or underemployment being as significant an issue as unemployment in the region

There are some caveats to these findings. First, there were strong disaparities between genders:

- men were significantly more likely to cite the pursuit of emploment as the top reason for emigrating (55%),
- a small minority of women (13%) left for the same reason. Women were most likely to state that their life was in danger (33%) or that they wished to rejoin family who had already migrated abroad (31%).

[8] http://www.wou.edu/~mcgladm/Geography%20370%20Human%20Migration/culture%20of%20migration%20article.pdf

[9] Net migration is about zero

- school and university students were highly motivated to improve the quality of their education, with 76% of students citing limited education opportunities for wanting to leave.
- researchers became aware during data collection that some respondents found the difficulty in making a living to be tantamount to a threat to life, further demonstrating the difficulties in disentangling economic and security-related motivations. As an example, somebody who has their business appropriated by the government would naturally link threats to life to economic difficulties.

Pawan

A Kurdish Iranian around 40 years old and married with children, left Iran in September 2015 and originally intended to travel to the UK where he expected improved education opportunities and to earn more than in Iran. He sold his house and borrowed from relatives to finance his journey. After around 3 months spent travelling through Turkey and Bulgaria, he finally ended up in Germany.

EXPLAINING DESTINATION CHOICE

NETWORKS

Overseas networks play a significant role in decisions. All respondents knew somebody abroad who they thought might 'assist' with the migration process. Yet, the prevalence of contacts abroad did not always correspond to destination choice. For example, all respondents who chose Australia as their preferred destination knew somebody who had already migrated there, but not all those with strong networks in Australia favoured it as a destination choice. Although 33% indicated that the majority of their international contacts resided in Australia, only 13% selected it as their preferred destination.

Constrastingly, networks were less important for migrants choosing the European Union. While all respondents knew people living in high income countries, respondents listing EU countries as the destination of choice tended to lack personal contacts there. For example, 75% of those preferring to migrate to Germany did not list Germany as a country in which they had contacts, and only 37% of those choosing the UK already knew people there. The results for Sweden were more mixed, with 54% lacking a network there.

Similarly, family reunion goals seem to have influenced decisions very little. Of the 'big three' destinations in Europe, Germany, Sweden, and the UK, family reunion was explicitly mentioned as a motivator for destination choice for only 9% of respondents. For Australia and Canada, the figures were 46% and 29% respectively.

Family reunion goals influenced decisions to migrate to the European Union very little. Of the 'big three' EU destinations of Germany, Sweden, and the UK, family reunion drove initial destination choice for only 9% of respondents.

Previous migration experience also had little bearing on the choice of EU Member States as respondents' preferred destination. Only 27% of wave one respondents who identified an EU Member State as their preferred destination had previous migration experience at all.

Europe's popularity seems to be motivated primarily by economic factors, with 49% of those bound for the big three EU Member States pointing to a difficult job market in Iran as their primary motivation for leaving. Education was important for those going to the UK (25%) which, when viewed in tandem with the corresponding figure for the US (57%) , corresponds to the global popularity of (legal) student migration to high income, anglophone countries.

EMPLOYMENT

Respondents displayed a remarkable flexibility in destination choice, suggesting that the prospects of successful arrival and stay were more important than traits specfic to a single given country. This contrasts with other populations that Seefar has worked with, who show a stronger orientation to particular destinations. An analysis of second and third country preferences shows that 47% of respondents would be willing to migrate to

destinations on at least two different continents.[10] Respondents accepted that the integration process might 'take some time' wherever they ended up, and did not reference the relative merits of various jo b markets.

In this regard, perceptions that Germany and Sweden were explicitly open to refugees certainly seems to have encouraged opportunistic departures. One respondent echoed the sentiments of many that the migration surge saw people depart 'who had never even considered migration before.' The official figures bear this out; from May to October 2015, the number of Iranians seeking asylum in the EU more than quadrupled.[11]

ASYLUM RECOGNITION RATES: AN INDIRECT ROLE AT MOST

Asylum recognition rates are unlikely to have directly influenced destination choice as respondents did not demonstrate a knowledge of diverging recognition rates between EU Member States. In 2015, the number of asylum applicants receiving positive decisions constituted:

- 45% of final decisions on asylum applications in Sweden,
- 51% of final decisions in the UK,
- 58% of final decisions in Germany.

Destination choice was predominantly focused on the UK in the first instance, which then transformed into a trend of asylum applicants switching their destination preference to Germany and Sweden. Patterns in destination choice thus did not resemble recognition rates. They may have played an indirect role, however, as respondents explained that the confidence they held in their migration plans often stemmed from stories of successful arrivals.

CHANGING DECISIONS

Layla

Departed Iran in June 2015. Around 30 years old, divorced without children, and of Ahwazi Arab origin, she was unable to earn a living at home. Despite the majority of her international contacts being based in Australia, she named Sweden as her preferred destination. Her final destination, after around 3 months of travel via Turkey and the sea crossing to Greece, was Germany, where she is staying with friends and family.

Between the first and second waves of the study, there was a marked change in migrants' destination preferences. Eight Member States were listed as the first choice destination among wave one respondents. These were the UK (selected by 25% of total respondents), Sweden (20%), Germany (18%), the Netherlands (2%), Belgium (2%), Italy (1%), and France (less than 1%). Despite its initial popularity, most migrants seemed to abandon attempts to reach the UK at some point during transit. Of seven respondents aiming for the UK interviewed in the second wave, only one had actually made it into the UK, while the rest had changed course for Sweden and Germany.

Decisions on destinations remained fairly open throughout the migration journey, demonstrating the dynamism of the migratory process and the control exercised by migrants over their journeys. While the results show that changes in this decision happened during transit, further follow-up is needed to ascertain the timing and extent to which decisions change.

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[10] For these purposes, Turkey is defined as outside of Europe.

[11] Eurostat, first time applicants, Monthly data, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database

Figure 2: Intended vs actual destinations

NAME	CHOICE PRE-DEPARTURE	ACTUAL DESTINATION
Jabari	Germany	Germany
Eman	Germany	Germany
Hakim	Sweden	Sweden
Nusi	Sweden	Sweden
Korai	Sweden	Sweden
Uday	UK	UK
Rahim	Germany	Germany
Bazan	Germany	Germany
Zaid	Sweden	Germany

NAME	CHOICE PRE-DEPARTURE	ACTUAL DESTINATION
Amani	Sweden	Germany
Asieh	Canada	Germany
Layla	Sweden	Germany
Jamail	UK	Austria
Aiya	UK	Sweden
Pawan	UK	Germany
Yusuf	UK	Sweden
Somita	UK	France
Haroun	UK	Denmark
Malik	Sweden	Holland
Zara	Sweden	Sweden
Kajin	Sweden	Germany

JOURNEY

ROUTES

Amani

The Ahwazi Arab minority and married with two children, departed Iran in July and arrived in Germany after less than two months. He travelled a more unusual route via Cyprus. Amani was one of only a few cases where a service provider obtained a Schengen visa on his behalf, allowing him to avoid the dangerous sea route. His decision to migrate to the West followed his removal from the United Arab Emirates, and difficulties finding work in Iran.

Migrants took two main routes from departure. A number of respondents headed north from Khuzestan by bus or private vehicle and crossed the land border with Turkey before heading west. They joined established routes with mixed flows of migrants and refugees from Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Others flew from Iran to Turkey where they awaited further instructions for the onward journey to Europe. Respondents entering the European Union generally did so via the sea crossing to Greece before moving on to their preferred destination via Macedonia. At least one respondent attempted to cross the Bulgarian border and was arrested, while another obtained a Schengen visa (for Cyprus) and then moved within the Schengen area to claim asylum in Germany.

SMUGGLERS

The border policies of Turkey and Iran were both central in determining migrants' reliance on external providers to support the journey. Turkey maintains a relatively liberal stance towards Iran, meaning that most Iranians wishing to travel to the EU face a relatively easy first leg, in which they can legally travel to the EU border following a flight to a western Turkish city.

Some Iranians face more difficulties exiting Iran than entering Turkey. As a general rule, citizens are not impeded from gaining a passport and no special permission is needed to exit the country. However, specific groups face restrictions. Those who are yet to complete their mandatory military service featured prominently in our sample, but restrictions also apply to separated women, who must secure permission, usually from their husband, in order to travel internationally.[12] Therefore, while some migrants can maintain the appearance of regularity for much of the journey, others must source forged documents prior to departure.

Once migrants were in Turkey, service providers were called upon to provide accommodation and arrange for passage to the EU, usually via the Aegean sea to Greece. It is notable how the common provision of accommodation and sometimes little else, in the first instance at least, leaves little to differentiate the activities of smugglers from legitimate travel agents.

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It is difficult to draw a clear picture of the smuggler's 'business model.' Some respondents reported that their smuggler had 'good connections' in Turkey, while others noted the role of 'local agents', whose commission influenced the overall price. Introductions to smugglers were often made through family or friends, with a first meeting often in person and subsequent contact made on the terms of the smuggler, often calling from a withheld number.

The accumulation of anecdotal evidence throughout the research suggests a loosely connected smuggling network, with low barriers to entry and wildly varying standards of service. The smuggling networks facilitating migration out of Iran bear some resemblance to the loosely connected networks documented on other major smuggling routes.[13] A criminal organisation cannot therefore be easily identified.

[12] http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/iran-women-restrictions-travel-rights.html

[13] http://igad.int/attachments/1284_ISSP%20Sahan%20HST%20Report%20%2018ii2016%20FINAL%20FINAL.pdf

In contrast to other major irregular migration routes, such as from the Horn of Africa and Western Africa, Iranian respondents appeared to retain decision-making power throughout the journey. Sub-Saharan migrants often report a loss of control over the migration process following departure.[14] A common example is the inability to abandon migration attempts at crucial moments, such as when boarding overcrowded vessels. Although a minority of respondents reported deception and theft on the part of the smuggler, this was never reported as extortion, and no respondent mentioned the use of violence or intimidation.[15] Again, this is at odds with the experience of many African migrants.

The smuggling field was marked by strong competition, which intensified as newcomers entered the market in order to ride the wave of the migration surge:

> *the growing number of migrants resulted in many newcomer smugglers into the business with no experience or care on how to assist the migrants safely to their destinations.*

Smugglers relied on a strong track record in order to stand out from an increasingly crowded field, with some migrants referring to smugglers who had helped 'hundreds of Iranians' sometimes over decades, and stating that 'the service providers have been assisting the people since the Iran-Iraq war in the 80s and are well known.' Community and ethnic ties play a role in building trust between some clients and service providers, with one respondent successful in reaching Sweden using the services of a smuggler, 'well known for assisting the Kurdish community.'

COSTS

The fees respondents expected to pay varied hugely. Almost all respondents expected the journey to cost USD5,000 or more. There was a marked difference in expectation between those who had migrated before and those who had not, with the latter more than twice as likely to estimate the cost of migration as between USD5,000 and USD10,000. In contrast, 58% of respondents with previous migration experience estimated the cost at more than USD 15,000.

As would be logically expected, couples and respondents with children were significantly more likely to estimate higher costs. The same pattern was nevertheless apparent, with 74% of those with previous migration experience likely to estimate the costs as above USD 15,000 compared to just 60% of those families without. This suggests that those without previous migration experience may be systematically underestimating the cost of migration and consequently departing unprepared. This finding warrants further investigation, as it may be an important contributing factor for heightened vulnerability en route.

Respondents reported an increase in costs during the 2015 migration surge. Despite the increase in competition brought by new entrants to the smuggling markets, which might be expected to increase the price of a journey, the corresponding increase in demand from migrants seems to have mitigated this effect. A number of respondents reported a rise in the smuggling fee from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars more (than the prices they reported earlier migrants paying) over the summer of 2015.

The payment arrangements between migrant and smuggler varied. Several respondents were able to secure 'pay on arrival' deals, for all or part of the fee, although these were relatively rare. About half of respondents expected to pay the full fee in advance of the journey, while half expected to pay partly in advance and partly on arrival.

Respondents reported a range of strategies for financing the journey, including the sale of property. Another common financing method was through loans from family who had acquired the money through savings, property sales and commerical loans. However, there was no evidence of commerical loans directly financing migration, or that the practice of service provider-issued finance was prevalent, which is common with migrant domestic workers, for example.[16]

[14] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/568312/EPRS_BRI(2015)568312_EN.pdf; http://www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/migration/Altai_Consulting_Free_Movement_and_Migration_in_West_Africa.pdf

[15] This is not to suggest that the occurrence of coercion and violence definitely can be definitively ruled out.

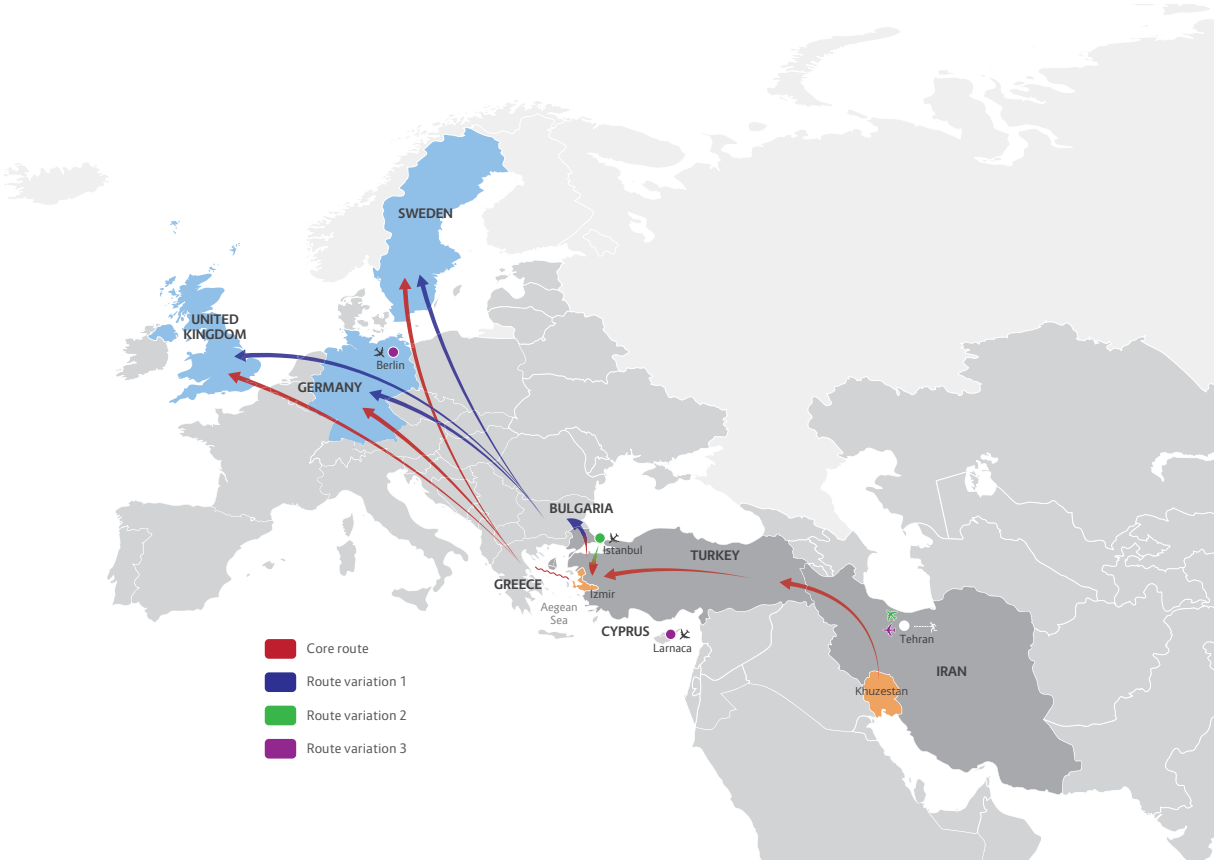
[16] http://seefar.org/large-scale-modern-slavery-research/

ASSESSING RISK

Respondents were largely aware of the dangers of travelling ('a big concern, especially for families with children'). There were a number wishing 'safer ways for migration' but almost all were clear that the dangers would not deter them from making such a journey. Rather, respondents were emboldened by 'news…on a daily basis… of safe arrivals [to European destinations],' which vastly outnumbered stories of those who lost their lives or returned to Iran.

Two respondents who had returned to Iran did cite concern about the safety of the journey. One expressed concern for small children travelling with him, while the other was wary of heightened risk due to his age. The majority of responses, however, reflected a realistic appraisal of the dangers of migration, which migrants weighed fairly and realistically against their relative chances of success. This pragmatic engagement with calculated risk embodies the entrepreurial spirit so widely celebrated in destination societies.

Figure 3: Map depicting routes



DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS

A 'failed' attempt was more likely to reinforce respondents' determination to take full advantage of subsequent opportunities than to lead to total abandonment of the intent to migrate. All respondents who had not yet migrated still had plans to do so, and were waiting for signals that migration channels were open. Respondents tended not to set themselves deadlines for migrating, and instead would 'oscillate between migrating and not migrating'[17] depending on their confidence in succeeding, and their financial situation.

The pathway from inception of the idea of migration to the decision to depart is non-linear. This means that restrictive border policies are more likely to delay or deflect migrants, than to deter migration.

'Success' is a label that must also be applied with caution. It is in some regards easier to judge successful those migrants who have arrived at their destination - especially as all reported satisfaction with their outcome. The precarity of their situation, however, means that changes in fortunes and self-evaluations are likely. At the time of the second wave interview, none had legal, independent sources of income, and none had yet received a secure legal (e.g. refugee) status. It will therefore be important to track the satisfaction of the 'successful' group in subsequent waves of the study.

Despite the caveats outlined above, there are some findings that can be stated with a higher degree of certainty. In particular, there was clear evidence why some migration attempts led to the fulfillment of plans, why plans changed, why migrants became stranded, and why some migrants chose to return to Iran.

LUCK OF TIMING OR QUALITY OF SERVICE?

Respondents who had successfully made the journey and those who had been frustrated in their plans, frequently referred to the quality and reliability of service providers as a major factor. A number of unsuccessful respondents claimed an element of deception on the part of the smuggler. This included:

- failure to deliver the promised service without refund,
- unrealistic assurances about prospects of success,
- false information on the risks of the journey, and level of discomfort.

In contrast, and perhaps unsurprisingly, successful migrants all reported great satisfaction with the service provided by smugglers, who utilised contacts in Iran and Turkey to ensure safe passage for their clients. Respondents' expectations of their smuggler were generally limited to safe passage to the EU. Those stranded in Macedonia or Greece tended to accept that the smuggler had done 'all he could do,' and that it was up to them from that point to either go it alone or enlist support from another service provider locally.

However, the extent to which the service quality actually determined success is undermined by the stark patterns of success of summer departures, compared to those leaving Iran in the autumn. Almost all respondents still in transit had departed Iran after September 2015, when governments in the Western Balkans region tightened border security. Some migrants continued to pass but - importantly for respondents still transiting Turkey and who had not yet departed Iran - confidence in the route was shaken, and plans put on hold. Those successful in reaching their destination had all departed in August 2015 or earlier. Success therefore seems highly contingent on the timings of departure. This was not lost on respondents, many of whom regretted their hesitancy and resolved not to miss future windows of opportunity.

Smugglers who stole funds from respondents or who did not deliver on promises, therefore, may have done so opportunisitically upon realisation that their client's journey would not be completed. The reality is thus likely more complex than the dichotomy of good and bad smuggler painted by respondents, and prominent in policy and academic discussions.

[17] Seefar unpublished report on migrant decision-making from Eritrea.

OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING OUTCOMES

Respondents offered a variety of additional explanations for the outcome and postponement of their migration attempt, usually relatable back to the costs of migration. While sanctions on the Iranian economy contributed to the economic woes and 'push' factors of departing migrants, it also adversely affected the practical feasibility of migration. The depreciation of the Iranian Rial—inflation reaching as much as 40%[18] —drove up smuggling fees denominated in US dollars. Along with the price premium created by the 'surge', which added several hundred dollars to the cost of passage, the costs of migration became unaffordable for many.

Reza

An Iranian of Turkish origin, was still in Greece six months after departing Iran. In that time, he had changed his preferred destination from the UK to Germany. He cites three unsuccessful attempts to reach Greece costing over USD 8000 in total. He says that the migrant 'surge' in the summer of 2015 encouraged migrants to take advantage of a small window of opportuntiy to move to a welcoming Europe. He blames this for rushing his plans, and consequently choosing a poor quality smuggler.

However, it is also possible (but not directly reported) that anticipation of the further depreciation of the Rial prompted respondents to pre-empt depreciation and leave while savings still held sufficient value. It would be worth investigating in subsequent waves whether improved economic performance sees departures increase or not. The lifting of sanctions in January 2016 may eventually see confidence improve in the economy, and encourage people to remain. Alternatively, a boost to the Rial may see those who have been contemplating migration finally able to pay smuggler fees.

Our findings on the relationship between the finances of respondents and the tendency to migrate supports the thesis that increased income results in greater emigration - at least in those communities inclined towards migration. This is reinforced by the number of respondents planning to leave paid jobs - and relative financial stability - to travel irregularly to the EU. This raises doubts over popular approaches to migration management based on 'root cause' explanations of irregular migration, which expect development gains to reduce migration.

[18] http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-foreign-exchange-sanction-relief-imports.html

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

FAILURE, POSTPONEMENT AND DELAY

All of the respondents who had not departed Iran, or had returned to Iran following an attempt to migrate to Europe still intended to migrate at some point. Border restrictions were more likely to see migrants suspend their journey or postpone plans entirely than accept major losses on their financial, emotional, and physical investments. One migrant had sold her house in order to make the journey. Her passage to the European Union was blocked and, with nothing to return to in Turkey, was effectively stranded:

> *I have no place to return to in Iran and must stay here, even if it means living in the streets of Turkey.*

Many migrants are therefore likely to bide their time until border restrictions are lifted. This indicates a temporary halt in the migration surge, rather than any lasting solution.

Migrants were unanimous in their position that they would recommend others to attempt migration. A majority said that they would advise future migrants on an opportune moment to migrate, namely when restrictions had eased and new or existing routes were opened up. Typical responses varied in levels of caution, but all were optimistic:

> *I certainly would encourage all my friends and relatives to take the risk, without risk you can never reach your dreams*

> *Yes I definitely would [recommend migration to others] but the current border control against the Iranians is forcing many to delay their plans with the hope of a change in heart by the European government [sic].*

It is notable that migrants made no specific reference to the high level communications of the EU, such as Donald Tusk's[19] statement declaring the Western Balkan route closed.[20] While respondents did consume mainstream media, respondents' easy access to first-hand accounts from other migrants meant that all statements could be quickly cross-checked with the facts on the ground.

Anahita

A Persian Iranian married with one child, had returned to Iran after two months, having been caught up in the rapid changes in border policy along the 'Western Balkan route.' She had aimed to reach the UK via the Bulgaria-Turkey land crossing, but abandoned her journey when conditions became intolerable. The attempt to reach the EU came after years planning migration to Australia, a goal made unattainable by restrictive policies there. Anahita expects to try again once policies become more favourable and finances have recovered.

LIFE IN EUROPE: PRECARIOUS BUT POSITIVE

Migrants successful in reaching their destination were almost unanimous in declaring their new home 'better' or 'much much better.' None, however, had acquired refugee status or employment income at the time of interview. Some stated that their income was lower at destination than in Iran, but they expected this to improve with time. They expected government support to integrate, and were largely satisfied with the reception assistance they had received so far, which consisted of basic support for housing and living costs. One migrant was detained but pragmatic, rather than frustrated. His expectation that everything would work out reflected the widespread tendency among respondents to take a long-term view.

This long-term perspective was further demonstrated by the prevalence of intangible terms used to describe the situation after arrival. While respondents were clear that they expected improved economic outcomes in the long-term, 'respect,' 'freedom,' and 'hope,' defined early success. Respondents' willingness to make short-term sacrifices for greater certainty in the longer term suggests that policies aimed at reducing living standards for newly arrived asylum seekers are unlikely to play a major role in migrants' destination choice.

[19] Donald Tusk was speaking in his capacity as President of the Council of the European Union / European Council

[20] http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-tusk-remarks-after-euco-turkey

CONCLUSION

The decision-making of irregular migrants was notable for a rational and realistic assessment of the risks of irregular migration versus the potential rewards. Motivations for migration came primarily from difficult economic conditions at home and the desire to live in liberal societies rather than under the restricted freedoms and economic marginalisation reported in Khuzestan.

Successive waves of emigration over the past several decades promoted a culture of migration, while major events—and disappointment in the lack of tangible gains following the lifting of sanctions under the new government—contributed to pessimistic long-term outlooks. Meanwhile, restrictions and effective messaging on irregular routes to Australia saw migrants turn their attention to Europe. The (perceived) opening of channels to Europe worked to encourage a greater number of Iranians to seriously consider irregular migration. Others responded by accelerating existing plans, perceiving the surge in summer 2015 to represent a rare opportunity not to be spurned.

While the UK was the destination of choice before departure, it was apparent that migrants were flexible in their choice of destination. There was a clear pattern of those aiming for the UK changing course to Germany. Family reunion was less important for EU destinations, unlike Australia where it remained the determinant factor.

For policymakers wishing to influence irregular migration flows, there are four key lessons.

- First, the majority of respondents were not irrevocably committed to migration or to any one particular destination, except for the minority that desired family reunion. They might therefore be considered open to alternatives to irregular migration. Indeed, respondents' plans highlighted how the perceived benefits (and risks) of migration to rich countries are weighed against other options, such as regional labour and study opportunities, and perseverance against the status quo in Iran.
- Second, an increase in employment would not necessarily lead to a reduction in irregular migration, as demonstrated by employed respondents who still departed on the basis of a poor jobs outlook. Rather, respondents would need to feel confident about their long-term employment and economic prospects.
- Third, respondents were generally well informed of the risks of migration, and the prospects of success. A calculation of the risks against the rewards from the perspective of the potential migrant is likely to give policymakers the best idea of likely future flows from the region.
- Finally, migration from Iran is likely to continue so long as a repressive state apparatus remains in place. There is therefore a migration management aspect to human rights goals in the region. A substantive and sustained change in governmental policy towards the region would likely be needed to encourage potential migrants to invest in futures at home instead of abroad.

Results from a longitudinal study of Iranians migrating irregularly to the European Union.
For updates and final publications in relation to this project, please **click here.**

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July 2016

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