



**Trapped in Transit:**  
*The Evolving Syrian Refugee Policy Crisis in Greece*

A Joint Research and Policy Project of the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies  
and the University of Sheffield's International Faculty, CITY College in Thessaloniki  
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## Background & Introduction

During 2015, over one million refugees attempted to move into Europe across the Mediterranean. At least half of these were Syrian refugees. While initially Europe welcomed refugees, and the public was moved by photographs and stories of refugees fleeing conflict, by the fall of 2015 Europe had changed its posture to the “migrant crisis” by closing borders throughout the Balkans and attempting to stop migration along the route. By spring 2016, media images had shifted from welcoming depictions of aid workers escorting refugees off of boats on the shores of Mitolini, to swelling camps of trapped and frustrated refugees along Greece’s borders, including the iconic Idomeni camp on the Greece-FYROM (Macedonian) border.

As a result, Greece’s humanitarian and security challenges with refugees have shifted from aid delivery to passersby *en route* to Berlin or Stockholm, to a more complex set of challenges in hosting refugees, delivering long term aid, socioeconomic integration, and handling migration in a closed-border region, while continuing to process new arrivals from Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan African protracted conflicts, especially the Syrian Civil War. As we move into summer 2017, and expectations of a new wave of migration emerge, Europe is not just struggling to prevent drowning in the Mediterranean: now the regional challenge is how to shelter, integrate, and facilitate safe and efficient movement of refugees within and across borders.

To better understand the complex and evolving refugee challenge in Greece, BCARS researchers conducted extensive interviews with experts in Greece

including aid workers, police, government workers, lawyers, and policy advisors. BCARS researchers also conducted interviews and surveys with refugees in three Greek locations: Athens, Thessaloniki, and Lesbos, in thirteen refugee sites in Greece along a spectrum of conditions from rented, five-star hotel spaces on Mitolini to informal camp settlements in the industrial brownfields of Athens to child safe spaces outside Thessaloniki.

This work was supplemented by research throughout the Migrant Route, from departure sites in Turkey, to migration hubs along the Balkans Route, and finally at settlement sites in EU destination countries. Additionally, BCARS partnered with the University of Sheffield International Faculty, CITY College in Thessaloniki to develop an understanding of the refugee dynamics of this important transit city.

This document draws from these findings to present recommendations to policymakers and practitioners working on Greece’s refugee challenges. Part one will introduce a summary of those recommendations: three local, three national, and three regional. Part two will give an overview of BCARS data sources, and the importance of Greece in the broader Syrian refugee context. Part three will expand on part one to give a more thorough explanation of BCARS policy recommendations. For more information on the refugee crisis, readers are encouraged to read the other sections of this series that include BCARS Policy Papers from workshops in Istanbul, Brussels, Belgrade, and Amman.

# Summary of Policy Recommendations

*The following are BCARS policy recommendations in brief. They are expanded further below.*

## LOCAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Tolerate and support informal housing solutions:** unoccupied urban structures provide a rapid, safe, and preferred housing solution to camps for refugees stuck in or passing through Greece.
- 2. Coordinate aid delivery with the “global Arab diaspora”:** a sizeable population of potential civil society actors exists among Arab-Greek residents who know migrant populations best, linguistically and culturally.
- 3. Improve information flow:** both refugees and locals need to be timely and effectively informed, especially to changes in border policies and smugglers.

## NATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Review procedures for vetting NGOs and independent aid workers:** many capable NGOs have been denied access to sites with critical needs, while independent volunteers and faith-based organizations wander camps freely and have created tensions with residents.
- 2. Increase oversight and review criteria for identifying and detaining smugglers:** refugees are often wrongfully detained as smugglers, while true smugglers have been largely undeterred through adaptations to coastal security operations.

- 3. Grant refugees access to labor markets:** tacit acceptance of immigrant labor—especially concerning those with temporary status in the country—is mutually beneficial to migrants as a source of income and for the host government for reducing welfare dependency.

## REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Facilitate voluntary return back to Turkey:** frustrated by the inability to proceed further into Europe, refugees are trying to return to Turkey and should be allowed to safely do so.
- 2. Review bilateral agreements on deportation and forced return:** Inconsistencies in border agreements, the militarization of borders, and fears of becoming host to more refugees have resulted in human rights violations and insecurity for refugees moving through the Balkans route.
- 3. Develop institutional memory:** Mass influxes into Europe will continue for the foreseeable future from stressors as diverse as civil war and climate change. Policies will need to be empirically tested and adapted, while institutions, not individuals, must develop long-term capacities for managing mass migration.

# Overview of BCARS findings in Greece

BCARS initial policy workshops took place in Amman, Jordan and Istanbul, Turkey. At the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, these forefront countries—alongside Iraq and Lebanon—were the epicenter of the global humanitarian response.

While these countries remain host to the greatest number of Syrian refugees, the refugee challenge has expanded to include the Balkans Route and the EU as central players, with Greece acting as a linchpin between these worlds.

BCARS has recognized that assisting Syrian refugees requires creative and efficient responses from Greece, a state handling a dominant share of the EU's migration mission despite limitations in terms of financial means, human resources, and management capacity.

Greece is unique as both a transit country—where refugees do not want to stay out, primarily out of concern about economic inopportunities—and as a EU-member state shouldering border protection, screening, and resettlement responsibilities under the Dublin agreements. Additionally burdensome, Greece is the *de facto* executor of the western side of the EU-Turkey deal.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, while BCARS focuses on the “Arab Region,” researchers from the BCARS network have worked extensively to understand Syrian refugee policy

challenges in Greece. This has included extensive field research in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Lesbos. Consulted experts included aid workers, police, government workers, lawyers, and policy advisors.

BCARS researchers have worked in thirteen refugee sites along a spectrum of conditions from welcome centers to formal permanent camp settlements run by the Greek government and INGOs to informal temporary tent settlements in public spaces.

Conditions ranged from five-star hotels rented by wealthy foreign donors for vulnerable refugee families, to abandoned squatter apartments in industrial urban outskirts that constituted shelter for homeless refugees turned back from the Macedonian border.

This “bottom up” field research was supplemented by “top down” findings from collaboration with partners at the University of Sheffield International Faculty, CITY College in Thessaloniki.

Additionally, findings were drawn from previous BCARS policy workshops held in Belgrade, Serbia with Balkans representatives; Brussels, Belgium with EU representatives; and Istanbul, Turkey with Turkish representatives from the aid, policymaking, and government spheres.

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<sup>1</sup> Under this agreement, “all new irregular migrants” can be returned to Turkey from the EU, while each returned migrant will require the EU to resettle a Syrian refugee residing in Turkey, increase financial support to Turkey's humanitarian activities, and expedite procedures on visa liberalization for Turkish citizens.

# Overview of BCARS findings in Greece

## THE BALKAN ROUTE AND GREECE'S ROLE

The Greek Coast Guard, police, and civil society actors have all responded in limiting drowning, reconnecting refugee families, and efficiently documenting migrants from Turkey, despite the overwhelming scale of migration and real limitations to human, financial, and management capacity.

While overwhelmed by the challenge, Coast Guard officers—completely untrained in humanitarian response, border management, or personnel screening—rapidly adapted to the procedures required by the EU and Frontex.

Simultaneously, INGOs and civil society actors from within the Greek population and the Syrian diaspora filled housing, medical, education, translation, legal advice, food, and non-food aid delivery gaps that government institutions failed to provide.

Greek police—also generally untrained in the challenges of humanitarian operations—have managed to play a complex role handling local-migrant tensions, intra-migrant tensions, and hostility toward hosts in an increasingly protracted refugee-hosting environment.

Refugees are generally appreciative of the Greek state's management of the "migrant crisis": most notably, numerous interviewees were saved by Greek Coast guard patrols after their boats sank in the Mediterranean between 2014 and present. Refugees in our sample were also generally appreciative of INGOs, the Greek people, and Greek civil society actors for willingly hosting them, and providing life-sustaining aid.

Despite these successes however, as refugees have been "trapped" in Greece by EU and neighboring states' border policies, there are numerous ongoing challenges and sources of refugee resentment that will require policy overhauls. Most glaringly is that in practice, the EU-Turkey deal has not been enacted smoothly.

EU member-states have either shirked their responsibilities under the agreement, or have entirely refused to participate, as was the case with Denmark and the UK. Case in point, in April of 2016, 400 migrants (mostly from Afghanistan and Pakistan) were returned to Turkey, while only 43 Syrians were given asylum and resettled elsewhere in Europe.

Syrians currently trapped in Greece are wasting away in limbo. Since most of them will likely be denied relocation and returned to Turkey, their risk to reach a better life in Europe and time spent sitting in camps in Greece are all costs spent to no benefit.

Complicating the EU-Turkey Deal are criticisms leveled by groups like Amnesty International who argue that Turkey is not a "safe third country." Our data from Greece, the Balkans, and Turkey found most Syrians are prefer life in Turkey to that in Greece and the Balkans because they could at least find housing and informal labor there, unlike in Greece.

# Overview of BCARS findings in Greece

Furthermore, many Syrians have expressed the desire to return home, despite the devastation and ongoing conflict there, saying the risk of death in Syria is preferable to languishing in Greece.

Evidence on the ground supports human rights groups' criticism of Turkey's use of the Deal as political capital. While Turkey has widely come under criticism for the Deal, relatively little blame has been aimed at the EU and its member-states for lack of cooperation with states like Greece on the forefront of the Migrant Route.

As summer 2017 approaches and European aid workers prepare for another wave of migration, tent settlements and other semi-permanent camps in Greece and the Balkans that were not designed for protracted stays are catalyzing frustrations among refugees with EU border policy, while forcing refugees into unhealthy and unsafe living conditions.

With Europe's border closures, Greece has transitioned from migrant hub to a *de facto* migrant host, but its policies, procedures, and support from the EU have not reflected this transition.

As a consequence, refugees repeatedly voice frustrations that they do not know when or if they will be allowed to migrate to other EU states, if they can return to Turkey, or if they will be provided permanent housing opportunities in Greece.

Many are giving up hope and fear getting trapped in camps indefinitely.

As a result of border closures, some 50,000 Syrian refugees have found themselves stuck in Greece with tens of thousands of other refugees and irregular migrants. Consequently, Greece's aid workers have found themselves overwhelmed.

Of eight camps visited by BCARS researchers, only half had 24 hour health services on site. Of those four camps, the lack of omnipresent health services had led to infant deaths from insect bites, widespread malnutrition of children, and at least one reported death of a pregnant woman who did not get transported to a hospital until she had died of seizures.

Educational services are also lacking: most Syrian refugee children in Greece are not in school entirely, or rely on a few hours of informal education from civil society actors. Refugee youth who partially completed degrees in Syria do not see university opportunities in Greece and represent an enormous underemployed human resource pool.

Food and water provision is enough to sustain life, but meals are regularly left uneaten due to their poor quality, rotten or insect-ridden ingredients: emblematically, before Piraeus Port's refugee camp was closed, there was an outbreak of foodborne illness that left over 400 refugees hospitalized. Instead, refugees will regularly spend what money they are sent from relatives on food and water.

# Overview of BCARS findings in Greece

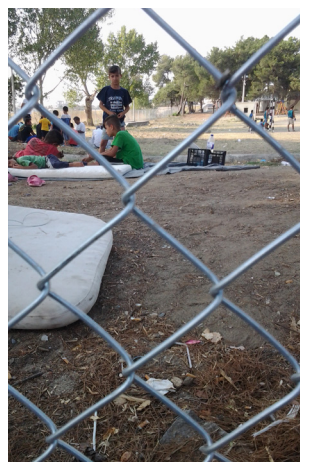
## SECURING REFUGEE MOVEMENT

A final capacity that has been overwhelmed is Greece's security services, especially security provisions for refugees. Sparked by resource scarcity, violent demonstrations were observed at several refugee sites between nationalities within the refugee population, and Greek law enforcement lacked the training, language skills, or authority to intervene. Resultantly, strongmen within the refugee community have emerged as unaccountable "protectors" within Greek refugee camps.

While Greek police are assigned to most refugee camps, in practice they are relegated to a gatekeeping role, monitoring aid workers coming and going from camps, but never passing the camp's fences to communicate with refugee residents. This lack of situational awareness among police results in insecurity for refugees: at a camp outside Thessaloniki, for example, an organ and child trafficker was allowed to regularly enter and exit the camp until refugees formed a mob and removed him forcibly.

While the Greek Coast Guard has significantly improved its operations in rescuing drowning refugees in the Mediterranean with support from EU and NATO vessels, they lack the capacity (especially due to a lack of linguists) to differentiate smugglers from refugees, causing wrongful detainments.

In short, policy has overemphasized border security and neglected human security. Evidence shows that migration has caused a much greater number of threats to the safety and wellbeing of refugees relative to the number of threats to the safety and wellbeing of native Greeks. In other words, the risk faced by refugees is far greater than the risk faced by local populations.



# Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

*Given the above context, BCARS offers the following three sets of policy proposals to policymakers and practitioners operating in Greece's humanitarian and security spheres.*

## LOCAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Tolerate and support informal housing solutions:** Unused urban structures, especially unused public property have provided free and immediately available short-term shelter for refugees that are preferable among refugees to government-run camps. Currently, harmful extra-parliamentary groups such as anarchists are providing refugees informal housing opportunities across Greece.

After over a year of living in warehouses such as Oraiokastro, many refugees have finally been moved into houses in Thessaloniki. However, while this has provided a satisfactory, if delayed, fix to 2016's migrant wave, more migrant waves are anticipated in summer 2017 and into the future, and will require new, rapid and responsive housing options."

Instead, Greek authorities should provide these housing options, which will deny harmful non-government actors a political presence among migrant populations while offering a low-cost housing option to refugees seeking temporary shelter.

A combination of widespread availability of unoccupied urban spaces and a low saturation of law enforcement have made "squats," and the groups that occupy them a feature of Greece prior to the "migration crisis." Tolerance, if not full support for these arrangements,

has several benefits for authorities and refugees: **(1)** informal solutions provide individual rooms for families in settings that are more secure and more individually private than in camps; **(2)** most of these properties have greater access to city centers and vital services such as hospitals, police stations, aid centers, and food vendors than do the sanctioned camps located on cities' outskirts; **(3)** informal housing appropriates out-of-use or unproductive public properties, while relieving pressure on officials trying to manage the crisis in camps; **(4)** sanctioned "squats" deny extra-parliamentary groups (e.g. anarchists) a political or ideological presence among refugee populations, and delegitimize such groups' messages of "solidarity" with "borderless/stateless societies"; **(5)** sanctioning informal housing builds confidence and trust between migrant communities and Greek officials.

- 2. Coordinate aid delivery with the "global Arab diaspora":** A sizeable population of potential civil society actors exists among Arab-Greek residents that know the migrant populations best linguistically and culturally. They should be empowered.

Diaspora communities, already integrated into both host and transit countries, should be considered an asset by governments, aid workers, and refugees. Members from these communities can be recruited as volunteer translators to assist refugees when interacting with medical staff, military and law enforcement, and public employees at processing centers and camps.



# Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

Furthermore, diaspora communities can help refugees navigate safely and legally through transit countries, and to integrate into those destination countries where they have applied for asylum or residence. Additional sources of helpful Arab communities include international students of local universities, international businesspeople, and faith-based groups.

These civil society actors should be organized and supported to provide a variety of services from within their own resources, many of which the state is unable to provide: these might include simple initiatives such as food or clothing drives.

For greater needs, certain members of the diaspora community possess medical, legal, and technological expertise, and can provide more sophisticated services (like legal advice) to refugees in transit, as well as those trying to integrate into host countries.

- 3. Improve information flow:** Both refugees and locals need timely and relevant information, especially vis-à-vis changes in border policies and smugglers.

Refugees need information nearly as much as they need food, shelter and medical help. Needed information includes border closure policies, risks along the route, procedures refugees will undergo in practice, the status of their family members and friends ahead of and behind them on the route, and

what refugees can realistically expect to be offered once they reach a destination country *prior* to their departure so that they can make educated decisions weighing risk of travel with reward on arrival.<sup>2</sup>

Locals need to be informed about what authorities at all levels are doing to secure and manage the transit of refugees, as well as how to address any safety problems that could arise along the migrant route. Needless to say, locals need timely information on how they can help both government agencies as well as NGOs operating in their vicinity.

Information must also be made available about financial roles: widespread belief that refugees are stealing tax dollars (rather than foreign aid) has created many instances of local resentment and hostility toward refugees and aid initiatives.

## NATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Review procedures for vetting of NGOs and independent volunteers:** Many capable NGOs have been denied access to sites with critical needs, while independent volunteers and faith-based organizations wander camps freely and have created tensions with residents.

Consistent medical care is one service that is not available 24/7 in camps, and has resulted in refugee deaths and resentment toward authorities that has erupted in demonstrations and riots.

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<sup>2</sup> Several refugees interviewed in Germany and Sweden reported disappointment in quality of life there and a desire to return to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, or even Syria. Objective information about life in destination countries would have prevented needless risking of their lives travelling to Europe.

# Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

Also problematically, a significant number of small aid organizations have created clientelist “mafia-like” distribution systems in refugee camps that give preferential treatment to some refugees while neglecting others, all orchestrated by self-appointed strongmen within the refugee community. Law enforcement personnel should consult refugees themselves about the effectiveness and issues with various aid organizations: refugees have the most immediate understanding of which organizations or individual aid workers are helpful and which are harmful.

Individual officers tasked with protecting camps also require legal discretion to manage access to refugee populations, rather than the current mechanism of gaining authorization to work with refugees from distant Greek ministries that lack “ground truth” and contextual knowledge.

- 2. Increase oversight and review criteria for identifying and detaining smugglers:** Many of the “smugglers” arrested by Greek police or Coast Guard are not smugglers, but in fact migrants offered price cuts by smugglers in Turkey to pilot migrant boats. In the case of one individual, a refugee was wrongly identified as a smuggler and detained for 10-days, making the difference between reaching Germany with his family and being trapped at the then-closed FYROM border.

The present criteria for identifying and detaining smugglers are too vague, and in many cases amount to violations of the rights accorded to refugees under the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Alarming, there have been recent reports of a significant increase in smuggler arrests, paired with a decrease in migrants qualifying for refugee status, suggesting a discriminatory practice of identifying and detaining smugglers based upon nationality and ethnicity, which appears to target migrants from Central/South Asia and North Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, detentions of smugglers have not caused migrants to stop attempting to reach Europe, but have instead translated into greater risks and costs incurred by migrants.

- 3. Grant refugees access to labor markets:** Tacit acceptance of immigrant labor, especially concerning those migrants with temporary status in the country, is mutually beneficial to migrants as a source of income, as well as for the host government in reducing welfare dependency.

Migrants tend to compete with one another for jobs, rather than competing with local populations for more desirable employment. Legalizing employment also discourages activity in informal economies among migrant communities, as well as feelings of frustration, boredom, and emasculation among refugees that may contribute toward political violence.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to numerous BCARS interviews with refugees and Greek lawyers identifying this issue, see also Harris, Mary. “Greek Police v. Smugglers at Evros: Agonizing Daily Battles,” Greek Reporter, October 24, 2016.

# Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

Presently, even those refugees that qualify for legal refugee status are denied the right to work in Greece, which is an encroachment on the rights accorded refugees under Articles 17 and 18 of the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

## REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Facilitate voluntary return back to Turkey:** Frustrated by prohibitively high smuggling costs to reach further into Europe, refugees are trying to return to Turkey or even Syria. They should at very least be permitted to do so, and ideally supported to travel to Turkey safely where prudent.

Often in the context of failed or stifled reunification with family members that traveled successfully to destination countries in the past, a significant number of refugees prefer to return to Turkey where they have more rights and greater access to markets and services, rather than languish in Greece or other transit countries.

In some particularly problematic cases of, refugees described to BCARS researchers cancellation of the asylum applications of family members in destination countries, wanting to return to Syria so that they could “die together as a family” or “rebuild what is left” of the country, instead of being stuck in separation by European borders.

Most of these refugees attempt to return via Greece’s overland border with European Turkey. They frequently find themselves deterred or forced back by tight border controls that existed before the migration crisis, rugged terrain, and a lack of cross-border overland transportation (e.g. train or bus services).

Assisting the return of migrants to Turkey from Greece would agree conceptually with the deal struck between Turkey and the EU in March, 2016. Furthermore, it is the right of a refugee to return

to their home country, despite prevailing concerns of violence or persecution, and is in the interest of the international community, especially where refugees express a desire to begin restoring regions of their country that have been ravaged by conflict.

While such a policy would require active participation by third-party legal, transparency, and humanitarian actors in distinguishing between voluntary and coerced return, in most cases, this policy would be mutually beneficial to refugees, Greece, and the EU.

- 2. Demilitarize the region’s borders, and review bilateral agreements on deportation and forced return:** Inconsistencies in border agreements, militarization of borders, and fears of becoming hosts to more refugees have resulted in human rights violations and insecurity in movement for refugees through the Balkans route.

Agreements between Greece and neighboring countries—such as Albania and FYROM (Macedonia)—to return migrants to Greece that were interdicted crossing borders is harmful to both migrants and to Greece.

In the specific case of *refugees* being returned to Greece from neighboring states, this is a violation of the right to the freedom of movement accorded refugees under Article 26 of the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

# Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

Over 2014, Europe's deployment of military units, equipment usually reserved for battlefields, and the operationalization of aggressive "catch and return" policies have resulted in frequent violence and wrongful detention by border security personnel against refugees, including minors.

A lack of capacity—especially a deficit of qualified linguists—to differentiate nationalities has caused returns of refugees who were wrongly categorized as irregular migrants.

**3. Develop institutional memory:** Mass influxes of people into Europe will continue for the foreseeable future from stressors as diverse as civil war and climate change. Policies will need to be empirically tested and adapted, while institutions, not individuals, must develop long-term capacities for managing mass migration.

While Greece, and Europe more broadly, has adapted several successful approaches to managing the current "migrant crisis," the long-term resilience of these adapta-

tions is questionable given the bureaucratic inefficiencies of the EU and the *ad hoc* arrangements of most bi- or multilateral relationships in the Balkans Region.

Furthermore, migration crises are expected to proliferate, not decline, due to climate change, civil wars following state collapses, and other international stressors. Europe, and the Mediterranean transit region, must recognize that the scale of future refugee waves might in fact be even larger than the ones experienced so far.

In order to prepare for any such scenarios, a conscious effort is needed to first evaluate existing policies, then adapt them when they have failed, and finally to build and preserve institutional memory with local, national, and regional actors.

Present-day *ad hoc* fixes may help Syrian refugees today, but should also be institutionalized to help the refugees of tomorrow. The role of academic institutions in this process is especially important.



TRAPPED IN TRANSIT:  
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## Conclusion

A Greek manager of a refugee aid organization made a statement that became a cornerstone of BCARS policy workshops in Belgrade and Brussels: “there is no refugee crisis in Europe, there is only a European *policy* crisis.”

The European and Greek virtues of security and humanitarianism are both attainable, but require adaptations to local, national, and regional policy. The recommendations put forward here are general: specific contextualization will be needed from individual actors.

BCARS and its partner institutions look forward to ongoing collaboration to meet the prolonged refugee challenges in Greece, the region, and beyond.





*We encourage policymakers, practitioners, and academics to reference these policy recommendations and tailor them for their unique circumstances. BCARS researchers are available to discuss these and other ideas. We thank all participants, especially our local partners and assistants in Greece for their valuable contributions.*

BCARS is grateful to our partners at the University of Sheffield International Faculty, CITY College in Thessaloniki, and the many practitioners, advisors, and refugees who provided guidance and expertise on refugee challenges. This document is the result of a collaborative fact-finding and interview process.

All refugees were provided anonymity when speaking; experts were asked to provide their name, title, and institutional affiliation. In accordance with BCARS house style, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other source, is specified in relation to a particular statement or set of views, however, references of expert sources that were interviewed for this paper are available on request.

Every effort has been made to provide a clear and accurate overview of sources' views and comments. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of BCARS, its funders, or its partners.



The University of Sheffield is a leading research university located in Sheffield in South Yorkshire, England. [CITY College](#) is the International Faculty of the University of Sheffield and is located in Thessaloniki, Greece.

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