

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### **Disability and forced migration: the experience of a Syrian Doctor**

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Over the years, migration from the South to Europe, across the Mediterranean, has been the prerogative of the young and healthy; those who can withstand the long and arduous journey. Smuggling networks were well established and offered their services to those who could afford the trip, monetarily and physically. For Syrians, this all changed with the mass exodus during the war. Entire communities were forced to leave their homes, regardless of class, age, gender or well-being. Those who in the past would not have been 'fit' to travel in more difficult conditions, were forced by the circumstances of war. This included people with disabilities, chronic illness, pregnant women and the elderly who all had to find a way to leave Syria.

My family and I had to flee Syria, first we went to Turkey, but I could not find work to support my family, and not much hope of long term security. I was promised employment in Libya, so we moved there in an effort to rebuild our lives. Eventually we saw that Libya was not safe for us either, stories of violence against women and children began to surface and I knew we could not stay there. Unfortunately the rest of the Arab countries were closed to us so we decided we had to take the chance and travel to Europe. There are many risks involved when making the journey to Europe, we had made good contacts, but some were not so good. Many more stories circulated about smugglers who would steal money and leave people stranded, others spoke of experiencing violence at the hands of smugglers, including beatings and rape. Many work for months and months to earn enough money to make the trip, whilst others are forced to remain in the camps because they are too poor to pay a smuggler to get them out.

During our journey we were among those who were struggling, one may say disabled by war. We travelled among many who were physically disabled, had chronic illnesses, elderly and many families with young children. For those of us with young families, our movements were limited, restricted by their needs as small children. This included having to carry them for long journeys, often through difficult terrain. It can be much easier for a single person, young and able-bodied to make this journey safely and without the added concerns. When we reached Zuwarah, the city where many refugees were gathering, we saw the extent of the tragedy and the disabling conditions.

We made our way to a location where the smugglers kept us all together in preparation for the journey across the Mediterranean. Over two hundred people were cramped in an unfinished apartment. There was only one lavatory for us all to use. We could not leave, some had to stay for over two weeks in dirty conditions. As time passed, and the number of people increased, one of the main problems was the lack of medication. There were people suffering from heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension, and supplies began to run out. We were locked in the flat like a small prison to keep us out of sight and under control of the

smugglers. I was not the only doctor present, the smugglers would go to get more medicine if we provided a list. Along with the other doctors among us and myself, we did our best to treat those who were afflicted in the best we could.

Ali, a man with us, had a deep wound in his leg that had become infected and inflamed, he couldn't walk and was in pain. The smugglers brought us some dressings and medicine for him but the real treatment he needed was not available. The smugglers did provide what they could for those who could afford to pay for their medications, but sometimes it wasn't enough. For example, there were those who had special dietary needs that could not be provided for. Others with high blood pressure went untreated. Supplies were limited; we only had enough food and water to keep us all alive.

Mobility was a large issue as well. Farid was a 50 year old man with polio and paralysis in one leg, just travelling the ten meters to the toilets was a tremendous. Both of these men had to rely on the care and support of their families and other young refugees to bring them meals and carry them whenever we were traveling. It is our duty and our culture to help one another, if someone is in need we would do anything we can to provide for them. Despite these challenges, somehow, between us we managed to support each other and survive the waiting. But this did not prepare us for what would come next.

### *Phase 1: The journey begins*

When we reached the zero hour everyone started to move. It was a long journey to the boat, we left the flat in closed trucks around 4pm with 30 or 40 people per truck. We were dropped off at the beach. The smugglers were generally kind, but sometimes they shouted or showed their guns to control the group, but they never used bad language or hurt anyone. I had heard stories of other smugglers who would take money from a whole family and leave them in the desert. We used the same smugglers that friends of mine had used to reach Europe, my friends had told me we would experience 24 hours of suffering across the Mediterranean, but that it was worth the suffering to reach Europe safely.

After sunset we walked across the sandy beach. For the physically impaired and chronically ill it was particularly exhausting. There were always one or two young people to carry Ali and Farid, the younger refugees would take it in turns to carry them, they were never without assistance. For families with multiple children it was the same, there was always someone who would help carry the children to the boat so that no one was left behind. 450 people walked on the sand that night, it was a critical time crossing in the open, and the smugglers became increasingly aggressive and impatient. It only took 20 minutes but we had to move quickly to avoid any authorities, and even though we were still on dry land we could not go back.

### *Phase 2: To the boat*

When we arrived at the sea we were told to leave all of our belongings on the beach, they said there was no room for bags or clothes on the boat, only people. We then had to wade 150 meters through the water to reach a rubber dingy that would take us to the larger fishing boat. 12 by 12 we struggled, many could not manage on their own and had to be carried on shoulders including children, the elderly and the physically disabled. The smugglers did their best to help us as well and to hurry along the process. It was a fight to reach the big wooden boat and when we finally did, people were sitting on top of each other restricted by the sheer number of bodies, but at this point, all we could do was wait for our trip North.

### *Phase 3: Sailing*

On the boat there were 3 decks. The bottom deck was a store where they would normally keep fuel and fish. I was told that the smell was so overpowering some people threw up as soon as they went down there. People were packed in all three decks, there was no room to move. Farid was on the top deck with me and my family, anything he needed, his family would get for him, and others around him made sure he had enough room to be comfortable. Ali was somewhere below, but from stories I heard he was treated the same. When it came to the sick and disabled, everyone took great care that they were looked after. For the first few hours, everything was smooth and we sailed through the night with enough food and water, but everything changed with the chase.

### *Phase 4: The chase*

After about two hours of sailing, a very fast boat approached out of the darkness, they directed a search light on us and demanded we go back to Zuwarah. The men in the boat said they were from the Libyan government, but they flew a Berber Amazigh flag, an independent ethnic group of North Africa. Typically the smugglers pay the authorities so that they will not interfere, but no one knew what to believe in this situation. The captain, a migrant himself called the smugglers and they told us to refuse them and not to turn back. It was then that the chase began. They shot in the air then down towards the store and eventually right on the top level. You can imagine how sounds of Kalashnikovs mixed with crying children pierced the night. When the chase ended, four hours later, three people had been shot, some of the doctors on board tried to administer first aid, but all we could do was stop the bleeding.

### *Phase 5: Damage*

When the sun rose that morning we all knew that the boat was badly damaged from the gunshots and water began to seep in through the holes. Conditions worsened by the hour. On the boat there were two pumps used to remove the water, and at 11am the first broke down and the second at 4pm. We began calling the Italians and the Maltese search and rescue when

the first one broke using a satellite phone, but it was still hours before they could reach us. Provisions began to run out and the three diabetics suffered greatly with dehydration and heat exhaustion from hours at sea. By midday the water was completely gone, it was so hot and nowhere to hide from the sun that one man became very sick from diabetic symptoms: he was dying.

I saw so much fear in the eyes of the most vulnerable you could see that they had a sense of helplessness and burden on the others. The chronically ill were only getting worse, the children were so scared, and just 30 minutes before the boat began to sink, two women began to go into labour. With the help of a few female doctors and a small cloth around her for privacy, the first woman gave birth to a boy. She named him Mabrook, which in Arabic means 'Congratulations' and 'Lucky'. There was excitement, and people began to give the mother any extra baby clothes they had. We took it as a good sign that maybe we would survive. The other woman was still in labour when the boat began to sink.

#### *Phase 6: Drowning*

People were desperately using their hands to get the water out as it filled the boat but it was useless. We began to tip from one side to the other, we would run back and forth across the boat to try and steady it. At this point I had six children I was looking after, my friends had stayed below with the rest of their families, but by now nowhere was safe. Farid and the others who were not mobile, by this time, just watched and waited for their destiny. After just five minutes the boat capsized, bodies were thrown in every direction, many could not escape the lower decks before the boat completely sank out of view. Entire families, generations all traveling together, were lost that day.

In the water there were more and more bodies everywhere. I had been thrown overboard and had found a piece of wood to hold onto. Many died in the water, children, elderly, and the sick in particular could not cope with the overwhelmingly strenuous situation and families could no longer protect each other as most had been separated. I saw Ali and Farid in the water – both managed to survive until we were rescued. Just after the boat sank, we heard the first rescue helicopters. I was in the water for two hours as the women and children were being rescued first. Whilst we waited to be saved, the Maltese search and rescue threw us life jackets to try to keep us alive. Finally I was picked up by the Maltese, but it was still ten more hours until we reached Malta. They gave us food and water and dry clothes, but could not tell us if our families had survived or not. When we arrived I was taken to the police station for finger printing and a medical check-up; the sick including Farid were taken to the hospital and the rest of us to detention. I later saw Ali on a news program in Italy, whilst Farid lost two of his daughters on that day. He now lives in Northern Europe.

The disabled were vulnerable during every step of the journey. They had no choice but to leave under horrible conditions and uncertainty and their only hope was to reach a safer place. Disabled people and their families are affected more during times of war because they have less options for escape. For those who have been left at home alone in the danger, along

with those who may have made the hard journey to “safety”, but lost their caregivers on the way, urgent assistance is needed to help them survive.

**Dr. Ayman** is a surgeon. He fled the war in Syria, and, alongside many thousands of refugees, made the arduous journey across the Mediterranean. He lost his wife and daughter at sea. He now lives and works in Malta. This is a short first hand narrative. For more on his story see: <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20140601/local/-I-lost-my-wife-and-little-girl-but-at-least-found-Malta-.521361>