

World

For desperate refugees, 'the smuggler's room is over there'

By **Liz Sly** September 11 at 3:00 AM

IZMIR, Turkey — For many of the refugees and migrants streaming toward Europe, the most critical and dangerous leg of their journey begins in this Turkish port city, and with a visit to a smuggler such as the one who runs his business out of a small hotel tucked at the end of a narrow alley.

He isn't hard to find.

"The smuggler's room is over there," the receptionist said without being asked, pointing toward a room adjoining the hotel courtyard. There, the smuggler greets his customers on a narrow bed lined with cushions, advising them what to bring, what to leave behind and pocketing the \$1,300 they hand over for the 45-minute trip.

A jowled, balding 40-year-old from the notorious Syrian smuggling town of Azaz, the smuggler is one of dozens belonging to a [highly lucrative network](#) that dispatches flimsy boats packed with people across the narrow stretch of sea between Turkey and Greece. Two thirds of those seeking asylum in Europe so far this year have taken this route, according to the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and a majority of those have set out from Izmir, the hub of the trafficking trade.

The city's leafy streets have been transformed as much as any of those in Europe by the influx of people. On any given day, thousands mill around the central Basmane neighborhood, sleeping under trees, crowding into cheap hostels, shopping for life jackets from street stalls that have sprung up to meet the demand and waiting in cafes for the call telling them they will be put on a boat that night.

When the call comes, those chosen gather at the central square to board buses that will take them to their allocated beach, clutching their luggage and life jackets under the gaze of Turkish police guarding the municipality headquarters nearby.

The roughly 15-mile route between Turkey and the eastern islands of Greece is shorter and safer than the one from Libya to Italy, which was previously the main crossing used by those seeking to enter Europe illegally — until the [deluge of refugees](#) from neighboring Syria swelled the numbers streaming to Turkey, confronting Europe with an influx of people unprecedented since World War II.

It is a hazardous journey nonetheless, conducted by stealth, at night, in flimsy inflatable dinghies pushed out from one of scores of remote beaches and coves strung along the jagged coast. The dinghies are punctured just before they reach the Greek island shores, so that Greek coast guardsmen can't force them to turn back — obliging the occupants of the boats to swim the last stretch, according to the smuggler and those who have made the trip.

At least 55 people have drowned so far this year crossing between Turkey and Greece, compared with over 2,700 on the Libya route, according to the United Nations. They include the toddler [Aylan Kurdi](#), whose death on another route, 200 miles south of Izmir, triggered an outpouring of sympathy for the refugees.

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The smuggler, who described his business on the condition that he not be identified, boasts that he has not lost a passenger yet, and that 90 percent of his customers make it to Greece on their first attempt. He never puts more than 45 people on one of the nine-foot dinghies, he said, and he takes care to make sure the boat is loaded well.

“In business, reputation is everything,” he said, explaining that customers seek him out on the basis of recommendations from friends and relatives who have safely arrived. “And I have a good reputation.”

Some of those gathered in the courtyard waiting to make the journey disagreed. Their trip the night before had failed because another smuggler had also assigned passengers to their boat, overloading it with 57 people. It quickly sank, and they were waiting to embark on another attempt.

“It’s a mafia,” said a man from Homs in western Syria, rolling his eyes and dropping his voice so as not to be overheard.

Many of those sleeping on Izmir’s streets have worse stories to tell, of being cheated by men posing as smugglers who vanish with their savings, or of being repeatedly assigned to overloaded boats that immediately sink, forcing them to swim back to shore. A man from southern Syria said he had made nine such journeys in the past 12 days, including one on which he swam for an hour and a half before being rescued by the Turkish coast guard.

“They overload the boats only to make profits,” he said.

Another Syrian, from Aleppo, said he gave \$8,400 to a purported smuggler to transport him and his wife and children, only to never hear from the man again. The family is now sleeping on the streets, unable even to afford to travel back to Syria.

Even without the cheating, it is evidently a profitable business. The UNHCR says over 258,000 people have made the boat crossing this year. With the price at \$1,200 per journey for most of the summer, that means that they have handed over roughly \$300 million to the smugglers — representing a huge transfer of wealth from people who are desperate to people who are being rapidly enriched.

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The smuggler denied making large profits or exploiting families and said he sometimes allows truly needy people to travel for free.

Costs also are high, he said, with the overall outlay of putting a boat to sea running at \$40,000, including \$7,000 for the disposable dinghy and fees to others in the smuggling chain. The entire network is ultimately controlled by two or three powerful Turks who reap most of the profits, he said.

For most of the summer refugees have been paying \$1200 per trip, but the price recently went up to \$1300 as more and more refugees converge on Izmir in a rush to make it to Europe before bad weather sets in and makes the sea crossing even more dangerous, he said. Last year, the journey cost \$900.

The smuggler said he is thinking of making the trip himself before it does, and has his eye on Britain. Other smugglers from his home town of Azaz, which was renowned even before Syria's war as a smuggling hotbed, have already moved on to Europe, where they are managing other lucrative segments of the route taken by the asylum seekers.

"If I go, it will be for the sake of my children," he said, before excusing himself to take a nap ahead of another busy night of smuggling.

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