



Round Table: Responses by Jason Danforth

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Question 1: The rhetoric surrounding smugglers is packed with graphic images of violence and exploitation. What does your research indicate? Are smugglers really parasites profiting on human desperation, or, at the end of the day, do they provide a service to those on the move? How do we move the conversation forward?

I've found ample evidence of media outlets and European officials exaggerating the figure of the smuggler as a hyper-violent, hyper-masculine predator, often intentionally conflating human smuggling with human and/or drug trafficking. While I believe it is important to deconstruct the narrative of the smuggler as a monolithic figure, and to examine the important role that the smuggler plays in facilitating passage, I believe that there *is* still a significant body of evidence concerning the poor treatment of refugees by smugglers.



This evidence often comes in the form of first-hand narratives gathered by law enforcement officials interviewing migrants unfortunate enough to be apprehended, so it is worth contextualising these accounts. But the fact remains that, as the situation in Syria worsens, all parties become more desperate, and the revenue generated by smuggling can become an increasingly important source of income for territorial factions. This is likely also the case for migrants fleeing the worsening economic and security situations in countries like Afghanistan. But to focus on a Syrian example, the Free Syrian Army originally allowed for free passage (at least for certain demographics), but has since turned to charging smugglers and their clients. This increased pressure inevitably affects the most vulnerable refugees, and violence and exploitation are often the results.

Question 2: Media, academic and policy circles suggest that human smuggling is a gateway into human trafficking. Many times both terms are used interchangeably. Does your work provide any insight into these phenomena and what does that say about migration?

The intentional conflation of human smuggling with human and/or drug trafficking is certainly prevalent in European media and official statements, but my research indicates that this is a tactic of misdirection: by vilifying the smuggler, EU officials shift attention toward combating a threat and away from asking what could be done to alleviate the suffering of the refugees. The 'war on smuggling' re-contextualises the interchange between migrants and the EU, away from the direct question of need and response (refugee-centric), and towards a forceful confrontation with a faceless enemy (smuggler-centric).

The fact remains that almost any Syrian who can afford to be smuggled into Europe could afford a plane ticket to Brussels, so the notion that smugglers present the EU with an insurmountable challenge is wholly disingenuous. Furthermore, there is simply no evidence (that I have seen) which implies connections between smugglers and traffickers: the organisations, routes, and exchanges are different, and the chaos of the Syrian crisis (rapidly evolving, and highly dynamic) creates opportunities for loose networks of opportunists, not



organised mafias of experienced criminals. This does not mean that a (even more) prolonged war could not give rise to networks of operators involved in both smuggling and trafficking, but simply that the evidence currently speaks to the exact opposite of the dominant media narrative.

Question 3: Another myth connected to smuggling is the one pertaining to its organisation. We hear of smugglers organised into cartels, networks or transnational groups, but also of small-scale operations. What does your work suggest, and what does that say about irregular migration?

My research addresses this issue explicitly, and I found no evidence of large-scale, mafia-esque organisations. The reason for this is likely the extremely dynamic condition of the Syrian war. While small operators are able to tap into networks of connections (finding drivers, recruiters, financiers, material suppliers, etc.), it does not appear that the type of organisations associated with trafficking have attempted to involve themselves in human smuggling.

Smugglers in Syria have all but stopped crossing the borders themselves now that they are so heavily patrolled. Instead they act as facilitators, bringing refugees within close proximity of the crossing and providing them with the means to complete the journey (i.e. inflatable dinghies for the crossing from Turkey to Greece, or directing migrants towards the camps at the Jordanian border and notifying the army that their clients are not combatants). In fact, despite the media attention paid to the sea crossings between North Africa and Italy, or Turkey and Greece - a crossing which weighs heavily on the minds of the refugees as well - it is likely that Syria's intra-state boundaries are far more dangerous. Crossing from, for example, territories controlled by the Syrian Free Army into those of ISIS or those of the Assad regime requires intimate and up-to-date information reliant on a flexible network of local operators.

Ultimately, the current migration crisis is defined by instability and its adaptation to new circumstances, be they victories and defeats on the battle grounds of Syria; the influx of commodities such as rubber boats and life jackets; the policy



decisions of international governments; or even the presence of operators as seemingly innocuous as volunteer workers (it is reasonable to speculate that the presence of NGOs on the northern shore of Lesbos shifted the entire operation of Turkish smugglers north to the ports of Behram/Assos). These radical shifts in politics and territory favour small, opportunistic operators over larger, better structured, and better defined criminal organisations.

See more responses here:

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