

# Lives on the borderline: between peril and pushbacks on routes through Iran, Türkiye, and Greece

## Background

The Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia corridors remain key for mixed migration, with Iran, Türkiye, and Greece acting as transit hubs and destinations for thousands of refugees and migrants each year.

However, shifting border policies, deportations, and security crackdowns have increasingly restricted movement, forcing people to rely on irregular crossings and smuggling networks, exposing them to greater risks, including pushbacks, detentions, and physical abuse by border security forces. In particular, Afghans in Iran, Türkiye, and Greece continue facing increasing threats of detention and deportation, as well as alleged violence at the hands of state officials.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, in 2024, reports emerged of an EU-funded deportation system in Türkiye, where Syrian and Afghan refugees were detained in removal centres, subjected to abuse, and forcibly deported to dangerous conditions, sometimes resulting in fatalities.<sup>2</sup>

Just at the beginning of 2025, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) raised concerns over the systematic expulsion of refugees and migrants from Greece to Türkiye, particularly in the Evros region, where reports of detention, violence, and illegal deportations have been documented since 2019.<sup>3</sup> While individuals of other nationalities may also face risks of detention and deportation in Türkiye, this snapshot focuses on Afghan and Syrian nationals due to their significant presence in the country and the existence of migration policies that specifically target these groups.

This snapshot presents data and testimonies collected throughout 2023, 2024, and early 2025 to look at drivers and journeys of Afghans and Syrians moving through Iran, Türkiye and Greece, the dangerous locations they crossed and the risks they reported.

## Key findings

- **Land travel was the most common mode of migration among** Afghan (94%) and Syrian (97%) respondents.
- **Arranging smuggling logistics was a common reason to stop.** Afghan respondents mainly did so in **Herat** (67 out of 82) and near the **Afghanistan–Iran** and **Iran–Türkiye** borders. Syrian respondents typically stopped in **Istanbul** (33 out of 70) and **Izmir** (30/60) for this purpose.
- Afghans often stopped in central Iranian hubs **to work and save for onward travel** 37% in Isfahan (out of 168), 23 of 70 in Qom, and 29% in Tehran (out of 568). For Syrians, reconnecting with family and members of the diaspora was an important reason for stopping after crossing the border, in **Hatay (62%), Gaziantep (60%) and Kilis (39%)**.
- **The Iran–Türkiye border and surrounding towns were widely reported as high-risk areas by respondents.** Across locations near the border, an average of **40% cited the risk of death, and 81% reported the risk of physical violence.**
- **Respondents shared accounts of forced returns and pushbacks at both the Iran–Türkiye and Türkiye–Greece borders.** Some individual trajectories also pointed to instances of forced return from Türkiye to Syria. These experiences were mostly drawn from **qualitative quotes and testimonies** and highlight protection risks at key border crossings.

1 Various Authors (2025) [Pushed, Beaten, Left to die. European Pushback Report 2024](#); OHCHR (2024). [UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination publishes findings on Armenia, Ecuador, Greece, Kenya, Monaco, Saudi Arabia](#); The New Humanitarian (2024) [Scores of Afghans killed by Iran border guards: report](#)

2 Lighthouse Reports (2024). [Turkey's EU-funded deportation machine](#); POLITICO [The EU is helping Turkey forcibly deport migrants to Syria and Afghanistan](#)

3 European Court of Human Rights (2025). [Decision G.R.J. v. Greece - Alleged "pushback" of an Afghan from Greece to Türkiye](#) and [Judgment A.R.E. v. Greece - "Pushback" of Turkish national to Türkiye without examining risks she faced on her return](#)

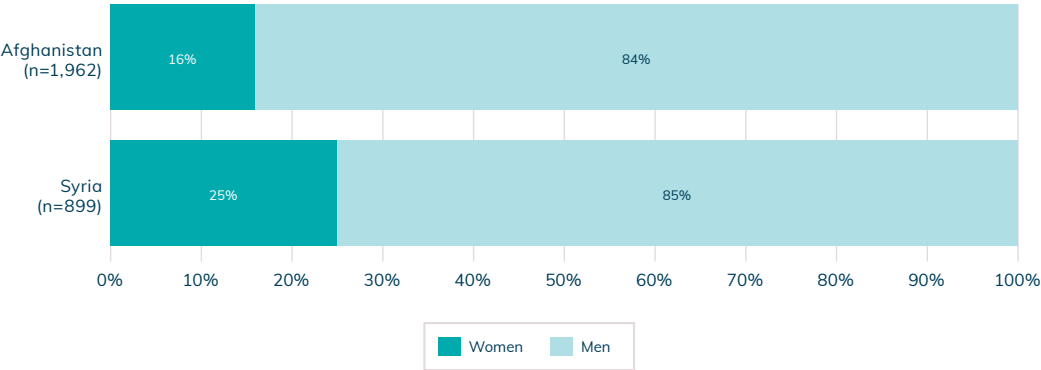
# Profile of respondents

This snapshot is based on 2694 interviews conducted with refugees and migrants from Syria (n=862) and Afghanistan (n=1832) between September 2023 and January 2025 in Türkiye (n=2465) and Greece (n=229). All respondents were aged eighteen or older and had arrived in Türkiye or Greece within the two years preceding the interview. 81% of respondents were men and 19% were women, with gender distributions remaining consistent between Türkiye and Greece (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Nationality of respondents by country of interview

Nationality of respondents	Interviews conducted in Greece		Interviews conducted in Türkiye		Total by nationality	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Afghanistan	82	36%	1,750	71%	1,832	68%
Syria	147	64%	715	29%	862	32%
Total by country of data collection	229	100%	2,465	100%	2,694	100%

Figure 1. Gender of respondents, by nationality



# Limitations

Due to the non-randomised sampling approach – which included purposive, convenience, and limited snowball sampling – findings are indicative of the sampled population but cannot be generalised to broader migrant groups. In Greece, humanitarian actors helped identify respondents and conducted interviews. Despite efforts to ensure data neutrality – such as emphasizing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the absence of any impact on access to services – the profile of the organization conducting the interviews and the locations where they were carried out may have influenced both the sample composition and participants' responses. This is a common consideration when data is collected by humanitarian organizations or service providers and should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

# Violence and economic hardship drive majority of respondents

The top three reported drivers of migration among respondents were violence and insecurity (69%), economic hardships (62%), or lack of rights and freedoms (39%). Respondents could select multiple drivers. The most frequently reported combination was violence, insecurity, and conflict combined with economic reasons (23%), highlighting the overlapping and intersecting factors influencing migration.

# Most respondents used land routes to reach Türkiye, and sea routes from Türkiye to Greece

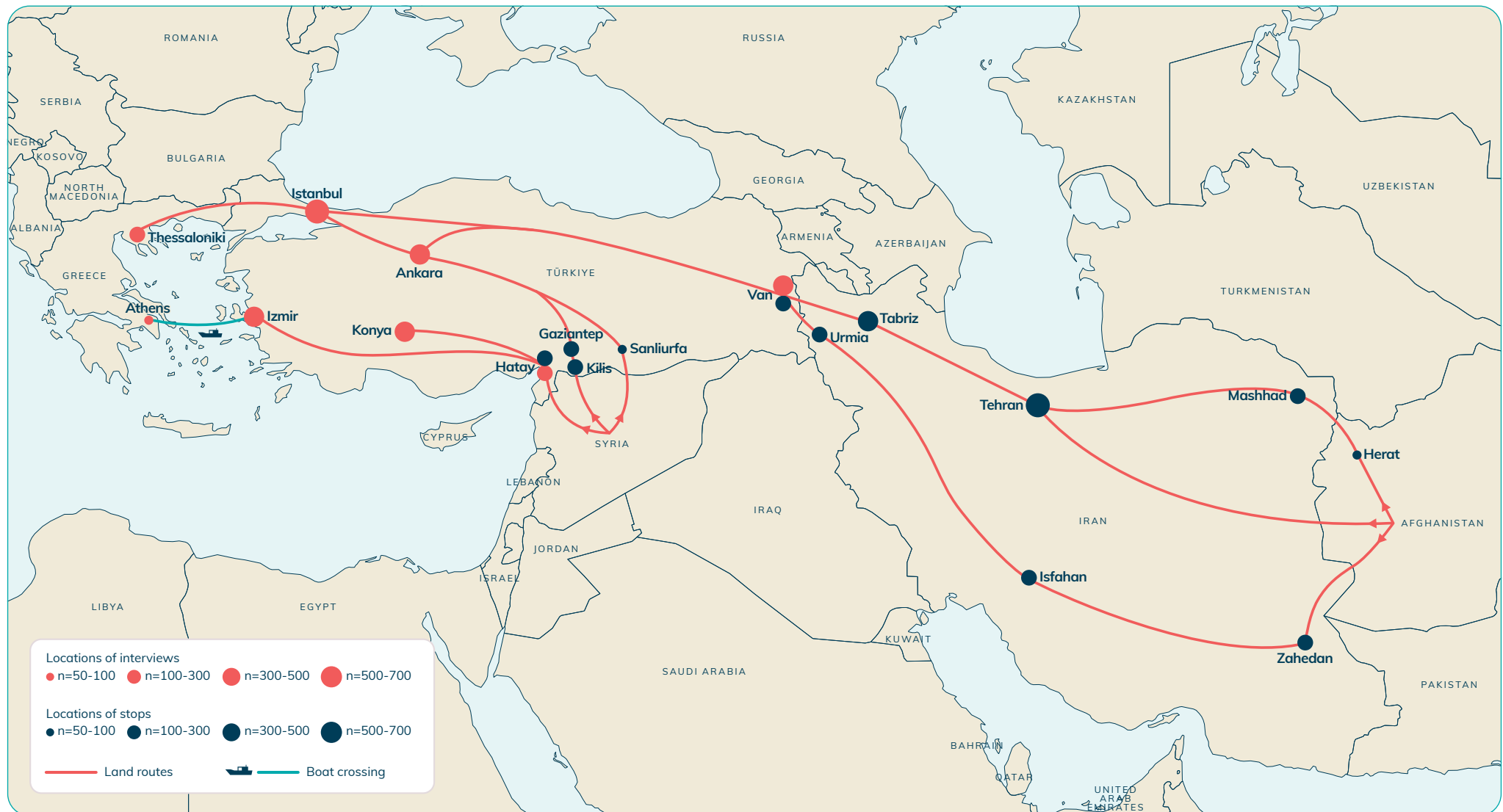
88% of Afghan respondents travelled via land routes through Iran before reaching Türkiye, as shown in Figure 2. 6% also travelled via land, but transiting through Pakistan before reaching Iran. 4% used a mix of air and land travel, mostly transiting via Iran. The remaining 2% used a direct flight from Afghanistan to Türkiye.

Among Syrian respondents, 97% travelled via land routes to reach Türkiye while only 3% used a combination of air and land travel. Those using a combination of air and land travel primarily transited through Lebanon, or Jordan. Less than 1% transited through Iraq via land before reaching Türkiye (see Figure 2).

Among respondents interviewed in Greece (n=229), 81% reported using a boat as their means of transportation. In contrast, fewer than 1% of respondents surveyed in Türkiye (n=2465) reported travelling by boat, indicating that boat use is primarily linked to

the maritime crossing between Türkiye and Greece. The remaining 19% of respondents in Greece are likely to have crossed via land, particularly through the Evros River border area.

**Figure 2. Main land and sea routes of Afghans and Syrians to Türkiye and Greece (n=2,550)**



## Reasons of stopping along the journey

**Afghans stopped in capitals and in border towns in Iran to look for smugglers, and in other transit hubs to work to finance journey expenses.**

**Capital cities and towns in Iran near the Afghan border emerged as key hubs for arranging smuggling services.** A sizable share of respondents stopped in **Herat** (82%, n=82) and **Tehran** (40%, n=578) specifically to look for a smuggler. Similarly, this was a common reason for stopping in Iranian border towns near the Afghanistan-Iran border, including **Mashhad** (41%, n=264) and **Zahedan** (24%, n=189). Given their proximity to the border, these towns appear to function as **early transit hubs to organise the travel through Iran towards Türkiye.**

**Iranian authorities have implemented movement restrictions for Afghan nationals across several provinces.** Specifically, Afghans are barred from residing in or travelling through 16 designated provinces.<sup>4</sup> This policy has had direct implications for Afghan transiting through the country, as it limits their mobility and can constrain their access to services, employment, and safer transit routes. Since Mashhad is not located in the 16 provinces where Afghans face movement restrictions, it may offer opportunities to arrange internal movement and prepare for onward travel towards Türkiye.

**Within Iran,** working to earn money for the next stage of the journey was a prominent reason for stopping in **capitals and transit hubs** such as **Tehran** (29%, out of n=189 who stopped there), **Isfahan** (37%, n=168), and **Qom** (33%, 23 out of 70), all located in central Iran.

**In towns along the Iran-Türkiye border, respondents frequently reported stopping due to factors related to smuggling arrangements and border enforcement.** Among those who stopped in **Tabriz** (n=356), the most commonly cited reason was **waiting for money transfers**, cited by 38%. This is likely to reflect payments to smugglers for onward movement.

Among those who stopped in **Urmia** (n=225), 36% reported stopping to arrange smuggling services for the Türkiye crossing. However, the most frequently reported reason was **immigration control procedures (41%)**, linked with the heightened enforcement measures

along the Iranian border,<sup>5</sup> which may in turn drive the need for smuggling facilitation. **Upon arrival in Türkiye, many migrants stopped at the location where smugglers left them.** In **Ağrı**, abandonment by smugglers was the most frequently reported reason for stopping, reported by 78% of respondents (56 out of 72). In **Van** (n=539), the most common reasons for stopping were waiting for transport (51%) and being abandoned by smugglers (33%; see Figure 3 on page 5).

**Syrian respondents primarily stopped after crossing the border to reconnect with family and friends and to organise onward travel. In central transit hubs, many reported halting to arrange smuggling services.**

As shown in Figure 4 (on page 6), reasons of stopping of Syrians reflect the dual role of key locations as both social support points and logistical hubs along the route.

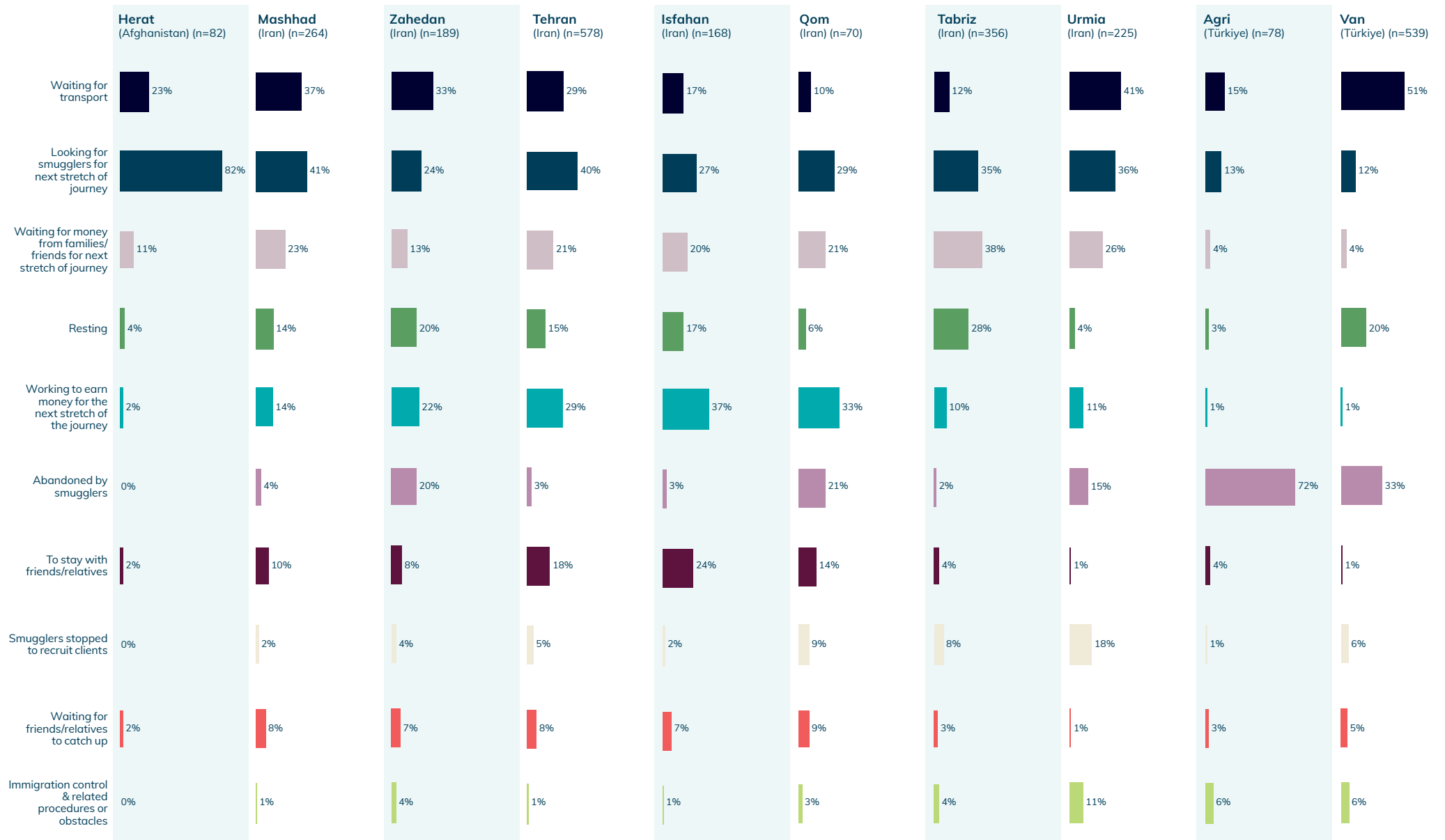
**Immediately after crossing the Syria-Türkiye border, many Syrians stopped to reunite with family and friends.** This was the most frequently mentioned reason among those who stopped in **Hatay** (62%; n=186), **Gaziantep** (60%; n=126), **Kilis** (39%; n=134), and **Sanliurfa** (70%; 43 out of 61 respondents). **Given the high concentration of Syrians in these areas, it is plausible that stops were motivated by the opportunity to reconnect with social networks and organise onward travel.** In fact, in these border cities, waiting for transport was another significant reason migrants stopped, emerging as the primary reason in Kilis (46%) and as the second-most reported reason in Hatay (35%) and Sanliurfa (49%; 30 out of 61 respondents).

People who stopped in **central hubs such as Istanbul (n=70) and Izmir (n=60)** predominantly did so to organize journey logistics. In **Istanbul**, waiting for transportation was cited by 53% (37 respondents), while searching for smugglers for the subsequent journey stage was reported by 47% (33 respondents). Similar patterns were observed in **Izmir**, where 63% (38 out of 60 respondents) mentioned waiting for transport, and 50% (30 respondents) reported searching for smugglers.

4 Iran International, [Iran Bans Afghan Migrants From Living In 16 Provinces](#). Published on 4 December 2023.

5 Daily Sabah, [Towering walls, patrols boost security on Türkiye's eastern border](#). Published on 24 September 2024.

**Figure 3. Top 10 reasons to stop among Afghan respondents<sup>6</sup> (multi-select)**



<sup>6</sup> The four least mentioned reasons for stopping, each reported by fewer than 5% of respondents in each location, are not displayed in the chart: poor health or injury, detention or being held against the respondents' will, intention to settle in the location, and applying for asylum.

**Figure 4. Top 10 reasons to stop among Syrian respondents<sup>7</sup> (multi-select)**



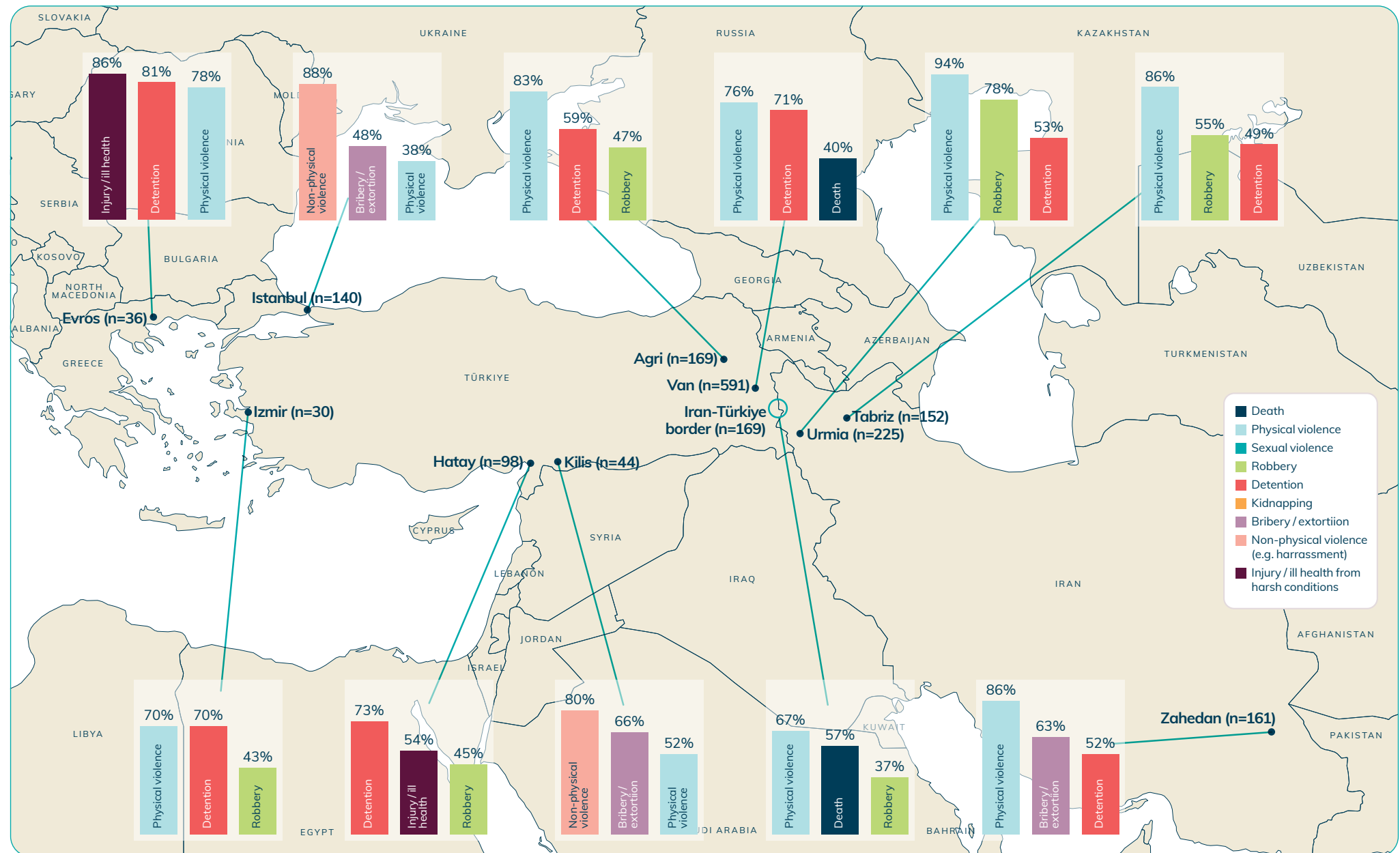
## Afghan and Syrian respondents who arrived in Greece stopped mainly to apply for asylum

Among the respondents who arrived in Greece (n=229), the main places of stop were **Rhodes** (13%), **Samos** (9%), and **Chios** (9%). In Greece, respondents have stopped mainly to **apply for asylum**, as was reported by 28 out of the 29 who stopped in Rhodes, 20 out of the 21 who stopped in Samos, and 19 out of 20 who stopped in Chios.

<sup>7</sup> The four least mentioned reasons for stopping, each reported by fewer than 5% of respondents in each location, are not displayed in the chart: smuggler stopped to recruit clients, stopping due to poor health or injury, stopping to wait for a money transfer, being detained, or other reasons to stop.

# Risks and protection concerns were most concentrated in border areas and capital cities

Figure 5. Dangerous locations across Iran, Türkiye and Greece and top three risks reported



## High risk of physical violence and robbery in Zahedan (Afghanistan-Iran border).

**Zahedan**, on the Iranian side of the Afghanistan-Iran border, was identified 161 times as a location where respondents felt at risk. The most commonly reported danger was **physical violence**, cited by 86% of those who mentioned the city among dangerous locations. Risks of extortion and bribery were also widespread (63%), while detention and robbery were reported by 52% and 50% of respondents, respectively. Since there are various reports covering the killings of Afghans trying to enter Iran by Iranian border guards,<sup>8</sup> it is notable that neither the Afghanistan-Iran border area nor the risk of death was more often mentioned by respondents.

## High risk of physical violence and death across the Iran-Türkiye border.

**The mountainous Iran-Türkiye border and its surrounding towns were among the most frequently reported dangerous locations along the land route taken by Afghans.**

On the Iranian side, **Urmia** (225 mentions) and **Tabriz** (152 mentions) were frequently identified as high-risk locations. In addition, several respondents described the **Iran-Türkiye border** (169 mentions) more broadly as a hazardous area, reflecting widespread perceptions of insecurity along this segment of the route. On the Turkish side, **Van** (591 mentions) and **Ağrı** (169 mentions) were the most frequently cited high-risk locations.

Among those who identified the Iran-Türkiye border as dangerous, **over half (57%) reported the risk of death as a primary concern**. Similarly high levels of perceived lethality were recorded in Tabriz (41%) on the Iranian side, and Van (40%) on the Turkish side.

On the Iranian side, the risk of **physical violence** was reported by almost all respondents in **Urmia (94%)** and was also widely cited in Tabriz (86%). On the Turkish side, **in addition to physical violence** – reported as a risk by 76% in Van and 83% in Ağrı – respondents also frequently mentioned **detention**, cited in 71% of responses in Van, and 59% in Ağrı.

The risk of physical violence and detention at the Iran-Türkiye border is likely exacerbated by Türkiye's reinforcement of its eastern border,<sup>9</sup> which began in 2024 in response to Iran's plans to accelerate the expulsion of undocumented migrants.

### 'We were pushed back and robbed': firsthand accounts of forced returns and abuse

While the 4Mi survey does not explicitly collect data on pushbacks, forced returns, or deportations, a few respondents described such incidents – and related violence – in their open-ended responses. In addition, MMC identified several potential forced return movements by analysing changes in 4Mi respondents' travel direction (e.g., from Türkiye back to Syria or Iran – places previously transited) when deportation was mentioned either as a reason for stopping or as a main danger. Although these cases were limited, the testimonies underscore the serious risks associated with the deportation of Syrians and Afghans to potentially dangerous situations. The testimonies also point to a broader pattern of abuses occurring along the Türkiye-Syria and Türkiye-Iran borders.<sup>10</sup> This corroborates the findings by the investigation conducted by Lighthouse Reports.<sup>11</sup>

*"We were pushed back from Türkiye to Iran. Border police of Türkiye shot in the air. After our push back to Iran we lost connection with smugglers and got robbed by armed robbers who took all our belongings and let us go."*

**22-year-old man from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens in 2024**

8 Reuters. [UN seeks probe into reported mass killing of Afghans migrating to Iran](#). Published on 17 October 2024. See also: Bayan News. Published on 26 November, 2024

9 Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative (2021). [Impacts of EU-Turkey cooperation on migration along the Iran-Turkey Border](#). See also Border Security Report (2023) [Measures Taken at Turkey's Land Borders](#) and POLITICO (2022). [Turkey puts its migrant security system on display for Europe](#)

10 Some quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and flow.

11 Lighthouse Reports (2024). [Turkey's EU-funded deportation machine](#)



## Cities on the Syria-Türkiye border and Istanbul were widely associated with risks of detention, deprivation, and both physical and verbal abuse

In Türkiye, **Istanbul** and **several cities along the Türkiye-Syria border** were the locations most frequently mentioned as dangerous by respondents. While **the capital was the most frequently mentioned high-risk location** (140 mentions), border locations were also highlighted, including **Hatay** (98 mentions) and **Kilis** (44 mentions), and **Sanliurfa** (22 mentions). Additionally, **Izmir** (30 mentions) also featured in respondents' accounts of risk.

88% of those who identified **Istanbul**, as a dangerous location mentioned **non-physical violence**. Other commonly mentioned risks included **extortion** and **bribery** (67 mentions), **physical violence** (53), and **robbery** (43).

In **Hatay**, **detention** emerged as the most frequently reported risk, cited in nearly three quarters of responses (72 out of 98). **Harsh conditions resulting in injury or ill health** were also widely noted (53 mentions). Similarly, among those who identified **Sanliurfa** as a high-risk location (n=22), **detention** (17 mentions), **robbery** (17), and **injury** (15) were the most commonly cited concerns. In contrast, respondents who mentioned **Kilis** (n=44) primarily highlighted non-physical forms of violence, including **verbal harassment** (35 mentions), with **bribery** also frequently reported (29 out of those 35 cases).

## Respondents face violence, detention and risk of death at the Türkiye-Greece border

**Evros, Greece, was the most frequently identified high-risk location among respondents interviewed in Greece (n=229)**, with 36 citing it specifically. The most commonly reported risks included injury and ill health (31 mentions), detention (29), physical violence (28), and death (27).

### Reports of mistreatment, abuses and pushbacks at the Türkiye-Greece border crossings

**Failed attempts to cross the border were reported and some respondents alleged that “criminal gangs or militias supervised by Greek authorities” participated in abuse and detentions.** Reports of unidentified armed men aiming to push refugees and migrants back to the Turkish side of the border have emerged since 2020.<sup>12</sup>

*“I recommend not to enter Europe via Greece, they do not respect human rights. My children and I will never forget the rape of a 16-year-old girl, on my second try to cross to Greece. It was an armed group with the support of the Greek border police that raped the girl.”*

**43-year-old man from Syria, interviewed in Thessaloniki in 2024**

*“I was pushed back four times on the land border between Greece and Türkiye. The mafia militia acting under the supervision of the Greek border police was speaking in English, armed, and beating us with bludgeons. After, I decided trying the sea crossing. Before succeeding, I tried seven times: from Izmir, Bodrum and Fathiyeh. The Greek Marine police robbed us of everything: phones, money, passports, diplomas, student cards.”*

**21-year-old man from Syria, interviewed in Athens in 2024**

12 UN OHCHR (2020). [Greece: Rights violations against asylum seekers at Turkey-Greece border must stop – UN Special Rapporteur](#) | OHCHR See also: Amnesty International (2021). [Greece: Pushbacks and violence against refugees and migrants are de facto border policy](#) - Amnesty International, Refugee Support Aegean (2022) [Putting lives at Risk, Separating Families after Pushbacks Operations](#) - R.S.A., Human Rights Watch (2022) [“Their Faces Were Covered”: Greece’s Use of Migrants as Police Auxiliaries in Pushbacks](#) | HRW



**MINISTRY OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK**

## 4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migration and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: [www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)