

The Journey to Dreamland Never Ends: A Refugee's Journey from Somalia to Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Large numbers of people continue to flee conflict and instability, moving along human smuggling routes, hiding in transit cities, and getting locked up in detention centres in the process of seeking safety and asylum. This is widely known, but the human cost and intricacies of individual journeys is often hidden behind statistics and political discourse. In this article, Ali Hassan from Mogadishu, Somalia shares the story of his two-year flight from Yemen to Sweden, illustrating the harsh conditions and dangers faced by forced migrants: the lack of food and water, the overcrowding inside vehicles or boats, the exploitation and abuse by smuggling networks, and the hostile reception from security and governmental officials. This detailed life story illustrates both the human impact of restrictive migration policies, and the problems this generates for aid workers, especially since information about the needs of forced migrants at different stages, and how and where they access assistance, is largely inadequate. By exploring how forced migrants negotiate invisibility and vulnerability, this detailed life story is an illustration of the challenges humanitarians face when responding to an unfolding crisis.

KEYWORDS: smuggling, humanitarianism, invisibility, advocacy, asylum

1. INTRODUCTION

With growing numbers of people fleeing conflict and instability, the recent asylum crisis has generated a great deal of attention in the media and policy arenas, ranging from the experience of forced migrants to the response of States and societies.¹ While the situation in Europe has received significant attention in the past year, the critical displacement crisis that has long been unfolding along migratory routes and in countries and regions neighbouring the crises has not. Displacement to “Western” countries is intermingled with national interest and limited political will to share responsibilities. Numerous States are sidestepping their responsibility to protect displaced people in two principal ways. Governments are financing humanitarian aid

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1 S. Castles, M. Cubas, C. Kim, & D. Ozkul, “Irregular Migration: Causes, Patterns and Strategies”, in I. Omelaniuk (ed.), *Global Perspectives in Migration and Development*, New York, Springer, 2012, 117–151.

to refugee camps, while at the same time raising obstacles for those same people to enter their own borders by externalising them in diverse manners, which reportedly diffuses accountability for what are often violations of the most basic rights. In the meantime, the ability of the international legal frameworks and mandated institutions to manage this global displacement phenomenon is limited in many ways. Subsequently, the mechanisms that have been created to enable the protection of displaced people and the provision of humanitarian assistance are turned against them, leaving people with little choice but to travel along risky smuggling routes where they are exposed to abuse, extortion, and violence.

This article offers a detailed narrative of the path taken by one refugee – Ali Hassan (a pseudonym) – offering this story as a lens into the journeys of many others. Based on unstructured narrative interviews, it illustrates how the path to Europe involves travelling across some of the most disadvantaged corners of the globe, over terrains with very limited access to humanitarian assistance, and – by necessity – through unregulated spaces that have minimal contact with authorities, local communities, and public services. Such conditions leave migrants uniquely exposed to harm, as well as posing distinctive challenges for humanitarian agencies such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).² Using a life history gives particular depth and context to the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies, as well as reflecting on the human costs of the migration crisis in Europe.

Life histories provide a unique perspective on large and generalised phenomena. By delving into the detailed personal experiences of a single person, they not only illustrate the human cost of social issues, but they can also draw attention to individual particularities and differences. Life histories can be used in scholarship for many reasons: to study social change, to document the different roles people take on in their lives at different moments, to demonstrate how people are socialised into new environments, to examine how identity is constructed, and to understand variations within a particularly common experience.³ A life history always involves some kind of selection and imperfect historical memory, but its value is that it puts some empirical flesh on the bare statistical bones of social phenomena.

In this article, life history is a particularly useful method because of its direct, first-hand account of suffering. The information included is based on observation and in-depth interviews with Ali Hassan. First of all, the author of this article, Linn Biörklund, exchanged emails, phone calls, and text messages throughout Ali's journey, which led to invaluable background information. The core part of this text was based on 15 in-depth structured interviews, which were carried out by Linn Biörklund in October and December 2014. Soon after Ali Hassan embarked on this journey, he developed a strong desire to tell others about his experience. He hopes that by sharing his story, the understanding of what so many people have to go through when fleeing and seeking safety may improve, and ultimately change the situation for people living in camps, along routes, or trapped in transit countries.

2 K. Koser & S. Martin (eds.), *The Migration-Displacement Nexus: Patterns, Processes and Policies*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2011.

3 D. Mandelbaum, "The Study of Life History", in R. Burgess (ed.), *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual*, London, Routledge, 1991, 146–151.

Ali Hassan and Linn Biörklund got to know each other when they worked together for MSF in Southern Yemen in 2010. Because of his own limitations with writing and the trust developed between the two, Ali specifically asked Linn to write his story.

This article has adopted a common method for life histories, which is to allow the person to “speak” on the page without analysis or interruption and for the scholar or analyst to resist the urge to change, alter, or interject in the person’s story. The final narrative was produced in close cooperation with Ali Hassan, and the final conclusion and reflection on the implications of Ali’s story for humanitarian action was written by Linn Biörklund. The collaborative nature of the article and the first person account in the main part of the article, has been consciously chosen to retain the dignity, autonomy, and ownership of the research subject; as Kirk Hoppe provocatively asked in relation to the multiple forms of editing and framing that go on when representing another person’s history: “whose life is it anyway?”⁴

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2, the personal journey of Ali Hassan is recounted in the first person, starting with an explanation of how this narrative was generated. This story is told in six parts, representing the main stages of Ali’s journey from Somalia, to Yemen, to Turkey, through the Balkans, and eventually to Sweden. In Section 3 of this article, the features of Ali’s story that can be generalised are examined. For all the rich empirical detail in this life history, it nonetheless speaks to a shared experience of many migrants, and the bigger picture is set out throughout the narrative. Section 4 of the article turns to an analysis of Ali’s story and examines its implications for humanitarianism. When migrants are denied their rights, forced underground into a network of invisible transit routes, and unable to access government services, aid agencies face real challenges and dilemmas in responding. A conclusion draws the main themes together with a reflection on one of the most serious policy crises Europe has faced since its inception – and one with a significant humanitarian angle.

2. A PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF FLIGHT AND SUFFERING

In 1991, conflict broke out in Somalia. Two months of public demonstrations led to chaos and war, when I, Ali Hassan, was only eight years old. Two of the powerful clans struggled to take control of the country after the government collapsed. The situation was miserable. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed during ongoing clashes, and a lot of my relatives died.

My father was working in the United Arab Emirates when the war broke out, and I was living with my mother and siblings. One day our neighbourhood was attacked, and I was shot in my left shoulder. I was taken to my mother’s relative who was a doctor. He stitched me together; it was so painful. My mother realised that we would all die if we stayed, so she decided we had to leave Mogadishu and go to Bosasso in Puntland where the situation was calmer.

4 K. Hoppe, “Whose Life Is it, Anyway? Issues of Representation in Life Narrative Texts of African Women”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26(3), 1993, 623–636; S. Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories: Method and Content”, *Sign*, 11(2), 1986, 334–351.

I remember travelling in a big truck; it must have been more than 10 days. We were squeezed in the back of the truck without food or water, passing by checkpoints with armed angry men. Arriving in Bosasso, we found our way to an overcrowded camp where we stayed for nearly a year.

At the end of 1992, we embarked on a ship and fled to Yemen. In the early 1990s smuggling networks were not as organised as they are today. The ship belonged to the Somali navy, and it took two days from Bossaso to the shores of southern Yemen. I think we were about 45–60 people on the boat. It was overcrowded and we did not have enough food and water. Many, especially women, young children, and sick people, suffered a lot.

Arriving in Yemen we were met by the Yemeni authorities. They recorded our names, and we were taken to the town of Aden, where the country's first refugee camp was established. After some months we were transferred to another camp close to Abyan town in Southern Yemen. The situation in this camp was initially good, but clashes between the two Yemeni governments soon started and war broke out. We were caught between the fighting parties on land, while at sea military ships were firing shells towards the mainland. The camp became an increasingly dangerous place to live. Once, a jet plane flew over the camp and threw a missile that exploded approximately 200 metres away from me. One of my best friends, Awil, was killed in that attack.

My mother lost contact with my father when we arrived in Yemen. There was no mobile network, no internet, and my mother only had a phone number written on a piece of paper that disappeared during the boat trip. Other Somali families in Yemen had a father or grown up male family members who took care of them. We had nobody. Life was very difficult and we had no chance of surviving in the camp, so we moved to Aden where my oldest brother could work as a cab contractor (the ones receiving money from people taking public transport). My oldest sister worked as a house server. We lived like that for several years before my father found us through the Somali networks. This is something we Somalis are good at: establishing networks.

Life in Aden was very difficult as Somali refugees were neither allowed to live or work in Yemeni towns. My siblings and I were kids, so we could be out on the streets, but adults could not go out without risking detention because campaigns and raids to take Somalis living in urban settings to refugee camps were common. On a more positive note, Somali children were allowed to study in Yemen, so I studied English and started to teach English to Somali refugees to earn money for my family. I also applied for official English teacher jobs, but if you are not a Yemeni national it is impossible to find decent employment. After many years, however, I was finally able to get a job with MSF.

I initially worked as a translator, and was later trained to become a social-counsellor to Somalis who arrived on the southern shores of Yemen. They were in devastating conditions, both physically and mentally, after having survived long and often horrendous boat journeys across the Gulf of Aden. In 2010, MSF closed its project. Most people arriving from Somalia and Ethiopia were now arriving from the Red Sea, and it became increasingly difficult to provide them with assistance. As a result of the project closure, I lost my job.

The situation in Yemen was getting tense and security was decreasing. The Arab Spring had not yet reached Yemen but it was just a matter of time until protests would break out. It was scary, and by the end of 2010 I had no option but to leave the country. Travelling alone is dangerous so I asked some people, whom I knew might want to flee, to come with me. In December 2010 five other men and I travelled to Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. Two of us are now in Scandinavia and two are in Turkey.

2.1. From Yemen to Turkey

There is a Somali saying that goes *Hadaad sidaad rabtid heliweesay sidee kabadan weeso ayaa lasameeyaa*: if I cannot do what I want, in the way I want, I will go through the impossible. It was with this spirit that I bought a plane ticket, and flew, for the first time in my life, to Damascus on 29 January 2011. If I had known what was in store for me in the years to come, I would probably not have embarked on this journey. But at least I arrived right before the conflict broke out in Syria. My walk to a better life had begun.

It was evening when we arrived in Damascus. We stayed in a house, owned by a Somali lady and her children, for three nights while waiting for the “green-light” from the smugglers. On the third day a man called and told us to meet him in a certain place where we should look for three black cars. We paid \$800 each to the smugglers, who took us from Damascus to a place relatively close to the Syrian-Turkish border. The journey took approximately three hours. The drivers drove recklessly fast and I was very scared. Arriving at the border, the smugglers informed us they had expected that the border policeman they knew would be on duty. Unfortunately, he was not. All of us got angry and nervous. The smugglers said we had to go for a secondary plan.

They assured us that if the border police saw us they would shoot. So we had to walk through the bush to the Syrian-Turkish border. We were told it would take four hours. Those four hours turned into walking the whole night, and the whole of the next day too.

After hours of walking we saw a large group of people. It was another group of migrants waiting for us so that we all could walk together, led by two smugglers. We ended up walking together as a group of around 70 scared, exhausted, and hopeful people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Kurdistan, and Somalia, hiking over mountains and walking in dark forests before crossing the Syrian-Turkish border in abject fear of the police. It was raining and freezing cold on the journey, and later it started to snow. No one was prepared for such a walk or for the harsh weather conditions. My bag was very heavy and I was losing energy.

During the walk, the smugglers were beating us with sticks and we were told to hold each other's hands in order to not lose anyone. Everyone was so angry. This was not what we had paid for. A Somali girl lost her shoes and had to walk barefoot on slippery and snow-covered sharp rocks. She fell and begged us to leave her to die. The smugglers told us to leave her behind, and screamed at her that she should never have embarked on this journey because she would never make it anyway. “People like you are too weak, and hundreds of them have died in these mountains”, they said. The girl was devastated. We refused to leave her and forced her up on her bare feet to continue the journey.

Suddenly we heard howls. I think they were from wolves. We had to stand still without making any noise. I do not know how long we stayed there; I just know that it felt like forever. My whole body was shaking from the cold and I could no longer feel my hands and feet.

Everyone was completely exhausted. Some were unable to walk so we pushed each other through the snow. My friend Somane had difficulty in breathing because of the height and the cold weather. "I want to lie down and sleep", he said. The man holding his hand did not have enough strength to keep pulling and Somane fell down in a hole. He screamed out our names. The smugglers got angry saying he had to shut up otherwise the border control police might hear him. We tried to get him up with a stick but without success. He begged us to leave him and to continue because otherwise all of us would die.

At that point, I did not imagine that similar scenarios would present themselves throughout my journey and that I would have to make many impossible choices to survive. People embarking on these journeys may be stronger and more fortunate than people stuck in conflicts or camps, but the journey makes them extremely vulnerable. Only the strongest ones make it, and everyone gets abused by smugglers, security forces, and governmental officials. Women, children, elders, the injured, and sick die along these smuggling routes every day.

After hours of walking, we begged the smugglers for a break to make a fire and warm up. The wood was wet from the snow, so we burned our own clothes. The barefoot Somali woman was now almost unconscious. Her feet were bleeding and she had a serious wound between her legs. Refusing to leave her behind, we took turns carrying her.

The next day at five in the morning we finally reached the border. The two smugglers who took us across the mountains handed us over to four other smugglers. It felt like we were a herd of sheep being handed over from one owner to another, the only difference was that we had to pay them. This time I paid US\$50.

Around 10am we reached a place where a number of cars were waiting for us. The smugglers told us to walk across a hill, and warned us: "if you inform anyone about whom the smugglers are we will come and find you and make your life even more miserable than it already is. All the smuggling networks are connected and we can easily find you all over the world." The cars drove for an hour before arriving in a town in the Antakya region in Turkey. The smugglers took us to a house where we could take a cold shower and change our clothes. Water but no food was provided. By then I had only eaten a piece of bread since I left Damascus more than 48 hours before. My stomach was swollen and I did not even feel hunger anymore.

One of my friends and I paid some money to one of the smugglers and he took us to his house. I knew that the risk of being caught is less when travelling with few people. We stayed there for a couple of days to recover from the walk across the Syrian mountains, but we had to keep away from the windows so as not to be seen by the neighbours. The man hosting us taught me some Kurdish history and culture and gave me fake identity papers to use during my stay in Turkey.

2.2. Detention in Turkey

My next destination was Ankara. Or I wanted it to be Ankara. A bus driver had agreed to accept us on the bus in exchange for money, but everyone on the bus was

looking at us. We travelled for some hours before reaching a checkpoint close to Adana, a big Turkish city, where one of the passengers called the police to tell them “black illegals” were on board. Everyone was forced to get out of the bus. People with Turkish nationality were allowed to get back inside the vehicle again, while foreigners had to stand on the side of the road for hours. Remembering what the Kurdish smuggler had told me (“do not tell them you come from Syria; tell them you come from Iraq”), I stayed quiet because if I told them I came from Syria they would have forced me to explain how I crossed the border and who helped me. After that I would probably have been sent back to Syria. It was windy, it was cold, and it was scary being interrogated in a language I did not understand.

A car came and all “illegals” (that is what they called us) were taken to a military camp. The animosity towards us “illegals” in every country I have transited through during my flight has surprised me. The truth is that we are not illegals; we are human beings like everyone else. The only difference is that we were born in another country, grew up in less fortunate societies, and had to flee our homes. A person cannot be illegal, and everyone has the right to be treated with dignity, especially in countries with resources to ensure the meeting of basic needs and the upholding of rights for everyone.

At the police station in Adana, we were searched and interrogated again. The policeman searched me and found some Syrian coins in my pocket. He told me to throw them in the toilet before a higher commander came. He said he understood that I was not a criminal but only searching for a better life. I put the coins in my mouth and spat them out in the toilet while quietly telling myself that I once again had been saved.

Two higher commanders came and tried to speak to me in Arabic. I kept quiet as I did not want them to know that I speak the language. A map of Syria was thrown in front of me and they questioned me endlessly. I finally pretended to speak bad English and explained that I had come from Iraq.

The next morning I was transferred to the courthouse, but before reaching there we stopped by the hospital. According to Turkish law, people who are arrested (“illegals”) have to do a health check to make sure they have not been beaten by the border police. It was me and six other people. We were all handcuffed and each of us was escorted by a policeman. There were journalists waiting outside the courthouse. We told them we had fled the conflict in Somalia by boat from Bossaso to Dubai. That later we had travelled to Kuwait and Iraq before crossing a river to reach Turkey.

After the courthouse, we were sent to a detention centre and were told we would have to stay there for a few days. There were three other Somali men at that place. One of them said, “welcome my friend, here you will sleep for a long time.” I did not understand what he meant, but it sounded depressing. In the end, I was detained for 90 days. It was my worst experience ever. Hundreds of people from Somalia, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere, mostly men but also women and children, had been detained in this detention centre for months, even years.

On arrival, all my belongings were taken and everyone had to wear prisoners’ clothes. The place was overcrowded and had very small rooms, each with 10 beds. The room was locked and I was not able to go out for three long months. Once a

day the guards would come with food. I was often not able to eat it. That is how disgusting it was. Sometimes they obliged us to eat. We had no access to information, and the first two months I could not even call my family to tell them I was alive.

The guards did not beat us, but we were psychologically abused. Every day they said we would be released and obtain papers to stay in Turkey. People were sick, and there was no healthcare. We, the detainees, started to fight among ourselves about small things. You can probably understand that in this environment, without sunlight for three months, people become extremely stressed and anxious. Everyone was depressed, had anxiety, and thought we would have to stay there forever. I gave informal counselling sessions to the ones who were suffering most, as a result of all sorts of traumatic events that had happened in their home countries and along their journeys. The guards often interrogated us and asked where we had come from. Money was stolen from us, and the commander in charge was so cruel. Sometimes I thought I would die.

I found out that the Turkish authorities wanted to deport all of the Somalis to Somalia and I managed to get in contact with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Istanbul and Ankara. This upset the detention centre commander. UNHCR informed him that Somalis cannot be deported back to their country as the situation had worsened and people were dying from drought.

On day 88 I woke up thinking “this is it”. A group of people agreed to revolt. We took off our clothes, went to the windows and screamed “we want freedom, we are not animals”. People from town came and saw us, the media was watching, and the commander went completely mad. Two days later I was released. The commander’s last words to me were “never come back, or I will detain you forever”. A man from Ivory Coast that had become my friend in the horrific detention centre was not released that day. It was so hard to leave him behind and I often wonder where he is now. Is he alive, is he safe, is he still stuck in detention?

I travelled to Ankara, and tried to seek asylum, but without success. I was told to go back to Adana, the town where I had been detained, so I escaped and did not dare to apply again. For five months, from May until September 2012, I worked illegally, day and night, in a factory in Ankara. The choices were work like a dog, or die from hunger. My responsibility was to carry heavy pieces of wood. I earned the equivalent of 5 Euros per day. The factory manager treated me and other non-Turkish workers like animals. Most of the other workers were Somalis, but there were also Kurds and other nationalities. We were not allowed to leave the factory during the day, and if we did he abused us. I lived in a 12m² room, together with 12 other Somalis. It was in a house located in a very poor neighbourhood. We had to squeeze together while sleeping. When one person turned during the night, he would wake up all the others and they would also have to turn. Most of the men living in that room are now in Europe, a few are still in Turkey.

2.3. Through the Balkans

In the end, I just could not cope. On 29 September 2011, 9 months after I left Yemen, I travelled to Istanbul and some days later I continued to Greece in a crowded minivan without seats. The smugglers were Kurdish. They were

collaborating with Somali and Sudanese smugglers and spoke Arabic. They asked everyone to pay much more money than had previously been agreed on. Many people did not understand Arabic, hence could not negotiate the price. I refused to pay the high amount they were demanding, and as I spoke Arabic I got a cheaper deal. They dropped us close to the border, gave us inflatable boats, and told us to turn left after having crossed the river to reach Greece, not right as that would take us to Bulgaria.

In the middle of the night, as the 26 of us paddled with our hands, the boat suddenly started to sink. A big French-speaking woman was sitting on me. She could not swim so I told her to hold on to me. We screamed for help, it was dramatic. The Greek river police showed up as if by magic. They told us not to move, and brought us back to the Turkish side. They threatened us with their guns and we were taken to a Turkish police base. There is clearly animosity between the Turkish and the Greek people in the border area, and they did not understand our plight. The police asked for our and the smugglers' names, then they took us to a very big detention centre with between 500 to 600 people. I saw a friend of mine; he had been there for a week, but I and some others were sent back to Istanbul. It is unclear to me what criteria is used when deciding who stays in detention and who is transferred elsewhere or released; most of the time, it is probably the luck of the draw.

The next day I tried the same journey to Greece, this time successfully. We were more than 30 people in a small mini bus. Some of the passengers were young girls. They said they were being taken to Greece to work in hotels, but all I could think was that they would suffer a lot. I saw how the smugglers were watching me speak with the girls, probably feeling uncomfortable knowing that I understood they were being trafficked. I wanted to say something to them, but I was too scared. The river crossing went well, but when arriving at the far shores a friend of mine and I had an argument. He wanted to go right, while I said we had to go left to reach Greece. He did not want to listen so we did as he said, and after hours of walking we saw Bulgarian number plates on the cars. This was when he finally agreed to turn around. We walked for one day and then we got arrested. The police were looking for bribes and gave us a choice: *you pay or you stay*.

I paid and made it to Athens. There I had nothing: no food, no place to stay, no friends. I knew that if I stayed in Greece longer than a month I would be put in prison for at least six months. That is how it works in Greece. One day I saw how a black guy was beaten by Greek citizens and I heard stories about foreigners being beaten and chased on the streets. I got paranoid and felt the urge to leave.

To get away, I paid almost 1,000 Euros to the smugglers. They were Gypsies from Greece, Albania, and Serbia, and they worked for the same network as the Somalis and Iraqis. I do not have the words to explain how organised these networks are and the intelligence of the ones managing them. First we had to take a train from Athens to Thessaloniki in northern Greece. Two Sudanese smugglers were now guiding us. They told us we would go by foot through Macedonia and to Serbia. I no longer believed what they or any other smuggler told me. They lie all the time, and all they think of is money. These smugglers in particular did not want to spend the money we had given them, which is why they proposed walking from northern Greece to Belgrade, the capital of Serbia: it was cheaper for them.

The train to Thessaloniki was nice. I daydreamed about Vienna and Austria, which I then hoped would be my end destination. Arriving close to the Macedonian border, we got off and the smugglers said we would go to a hotel. This was of course not true. Instead we were taken to an abandoned building inhabited by drug addicts. It reeked of stool and stoned humans. I was so stressed, it was another sleepless night.

The next morning, we got on a bus to the last village in Greece, but before arriving we were arrested and taken to a big room where there were some 65 people from different countries. I was sent back to Thessaloniki. The same thing happened again and again. After three attempts to cross the Greek-Macedonian border, I finally made it across the river that divides the two countries. I walked through the jungle, hiding from police that reportedly beat foreign people to death. After hours of walking, I got on a bus to Skopje, the capital of Macedonia and continued to Lojane near the Macedonian-Serbian border. I was caught again, but this time I was not arrested. The Macedonian police took me to the border and said “leave our country now, and never show your face again”. I remained quiet while thinking how I truly wished my face would never see that place again.

The Macedonian-Serbian border region is dangerous and the local mafia is very hostile. The smugglers operating there are the scariest people I have ever met, and they are so professional. I walked non-stop, afraid to look back, and afraid of what was to come. My body was aching and my feet were killing me. It is impressive how strong we can be when it is about life and death. I met a Pakistani woman, she was eight months pregnant and she just kept on walking. The smugglers knew the way by heart and said that we had to pass through four villages to reach a village with a mosque, where we could rest in relative safety.

The view of the mosque gave me peace. Sadly, that peace only lasted for a few minutes. Arriving at the mosque, we were met by Albanian mafia men. The smugglers screamed that we had to run. I ran towards the main road but got stuck in a needle bush. Laying on the ground a Kalashnikov was pointed at my head. I could smell the oil from the gun: that is how close it was. The man loaded it and prepared to shoot. This is it, I thought. This is where my life ends, shot dead in Serbia.

Luckily, the Serbian military came and arrested all of us – the mafia men, me, five other migrants, and two smugglers – and took us to a prison. They said many people transiting through have been killed by the mafia, and one told me that a woman doing the same journey had been raped in front of her husband, and her husband was killed just the previous day. I was accused of being a smuggler because of my good English, and was therefore badly tortured. We were kept in custody together with several mafia men. I recognised some of them, including the one that had held the Kalashnikov towards my head. The next day, I was put in the back of a military truck and taken back to the Macedonian border. The police stole my money and one of them kicked me hard, and grabbed my penis. I fell to the ground and got a fracture in my arm. They shot in the air and commanded me to run.

Back in Lojane, where the Albanian mafia has full control, some of the villagers said it was necessary to hide from the bad guys. They recommended going to a man to sleep for the night. No food, no water. I had lost a lot of weight by now. There were approximately 20 other Somalis in the house. Later that night I tried the journey back to Serbia with some others. Once in Serbia the police came and we were

arrested again, this time for several days, before we got a paper that read: “you have ten days to leave our country.” Serbia was absolutely the hardest country to transit through.

We went to a region called Losanisa to hide and gather strength before continuing the journey. After days of walking, we reached Subotica, close to the Serbian–Hungarian border, where I found approximately 850 people from various countries hiding in the forest. I saw frozen bodies and a Somali girl who had a leg infection and could not walk. She was screaming from pain and frustration. I wanted to carry her, but then both of us would have died. She was the second person I had to leave behind since my journey started. It was horrible, but I know that if I had stayed I would not be alive today.

The story repeats itself; the Serbian police came and arrested all “illegals”. When they asked who could speak English, everyone pointed at me so I and another person acted as translators. Everyone was to be deported back to Macedonia except me and the other “translator”. In the meantime, we were taken to a big military camp. Our belongings were stolen and we were put in cells. A Pakistani man who was also being held there said that the persons detained in this place are considered to be a threat to national security. Once again I thought this was it, my life is over and I will never make it to a safe place.

After a month in this prison, we – five Somali, Afghani, and Pakistani men – went on a hunger strike. We refused to eat for several days. The Pakistani man almost died. Finally, one of the high commanders demanded that we be deported immediately. They took our fingerprints, and repeated what I had heard many times before: “never come back.”

2.4. Stuck in the Balkans

Back in Macedonia, I had a complete breakdown. I had no energy left, and could not decide what to do with anything. I came to Sutka detention centre in Skopje where I stayed from December 2011 until May 2012. Hundreds of people in the same limbo were held there. I had a lot of psychological problems during my stay. I was free to leave but did not know where to go. To Greece where the situation for migrants and asylum-seekers was deteriorating? Or to Slovenia via Serbia and Croatia, countries I knew nothing about? I was constantly hungry and sick and was losing hope. Reaching what I believed was Dreamland – Western Europe – or even being able to return home seemed very far away. It took me five months to get over the depression and find some strength.

In May, a group of Somalis asked me to come with them to Croatia. I was hesitant at first remembering the insults and violence inflicted upon me the last time I tried to get through the Balkans. However, I decided to try my luck once more. We left the camp in Skopje – it was the night Chelsea played in the final EU championship – by car to Lojane and from there we walked. It was difficult; many people we met could not walk. A woman that had recently gone through surgery was suffering so much, so I carried her on my back for more than an hour. It was exhausting but I kept in mind the promise that our smuggler had given us: “When you have passed Nis, you are safe.” That night, I secretly lay awake listening to Albanian smugglers talking business.

The next destination was a detention camp in Belgrade. This place lacked food, beds, and showers. You can survive without the last two, but I had to let go of my dignity and search for food in trash bins. To enter the camp, we had to report ourselves to the police. It was nerve-racking, because I was worried my name and fingerprints would reveal that I had previously been in prison in Serbia. With the fear of prison and more abuse, I fled across the Drina River and reached Bosnia and Herzegovina together with 12 others. A cross-border policeman living by the Croatian border let us stay with him if we paid. Nothing is for free when you are an “illegal” traveller.

At four o'clock the next morning, we ran like maniacs across the border into Croatia. The border guard shifts change at that time, so the border is uncontrolled for 15 minutes. We reached Zagreb, the capital, by bus, went to the police, and were transferred to the nicest camp I had ever seen in a town called Kutina. I stayed there from July to August 2012.

For the first time since I left Yemen in December 2010 I slept well at night, but it is almost impossible to obtain refugee status in Croatia so I continued the journey. I walked with some other Somalis through the forest to Slovenia. The smugglers from Algeria misled us and the third night they stole our money and we were left alone in the forest. We had to drink dirty water to survive. After six days of walking along a railway track, we reached Italy. The police caught us and sent us back to Croatia.

With another smuggler, this time from Pakistan, more money, and more uncertainties, I again tried to reach Italy. The Pakistani man was well-organised and knew what he was doing. Three days later we reached Italy. He bought us bus tickets to Trieste, and from there I took a train to Milan. I called my family to ask for more money. It was so upsetting having to borrow more money; this journey was taking so long. My family had to beg their neighbours for money, and promised I would soon support them. I am still paying back that money. I would have liked to stay in Italy but it is too difficult to obtain refugee status there as well.

2.5. The final push to Sweden

Once in Italy, I was in the Schengen area, so on 2 September 2012 I could fly from Milan to Copenhagen, 21 months after I had left Yemen. I passed through customs with a fake passport, and felt guilty about it. That same day, I crossed the Öresund Bridge to southern Sweden. It is easy to get a fake passport that looks real as long as you have money to pay for it. It even had my picture in it. I was nervous using it, it felt wrong, but it saved me and no one seemed to notice that it was not real.

Arriving in Sweden I was happy but did not trust anybody around me. A major choice that could impact my whole life was in front of me: apply for asylum, or not. Would I be able to obtain refugee status? In theory Somalis should be considered refugees, but in practice there are so many loopholes and regulations that prevent many of us from actually obtaining the status and being able to stay in a safe location.

At the train station in Malmö, in Southern Sweden, a couple of guys approached me. They saw that I was Somali and that I looked completely lost. I borrowed their phone and called my family to inform them that I had arrived in Sweden and that I

thought I was finally safe. It was emotional. My mom cried, and said “tonight is the first night since you left that I will be able to sleep without worries”.

The feeling I had in my body was one I had never felt before. I was so happy and relieved to be in a country where I did not have to fear being imprisoned. At the same time, I was completely exhausted and had a weird sense of emptiness. I managed to get to a hostel outside Malmö where newly arrived people can stay for a night or two. A man asked me all sorts of questions. At first I got scared, but I quickly realised that in Sweden you are actually treated with respect even if you are a foreigner. I got a room, and he gave me a package with soap, a towel, toilet paper, and even some “welcome money”. I was stunned by how differently asylum-seekers are treated than in the countries I had travelled through. The next day I applied for asylum and was sent to a migration centre outside Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. There were a lot of Somalis and other nationalities there. I had an interview and they took my fingerprints. I told the woman who interviewed me that I was from Somalia, but had lived most of my life in Yemen, and that I had fled there in 2011. She was nice and said I would have my status interview in October and that I would be transferred to a migration centre in a small town in the middle of the country. The two months together with 200 other asylum-seekers waiting for the big interview that would frame my future felt endless. Most of the people were from Syria, Somalia, and Eritrea. Others were from elsewhere but said they were Somalis.

The end of October was the key to my future. I had my second interview with the migration authorities, and if my asylum was rejected everything I had struggled for would fall apart, and my family would see me as a failure. If I obtained refugee status, the journey of hardship would continue, because even if you are safe as a refugee in a foreign country, you are still far away from everyone and everything you know, which makes life and hopes for the future very difficult. I answered all the questions and I said I had left Yemen because of the Arab Spring uprising. I admitted that I was not threatened, but that I fled because the situation was getting tense and I did not have a job or money to survive. The interviewer asked if I had documentation from Yemen. I showed her my ID card that I had kept inside my clothes throughout the journey. I also gave her the contact details of a Swedish friend who could prove I was telling the truth.

On 7 November I obtained asylum. I even got permanent refugee status, which means I am allowed to stay in Sweden for as long as I need to. I was screaming, crying, laughing, and talking to myself like a crazy man. Hysteria is probably the word that best explains my condition. When I got back to the migration centre, I called my family to tell them. Hysteria was my mother’s reaction as well. She cried and screamed out loud.

A few towns were given as options where I could move to and learn Swedish (all refugees in Sweden are required to learn Swedish). I chose to go to a small town in northern Sweden. It is so far north that in the winter the sun only shines a few hours per day, while in the summer time it is light throughout the whole night. Learning Swedish was very difficult at the beginning; it is nothing like any other language I know. I was suffering from the cold and dark, I even started to lose my hair.

In April 2013, I was invited by an international human rights organisation to come to Brussels and participate in a campaign aimed at the European Parliament

about restrictive migration policies and the effect it has on people fleeing for their lives. I told my story to some of the parliamentarians and I was even interviewed by some English newspapers. That day felt like a victory. I, Ali, had managed to reach Sweden and obtain asylum, and I, together with a group of people, was lobbying European policymakers about the need for change. Later that year I also attended similar events in Greece and Sweden.

Now, two and a half years after I arrived in Sweden I am still living in the north of the country. I have learned Swedish and speak it pretty well, and more importantly I have managed to get a job. I work as a social counsellor and coach for unaccompanied minors arriving from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Eritrea. They often have nobody and arrive in a very fragile state. It feels good to be able to do something for these vulnerable children.

Life in Sweden is not always easy; I miss my people, and a foreigner will always be a foreigner. Some people do not want me here and think I should go home. I can understand them, but they should also try to understand how thousands of other people are risking our lives because we have no other choice.

3. ALI'S JOURNEY: KEY FEATURES AND COMMON EXPERIENCES

Ali's story could be the story of many others, and the route he took to Europe, through Turkey and the Balkans, has become the most travelled path to claiming asylum – one in which forced migrants see their most basic rights violated by governments, smugglers, and criminal gangs. Ali Hassan's story illustrates how extremely exposed people in flight can be, and while the situation is very different in every transit country, the common denominator among displaced groups is a general lack of access to their rights and basic services. In these circumstances, human suffering is widely documented and is known to be rife, but in spite of these known dynamics, state policy remains focused on restrictions, often neglecting human needs and dignity.

Large numbers of people flee conflict insecurity, persecution, extremely limited access to protection and assistance, poverty, natural disasters and other existential threats, every year. An estimated 60 million people were displaced in 2015, the highest level ever recorded.⁵ While global migration and displacement is not a new phenomenon, the numbers of people entering Europe are unprecedented. According to UNHCR, by November 2015, 792,883 people had arrived by sea to Europe since the beginning of the year. Globally, the International Organization for Migration estimates that at least 4,825 migrants died along migration routes between January and November 2015 and at least 45,000 since the year 2000.⁶ The true number of fatalities is likely to be much higher, as many deaths are never recorded, and there is no internationally standardised definition of what constitutes a "border-related death".

5 "Worldwide Displacement Hits All-Time High as War and Persecution Increase", *UNHCR Press Release*, 18 Jun. 2015, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

6 Updated figures available at : <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/latest-global-figures> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016). The dates for these numbers were 1 January–3 November 2015.

Some experts have suggested that for every dead body discovered, there are at least two that are never recovered.⁷

There are also some more particular facets of Ali's journey that are shared by thousands of other forced migrants. The first is the original reason for his flight and the journey from Somalia to Yemen. For the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of people from Somalia and Ethiopia have embarked on hazardous boat journeys across the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea to seek refuge in Yemen or in neighbouring countries and Europe. Yemen has been welcoming to people arriving from the Horn of Africa, especially towards Somalis, and according to UNHCR there were, as of January 2015, approximately 246,000 refugees in Yemen, 95 per cent of whom were Somalis.⁸ The large number of refugees and migrants, however, poses major challenges for Yemen, which has long been affected by political instability, insecurity, unemployment, rapid population growth, declining water resources, and the highest poverty levels in the Arab peninsula.⁹ Since 2015, the country has also been embroiled in a civil war and multiple ongoing conflicts influencing its position on refugees. Yemen has for some time been under strong pressure from Saudi Arabia and other neighbouring countries to stop the flow of irregular migration.¹⁰

The second facet of Ali's journey shared with many other people is his experience in Turkey, which, because of its geographic location and the ongoing war in Syria, has become the main transit country for people aspiring to move to the European Union (EU). Until the 1980s, Turkey was recognised as a "sending" country in terms of international migration, but since then, Turkey has become a "receiving" and a "transit" country. Since 2014, Turkey is the largest refugee hosting country in the world. People enter the country through different means: using forged documents, hiding in border-crossing vehicles, passing the land borders on foot, crossing the sea borders by boat, or entering the country legally and overstaying.¹¹ The specific routes to and through Turkey are constantly changing, usually in response to border control policies, but also as a result of the available smuggling services.¹²

Attempts to shift responsibility for migration management onto third countries, such as Turkey, have been reinforced in the past years. In 2014, Turkey ratified a returns agreement with the EU in exchange for launching talks – to be finalised by the

7 International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration*, Geneva, IOM, 2014, 20, available at: <http://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/pbn/docs/Fatal-Journeys-Tracking-Lives-Lost-during-Migration-2014.pdf> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

8 Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS), *Responses to Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa and Yemen: Policies and Assistance Responses in a Fast-changing Context*, Nairobi, RMMS, Aug. 2013, available at: http://www.regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/rmms_publications/series_three_booklet.pdf (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

9 "Forgotten Hunger in Yemen", *IRIN News*, 8 Jul. 2013, available at: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/98376/slideshow-forgotten-hunger-in-yemen> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

10 RMMS, *Responses to Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa and Yemen*, 75.

11 F. Duvell, "Turkey, the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Changing Dynamics of Transit Migration," in *IE Med Mediterranean Yearbook 2013*, Girona, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2013, 278–281, available at: <http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/iemed-2013/Duvell%20Turkey%20Syrian%20Refugees%20EN.pdf> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016). "Turkey Faces More Risks on Border as Syrian Conflict Escalates", *Xinhua News*, 9 Sep. 2013, available at: http://news.xinhua.net.com/english/special/2013-09/10/c_125354891.htm (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

12 Duvell, "Turkey, the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Changing Dynamics of Transit Migration".

end of 2017 – on liberalising visa requirements for Turkish national travelling to Europe.¹³ More recently, the EU has offered Turkey 6 billion Euros in what has become known as the EU - Turkey deal, to keep refugees inside the country.¹⁴ While they are in the country, asylum-seekers and migrants are often detained on charges of illegal entry or exit or for failure to comply with “temporary asylum” procedures. They are held for detention or deportation processing. Detention locations exist in all of the major Turkish cities and living conditions are reportedly dire.¹⁵ Ali’s experience in these places is far from unique.

The third experience that Ali shares with many other migrants is his relationship with smugglers and criminal gangs. People smuggling has become the preferred trade of a growing number of criminal networks worldwide, and although hard facts about human smuggling and trafficking are difficult to obtain the amounts of money involved are remarkable. For example, it is estimated that transnational organised crime (TOC) produces \$9.5 million of illegal revenue per year globally from human trafficking, the third largest profit for TOC groups after drugs and arms.¹⁶ Migrants are often reluctant to speak about the smuggling networks and how they work. It is clear, however, that smuggling networks rely heavily on intermediaries, often from the same countries as the target population.

Smuggling networks are frequently organised in a pyramidal structure where those in the middle and high levels never meet and are never contracted by the “customers”. People interviewed in a MSF migration project on the Central Mediterranean Sea reported that even though they travelled through and were often trapped in Libya for long periods of time, they never met Libyan members of the smuggling networks until the last moment; it was only when embarking on the boats taking off towards Europe that the Libyan smugglers appeared, acting as guards. Most people use different smugglers throughout their journey, and changes often happen in border areas. This indicates that smuggling networks go across continents while national and even local networks link to the larger ones, with few people actually managing and benefitting from the business. While people often pay for their whole journey beforehand, there are other, parallel networks that frequently seek to exploit their vulnerable situation by forcing them to pay again.

Contact with the middlemen is usually by phone, through numbers obtained prior leaving their places of origin or from other migrants they meet throughout the

13 C. Malmström, “Statement on the Ratification of the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement by the Turkish Parliament”, *European Commission Press Release*, 26 Jun. 2014, available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-14-210_en.htm (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

14 “EU Offers Turkey Cash, Closer Ties for Migration Help”, *Reuters*, 16 Oct. 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/16/us-europe-migrants-idUSKCN0S92HU20151016> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016). More details about the offer are available from the European Commission factsheet “EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan”, available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5860_en.htm (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

15 Global Detention Project, *Turkey Detention Profile*, Geneva, Global Detention Project, 2014, available at: <http://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/turkey/list-of-detention-sites.html> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

16 United States Department of State, *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act 2000: Trafficking in Persons Report 2005*, Washington, DC, United State Department of State, 2005, available at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/47255.pdf> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

journeys. Alternatively, smugglers get in contact with migrants in detention centres, or along borders, to offer their services. This highlights how connected smuggling networks can be with authorities, militias, and criminal groups. In interviews carried out by MSF with migrants arriving in Europe, the interviewees often described inhumane and degrading treatment perpetrated by smugglers.

The fourth element of Ali's journey that is a very common experience for migrants is his experience on the road from Greece to Western Europe through the Balkans. This is often referred to as the "Black Road" by migrants, because of the number of people who have been found dead on it. The majority of people using that route pass through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia, at which point they choose either Croatia or Hungary. The real number of people crossing Macedonia towards Serbia and Western Europe is believed to be 10 times higher than the number of asylum-seekers registered. Although fleeing from conflict, many people suffer the effects increased border controls, the building of fences, detention, and violent pushbacks. Moreover powerful smuggling networks and mafias have made routes through these countries exceptionally harsh and dangerous.¹⁷

Since June 2015, this has become the most common route to Europe. With the German announcement that Syrian refugees are welcome, a temporary border-opening "domino" effect occurred along the so-called "Black Road". This facilitated movement and shortened journeys remarkably. However, less than half a year later, countries along the route again tightened the management of migration with stricter border controls returning, continued "cooperation" agreements with countries of origin, restrictive interpretations of refugee law, obstacles to access to asylum procedures and other basic rights and needs, including healthcare. The Dublin system does not help. It aims for the coherent implementation of a common European asylum system, with people who want to apply for asylum in Europe required to do so in the first country of arrival,¹⁸ but it leads to people bypassing the system, considered as irregular migrants and subjected to detention and deportation.¹⁹

The final stage of Ali's journey to Western Europe – but only the start of the next stage of his life – was the process of claiming asylum. In Western Europe, during the second quarter of 2015, the number of new asylum applications increased by 85 per cent compared with the same quarter of the previous year. Between January and April 2015, 228,600 asylum applications were recorded; in 2014 the figure had

17 U. Friedman, "The Black Route of Death From Syria: On the Desperation behind the Migrant Tragedy in Austria", *The Atlantic*, 28 Aug. 2015, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/08/the-black-route-of-death-from-syria/402802/> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016); J. Psaropoulos, "On 'The Black Road' into Europe with Syria's Refugees", *The Daily Beast*, 20 Jul. 2015, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/20/on-the-black-road-into-europe-with-syria-s-refugees.html> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

18 See Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), OJ L 180/31, 29 Jun. 2013.

19 European Commission, "Towards a European Agenda on Migration", undated, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/migration/index_en.htm (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

already exceeded the highest total for any year since 2001, while the numbers in 2015 were exponentially higher than any period previously recorded. The remarkable increase was and still is mainly driven by the “Syrian effect”.²⁰ Syrians, Afghanis, and Albanians are the top three groups of asylum-seekers, followed by Iraqis. Of the Syrians who applied for asylum in the second quarter of 2015, the great majority did so in Germany, Hungary, Austria, and Sweden. Faced with this phenomenon, States receiving high numbers of asylum-seekers and migrants, are developing growing sets of regulations to manage the movement of people according to their national interests.²¹

Not only do these policies dramatically shape people’s wellbeing and ability to move across borders, but they also create the conditions for human smuggling and trafficking. Asylum-seekers and other migrants tend to use the same routes and means of transport; they face the same risks, and their needs for protection and assistance are often very similar. This, however, is not how they are perceived by the international governance structures. People on the move are constantly categorised, sub-categorised, and re-categorised. For governments, and especially for border control and immigration authorities, such categories have their uses, as they allow the problem to be framed in legal terms, separating the “wanted” from the “unwanted”, the “legal” from the “illegal”, and ultimately to serve to justify political choices about how a particular government responds to a certain crisis and certain populations.²²

The highest level of protection is attached to those who are considered to meet the definition of a refugee in the 1951 Refugee Convention: someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”.²³ All signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its additional protocols are obliged to give protection to people who face serious threats to their lives or freedom if they are returned to their country of origin. However, many people who in theory *should* be considered refugees regularly fall outside existing categories – particularly when they are in transit – and can disappear from sight.²⁴ This often leads to them being treated as “illegals”, hence denying them access to basic rights and needs.

Under the international refugee regime signatory States are supposed to assure immediate and adequate protection and assistance to people that have fled their

20 Asylum statistics available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics (last visited 15 Dec. 2015).

21 B. Badie, R. Brauman, E. Decaux, G. Devin, & C. Wihtol de Wenden, *Migration: A New Perspective. Building Global Governance*, Paris, Science Po, 2009, available at: <http://historico.migrantologos.mx/textosmateriales/Global%20Governance%20%20migration%202010.pdf> (last visited 11 Mar. 2016).

22 A. Betts, *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013.

23 Art. 1A(2) of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 UNTS 137, 28 Jul. 1951 (entry into force: 22 Apr. 1954), as amended by the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 606 UNTS 267, 31 Jan. 1967 (entry into force: 4 Oct. 1967).

24 O. Bakewell, “Conceptualizing Displacement and Migration: Processes, Conditions, and Categories”, in K. Koser & S. Martin (eds.), *The Migration-Displacement Nexus: Patterns, Processes and Policies*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2011, 14–28.

places of origin. While also facilitating integration in the host society, voluntary repatriation to peoples home country once the circumstances permit, or resettlement in a third country. Today's global displacement crisis has proven that the contemporary refugee protection framework no longer offers such promise. Hospitality towards refugees, as occurred after the Second World War and even during the Cold War, has turned into hostility, for a variety of reasons, including economic crises, securitisation, the influence of political parties, and media that have worked towards making refugees a "threat". Over the past decades forced migrations have increasingly been dealt with using policies of containment rather than integration within host societies or resettlement. Repatriation has also become more difficult, as conflicts such as those in Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Sudan have become prolonged and protracted displacement has become the norm.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIANISM

The European migration crisis, and journeys like Ali Hassan's, produces numerous challenges for humanitarian action. Providing assistance to people on the move along transit routes, in urban hubs, and outside traditional camp settings is particularly difficult, mainly because information about needs, and about how and whether these groups of people can access assistance, is largely inadequate. MSF has a long history of working with refugees and internally displaced persons, ranging from the large refugee movements in South East Asia in the 1970s and Central America in the 1980s, to displacement in different parts of Africa and the Middle East. Until recently, however, MSF engagement with displaced populations has remained largely confined to legal and geographic boundaries defined by States – mainly in refugee camps and to a lesser extent in detention centres.

Contemporary displacement patterns show that the large majority of forced migrants exist in less formal arenas. They live in urban areas and move along routes that fall outside the scope of existing protection frameworks. For humanitarians, the most striking point is that all forced migrants endure considerable amounts of suffering. There is not only the suffering that arose from the conditions in their countries of origin, which originally forced them to flee, but there is also the suffering that arises as a consequence of their journey to safety. In that sense the very reason humanitarian organisations such as MSF are concerned about forced migrants is that the journey, in itself, is immensely dangerous: those who move within their own country will lose the protection of their communities, while not necessarily becoming safer from violence and hardship in their new location. Furthermore, crossing a border is very dangerous, with the risks of becoming lost in the forest, dying of dehydration in the desert, suffering the consequences of mistreatment, or drowning at sea. To make matters worse, a growing number of people find themselves blocked in transit countries for long periods, with little hope of continuing their journey or returning home. Access to these people is very difficult, since many seek to remain underground. They are afraid to be found by the authorities or criminal gangs, and are at a constant risk of being deported, detained, or abused.

There are many reasons why humanitarian interventions in camp settings can be more effective than those in more "open" settings (such as cities, along routes)

including the greater opportunities to count, assess, and provide for the people in need. It is significantly easier for humanitarian agencies to deliver care, organise logistics, and establish health surveillance systems for contained populations than it is for dispersed or mobile populations – not to mention migrants whose hubs and hiding places frequently change.²⁵ For that reason, MSF has had to adapt its operational models. Humanitarian crises linked to global displacement are not comparable to more humanitarian and medical crises like violence in Central African Republic, nutrition in South Sudan, or malaria in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Interventions with mobile populations are different while medical and humanitarian needs are bound to vary along peoples' routes to safety.

The differences flow right down to the basic aims. Humanitarian interventions with mobile populations are not primarily lifesaving; rather, they aim to restore dignity and stand in solidarity with those neglected by state policy. The need for advocacy is as essential as medical humanitarian relief. The core advocacy positions for MSF are: 1) to assert that the right to flee and seek asylum are fundamental and must be defended;²⁶ 2) to counter the policy of containing those affected by conflict and persecution; and 3) to provoke a change in policies and practices that ultimately cause harm. This is done by continuously highlighting the fate of exposed refugee populations in different parts of the world including in Africa, Europe, and South East Asia, and by putting silent and public pressure on governments and international organisations and other relevant actors to ensure that adequate protection and assistance is provided.

5. CONCLUSION

The story of Ali Hassan is a powerful narrative that highlights this need for persistent efforts to provoke positive change for forced migrants worldwide. It demonstrates the challenges of responding to mobile populations and the inadequacy of medical humanitarian assistance on its own. Taking advocacy positions like this is not without its challenges. Humanitarian responses to migration have led to numerous debates within MSF, and the articles in this special issue have endeavoured to show some of these debates in action. But engaging in these debates is extremely important, not just for MSF, but for humanitarians of all kinds – partly because suffering on migration routes is intensifying, but also because the political frameworks for offering protection to displaced people are failing to prevent this suffering. Since Ali Hassan made his journey in 2011–2012, the migration route through Turkey and the Balkans has become particularly high profile, with dramatic scenes from Greek islands, riots on the Serbian–Hungarian border, and temporary camps at Keleti railway station in Budapest appearing on television screens throughout the summer of 2015. But existing displacement protection frameworks are increasingly outdated, and

25 For more on MSF's work providing healthcare to mobile populations, see in this special issue A. Ponthieu & A. Incerti, "Continuity of Care for Migrant Populations in Southern Africa".

26 Based on the right to life, the right to leave your own country to seek protection and asylum, and the non-refoulement principle.

European systems such as the Dublin Regulation are no longer fit for these purposes.²⁷ They often serve current political interests, creating a system in which affected people are labelled in restrictive ways and left unable to claim asylum without taking very dangerous journeys. If aid agencies are going to develop an effective response to the vulnerable people at the centre of this situation, understanding the personal toll these journeys take on forced migrants, like Ali Hassan, is certainly an important place to start.

27 Betts, *Survival Migration*.