

Europe's Refugee Crisis: facts and policy responses

This Policy Brief was written by Yano Moussavi, who is currently a Research Intern at NIESR, and is a postgraduate student at the London School of Economics. NIESR's work on mobility and immigration issues in the European Union is supported by the ESRC's "Britain in a Changing Europe" programme.

"Europe is living through a maritime refugee crisis" according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in its July 1 2015 report on migrants travelling to Europe via the Mediterranean, which has cost nearly 3,000 migrants their lives so far in 2015. The vast majority are refugees from war-torn and repressive nations, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea. They are not, as many assume, economic migrants. Nor, to paraphrase UK Prime Minister David Cameron, is Europe facing a 'swarm of migrants'. New Asylum applications to the EU totalled 626,000 in 2014, roughly 0.13% of the EU's c.500 million people. However, UNHCR predicts that the 2015 total will far exceed this, and observes roughly 400,000 migrants have arrived by sea so far this year, almost double the 2014 total. Highlighting the increasing urgency of this crisis, Germany has announced it alone expects to process up to 800,000 asylum applications in 2015.

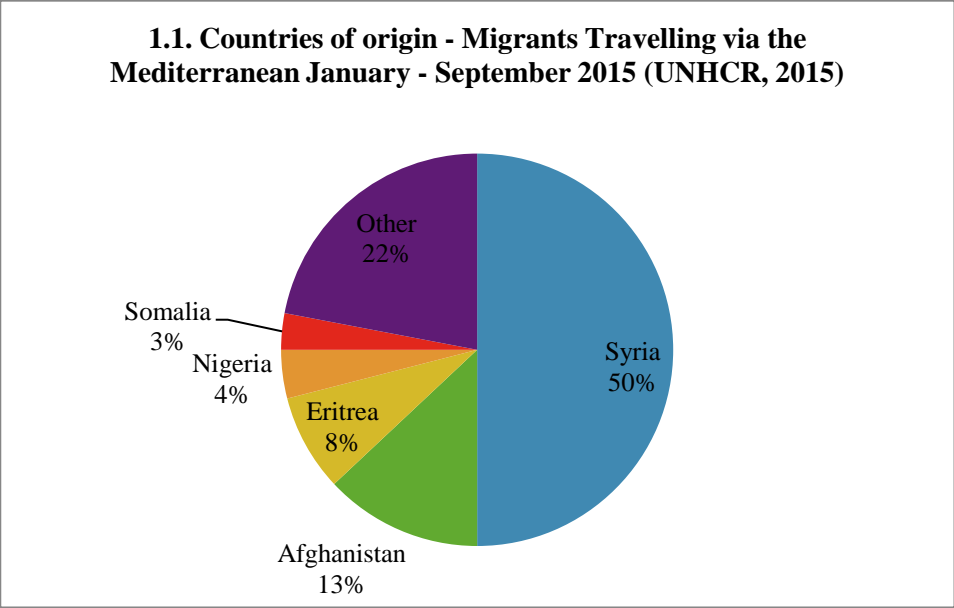
The aims of this policy brief are threefold. First, I explore migrant flows to Europe via the Mediterranean, discussing countries of origin and the motivations behind departure. Syrians, Eritreans and Afghans were the largest beneficiaries of asylum protection in 2014, together accounting for 53% of all applicants that were granted protection. Second, I identify migrant destinations, indicating the challenge of enforcing the Dublin Regulation, which states that asylum claims must be made in the first member state entered. Yet, despite the central routes into Europe passing through Greece and Italy, these countries do not receive the largest share of asylum applications. In recent weeks German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande have stressed the need for reforming EU Asylum policy, and crucially, the Dublin Regulation, which is often used by some countries as justification for inaction towards refugees. Finally, this brief outlines several policy options available, identifying three key areas: **search and rescue, relocation and settlement**, and creating **legal avenues to safety**, the development of which is critical to prevent further tragedy.

Who are they? Where are they from?

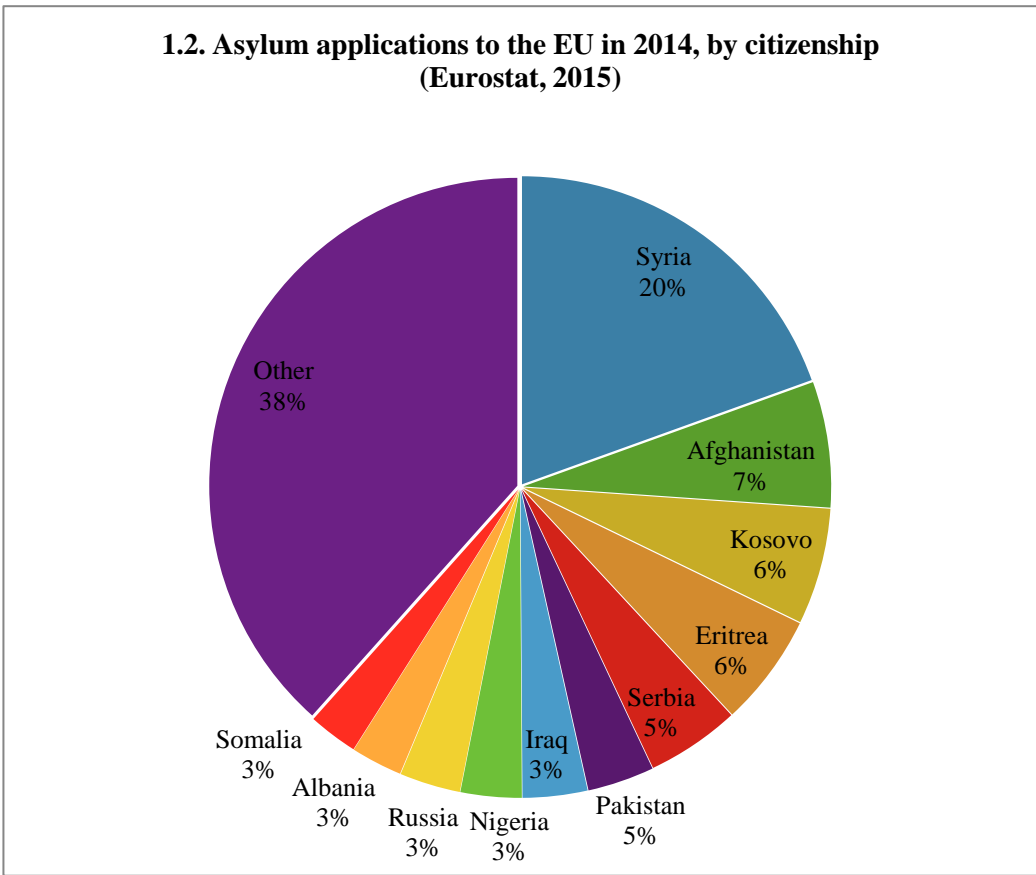
Between January and May 2015, approximately 92,800 people arrived into Europe via the Mediterranean. By contrast, over the same period in 2014, the figure was 48,630. UNHCR and The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimate that so far this year, between 380,000 and 430,000 migrants, predominately refugees have arrived by sea. The majority of deaths occurred as migrants attempted to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy. Over 2000 migrants have died attempting to cross into Italy, which has led to the emergence of a second, more favourable and comparatively safer route, from Turkey into Greece.

According to UNHCR data, 71% of migrants crossing the Mediterranean are from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan. As seen in Figure 1.1 Syria alone accounts for 50% of the total. Afghanistan and Eritrea accounted for 13% and 8% of migrants in the first nine months of 2015, respectively.

Moreover, the vast majority from these three nations are likely to have a valid claim to refugee status. In 2014, 95% of Syrians, 89% of Eritreans and 63% of Afghans were granted asylum



protection by the EU-28. Indeed, this is hardly surprising. Syria is four years into an intense civil war that has caused the deaths of roughly 250,000 people, and produced 4 million refugees. The civil war in Syria

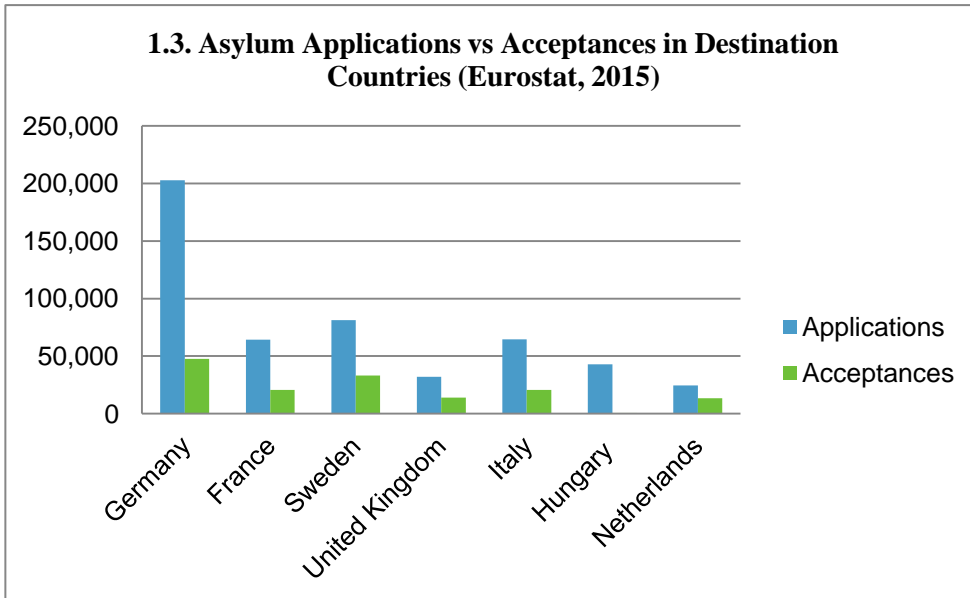


has resulted in the near total collapse of infrastructure, and has created an environment in which targeted or indiscriminate violence is pervasive. Research by Human Rights Watch indicates that fear of persecution, torture and death is central reason behind the dramatic rise in refugees.

The situation in Afghanistan paints a similar picture, in which the growing presence of the Taliban has fuelled concern, particularly for girls and young women. Corruption among local police and high-level officials further contributes to this fear of persecution. Similarly, Eritrea has one of the world’s most repressive regimes,

where civil liberties are non-existent and arbitrary arrests and detentions, rife. Interviews conducted with migrants from Eritrea that had landed in Italy, revealed the desire to avoid or exit the military was the main driver behind their flight.

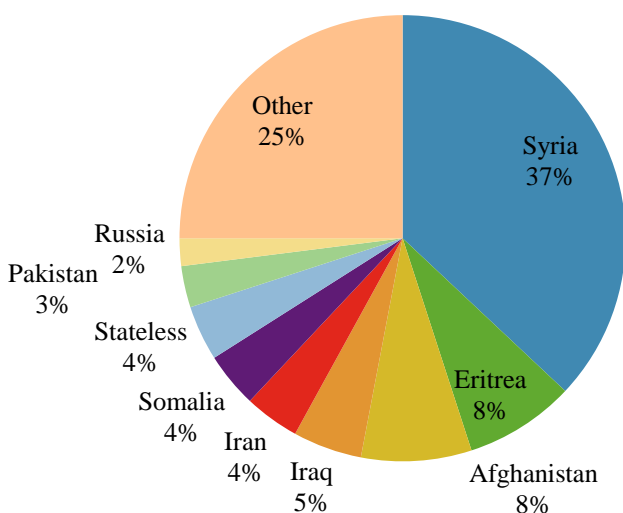
Where are they headed?



In 2014, the total number of new asylum applications rose to 626,000, a 22% increase from 2013. As noted in Figure 1.2, Germany received the largest number of asylum applications (202,815), and expects a dramatic fourfold

increase in applications by the end of 2015. This was followed by Sweden (81,325), France (64,310), Italy (64,625), Hungary (42,775) and the UK (31,945). In absolute terms, Germany (48,000), recorded the largest number of positive decisions (first instance and on final appeal). Yet, Bulgaria had the largest percentage of positive first instance decisions, with a recognition rate of 94% (7000 positive from 7435 initial decisions), followed by Sweden, with 77% or 33,000 positive decisions. The vast majority of those granted protection were Syrians (68, 300, or 37% of the total number of positive decisions), Eritreans (14,600 or 8%) and Afghans (14, 100 or 8%).

1.4. Beneficiaries of Asylum Protection in EU, 2014, by citizenship (Eurostat, 2015)



There are numerous reasons for this imbalance among destinations, including the perception that prospects for protection and integration are higher in Germany and Sweden. In principle the Dublin Regulation, the EU's Asylum policy, assigns responsibility for refugees to the first EU country in which they land. However, in practice, this would pose an

unacceptable burden on Greece and Italy, the primary points of arrival for the vast majority, particularly given current economic circumstances. They do not therefore seek to enforce registration for all applicants, and, informally or tacitly many are encouraged to pass on to other EU member states, rather than claiming asylum at their point of arrival. Over the medium term, it is not inconceivable and would be within the legal rights of Greece and Italy to offer permanent residency permits or even eventual citizenship to asylum seekers, providing them with access to legal travel and freedom of movement.

Whilst highlighting the failings of EU Asylum policy in resettling refugees, it is important to contrast the number of EU asylum applications with those across the rest of the world. As the number of refugees entering Europe increases, six EU member states, Germany, Finland, Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden, anticipate as many as 1.3 million asylum applications. Worth mentioning is that this figure includes migrants from the Balkans, such as Kosovo and Serbia, which have very low asylum recognition rates, and are deemed safe countries by the European Commission. However, the situation in Europe is often overblown, and is a small part in a broader refugee crisis that spans the globe. 86% of the world's refugees live in developing countries. At the end of 2014, Turkey and Lebanon hosted roughly 1.5 million refugees, and Jordan, 650,000. These are mainly Syrians, and the figure for these three countries is expected to rise to 4.7 million by the end of this year. Pakistan also provides refuge to over 1.5 million Afghans, which is expected to rise to over 2 million by December 2015. Similarly, Iran hosts just under a million Afghan and Pakistani refugees.

An "Agenda on Migration"

Despite the fundamental issue of burden sharing that arises out of the Dublin Regulation, in the past, comprehensive reform of the agreement is difficult, since many national EU governments benefit from status quo. After the April 2015 tragedy in Lampedusa, in which 800 migrants perished, the European Commission launched its "European Agenda on Migration", with the aim of constructing a (partial) common approach, composed of several elements:

(i) The expansion of Triton, the EU's far smaller replacement for Italy's 2014 Mare Nostrum operation, which is credited with rescuing over 80,000 migrants. By some estimates, Mare Nostrum prevented the deaths of up to 130,000 migrants and refugees. Initially limited to border patrols, increased Triton funding and an expanded mandate has certainly reduced (albeit not eliminated) loss of life in the Mediterranean.

(ii) "Burden-sharing". Plans to relocate refugees from Greece and Italy across the EU faced intense obstacles at an EU summit in July, with mandatory quotas for each member state abandoned. Eventually, member states agreed to the relocation of 32,256 refugees, 20% lower than the Commission's proposed target of 40,000. The UK had chosen to opt-out of this agreement, accepting no new refugees, whilst Ireland, which possesses the same opt-out clause, agreed to take in to 600 refugees and resettle an additional 520. However,

growing urgency has fuelled public outrage, which, alongside pressure from key EU officials, has forced a U-turn, with Prime Minister Cameron announcing that the UK would accept as many as 20,000 refugees over a period of five years. An important caveat is that only processed individuals from refugee camps will be provided with resettlement. The future resettlement of a further 22,504 refugees across the EU has also been committed to, although this is due in large part to the willingness of non-EU nations such as Norway and Iceland to participate. Whilst admirable, this is a tiny sum when compared with the 960,000 refugees in need of resettlement.

(iii) Migrant and asylum seeker identification. Although unlikely to deal with the underlying stresses on the Dublin system described above this has been expanded under President Juncker's proposals in September 2015. The Commission outlined a plan to establish a list of safe countries, immediately disqualifying persons from nations with low asylum recognition rates, such as Kosovo, thus expediting the asylum process for refugees.

(iv) Targeting smuggler and traffickers' boats, whilst perhaps well-intentioned, miss the broader point; the main factors driving migrant travel to Europe are to be found in source countries. The EU aims to tackle "push" factors, both economic and political, through sustainable development and conflict resolution. Yet, in practice, development aid packages associated with this frequently end up in the control of the greatest human rights violators. Eritrea, as discussed, with one of the most repressive regimes globally, remains a huge beneficiary of EU and UK aid. Meanwhile, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, international efforts to address the Syrian crisis remain almost entirely unsuccessful.

Policy Remedies

The preventative approach laid out by the Agenda remains inadequate: At best, it deals with short-term symptoms only. There are three policy areas that must be addressed:

- 1) The **necessity of continued and expanded search and rescue operations** in the Mediterranean has been emphasized by both the UNHCR and Human Rights Watch. Italy's Mare Nostrum operation in 2014 proved extremely successful in preventing deaths at sea, and the growth of funding for EU Triton operations is hence welcomed. Further expansion of broad search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean is necessary, but not a long-term solution, which must be addressed through creating alternative, safe, pathways to refuge. Expansion of similar operations does not serve as an incentive for dangerous travel. The number of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean increased even in the wake of a reduced Frontex (the EU's border agency) presence, and continues to rise.

- 2) **Greater emphasis on relocation and settlement.** The current crisis has exposed the flaws in the Dublin Regulation; as long as Greece and Italy are expected to bear almost the entire burden of what is a European crisis, it will be unworkable. Highlighting this instability, 45% of all asylum applications are lodged in Germany and Sweden, hence a new EU-wide approach is required. In recent weeks, review of the Regulation has been driven by Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande, and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who recently announced proposals to implement quotas on resettlement of 120,000 refugees, in a renewed effort to ease the burden on Greece, Italy and Hungary. These proposals are admirable, yet in practice they still are unlikely to be sufficient. With asylum applications to the EU expected to be in the millions (Six EU member states expect 1.3 million applications alone), an expansion of President Juncker's proposals is of utmost importance. Furthermore, they face intense obstacles. In May, EU member states signed up to resettle only 32,000 refugees of the 40,000 proposed, further emphasising the difficulties in forming a comprehensive approach to asylum and resettlement. Many EU leaders, including the UK, argue that domestic economies cannot cope; or, alternatively, especially in Eastern European countries with little recent experience of substantial inward migration, that too many refugees would threaten social cohesion. However, from an alternative perspective, one that is gaining increasing support among key EU leaders such as Chancellor Merkel, a more far-sighted approach would be to view migration as a potential opportunity: Europe's population is ageing and, in many countries, shrinking. In 2014, deaths exceeded births in Greece, Italy and Germany. Crucially, it's not just about the number of people or workers – migrants bring fresh ideas and new dynamism to an economy, something many European countries sorely need.

- 3) **Developing legal avenues to safety.** Establishing a system of managed migration would serve as a far more effective method of discouraging travel across the Mediterranean than directly targeting traffickers' boats, which ultimately achieves little in mitigating refugees' desperation. Processing asylum claims in third party nations, similar to proposals contained in the "Agenda on Europe" would go much further toward preventing tragedies as well as allowing European countries to reintroduce managed migration programmes that could maximise the economic benefits to both migrants and receiving countries.

References:

- Aisch, G., Almukhtar, S., Keller, J. & Andrews, W. (2015) ‘The Scale of The Migrant Crisis, From 160 to Millions’, *The New York Times*, 10 September [Online]. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/10/world/europe/scale-of-migrant-crisis-in-europe.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0
- Birrell, I. (2015) ‘The inconvenient truth about migrants is very different to what Cameron would have you believe’, *The Independent*, 9 August [Online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-inconvenient-truth-about-migrants-is-very-different-to-what-cameron-would-have-you-believe-10447531.html>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- DFID (2015). *Development Tracker: Eritrea*. Available at: <http://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/countries/ER/projects/>. (Accessed: 14 August 2015).
- Eurostat (2015). *Asylum statistics*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- Eurostat (2015). *Asylum decisions in the EU*. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-press-releases/-/3-12052015-AP>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- Eurostat (2015). *Asylum in the EU*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/docs/infographics/asylum/infographic_asylum_en.pdf. (Accessed: 17 August 2015).
- Eurostat (2015). *Asylum quarterly report*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report#Where_do_they_come_from.3F. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- Human Rights Watch (2015). *The Mediterranean Migration Crisis. Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do?* Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do#page>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- IOM (2015). *Deadly Milestone as Mediterranean Migrant Deaths Pass 2000*. Available at: <http://www.iom.int/news/deadly-milestone-mediterranean-migrant-deaths-pass-2000>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- IOM (2015). *Latest Global Figures - Migrant Fatalities Worldwide*. Available at: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/latest-global-figures>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- IOM (2015). *Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals Approach 250,000*. Available at: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/en/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-approach-250000>. (Accessed: 10 September 2015).
- IOM (2015). *Mediterranean Update, 10 September 2015*. Available at: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/en/mediterranean-update-10-september-2015>. (Accessed: 11 September 2015).

- Nardelli, A. (2015) 'EU member states miss target to relocate 40,000 migrants', *The Guardian*, 21 July [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2015/jul/21/eu-member-states-miss-target-to-relocate-40000-migrants>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- Portes, J. (2015) 'The truth about the people and numbers in loud and furious migration debate', *The Guardian*, 1 August [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/aug/01/calais-illegal-immigrant-uk-facts>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- Sims, A. (2015) 'Syrian conflict 'has killed quarter of a million people'', *The Independent*, 8 August [Online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-conflict-has-killed-quarter-of-a-million-people-10446650.html>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- Taylor, A. (2015) 'Italy ran an operation that saved thousands of migrants from drowning in the Mediterranean. Why did it stop?', *The Washington Post*, 20 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/20/italy-ran-an-operation-that-save-thousands-of-migrants-from-drowning-in-the-mediterranean-why-did-it-stop/>. (Accessed: 10 September 2015).
- UK Home Office (2015). *Immigration statistics, January - March 2015*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2015/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2015#asylum-1>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- UNHCR (2014). *Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2015*. Available from: <http://www.unhcr.org/543408c4fda.html>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- UNHCR (2015). *The Sea Route to Europe: Mediterranean Passage in the Age of Refugees*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/5592bd059.html>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- UNHCR (2015). *Syria Regional Refugee Response*. Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. (Accessed: 13 August 2015).
- UNHCR (2015). *Country Operations Profile - Lebanon*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486676.html>. (Accessed: 11 September 2015).
- UNHCR (2015). *Country Operations Profile - Jordan*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html>. (Accessed: 11 September 2015).
- UNHCR (2015). *Country Operations Profile - Islamic Republic of Iran*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486f96.html>. (Accessed: 11 September 2015).
- UNHCR (2015). *Country Operations Profile - Pakistan*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e487016.html>. (Accessed: 11 September 2015).