



**Save the Children**

Italia ONLUS



**“THE BOAT IS SAFE  
AND OTHER LIES”:**  
WHY SYRIAN FAMILIES  
ARE RISKING EVERYTHING  
TO REACH EUROPE

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A Syrian mother waits to receive advice  
at a daycare centre in a reception centre  
for migrants in Milan, Italy

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## INTRODUCTION

The journey from Syria to Italy is a dangerous and an expensive one. Nearly all the families who arrived in 2013 and 2014 belonged to the Syrian middle class and came by boat, mostly through the help and at the mercy of people smugglers.

In this report, families describe the terrible situations they left behind in Syria, as well as the dangers, discrimination, and extreme conditions they went through during the long journey to Italy. It highlights the hopes and fears faced by thousands of ordinary parents who were forced to make perilous journeys in search of safety and security for their children.

Save the Children met these families when they first arrived in Sicily, as they disembarked from Italian navy ships that had rescued them at sea and as they sought shelter in the numerous reception centres set up for migrants who had survived the crossing. Save the Children also met families in Milan, where it provides orientation and support to children and families in transit centres or, sometimes, sleeping rough.

This report looks first at the numbers of Syrian families migrating across the Mediterranean, how this trend became significant, and how it continues to grow. It considers the main factors distinguishing Syrians from other groups of migrants attempting this route, as well as the current and dire humanitarian situation in Syria, which has driven millions to seek safety and sanctuary elsewhere. Aside from highlighting the dangers and difficulties associated with such journeys, it shows how the end goal for the majority is to reach other EU countries, namely to reunite with family members and other loved ones. The largest part of this report however focuses on families' stories, which capture the risks and desperate measures families feel obliged to take in order to ensure a better life and future for their children.

## 1. SYRIANS ARRIVING BY SEA: LOOKING BEYOND THE NUMBERS<sup>1</sup>

Although the crisis in Syria started in March 2011, it was not until 2013 that Syrians started to arrive in Italy in large numbers, attempting the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea aboard run-down and rickety boats: putting their children and their own lives in peril to reach the safety of Europe.

In 2012, Syrian refugees represented only around 4.5% of all migrants arriving to Italy by sea (i.e. 582 out of 13,267 people)<sup>2</sup>. These Syrians were mostly adults, and of the 120 children amongst them, roughly half (56) were accompanied by their parents, while the other half (64) were children who were travelling on their own. Nonetheless, Syrian children still accounted for a fifth of all migrant children travelling with one or two parents, illustrating how this trend was relatively uncommon. The majority of other migrant children travelled on their own, or with other minors (indeed, unaccompanied Syrian minors represented just 3.5% of the total number of unaccompanied migrant minors attempting this crossing). The main countries of origin for the 1,764 other unaccompanied children that year were Afghanistan, Somalia and Egypt<sup>3</sup>.

A sudden upsurge in Syrian arrivals occurred in July 2013, when more Syrians (689) came to Italy by sea than had arrived during the whole of 2012. Amongst them were 123 women and 230 children. This time, most of these Syrian children (149) were unaccompanied<sup>4</sup>.

This trend continued for several months, with the highest increase of Syrian arrivals occurring between August and October 2013. During these three months, 9,365 Syrian migrants disembarked on the Italian coasts, of whom 1,405 were children. September 2013 saw the highest peak of Syrians arriving, with 4,105 new arrivals, including 805 women and 1,405 children. That month, Syrian nationals represented almost half of the total number (8,859) of migrants who arrived by sea. Syrian children accounted for approximately 92% of all children who were accompanied by their families (884 out of 962), while unaccompanied Syrian children represented just over half of the total number of unaccompanied children (521 out of 996)<sup>5</sup>.

The number of Syrians arriving by sea decreased after October 2013, a month marked by two major tragedies at sea. The boat which capsized on the 11<sup>th</sup> October was transporting hundreds of Syrian migrants, including many families and children (see box below).

Between November 2013 to March 2014, an average of 385 new Syrian migrants arrived on the Italian coasts every month<sup>6</sup>.

### **The tragedies at sea and Italy’s response: Operation Mare Nostrum**

2013 was marked by several sea disasters involving migrants trying to reach Europe.

**Catania, 10 August:** six Egyptians, including two boys and four adults, drowned while trying to reach the shore at a distance of just 15 metres, after the fishing boat they were travelling on with 120 other migrants, ran aground.

**Scicli, Ragusa province, 30 September:** 13 out of 200 Eritreans onboard died before reaching the coast after being forced to throw themselves overboard by the smugglers.

**Lampedusa, 3 October:** 366 people died, at least 15 of whom were children, all of them from Eritrea, following a dramatic accident that occurred just a few miles from the shore. There were 155 survivors, 41 of whom were unaccompanied minors.

**Between Malta and Lampedusa, 11 October:** another terrible accident occurred involving a boat carrying mostly Syrian refugees, 400 according to the accounts of some survivors. The survivors described how, shortly after leaving the Libyan coast, the Libyan coastguard shot at them, injuring 3 people and damaging the vessel. It is believed that the boat capsized due to the migrants’ reaction when the boat came to a sudden and unexplained halt. 212 people survived, 146 of whom were brought to Malta, (21 children), 57 to Porto Empedocle (10 were minors travelling with their parents, while six were children who were thought to be orphans at the time - their parents were identified in Malta a few days later) and nine to Lampedusa (of whom two were children travelling with their parents).

During a government meeting held on October 14, it was announced that in order to prevent other tragedies from occurring, the Italian Navy would launch a humanitarian operation called “Operation Mare Nostrum”. The operation commenced on the 18<sup>th</sup> October.

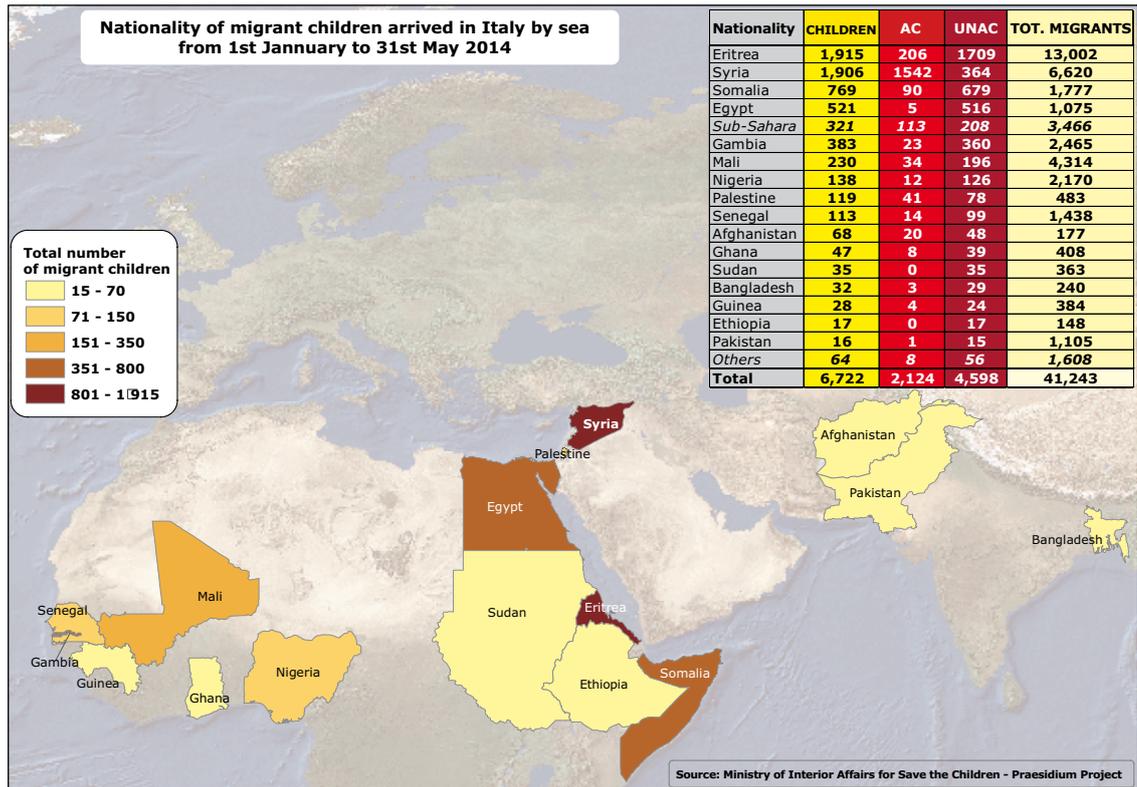
Despite the efforts made during rescue operations, another accident occurred on **12 May at 40 miles from off the Libyan coast:** 206 migrants were rescued by the Italian Navy and brought to Catania together with the bodies of three men, twelve women, a baby girl, and another very young child.

Arrivals by sea have increased again since April 2014, and this upward trend looks set to continue during the summer. In April alone, 15,682 migrants were rescued off Italian coasts as part of Operation Mare Nostrum, including 1,592 women and 2,286 children (including 765 children who were travelling with their families, and 1,521 unaccompanied minors).

About 15% (2,348) were Syrian, including 422 women (over a quarter of all women migrants) and 629 children (over a quarter of all child migrants). Two thirds of the children (424) travelled with their families, while 225 were unaccompanied minors<sup>7</sup>.

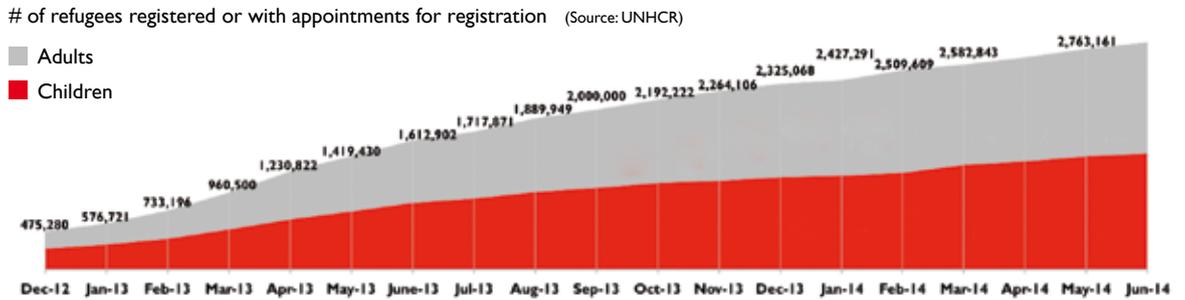
The total number of migrants rescued from 1 January to 31 May 2014 was 41,243, which is almost equivalent to the total number of migrants who arrived in Italy in 2013. Some 6,620 came from Syria, which is only preceded by Eritrea, with 13,002 migrants, as the main country of origin for those arriving by sea. However, Syria has the highest numbers of children travelling in family groups; 1,542 out of 2,124<sup>8</sup>.

Since May, the number of children (including very young children) undertaking this perilous journey has increased. This is for instance illustrated by a rescue operation by the Italian Navy on May 24<sup>th</sup>, when 488 migrants taken aboard included 141 Syrian children accompanied by one or both parents<sup>9</sup>.

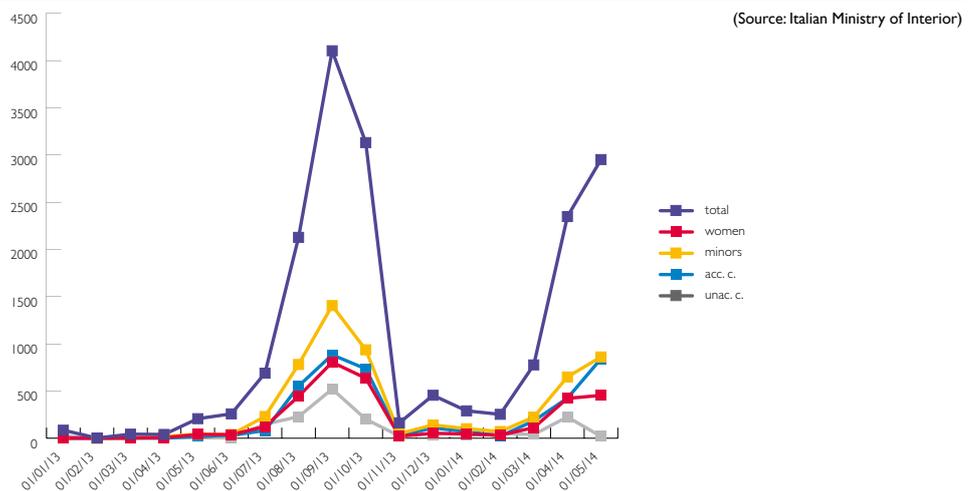


Graph 1 shows the increasing number of Syrian refugees registered or with appointments for registration by UNHCR in the Middle East region (countries neighbouring Syria and Egypt) between December 2012 and June 2014<sup>10</sup>. Graph 2 shows the increasing number of Syrian migrants arriving in Italy between January 2013 and May 2014, with peaks in September 2013 and between April and May 2014<sup>11</sup>.

Graph. 1 - Regional refugee stats - dec. 2012 / june 2014



Graph. 2 - Number of Syrian migrants arriving in Italy - January 2013 - May 2014



## 2. PERILOUS JOURNEYS - THE ROUTES FAMILIES TAKE TO GET FROM SYRIA TO ITALY

The stories of children on the move whom Save the Children met in coastal areas or Italian cities highlight the extremely difficult living conditions in their country of origin, as well as the arduous and often traumatic journeys they survived to reach Europe. These often include violence, abuse, discrimination, and the death of parents or friends when crossing the desert and at sea. Below are some of the facts and trends that come to light in the stories told by Syrians, one of the main groups of migrants arriving by sea in 2013 and 2014.

### 2.1 *The situation in Syria and what families leave behind*

The arrival of Syrian refugees in Italy is a symptom of an armed conflict that has been going on for over three years and which has virtually destroyed all of Syria. The death toll from the armed fighting in Syria is estimated at approximately 100,000<sup>12</sup>, including 10,000 children<sup>13</sup>. The conflict has also "trapped" an entire generation of children, as an estimated 4.3 million children are living in conditions of desperate need inside Syria<sup>14</sup>. Certain towns and villages have been under siege for months. There is a lack of food. The health system is on the verge of collapse with serious consequences for everyone, but especially the most vulnerable. Children suffer from malnutrition and many have had limbs amputated due to the lack of available healthcare (60% of hospitals have been damaged or destroyed, nearly half the total number of doctors have fled the country, very few of the remaining health workers are qualified doctors able to deal with emergencies and there are not even enough ambulances). They are exposed to epidemics including polio, which has resurfaced in Syria after having been eradicated in the country in 1995. This is due to a drastic decline in vaccine cover - it has dropped from 91% at the start of the conflict to the current 68%<sup>15</sup>. Save the Children experiences great difficulty accessing those in need, and more than three months on from UN Security Council resolution 2139 (which was supposed to facilitate access of humanitarian aid in Syria), the situation has not changed at all. Aid is unable to reach large areas where conflict is rife - and where there are huge needs - and the few routes that can be used are complicated by the numerous road blocks set up.

The humanitarian emergency in Syria has had serious implications for the entire region. Almost 2,870,496 Syrians have left the country and 1,448,000 of them are children. It is an ongoing exodus. In 2013, approximately 4,700 new refugees left Syria every day to go to neighbouring countries where they live in camps or in host communities. According to the most recent figures, there are 1,100,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon (which represents almost a quarter of Lebanon's own population), 600,000 in Jordan, 225,000 in Iraq and 138,000 in Egypt<sup>16</sup>.

### 2.2 *Journeys from Syria to Italy*

Syrians fleeing the crisis in their country constitute one of the main groups of migrants entering Italy. In many cases they arrived in Lebanon first and then travelled by plane to Egypt where they lived for weeks or months in the suburbs of Cairo and Alexandria, in precarious conditions that worsened due to the political instability in Egypt. In some cases they departed for Italy directly from Egypt. In others, they crossed over the border into Libya. Most Syrians in Libya can be found in the city of Benghazi where, according to their accounts, the situation has worsened in recent months, to the extent that Syrians no longer feel free to walk in the streets and children cannot attend schools.

The only real choice families felt they had was to place themselves at the mercy of people smugglers in order to reach Italy and Europe, knowing that they faced the risks of drowning at sea: "But it was still better than living in that hell" one told us, a sentiment echoed by many others.

According to Syrian migrants who landed in Italy, the journey by sea costs between 1,500 and 3,000 US dollars and can last up to 10-15 days during which time they don't know exactly where they are and where they are headed, and have just a little food and water available.

### 3. ARRIVING IN ITALY

In 2013, the main points of arrival in Italy for Syrians were Lampedusa and the province of Siracusa in Sicily. Migrants arrived on rundown boats.

Arrivals of Syrians in Calabria mainly concerned the province of Reggio Calabria and, especially, the town and Commune of Roccella Ionica. Migrants found temporary shelter in municipal gyms and schools in the location where they landed or where they were found by the Authorities.

At the time of writing, no migrants were known to arrive directly on the Italian coasts in 2014. All migrants were rescued as part of the Operation Mare Nostrum and brought mainly to the Augusta Port (SR). When the number of arrivals started to increase in April and May, the locations of Pozzallo (RG), Porto Empedocle (AG) and Catania were also involved in the operations. According to Save the Children, the first reception services provided to migrants, as well as identification and referral procedures, vary considerably from one area to the other.

#### **Save the Children action on the Southern Coasts – Praesidium Project**

Since May 2008, Save the Children has been providing services to new migrants arriving on the Southern coasts of Lampedusa, Sicily, Puglia and Calabria, working in partnership with UNHCR, IOM and the Italian Red Cross as part of the Praesidium Project. This project is coordinated by the Ministry of Interior-Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration, with the support of the European Union. The project, through a multi-agency approach, aims to strengthen institutional capacity to manage migration flows by sea, through monitoring reception conditions, as well as ensuring that procedures are respected and migrants receive legal assistance through cultural mediators and legal consultants. Save the Children also makes regular visits to care facilities for unaccompanied children and to the Centres for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (CARA) where children travelling with their families are transferred.

For further information, go to: "Praesidium Project: Recommendations and good practices in the management of mixed migratory flows by sea" - [www.savethechildren.it/pubblicazioni](http://www.savethechildren.it/pubblicazioni)

## 4. HEADING TOWARDS NORTHERN EUROPE

The majority of Syrians (including unaccompanied and accompanied children), Eritreans, Somalis and Afghans, do not want to stay in Italy, but wish to continue their journey towards Northern European countries (most often to Sweden, Norway, Germany and Switzerland) where other family members and friends are already living. As soon as they arrive in Italy, many Syrians try to leave coastal areas, and most do not end up providing photo records and fingerprints.

They tend to leave the reception centres they are transferred to as soon as possible, possibly without being identified by the Italian authorities. This is because they fear they will be sent back to Italy, their first country of entry in the EU, when they reach their target European country, as agreed through the Dublin Regulation (which calls for asylum seekers to request refugee status in the first member state they enter). It is often impossible for migrants registered in Italy to be able to continue their journey, reach their destination and obtain protection in the countries in question due to the application or interpretation of EU legislation. For this reason they refuse to be fingerprinted in Italy and try to leave the country as soon as they can.

In most cases, they travel from Sicily to Milan by train, where they receive assistance in reception centres run by the Municipality, and from there they continue their journey towards the North, either by train or through people smugglers or traffickers.

### **Save the Children action in Milan**

In Milan, Save the Children has opened the "CivicoZero" day centre at the beginning of 2014 with the aim of providing support and follow-up to unaccompanied children in the city. Given the regular flow of Syrians transiting through Milan, the centre also provides support to Syrian families. In the Centre and at Milan's Central Station, Save the Children, in cooperation with grassroots organisations, provides legal support, cultural mediation and distributes backpacks with essential hygiene items.



In Messina, Sicily, a group of Syrians wait for a train that will take them to Catania and then onto Milan in Northern Italy.

## 5. STORIES OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Dana, 8, disembarks at the port of Catania in Sicily with a Barbie backpack on one arm and her brother, Amir, on the other. Their parents are worried about the bad cough they both have, but the children only have eyes for the bulldozers that are gathering up old junk from the quay.

At Termini Station, in Rome, Elin has just tasted pizza for the first time in her life. She is 16 months old and full of admiration for her brother, Hammudi, who at the grand old age of two and a half, is telling her the right way to eat it. For Nadia, 15, Milan is synonymous with safety. At long last she is thousands of kilometres away from the obsessive attentions and threats of a violent man she met in Libya. Nadia is one of thousands of Syrian minors to have passed through Italy, coming from Libya, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, and on their way to countries such as Sweden, Germany, Denmark and the United Kingdom. From Catania to Milan, via Rome, Save the Children collected the testimonies of Syrian families who arrived in Italy by boat in recent months. We spent time with them in order to understand who they were, what they were fleeing from and where they were headed to now.

Some of the families we met had only just arrived in Italy after entrusting human smugglers with their lives, while others had returned to Italy after being sent back by other European countries, such as Sweden, Denmark and Austria. European regulations are clear in this regard: if Italy is your first country of entry into the European Union, you must make your asylum claim there. Italy for its part is obliged to fingerprint incoming migrants and, where relevant, to consider their rights and applications for asylum. Attracted by higher standards of living in North European countries and by the presence of relatives and friends who have already settled there, some Syrians have attempted to cross borders clandestinely in order to reach countries where they believe asylum seekers are guaranteed food, housing, professional training, a subsistence wage and, above all, access to work and bilingual schooling for children. In a single word: dignity.



Syrian children at a reception centre for migrants that has been set up in a former elementary school in Milan, Italy.

## MONZER IS ON HIS WAY BACK TO LIBYA: "MY SISTER IS STILL IN SYRIA AND IS MALNOURISHED, I'M WORKING SO SHE HAS SOMETHING TO EAT"

"The whole world saw the images of our children, racked by convulsions following the attacks. Today, those children, the ones who survived, include my siblings Fahed, 8, and Rama, 12. All I think about is work in order to give them something to eat, to get them out of that hell".

We meet Monzer, 24, blond and clean-shaven, holding his red case, in front of the main gate of the reception centre in Milan. He is originally from Damascus, from an area that has been heavily shelled. "When I hear my sister on the phone, she talks like an adult, she tells me they're malnourished, that they eat what they manage to find, grass and also boiled roots. The women who try to go outside risk being raped by armed men and that's why Rama no longer sets foot outside of the home. When I hear her talk about these things, I get so angry, I'd like to go back to Syria right now in order to protect her".

Monzer feels a great sense of powerlessness. "Six months on from that terrible attack which all the TV news programmes worldwide talked about, children are no longer dying due to the lethal gases, but of cold and hunger because there's no electricity to heat the homes and no food to offer them sufficient nourishment. However, this isn't important for anyone anymore. So I have to look after my family. I cross borders illegally, I do underpaid jobs, today I'm on my way back to Libya, but I'll try again to get back to Europe. I've too many good reasons to do so".

Monzer, who arrived in Pozzallo, Sicily, seven months ago, gave his fingerprints, even if he would have preferred not to. After 2 weeks in Sicily, he moved on to Milan where he slept rough for the first week at the Central Station. Then he went to Malmo in Sweden where he stayed for three months before being sent back to Italy. "Now, I've decided to go back to Libya", he explains, "it's where my brother-in-law, who lent me 7,000 Euros to come to Europe, lives. That's a lot of money and I want to work there to pay him back and I'd also like to earn some money to send back home. I'd never have imagined ending up poor. My father had an electrical appliance shop in Syria. Today, in my neighbourhood [in Syria], not only are there no shops, but there's no food, water, electricity, or even bread. They take it in turns to buy flour. On some days a kilo of rice can cost up to 100 dollars. When you try to complain, they tell you it's because of the cost of petrol. My family's home is surrounded, that's why my parents and siblings weren't able to flee. I'm outside of the siege and it's my duty to help them".

Monzer is, however, an exception. Very few people want to go back to Libya. Most of the Syrians we met in Milan have terrible memories of the time they spent there.



Monzer, 24, from Damascus, is returning to Libya after a brief stay in Italy.

## IN LIBYA, LIVING AMIDST VIOLENCE AND ENDURING CHILD LABOUR

Hamid was born 15 years ago in a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. He arrived in Italy this year, but "I left Syria a year and a half ago", he tells us, "when clashes started among various groups in our neighbourhood and we were also being shelled. So my mother, my younger brother and I went to Lebanon where we lived in a residence, but it was really too expensive. Everything is expensive in Lebanon: food, water, clothes, mobile top-ups. That's why we decided to move to Libya".

There are four people in Hamid's family: "my mother, my brother, Salim 13, and I. But my father stayed with his father, my granddad, who is too old and sick to travel. We all lived together, with my granddad and other aunts and uncles who have all left. That's why my father stayed with him, so as not to leave him completely on his own". The area where Hamid's house is located is isolated, the only way to have any news of relatives is to send an acquaintance every now and then to see how they are. "We lived in Libya, in Brega, for a year and two months. In the beginning I went to school, my mother didn't work, but life was too expensive, that's why I started to work. I worked as a manual worker, blacksmith, painter, or work at making aluminium doors and fixtures".

These days, there is a very high prevalence of underage Syrian workers in Libya. "There were other Syrian children working with me in the construction trade. Many work in shops. The pay is weekly and you can just about manage to eat with the money they give you. We used the money to buy the bare necessities and that's all".

Syrians find work by word of mouth "all you need is to know some Libyans who put you in touch with other Libyans who are looking for workers".

However, at a certain point, the insecurity of this existence in Libya became unbearable for Hamid. "I received death threats, I was robbed, and also stabbed". He shows us his wounds in his stomach area. "These things are happening more and more often, at night-time, when you can't see anything and don't recognise your attackers. I think they are just everyday criminals, without any political connotation. After the attack two months ago, my mother got afraid and decided to leave".

In order to organise the trip, "we got in touch with another Syrian family living in Brega. The head of the family had contacts with the traffickers that had already brought other Syrians to Europe. We followed him. We arrived in Tripoli from Brega where we slept in a house for a couple of days while waiting to leave".

Hamid knew about the risk of the boat capsizing. "We used to watch the TV, we knew we were risking our lives. I wasn't concerned for myself, but for my mother and my younger brother. Then, however, I got afraid as well when I went on board". Nobody tried to reassure us.

"We never saw the people smuggler. He sent people, smugglers, who only gave us information about where and when we had to meet. They gave us a lifejacket, cheese sandwiches, water. They didn't tell us what we had to do. We left during the night. There were no captains for the boat. They gave instructions about how to steer the boat, and two volunteers tried their best, but the boat's engine was already damaged before we left. Just a few hours later, the engine broke down and we started to take in water. I was really afraid I was going to drown".

In order to prevent the boat from sinking, the people onboard formed a human chain and threw the water back overboard with buckets, until the Italian coastguard arrived and rescued them.

"They brought us to Italy. I didn't know too much about this country, I only knew that we would be brought safely to Sicily. They told us that we would have a place where we could rest and recover. I never thought about staying here. To be honest, I'd never really thought of leaving Syria". Hamid misses his old neighbourhood a lot, his videogames, his friends... And more than anything, his father.

Fully aware of the risks of travelling clandestinely, Hamid and his mother had applied for a Danish visa from the Danish embassy in Egypt, but their application had been refused. Despite this, they remained determined to go to Denmark, as this is where their maternal aunts and uncles currently live. "As soon as I get to Copenhagen, I'll try to request family reunification with my father. I'm going to enrol at school where I hope to make new friends".

On the same boat as Hamid and now in the same room as him, there is a slender, lively girl with pale skin and deep green eyes. She was repeatedly molested by a neighbour when in Libya.



Hamid, 15, from Damascus, with his mother at a reception centre for migrants in Milan.

## NADIA'S ESCAPE FROM ABUSE BY A VIOLENT MAN

Nadia, 15, is originally from Homs, a city that has paid a high price in terms of victims during the three-year war. "We left Homs two and a half years ago - she says while nervously playing with her hands - we went to Damascus where we stayed for two months, then to Cairo in Egypt for another two months, but we were in danger there too so we moved on to Libya. We travelled as a group of five: mum, dad, and two younger brothers aged 4 and 10". Her last memory of Homs is her home: "my room, with all my posters, clothes, dolls from when I was a kid, before the roof collapsed. A rocket destroyed our apartment".

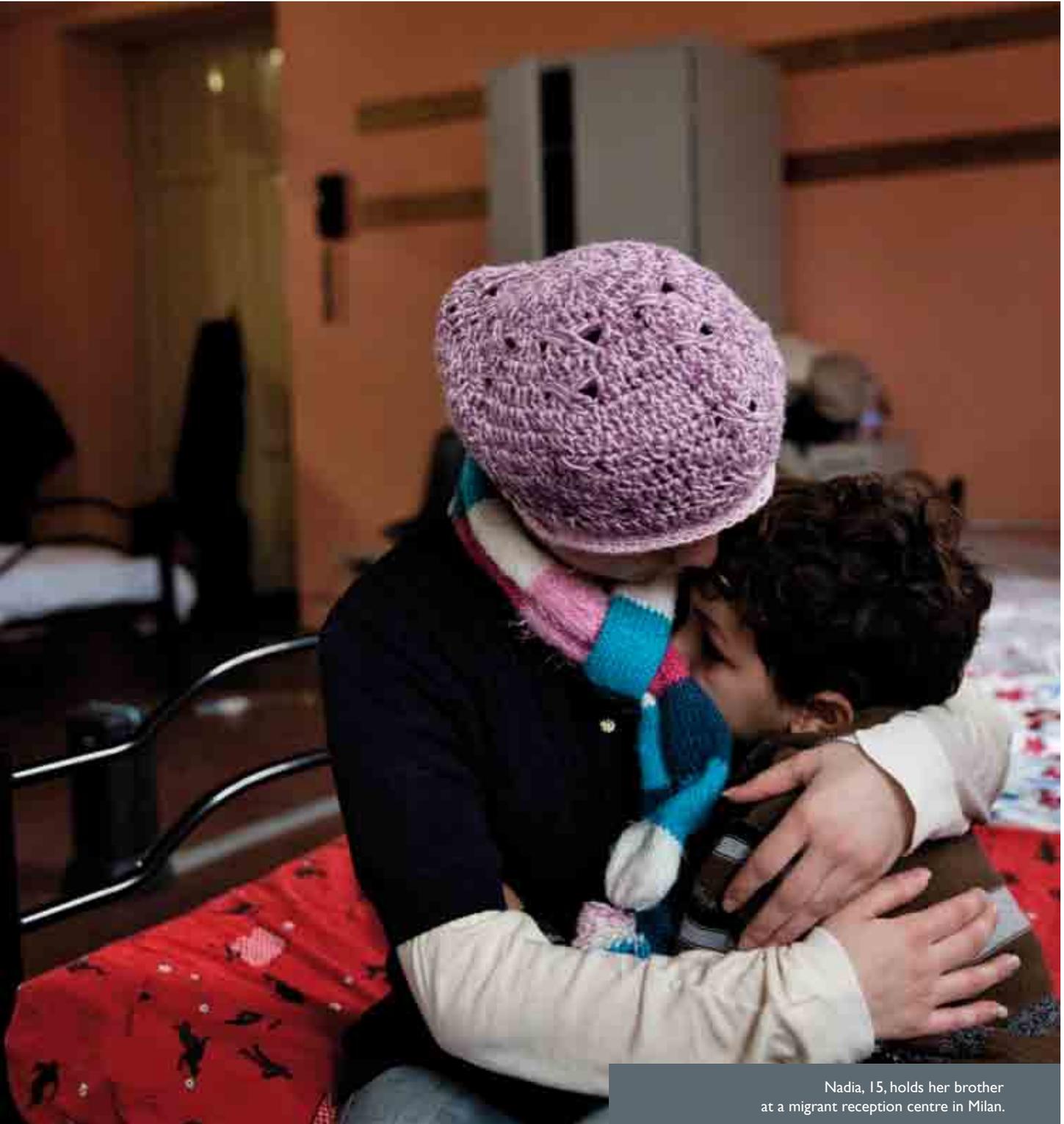
Nadia completed the third year of high school in Libya, but she would like to continue her education, go to university, study law and become a lawyer. She could have done that in Libya if only this had been possible.

"Whenever people found out we were Syrian, they attacked us verbally or using weapons. They told us to go back to our country. In particular, there was a man, a neighbour, who wanted to marry me. I wasn't interested and neither were my parents obviously. So he started to threaten my family, saying he would kill us all if we didn't accept his proposal. There are many young Syrian girls who were in this position. Not just Syrians obviously, but we are particularly affected because many of us have light skin and eyes, a rarity which is, disgustingly, appreciated by many men. There are other girls who, just like me, came away with their families".

As for the journey, explains Mervat, Nadia's mother, a very well-dressed woman in her forties, they decided to leave as part of a group with other families, paying 1,500 US dollars per person. "The journey was a nightmare, Mervat confesses. First they piled us all onto a dinghy, and then we got onto a boat that didn't work. After he brought us to the boat, the man left us and didn't return. Three Syrian young men tried to get it to work. We were 150 onboard, and the boat then started to take in water. I thought everything was OK, even when the water was lapping around my ankles. But then I saw the level rising and before I knew it my jeans were soaked. I saw that the Libyans had gone back to the shore, and I thought they'd left us there to die. My fear wasn't just for my own children. The boat was full of kids who were asking their parents "Are we going to die?". We tried to reassure them by saying that the Italians would arrive very soon to save us. And then they really did arrive." "We'd been trying to scoop the water out of the boat..." Mervat continued, imitating these actions. "But more and more water just kept coming in". Mervat suddenly goes quiet, apparently overcome with anguish when recalling the journey. Her youngest son, Anas, 4, however, seems to have put it all behind him. He's sitting on the bed, eating a banana, in clean and dry clothes. Later in the day, Anas will join Save the Children's dedicated play area inside the reception centre. Nadia picks him up with motherly care. He seems to adore his older sister. His 10-year old brother, Humam, proceeds to tease him. "My brothers also asked mum if we were about to die", explains Nadia, filling in her mother's silence. "After the Italian rescue boat arrived, we were brought to Sicily, and then onto a reception centre in Siracusa where we were able to rest. They asked us if we could give our fingerprints, for identification and registration purposes, they said, but this was taking time and we said we were tired and wet. They let us rest, and then we travelled from Catania to Rome by plane." They took us to another reception centre in Rome, but then we left and ended up in Milan. We hoped that from there, we would find a way to get to Denmark, where my aunt lives".

"As soon as I get there, my brother Human and I are going to enroll in school", Nadia said.

Nadia is the oldest of her siblings, the only one who will probably never manage to leave behind the nostalgia she feels inside. "I'll always miss Homs. I had a simple, good life there. I went to school and I had friends I could confide in. We had so many dreams we wanted to realise in Syria. There, we had all we needed to be happy".



Nadia, 15, holds her brother at a migrant reception centre in Milan.

## WHAT THE SMUGGLERS PROMISED THE MOTHERS: YOU WILL TRAVEL IN COMFORTABLE BOATS WITH KITCHENS, BATHROOMS AND TOYS FOR CHILDREN

"They told us the journey would be very comfortable, that there would be bathrooms and kitchens onboard, as well as powdered milk for the children", says Olfat, 40, and mother of four boys aged 18, 14, 6 and three. "But then they made us get onto an old boat, which had no shelter". Olfat is speaking to us outside the room she was assigned at the reception centre in Milan. She drinks a cup of tea and adjusts her hair under her hijab before she feels ready to tell us about "the worst journey of her life".

"As we got onboard the boat, the smugglers pushed some of my children, who fell into the water and got wet. I don't know why they did this, maybe they wanted to scare us. They wanted us to do everything they told us to. We spent eight long hours waiting to be rescued by the Italian authorities. Eight hours during which time over 40 children were crying and vomiting. They were numb with cold because of their wet clothes. Us mothers were unable to make them feel warm. These are the times when a mother feels useless and starts to curse. We started to pray, all together".

Olfat and her family's journey started in Zwara port in Libya, and they arrived in Sicily with 200 other Syrian migrants on the 4th January of this year. "We had nothing to eat during the journey, the smugglers told us not to bring any food because they would provide this, and this would weigh down the boat. But then, they only gave us fruit juice".

There was no bathroom onboard, which was very difficult for the women. "The men could relieve themselves standing up, but the women, we couldn't get undressed, we had to go in our clothes".

The group spent forty hours at sea before the Italian rescue services showed up. "I'm grateful to Italy", says Olfat, who speaks fluent English. In another life, before she left Syria, she taught the language of Shakespeare.

"When we arrived, Fadi, my youngest son, had a temperature of 39.5. I spent two days anguishing about his health". Olfat touches her son's forehead as if instinctively. "He was in a very bad way, but then an Italian doctor saw him and gave him antibiotics". His condition improved. "I asked for extra antibiotics, in case I needed them in the future", says Olfat. "We'll leave for Norway soon, to stay with my brother who's lived there for twenty years". Fadi's brothers play with him, showering him with kisses. Fadi's father, Olfat's husband, used to work as a biologist in an analysis laboratory in a hospital in Latakia. "We fled because my husband helped anyone who was injured in the fighting. He didn't care about their political allegiance. He did his best to save and help those who were brought to him". Until one day our family was threatened because of this. "We had to escape, we didn't have any other choice". Olfat tried to get to Norway through legal channels but was asked for an individual guarantee fund of 10,000 Euros to put into a bank account. "But this sum of money would allow all six of us to travel", she says.

Olfat gives us a handwritten letter in Arabic, with the following moving content:

*"I will try to sum up our story, that of Syrian refugees, in just a few words, even if these may not be enough. Our story started with the word "freedom". However, this word did not generate the desired effect among the population, but destroyed homes and cities. And we refugees do not know where we are headed and where we will end up. This word "freedom" led to naked, hungry children. The story is one of control, a game for "seats of power", without consideration for the lives of common people. We left Syria, fleeing from those who only wanted to hold onto power and from those who challenge this power by going into neighbourhoods and remaining there until they have been reduced to a pile of rubble.*

*My story is that of all Syrian refugees who have had to leave their country and origins to end up living amidst the unknown. While the blind world turns away to avoid seeing our suffering".*

Like Olfat, many parents were promised comfortable journeys for their children, as Hasan can testify.

## HAMMUDI, TWO AND A HALF YEARS OLD, ELIN, 16 MONTHS OLD, SEPARATED FROM THEIR FATHER ON THE BOAT

"I met with a people smuggler at his home, where he invited me to drink tea together with his family. He assured me that the journey from Libya to Italy would be a safe one. The boat was so new his children would have travelled on it as well".

Hassan, 28, originally from Damascus, tells of the long odyssey he, his wife Dalal, 20, and his two children, Hammudi, two and a half, and Elin, 16 months, had to face. "When we arrived at the beach near Tripoli port, the smugglers made us walk quickly for 20 minutes despite the fact that we were many families, all laden down with cases and crying children.

They pushed me onto the boat even though I was holding my son, while my wife was holding my young daughter. While getting onto the boat, they robbed the case that had Hammudi's stuff inside. During the journey we were insulted and yelled by the smugglers. They took the children and moved them together with my wife to the back of the boat. I screamed at them that I didn't want to be separated from them, but there was nothing I could do about it. The boat was stationary for hours. As it gradually filled up, they split us according to nationality. The Syrians and Syrian-Palestinian were left on deck while the Africans were put down in the hold.

They only stopped taking people on board when there wasn't even a centimetre of space left free. There were 400 of us, all sitting one next to the other with our elbows on our knees. There wasn't even enough room to move your arms". Hassan's wife, Dalal, talks about how difficult it was to keep Hammudi calm throughout the journey. He never stopped asking "Where's daddy? When will we get there?". Their daughter found it difficult sleep in the extreme cold.

The crossing ended in Lampedusa on 15 October where they stayed for a week. "There wasn't any room at the reception centre. We slept outdoors. One night it even rained. They gave us foam mattresses and we did our best to make ourselves comfortable". During the next phase spent in Pozzallo, in Sicily, "an Arabic translator told us that we had to provide fingerprints so that we could be traced if we ever committed crimes in Italy".

Later, Hassan travelled with his family to Austria, where they applied for political asylum. But the Austrian Consulate told him that an application had already been made on his behalf - and rejected. So Hassan and Dalal had to return to Italy with their children. All four of them were "sent back" on a flight from Vienna to Rome.

When we meet Hassan's family again, they are in a café in Via Giolitti, opposite Termini Station in Rome, as they wait to catch a train to Milan. Elin tastes her first pizza, and Hammudi helps her with the stringy mozzarella. They do not have any toys any more. They have lost them during their countless journeys. Syria, Egypt, Libya, Italy, Austria and Italy once more.

"Now I'm going to ask for political asylum here, Hassan says. I don't expect Italy to give me any money, just a roof over my family's head and a school for my children. I want to work as I have always done and earn enough to live in dignity".

Hassan has kept his tool case with him throughout his journeys. He is a car mechanic. He repaired the cars of numerous diplomats in Libya.

"I asked them for help in getting to Europe legally, but all of them told me in an extremely kind way that they couldn't do anything to help me."

Hassan's attempt to rebuild a life with few resources and hard work is the same facing many other fathers such as Fuad, a 48-year old engineer who landed in Siracusa with his wife and three young children, Dana, eight, Amir, five and Sami, three.



Hassan's one way return ticket from Austria.

## DANA, 8, A DRAWING EVERY DAY FOR HER FATHER FAR AWAY

"When I had to leave my home for the first time because of the war, my daughter, Dana, started to do me a drawing every day. I've kept a few and I always have them with me".

Fuad, a 48-year old engineer, as skinny as a beanpole and, originally from Damascus, is speaking just a few hours after landing in Sicily. His wife, Khalida, covers her hair with a woollen hat rather than the more traditional veil because she suffered from the cold during their three days at sea. They were rescued by the Italian Navy ship, San Marco, in international waters after an eight-hour wait in a broken-down boat.

Their children, Dana, eight, Amir, five and Sami, three, disembark from the Navy ship holding their backpacks. Dana has black, shoulder-length hair and is dressed all in pink while Amir, wrapped up in a Mickey Mouse windbreaker, is admiring the bulldozers at work at Augusta Port, saving this first image of Italy to memory.

"Thank God" says the children's mother "that they came to rescue us quickly. The doctor visited us on the ship. Amir needs antibiotics, he suffers from asthma and the cold endured at sea has given him whooping cough".

They are put in a large room at the reception centre - a former hospital - where they are sleeping with the other Syrians who landed with them. 15 people in total. Fuad's is the only full family among them. The children play with each other and the toys provided by the Save the Children team that are frequent visitors to the centre.



Dana and Amir travel by train towards Milan. They will then travel to Germany.

"We need nappies and cleansing wipes. I went to the bathroom and there is no water", the mother says. "These are things a mother needs. We won't stay here very long. My husband wants to go to Milan as soon as possible and then on to Sweden."

The same evening, against regulations, the whole group of 15 leaves the reception centre without providing their fingerprints. More specifically, some Tunisian smugglers find the way for them. For another € 150 each, they are brought to Catania station, but the last train for Milan has already left. The same Tunisian smuggler accompanies them to a mosque where the custodian, a young Somali, lets them in to stay for the night. It does not cost anything to stay at the mosque.

The next day, a young Moroccan volunteer from a local Association, puts them on a train for Messina and from there, on the non-stop train to Milan - a 17 hours journey. They all have Syrian passports and identity cards. They are not illegal immigrants but they are not totally legal either. Their presence in Italy needs to be made official through registering with the authorities and by providing their fingerprints, which they have so far managed to avoid.

"So far, the journey has cost my family and I more than 7,000 Euros, Fuad admits. I'll sell all my land in Damascus. I want to live in safety and offer my children a future. As for me, I don't know what I'll do. I had a good job, I worked for the state electrical company. I tried to stay right to the end, moving my wife to a safer village near ours, but it became a hell there too. Our village was targeted and shelled for months. Now, there's nothing left. That's why I took my family and went to Libya. We planned to go to Europe right from the start. Because it's meaningless to leave a country at war to go and live in another one, like Libya, where there's no type of security."





A few Syrian children at the children space of the NGO "L'albero della vita" inside the reception centre located in Milan.

## "I'LL BECOME A FATHER FROM AFAR, I WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE THE BIRTH OF MY FIRST SON" THE LIFE OF AHMED, A DOCTOR FROM ALEPPO

Ahmed is 38 years old. He is a surgeon from Aleppo, a city from which most doctors have fled due to the conflict. "The first victim of this war was a child", he says. "We found the bodies of children, dismembered and disfigured. In many areas, children have joined the fight, many children have become orphans and armed men offer them food in exchange for their active involvement".

After fleeing Aleppo, he arrived in Cairo where he met Sumaya, his wife, who he has left behind in Egypt.

"I met Sumaya in 2011, near the Pyramids, which she was visiting with her friends. She was still studying engineering at the time. After just a few months, I asked her parents for her hand in marriage. They live in Cairo too. We got married and she became pregnant. When I found out I was so happy because I'm not so young, 38: I thought that if I waited any longer, I wouldn't succeed in becoming a father.

We spent these months of her pregnancy together, carrying out lots of check-ups, trying to stay safe. But the situation in Egypt got worse. Instability reigns supreme, even in the city centre. I looked for work but with no joy. There's such a level of poverty and unemployment in Egypt that there's no hope for us. I'm used to living a comfortable life and I love my work. I couldn't stand the idea of staying there without doing anything and watching my savings being eaten up without knowing how to guarantee a future for my soon-to-be-born son.

I made a last attempt to apply for a visa at the French Embassy in Cairo. I might have been able to work in the clinic of a doctor I know in Lyon and I also speak French very well. But not for the first time, I didn't receive any reply. So I decided to come to Europe illegally, by sea, facing dangers I was perfectly aware of. That's why I didn't want my wife to come."

When Ahmed told his wife of his intentions, she reacted very badly. "Our destinies are joined, where you go, I go too. If you die, I'll die too", she said.



Ahmed at a mosque in Catania, Sicily

## TATTERED DESTINIES, YOUNG ADULTS SEPARATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES

Mohammad was born in Aleppo in 1997, but his passport lists his date of birth as 1995. Mohammad, who is still a child, cannot yet be reunited with his family in Sweden because of a bureaucratic error, with dramatic consequences. The separation from his family has caused the teenager great anxiety. Ever since he was forced by the Italian police to provide his fingerprints, he fears that he will not be able to be reunited with his family.

Mohammad explains how they became separated: "One of our cousins came to get us by car from Germany, but unfortunately we couldn't all fit in the car. So my mother went first with my younger siblings. I have a sister of two and a half, a brother of four, another of 14 and another of 16. Since I'm the oldest, I was to stay here in Milan and join them after".

The family arrived in Malmo, Sweden, where their application for asylum was approved. Mohammad, who is still in Italy, was stopped by the police at the Central Station and brought to the police station for identification and fingerprinting, and now faces an agonising wait.

"We had all travelled together from Libya, only my father had remained there because he is disabled. He lost the use of a leg after he fell from the second floor of a restaurant where he was working. Obviously since he stopped working, his bosses don't pay him anymore. If you're Syrian, you don't have any rights. That's why we decided to come to Europe. My father was no longer able to put food on the table for us all."

Mohammad proudly shows us a photo of his baby sister, Maha, "she has eyes as black as coal and now that



Mohammad, 17, originally from Aleppo, at a reception centre in Milan.

she's just started to talk, she calls me by my name and I'm her favourite brother. My mother lets me talk to her on the phone and she tells me that she misses me a lot. I know that my mother doesn't know how to get by without me. She doesn't speak a word of English. She puts on a strong front but she feels lost."

Mohammad is convinced he can get a copy of his birth certificate in Aleppo and prove he was born in 1997. Despite the war and logistical difficulties, he truly believes that Aleppo is the same city he left three years ago.

"We moved to Libya because of my father's job, but then the troubles started and the Libyans decided to gang up against the Syrians for no reason. They steal from us and attack us and we have to start all over again every time. Even before my father had his accident, we were planning to leave. He was supposed to come too, and instead he'll have to stay there until someone can go and get him".

Mohammad also speaks about the journey by sea: "There were 380 of us on an iron boat measuring 14 metres in length and three and a half metres in width. I was afraid my family and I were going to die. The boat broke down almost immediately and rocked so much that we suffered sea sickness for many days, even after we landed".

Dalil, seated next to Mohammad, is also from Aleppo. He came to Italy via Greece, leaving from Thessaloniki. Two days at sea, this was a very different kind of journey costing him more than 4,000 Euros. Having just turned 18, he shows us his passport with his date of birth marked 1995. Dalil was sent back to Italy from Austria, he shows us the document issued by police headquarters in Venice stating his obligation to leave Italy within 60 days. He did not want to ask for political asylum in Italy because his family are safe in Denmark. Dalil and Mohammed are two young people separated from their families, both legally and geographically. Yet, they are still very much in need of family support.



Mohammad's passport.

## MY BROTHERS PLAY AT BEING REPORTERS: THEY GO OUT EVERY MORNING TO COUNT THE DEAD

Concern for their younger siblings is something experienced by many young people. Abu Rabiaa tells his story while travelling by train from Catania to Messina and then on to Milan.

"The shelling is usually heavier at night time. The children go out in the morning to see where the mortar shells fell and play at being reporters. They go back home and say 'Dad, Mr. So and So died', and then they ask when will it be our turn? When will we die too?" Abu Rabiaa is a blondish, lanky, 22-year old from Daraa, in the south of Syria. He explains "there are nine of us in our family - I'm the oldest of the seven children, the others are 20, 18, 14, 10, eight and five". We ask the young man why he decided to come to Europe and he replies immediately: to get his younger siblings out of Daraa. "They don't go out of the house to play, but to see who has died and even to pick up exploded bullets they find on the ground. The schools have been closed for more than two years. Even a simple biscuit has become a forbidden dream for some children. If I ask my eight-year old brother, Arif, what do you expect from the future, he replies 'nothing, I can die today or tomorrow'. Childhood is no longer synonymous with play in Daraa, death has become part of everyday life". Abu continues; "I never think about my future now, I once would have liked to study Business and Economics - there is no future for me anymore. All my plans have disappeared; the only reason for living is to guarantee my siblings have a chance to save themselves. I've heard it's easier to obtain family reunification in the United Kingdom than in other countries. I'll go there".

Abu Rabiaa seems to be aware that the 'Strait of Calais', where many migrants attempt to reach the United Kingdom illegally is one of the most dangerous crossing points in the world. However, speaking of risks with him is meaningless. He explains "there were 27 people from Daraa that I knew on the boat that sank off the Libyan coast on 11 October 2013, one of them was my neighbour. They are all dead. Despite this, I wasn't afraid to get on a boat and face the same fate. Death by death, we've tried new routes, because nobody wants Syrians anymore. Neither in Lebanon, nor Egypt nor Libya". Life for Abu Rabiaa in Libya had become a nightmare. He explains; "I knew all the road blocks, all the barracks. Every time they saw I was Syrian, I was arrested and searched. Lots of times I worked for Libyans and when it came to paying me, they told me there was no money". Abu Rabiaa dreams of England where some of his childhood friends have gone. "Us people from Daraa, we all know each other. We're simple folk, with a farming culture, we'll find each other, even in London, I'm sure of this".



Syrian children play at the reception centre in Milan.

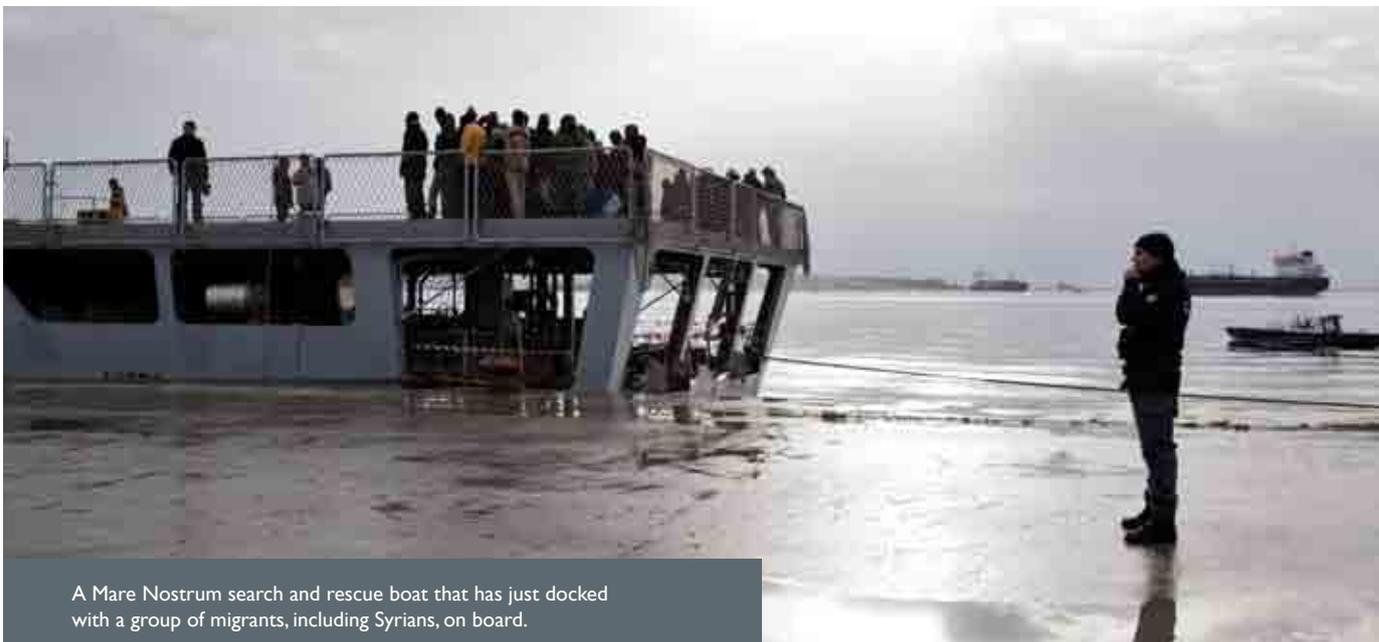
## EGYPTIANS, TRAVEL COMPANIONS

Egyptian youngsters are similar to, yet different from the Syrians. They are similar because they speak the same language and wear the same fashionable clothes, the same gel used on short, clean hair. They often laugh at the same jokes, but the difference is there is a glimmer of hope in the young Egyptians' eyes that Syrians do not have.

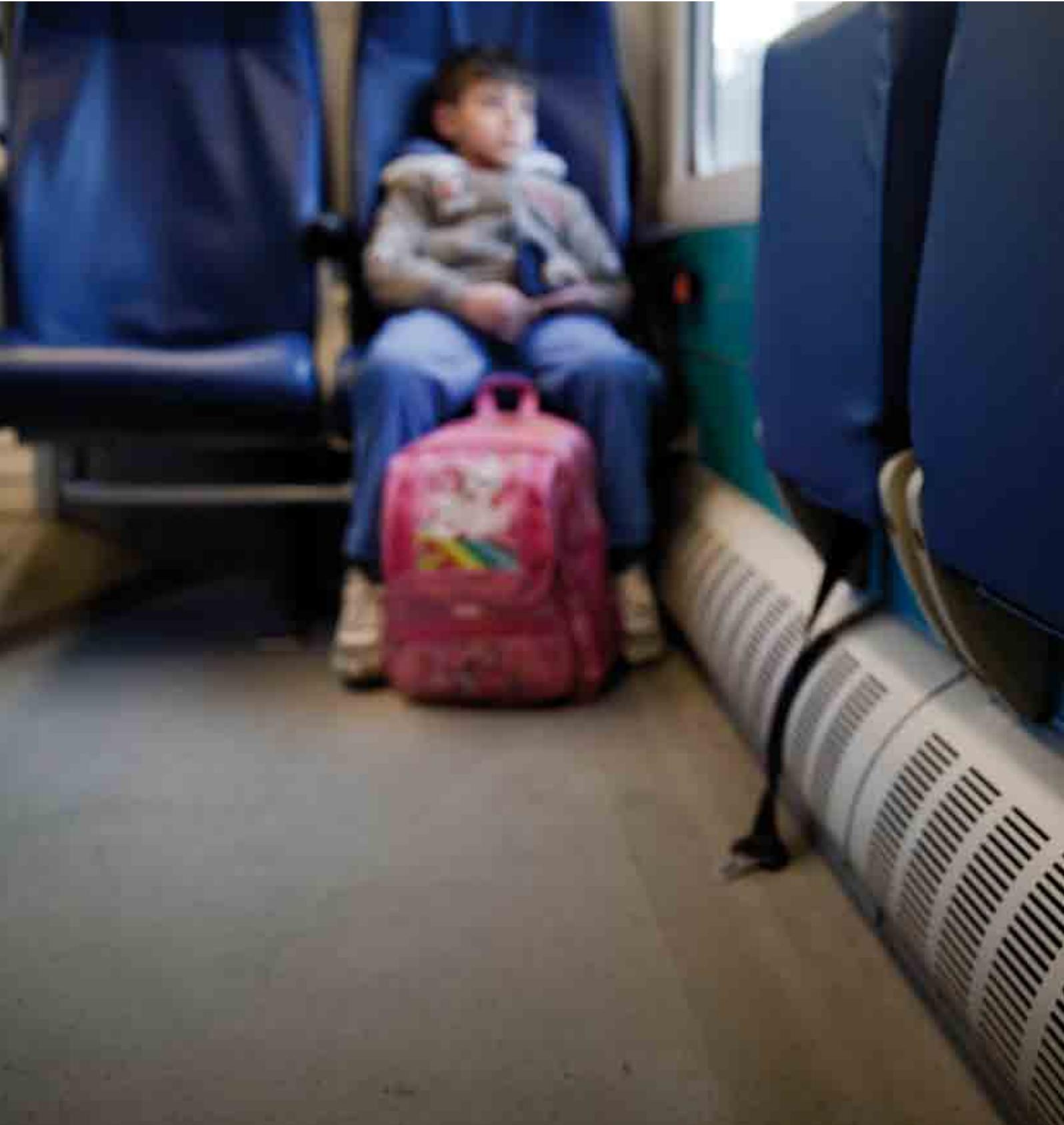
We meet Egyptian teenagers aged between 16 and 17 at a cooperative called Civicozero, a Save the Children daytime centre located in the heart of San Lorenzo, a historical Roman neighbourhood near Termini Station.

They all arrived in Italy during the second half of 2013. They are cheerful and funny, thinking about doing professional training in Italy where they believe they will be able to join Italy's large Egyptian community that is well integrated into the fruit and vegetable retail and restaurant sectors, without too much difficulty. However, this is not the case for Syrians, says Mohammed Ali, who travelled from a village near Alessandria on a boat with 150 Syrians last November. He explains: "the Syrian guys I travelled with had land and money in Syria. They were well-off before the war. They were especially sad to have been forced to leave their country. They had to leave because they were being attacked from all sides in the conflict. The Syrian families on the boat had lots of young children, many of them would have liked to reach a Northern European country in order to continue their studies. There were no children of my age without parents among the Syrians".

Mohammed Mustafâ, a 16-year old Egyptian, speaks about the Syrians from Homs who escaped the siege and travelled on the same boat with 250 passengers all piled in together. "They had been trapped in their homes for days in Homs. They had escaped with great difficulty and made their way to Egypt". The arrival at the boat in Alessandria, as described by Mohammed, is like a scene from a biblical exodus of never-ending groups of families with children and pregnant women. "The journey lasted ten days. We left on one boat, then they put us onto another older boat which broke down after just a few hours. Luckily the Italians arrived to pick us up and save our lives. Once we got to Sicily, the Syrians left immediately. There were no unaccompanied minors. They were brought to reception centres for families where it's much easier to escape".



A Mare Nostrum search and rescue boat that has just docked with a group of migrants, including Syrians, on board.



Amir while travelling by train to Milan and subsequently onto Germany.

## BECOMING A LAWYER TO GET HER FATHER OUT OF PRISON - THIS IS WHAT RANYA, 11, DREAMS OF IN HAMBURG

March 2013, the Syrian war has just entered its second year. "Earthquake, earthquake!" Ranya, 12, yells at her mother before jumping up at six in the morning as dawn is about to break on a Palestinian camp in Damascus. But, it wasn't an earthquake. It was a column of armed vehicles, explained Ranya via Skype from Hamburg, Germany, where she is currently living. "The armed vehicles were driving along the road where our home was, there were so many they made the earth, the doors and the walls of our house shake. I was really convinced it was an earthquake. I woke up my sister, Rana and I told her to get ready to leave because the roof was about to fall in on us". Maisa, 38, the mother of Ranya, 12, and Rana, 11, who has a son aged 20 and another daughter aged 18, spoke to us from Germany; "The girls were already traumatised because one morning armed men came and arrested my husband. The girls were there and they saw everything". Ranya and Rana have had no news of their father since that day. "Every time we hear someone knocking at the door, we run and hide in the bathroom, even now that we're in Germany", says the older of the two girls. "They're much better off here, the mother says, however, unfortunately, it will take time to get over the trauma. Last week a neighbour came into the house unexpectedly and the girls bolted like lightning. It hurts me to see that they're still so affected by this".

Maisa continues to speak of the journey she decided to take with her children, without her husband, when the police forced their way into her home once again following her husband's arrest.

"We didn't even have time to pack. I called a friend who once had a travel agency. He organised a coach together with five other families and we decided to go to Egypt. The journey by road, crossing through Jordan, took five days. We even pretended that we had to bring our children to Egypt in order to be operated on. Every time they started to create problems, we paid a thousand dollars and they let us through". After just a few months life in Egypt became unbearable for Maisa. "As lots of people started to become untrusting of Syrians", Maisa decided to go to Europe and leave behind that especially hostile climate. "My son, Alaa, left first. He offered to see what the journey was like before putting his sisters and me in danger. Once he arrived, he told me it was feasible and so we left to join him". Maisa and her daughters left from Alessandria and landed in Calabria. They went by train to Milan and by car as far as Hamburg. "They didn't take our fingerprints in Italy. We submitted an application for asylum in Germany". The woman and her four children live in a flat assigned by the state in the suburbs of Hamburg. They get 1300 Euros per month in total as sustenance salary, "there is just about enough money to eat. I hope my son can start to work soon", she complains.

In the meantime, Ranya and Rana go to school. "We attend German lessons in the afternoon and in the morning we go to a normal school and try to understand as much as possible even if it's very difficult", admits Ranya. Maisa was interviewed by a local newspaper and received a great welcome from her neighbours. The day after her arrival they brought her sweets and toys for the girls. "They also gave us a television", says Rana with great satisfaction.

"They're not used to so much physicality. In Syria you don't see semi-naked women in adverts or actors that kiss each other. But I realise that the TV is important for learning a language", says Maisa. Ranya would also like a computer so she could be like her school friends, as she is the only one who doesn't have one. To be honest, there are a lot of things that they do not have in the house. "We only have the necessary furniture, beds grouped in one room. However, thank God that the girls are well, they can play with their peers and finally feel safe. It seems like a long time ago when armed vehicles made the walls shake". As for the future, Ranya has only one great desire: "to become a lawyer, even if I hope that my dad won't need one any more by that stage".



At Rome's main train station, Termini, Hassan walks with his daughter Elin after have been sent back to Italy from Austria.

## SEDRA, 6, SAW HER TEACHER HAVE HER THROAT SLIT IN DAMASCUS

Three Syrian families are on board the Italian naval ship, San Giusto, that docks at Augusta Port where the majority of naval units involved in Operation Mare Nostrum arrive after an extenuating journey that started from Damascus in 2012. The air inside the hold is heavy, damp, full of uncertainty for the future, but the happiness is tangible. At long last they have reached land after this long, long journey.

Nada, the mother of Sedra, a six-year old girl with dark hair, starts to tell the story of their flight. "After three years of conflict, we decided to leave Syria for the good of our children and to avoid running the same risks that many of our family members have had to face. We were ordinary people before the war. We had jobs that allowed us to live well, we had a house of our own and the children went to school. Then the war made everything more complicated. In the beginning we were very frightened. The children started to suffer panic attacks and respiratory problems. The situation we were living in had become terrifying. My six-year old daughter saw a group of armed men slit her teacher's throat in the classroom".

Nada cannot hide her sad, angry expression. Her daughter will probably remember that terrible image for the rest of her life.

"Life in Damascus at the moment is especially difficult for the children" says Rama, the mother of Malik a young boy with large dark eyes who is following the conversation with great seriousness: "The roads aren't safe. It's no longer safe to even go to school".

Sedra is closely observing the Save the Children workers that have boarded the San Giusto ship in order to check the children's health conditions. "Armed men constantly threaten the citizens of Damascus - the mother continues - without making any distinction. They have committed acts of atrocity just in order to show and emphasise their authority. My husband and I monitor Sedra's psycho-physical equilibrium with great apprehension. We're doing our best to give her back a normal life. That's why we've decided to come to Europe and leave behind our house, work, family, everything".

Nada has left behind younger brothers in Damascus that she would like to bring to Sweden, the country where they are headed, as soon as possible. "I've heard there are good doctors and psychiatrists that can help traumatised children like Sedra", she explains, voicing a glimmer of hope.

Ragiat, three years old with a head full of blonde curls, is playing next to Sedra. She too has a set of memories to be wiped out. She repeatedly imitates the kicks used by armed men to break down a door in order to enter her home. The other children laugh at her funny gestures while they politely accept the glasses filled with canned peaches offered them by the doctor aboard the San Giusto. Once they have finished eating, the children start to play once more with the toys brought by the Save the Children team.

The parents carry on talking. "When the situation became unbearable in Damascus - Rama continues - we were forced to flee, first to underground shelters in the city, then to the nearby countryside. Lastly, when we found out that some of our relatives had died, we decided to leave Syria even at the cost of never going back".

Sedra's father, Mahmud, who has remained silent until then, decides to tell the worst part of their journey. "We left Syria and arrived in Lebanon, crossing over the border on foot. It wasn't easy for the children. Then we took a plane to Egypt but we still didn't feel safe in Egypt, also because many of our fellow Syrians had told us bad stories, so we decided to move on towards Libya".

Rama starts to talk again incessantly, but her eyes constantly seek out her children who are busy eating. "During the journey across the desert from Egypt to Libya, we were all shoved together like cattle in pickup trucks. There were about two hundred of us on the boat, one on top of the other with no space. The sea conditions were terrible and we were all extremely frightened. When they decided to stop to burn all our extra clothes and personal belongings in order to lighten the load, we feared for our lives and the lives of the children - tears swell up in her eyes. They left us without any reminder of our beloved Syria. We'd never thought of making a similar journey".

Hassan, one year old, is sleeping peacefully in his father's arms while his parents take turns to talk and tell their story. Marwan cuddles him, making sure he is well wrapped up. "We didn't think that things could get so bad in Libya. We thought we'd find a friendly welcome and instead some criminal groups even went so far as to steal children and ask for money in exchange for their release. It was a nightmare for us and our children. In Libya many humanitarian organisations were willing to help us, but their help wasn't enough. We were completely on our own and we also had to protect ourselves from many unscrupulous people".



Syrian migrants disembark from a Navy ship. They will be transferred by bus to a reception centre in Siracusa, Sicily.

## HIDA, HEAVILY PREGNANT DURING THE JOURNEY

Hida, who is heavily pregnant, is amongst other Syrian women when she disembarks from the San Giusto Navy ship in Pozzallo. She has to go to hospital to do some checks and a scan, nothing serious, but she breaks down into tears. She does not want to be alone, and asks to be accompanied by her husband. At that point, her husband is still onboard the ship with their three children. Then, as if she has just remembered this, she cries out: "My sister is pregnant too, and she's also on the ship!"

Hida is only comforted when her sister joins her, though her relief appears short-lived. "I'm not going anywhere unless my husband comes with me", she tells the medical staff, who tries to reassure her that she'll see her husband as soon as the gynaecologist has finished examining her. Finally, she smiles widely as she sees her husband coming off the ship holding Dalal, their 20-months-old daughter who is crying out for her mother. Dalal's six-year-old brother, Ahmed, appears calm and smiling.

Hida's husband asks for a blanket, and explains: "They threw all our clothes into the sea. We were on a boat of around three metres wide and 10 metres long. There were 600 of us, even though the boat had a maximum capacity of 240. Shortly afterwards, the boat started to take in water. We asked the Italian coastguard for help, but they told us we were still in Libyan waters. So we risked our lives until we finally entered Italian waters and were rescued."

He looks at the child in his arms and says that Dalal was only a month old when they left Syria: "We wanted to escape from that hell. We spent a year and a half in Libya, but then we had to leave there too because of the racism and other types of discrimination". Nur, their eldest daughter, asks: "But are we now in Italy?". The father nods, and she claps her hands. "Do you know why she is clapping?" Nur's uncle, who is standing behind her, asks. "A missile fell just a few metres from her in Syria. It's a miracle that she is still alive."

## KHALID IS ONE OF THE FEW WE MET TO HAVE ARRIVED DIRECTLY ON THE CALABRIAN COAST

Not all families arrive in Italy on naval ships after having been rescued at sea. In some cases, which are much rarer now, migrants disembark directly from small makeshift vessels, mostly on the Calabrian coast. This was the case for Khalid, 17, who landed in Reggio Calabria together with his parents and 46 other people, who survived the open sea for seven long days. "There was a lack of everything on the boat", the youngster tells us during the few hours he spent in Calabria's main city. "Food, drinking water... There even seemed to be a lack of oxygen." Indeed, the migrants' travelling conditions can be extremely precarious, and depend on the smugglers. The profits they make are directly proportional to the number of people they manage to load onto each boat, both above and below deck.

"We departed from Greece", explains Khalid, "but left Syria over a year ago. We lived in Afra in Aleppo. Given my age, I would have been obliged to fight, either with the national army or with the opposition. That's why we decided to leave and seek refuge in Turkey." Khalid also explains how it had become almost impossible not to fall under the sphere of influence of one armed group or the other. The cost of living in Syria had become virtually unmanageable, even for middle class families like Khalid's, due to the war, the black market, the lack of essential items and inflation. Life became unbearable, so he and his parents decided to leave. "We are headed for England, he explains with a hint of anxiety. "We are aware that it will be difficult for us to find work in Italy, and I don't have any great ambitions. I just want to start working as soon as possible, get some treatment for myself because I am ill, and see my parents happy after this long journey, which four and a half months ago, in Istanbul".

Like many other Syrians, Khalid spend a long time living in limbo in the Turkish Capital, waiting for the "right person" and the "right time" to embark on this long and expensive journey. This journey, which he hopes will finally come to end when he arrives in his chosen European destination and can apply for asylum.



One of the largest group of migrant minors on the same boat from Libya, rescued by operation Mare Nostrum.



A Syrian child at a reception centre  
located in Milan.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Source for all data in the chapter 1: Save the Children Italy, based on statistics from Italian Ministry of Interior.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior; 31 December 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Idem.

<sup>4</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior; 31 July 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior; 31 December 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior; 31 March 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior; 30 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior; 31 May 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Data from Save the Children Italy collected by the staff at the Port of Pozzallo, Ragusa Italy, 24 May 2014.

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, Regional refugee Statistics, December 2012 - 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014 .

<sup>11</sup> Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior from 01 January 2013 to 31 May 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Data from United Nation office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: <http://syria.unocha.org/>. The figures refer to the period between March 2011 - July 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Save the Children, A Devastating Tool. The impact of three years of war on the health of Syria's children, 2014, p.4.

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, Emergency Alert, January 2014: [http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/UNICEFEmergencyAlert\\_Syria\\_Jan14.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/UNICEFEmergencyAlert_Syria_Jan14.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Save the Children, A Devastating Tool. The impact of three years of war on the health of Syria's children, 2014, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, Syria Refugee Regional Response, Inter-Agency Sharing Portal, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. Last checked on 18 June 2014.

**Save the Children** is the world's leading independent organisation for children. We work in over 120 countries. We save children's lives; we fight for their rights; we help them fulfil their potential.

We work to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives. Across all of our work, we pursue several core values: accountability, ambition, collaboration, creativity and integrity.

Save the Children was acknowledged as a socially useful non-profit organisation (ONLUS) in Italy at the end of 1998 and started its activities in 1999. Today it is acknowledged as an NGO by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In addition to its international level commitments, Save the Children Italy has been developing national programmes for over 10 years, aimed at improving the lives of children living in Italy, and focusing on the fight against child poverty, protection of minors at risk of exploitation (such as unaccompanied foreign minors), education and school, safe use of new technology and protection of children in emergency situations.



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