Refugee and migrant children in Greece
September 2017
Introduction
The number of children moving across international borders – more and more of them on their own – is skyrocketing. In Europe alone, the number of children seeking asylum multiplied almost 10-fold between 2008 and 2016, while the share of children among asylum seekers grew from one in five to one in three. As of 2015, 31 million children were living outside their country of birth. In the same year, a large number of uprooted children have also been crossing Greek borders, driven by hunger, conflict, violence and severe poverty.

The Greek people have opened their doors and hearts to refugee and migrant children. Hundreds of volunteer groups and individuals, in an extraordinary outpouring of solidarity and compassion, have worked around the clock to help them.

UNICEF came to support the efforts of these people and the authorities in Greece. Since the beginning of 2016, building on UNICEF National Committee’s presence in the country, a Response Team has been deployed to ensure that uprooted children are provided with a safe environment, a sense of normalcy and opportunities for fostering resilience by helping them access child protection, education, health and other services. This booklet brings together key data along with voices of the children themselves - their stories of life-threatening risk and hardship to reach safety, as well as their hopes and dreams for a better future.

Although each child’s story is unique, they all share a common thread. These are stories about survival but also about children having the chance to develop their full potential. Not only does this constitute their right, but it is something that we all need, in order to support the next generation of an open, united and strong citizenry.

Laurent Chapuis,
Country Coordinator
UNICEF Refugee and Migrant Response Team in Greece
The decision to flee

Most children arriving in Greece left countries affected by armed conflict or generalized violence: In 2016, the majority of children were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Reasons for leaving include:

**Seeking safety**
84% of children in the Eastern Mediterranean route reported leaving due to war, conflict or political reasons;

**Access to education**
1 in 3 parents or caretakers said that seeking education for their children was the main reason they left their countries for Europe;

**Fear of forced recruitment**
In Syria, children as young as 7 are recruited by armed forces and groups;

**Persecution and discrimination faced by minorities**
38% of the Afghans arriving in March 2016 reported being from the consistently persecuted Hazara ethnic group;

**The situation in countries en route**
65% of unaccompanied children from Afghanistan reported lack of documentation as a reason for leaving Iran, where they were living.

Choosing a destination:

43% of Syrians interviewed by UNHCR in Greece in 2016 mentioned family reunification as one of the main reasons for choosing a destination country.

29% said that they didn’t choose a destination

13% made their choice on the basis of the destination country’s respect for human rights.

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43%
Family Reunification

29%
No Choice

13%
Respect for Human Rights
“Before the war, my life in Syria was very nice. We had as much money as we wanted, a house in Deir Ez-Zor and food to eat.

But the situation became very difficult, especially when the war and the bombings started and when ISIS came. You couldn’t show your face or wear a T-shirt or jeans. You had to wear all black, everything black. Even boys could no longer go out on their own. There were cars passing near the house telling people that they had to pray. One time they took my father, but they let him go quickly.

When the planes started coming, my siblings were afraid and hid under their beds and the TV stand. Sometimes they took their toy weapons and said that they would stop the planes, but I explained to them that they cannot do that.

In order to leave the country we had to give up all our money and then borrow some more. It was very scary to come to Greece and we tried three times to make it. Now, I have been living in Skaramangas camp for seven months with my uncle and his family. My parents are in Germany and I haven’t seen them for more than a year. We are all safe now, but everyone is in a different country.

When I grow up, I want to become a surgeon. I would like people to come to me, so that I can help them, just as my doctors helped me when I needed it. If someone helps me to make my dream come true, then I will be able to help this person, too. I will bring medicine to them and whatever else they need. I just need a little assistance to make it.”

Bayan, 11 years old from Syria
The long journey to safety

Separation during the journey

7% of Syrians and 10% of Afghans interviewed by UNHCR in Greece in 2016 reported having been separated from a family member during the journey, mainly in Turkey.

For Iraqis, family separation was also common along the route, mainly:

- At registration, when at times families were not registered together.
- When boarding trains, given the large crowds.
- At border crossings.

Experienced violence

- 37% of children aged 14-17 might have experienced trafficking or other exploitative practices on the Eastern Mediterranean route, compared to 16% of adults, according to an IOM survey.
- Such exploitative practices may include sexual exploitation, forced labor practices similar to slavery, etc.

Dangers experienced during the journey in 2015, by country of origin

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<th>Syria</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experienced violence</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<td>Experienced exploitation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Witnessed death</td>
<td>7%</td>
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Experienced by

At least 97 children died in 2016 trying to reach Greece.

By the end of July 2017, 11 more children had lost their lives on the way to the Greek islands.
Separation during the journey

7% of Syrians and 10% of Afghans interviewed by UNHCR in Greece in 2016 reported having been separated from a family member during the journey, mainly in Turkey.

1 to 3 months is the average length of the journey from the country of origin to Greece.

30% of children aged 14-17 might have experienced trafficking or other exploitative practices on the Eastern Mediterranean route, compared to 16% of adults, according to an IOM survey. Such exploitative practices may include sexual exploitation, forced labor practices similar to slavery, etc.

Experienced violence

Syria  Afghanistan  Iraq

Experienced exploitation

Witnessed death

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For Iraqis, family separation was also common along the route, mainly:

When boarding trains, given the large crowds

At border crossings

Children face many dangers on the route

“I’ll never forget that night at the border between Iran and Turkey.

My husband was holding the hand of my son Mahdi and I was holding our two other children, Mohammad and Hadi, when the army started shooting. My husband and Mahdi managed to cross. But the rest of the family was forced to stay behind. We were deported to Afghanistan and had to borrow money from the neighbours to try again to cross to Europe.

One woman and two boys, without a man: I was terrified of the journey. Who knows what can happen in the forest? To cross the same border, we had to walk for 18 hours up and down mountains and roads. The smugglers promised that they would send us through an easier way but this didn’t happen. When we arrived in Turkey we were all sick. At the Aegean coast, while we were waiting for the boat, we were attacked by robbers. Even though they had knives, some Afghan men near us managed to chase them away with sticks that they had gathered from the woods. We stayed on Lesvos island for six days. Then we were sent to a camp in Filipiada before arriving here, at the hotel in Ioannina.

Now, it’s been over 18 months since I have seen my husband and son. I speak to them on the phone and tell them that I love them. Hadi is learning how to box at a gym near the hotel, while Mahdi, who is in Germany with his dad, plays football. Every day they exchange videos. There is competition between them on who will become more successful in sports.”

Fatimah, mother of three
35 years old from Afghanistan
In 2016, 63,290 children arrived in Greece – making up 37% of all arrivals.

In the first six months of 2017, one in three new arrivals by sea to Greece was a child (32.5%). In total, 3,020 children arrived in Greece in the first 6 months of 2017.

Most children arrived with their families.
Unaccompanied and separated children represent 8% of all children arriving in Greece by sea in 2016 and 14% of all children arriving in the first six months of 2017, based on referrals to the National Center for Social Solidarity (EKKA).

In the first three months of 2017, the primary countries of origin of all children arriving by sea were Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

The top three nationalities of unaccompanied and separated children during the same period were Pakistani (42%), Afghan (19%) and Syrian (13%), based on referrals to EKKA.
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“Everybody thinks that it’s easy to come to Greece, but the journey is difficult and dangerous.

My family spent three months en route from Afghanistan. First we arrived in Pakistan and from there we had to walk to Iran, with my parents, my younger brother and sister. The mafia kept all our money and told us that we cannot leave. When we finally managed to continue, we had to walk again for some parts of the trip.

I have a lot of things in my heart, and they are bad and good, but a lot of bad. For 12 days, we were put in a dark room with another 30 people. They closed the door and I didn’t see anything outside. All around us was darkness. Our only contact with the outside world was when they opened the door and threw in food. No one could tell them anything, because they would kill them.

In Turkey, we were put together with 90 people on a boat that fits 40, and spent five hours at sea. It was so overcrowded that my parents lost my sister and thought that she had drowned. Other people were sitting on top of her, and risked suffocating and crushing her. When the Greek Coast Guard found us, the boat was full of water and everybody was trying to empty it so as that it wouldn’t sink.

When I arrived in Greece I felt that all doors were closed to us. I understand that the situation is very difficult. The Greek government does not have money and jobs to give to its people. It is therefore very difficult to offer a job to refugees as well. That makes me worry a lot. Other times, though, I say to myself: ‘Calm down. You are safe here’.

I like going to school. I wish I was able to learn all languages, but I like Spanish the most.”

Dounia
11 year old girl from Afghanistan
As of July 2017, 18,500 refugee and migrant children are estimated to be living in Greece. Among them, 2,350 are unaccompanied children.

The majority of children accompanied by their parents or caregivers are under 14 years old, whereas unaccompanied and separated children are mostly 15-17 years old.

Gender breakdown of all children:
- In 2016: 56% boys and 44% girls
- In the first quarter of 2017: 58% boys and 42% girls

The ratio between accompanied boys and girls is 3:2. However, more than 90% of unaccompanied and separated children are boys.

Ages of children who arrived in Greece in 2016:
- Accompanied: 30% were 0-4 years old, 52% were 5-14 years old and 18% were 15-17 years old
- Unaccompanied and separated children: 16% 5-14 years old, 84% 15-17 years old

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- Accompanied: 32% were 0-4 years old, 47% were 5-14 years old and 21% were 15-17 years old
- Unaccompanied and separated children: 92% 15-17 years old (boys)

Percentage of children per type of location - July 2017

- Accommodation sites: 34%
- Hotels, apartments, buildings, squats, self-settled: 50%
- Reception and Identification Centers: 10%
- Shelters and safe zones for unaccompanied children: 6%
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"We left Syria exactly 29 months, 19 days, and 4 hours ago. Back home, in Kobani, I had almost finished school when it was shut down due to fighting.

With my mother’s blessing, I travelled to Aleppo to take part in the end of year exams. I studied in the daytime and listened to bombs at night. After completing exams, I was on a bus going home when the vehicle was stopped by ISIS fighters. Girls were permitted to continue on their journey, but boys were removed and kidnapped. I never heard what happened to them. The first thing I packed when I left Syria, was my diploma.

We wanted to go to Germany, where we have close relatives. But when we arrived in Greece there was a new agreement and we could no longer continue our journey. Sometimes I feel trapped. But in my books, my studies, I can feel freedom. I’ve lost so much time. There is so much I want to do, but I can’t do it here. I wake up in Skaramangas camp every morning, I see six people in our tiny room, and I think: ‘I need to make this situation better. I have to fight, and every day I fight to improve.’

In the camp, I’ve started working with volunteers to teach Arabic, mathematics and English to five-year olds. The sense of being needed gives me purpose and hope. It gives me a way to forget about our situation. I want to fix the things that are wrong. I want to be a leader to help people who need help all over the world, and help the women who are oppressed.’

Azhar
18 year old girl from Syria
Estimated total number of refugee and migrant children in Greece

2000 is the estimated number of children in private accommodation or other types of facilities. This includes children in private accommodation alone or with their families, children in protective custody etc., based on government estimates as well as data available through EKKA.

Mapping conducted by UNICEF and REACH, July 2017.
“Sudais [my 5 year old son] brings me to the Child Friendly Space every single day. It’s the first thing he asks for, when he wakes up in the morning. He is diabetic. But we are very organized here and he receives a lot of love. When his siblings finish the lessons they attend, they also come to play and make drawings.

You know, back in Afghanistan, we also had spaces for children. But no parent would send them there, fearing that they would be abducted. It is here that we finally feel safe.

Since I was born, our daily focus was the war – who killed and who got killed, which young person in my town was brought down by bullets. Nothing good or happy ever happened in our lives. Not one night went by, without the sound of rocket fire. I never got the chance to go to school. But my husband is a teacher and I wanted all my kids to be raised properly and have an education. This dream was very far away from our lives in Afghanistan. Every time bombs exploded in the air and fell in pieces over our home, I ran in horror all around, to save my children from harm.

Leaving Afghanistan was not easy. We saw the life that we had there slipping through our fingers. We left behind our parents and our siblings, our house and our fields. It took us one month to come to Greece – walking through mountains and shivering in the cold, together with our little ones. I didn’t know much about Greece. I just wanted to go somewhere to be protected and get assistance. In the one year that I’ve spent here, I am happy to have achieved that.”

Najibe, mother of 5 year-old Sudais
31 years old from Afghanistan
2,350 is the estimated number of unaccompanied children currently in Greece, as of 3 August 2017.

EKKA (the National Centre for Social Solidarity) is the national referral mechanism undertaking their placement in appropriate accommodation.

More than half of the total estimated number of unaccompanied children are waiting for suitable accommodation at a shelter for unaccompanied children:

1,229 is the total number of accommodation places available in shelters

1,423 is the total number of unaccompanied children on the waiting list to be put in a shelter, due to the lack of places

While waiting, the children are staying, among other areas:

250 in Reception and Identification Centers

128 in protective custody

180 at accommodation sites, together with the rest of the population

165 at designated spaces for unaccompanied children (safe zones), in the accommodation sites

8,029 is the total number of unaccompanied children who were referred to EKKA, from 1 January 2016 to 3 August 2017.

UNICEF has provided child protection services, including accommodation, to approximately 300 unaccompanied children since September 2016.
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“My father says that if someone wants to get something, they can, if they try hard enough. He wanted to go to school himself, but he never could because of the situation in Afghanistan. So he focused on me. Now that I live in Greece, at the shelter for unaccompanied children, I still manage to speak to him every week or two. He works as a security guard near where we live, about 30 minutes outside Kabul. He says: ‘Don’t let a bad day become a bad life.’

I left my family one year ago. There is a big problem at home with religion – over whether you are Sunni or Shia. I am a Shia Hazara, and my older brother was killed by the Taliban. My father was really worried about me. He loves me so much, but he couldn’t lose another son. He raised money for me to leave, with no plan on where to go except to safety.

I first went to Pakistan and then Iran, in order to reach Turkey. We were 22 of us in a car, going from country to country. It was like a moving grave. I wish that no one I know, none of my family, will ever make that journey. Now, at the shelter, it’s very good, very supportive. We all help each other. I go to school and play as a forward on the shelter football team. I also teach English at the shelter as well as at a day centre run by volunteers.

If it’s possible I want to get to France or London. I will try to get into Oxford University and become a doctor. I already help at a small clinic here in Athens, in Exarchia Square, translating for a Spanish doctor who is treating refugees. We should all help and try to give more. Bringing help and happiness to those with lots of problems shows that we are all human beings. My father, when I can talk to him, always gives good advice. He says - never lose your confidence, and always try help those who need help. Every night, every second I am thinking of my family. It is not easy to survive without your family.”

Serdar*
16 year old boy from Afghanistan

*Name changed for protection reasons
Relocation:
Relocation is the transfer of persons who are in need of international protection from Italy and Greece to other EU Member States.

In total, 27,324 relocation applications have been registered by the Greek Asylum Service as of 30 July, 2017. Currently, nationalities eligible for relocation include Eritrea, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bhutan, Qatar, Syria, United Arab Emirates and Yemen or a stateless person previously residing in one of these countries.

11,072 relocation requests (44.9% of the total) have been made by children in Greece, as of 30 July 2017.

Out of these, 7,427 children have been relocated, as of 31 July 2017.

According to IOM, among them, 282 unaccompanied children have been relocated to Finland, the Netherlands and Spain.

Relocation figures for children in Greece scaled up in 2017

with a total of 1,761 (including 80 unaccompanied and separated children) relocated between January and March 2017

This is up from 197 (including 6 unaccompanied and separated children) relocated between January and March 2016

Family reunification

1,107 successful applicants for family reunification reached their destination country during 2016.
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**Family reunification**

**Outgoing requests for family reunification**
- Among the total 1,107 successful applicants for family reunification reached their destination country during 2016.

“..."It was my father’s letters that led me here today: Initially, he was illiterate and asked from friends and neighbors to read to him any official correspondence.

But one day they got fed up, so he was forced to learn how to read and write in a period of just three months! He decided to give a better future to his children, so I got the chance to finish school and start training to become a teacher. It was the last semester when the Taliban swarmed the area. We fled to Pakistan, but upon our return, I was required to get a husband. My father preferred to have me married than arrested as a young girl going to college.

I hadn’t met my husband before the wedding, and he was illiterate himself. I tried to send him to adult courses but it was impossible back then. We had five children together and we were inseparable. Until 2015, when on the way to Europe we got split at the borders of Turkey. He managed to pass with our son and one daughter. I stayed behind with our other three girls. Travelling with children is difficult – but with girls it is worse. My oldest one was 12 years old when we tried to reach Europe for the second time. I made her constantly walk in front me, so as to watch her from the smugglers. My youngest one was four. In order to encourage her, I told her: “Look, your father is waiting for you behind these hills”. Every single night, she cannot sleep before talking to him on the phone. We are now waiting to go and find him in Stuttgart, where he lives.

Until we meet again, the whole family gets an education! My two children in Germany are such good students that go to regular public schools. For the first time in his life, my husband is learning to write using the Latin alphabet. I take Greek courses for adults, while my daughters also attend a non-formal centre that UNICEF supports. It’s one year and four months that I haven’t seen my husband and we miss each other a lot.”

Fauzia, mother of five
36 years old from Afghanistan
102,184 claims for international protection were registered by the Greek Asylum Service in the first four years of its operation – from June 2013 to end May 2017.

Almost 1 in 3 were by children (32,272 or 31.5%).

14% of these asylum-seeking children (4,401) came unaccompanied to Greece. Of those, 11% were girls and 89% boys.

3,825 children were granted international protection at 1st instance from June 2013 to June 2017.

374 unaccompanied children received international protection in Greece from June 2013 to end of May 2017.

International protection granted at 1st instance to children in Greece:

Asylum applications filed by children in Greece:

In the first quarter of 2017, more children claimed asylum in Greece, despite the much higher numbers of arrivals through the Central Mediterranean route:

5,927 applications in Greece vs 4,010 applications in Italy.

Decisions on asylum applications by children per nationality, first quarter of 2017:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Refugee status</th>
<th>Subsidiary protection</th>
<th>Humanitarian status</th>
<th>Rejected applications</th>
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<td>Syrian children</td>
<td>46%</td>
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“We all go to the same school. Our classmates are of different nationalities: They come from China, Ukraine, Albania, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh...

We all communicate in Greek. It was startling to see how many common words there are between our languages. Farsi has common words with Arabic, as well as other common words with Greek! We like to play sports together – we split our teams in boys against girls.

There are many good things at the Greek school. Boys and girls are treated as equal inside the classroom. We also don’t wear uniforms! We just wish that everybody would wear the same types of clothes, like sportswear. Now it’s easy to see from our clothes that some children have more money than others and that can make you feel bad. Besides, breaks are more often in Greek schools and we don’t get bored! At the school in Iran, there was one break every 90 minutes.

We understand that there are some people who do not want refugee and migrant children together with their kids at school. There is fear transmitted from some parents to the children, similar to the discrimination that we experienced in Iran, where some people also didn’t want Afghans in the classroom. What we would like to tell to these parents is that there are bad and good people everywhere, and we like them to give us a chance to play together.

The cousin of a member of our team, who lives in Germany, went through the same thing. She told us: ‘Initially, I felt that everyone was afraid of me. But then, they gave me a chance to join the same activities as them, and they saw that I am just a kid like they are: I want to play, I want to laugh, I want to eat sweets, I want to live’.”

Adolescent and young girls from Afghanistan from 15 to 26 years old Members of the editorial committee of the newspaper “Migratory Birds”
Educational needs of refugee and migrant children

99% of parents reported that conflict and displacement have been the main barriers to education for their children at interviews from 2016. The reasons for the difficulties that children faced in attending formal education in their countries also include: military attacks on schools, forced conscription and high education costs.

In addition, 50% of the children interviewed by Save the Children in Syria reported that they never or rarely felt safe at school.

“Number One priority” was the value given to education at a study with adolescents and youth in 2016

15,000 is the estimated number of school age children in Greece (3-17 years old), as of July 2017. Among them, 12,000 are the estimated children who belong in the age category of compulsory education.

Over 2 years is the average length of time that children currently in Greece who missed out on their education have stayed out of school.

Some refugee and migrant children have never been to school

UNICEF response in Greece

UNICEF currently provides non formal education in 9 locations in Attica, 7 locations in Central Macedonia and 1 location in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

Education:

4,000 children participated in structured educational activities, including, Greek, English, mother tongue and life-skills education (59% boys, 41% girls)

7,600 children received school material

700 children (3-5 years old) benefited from early childhood activities (54% boys, 46% girls)

12,000 children were vaccinated against vaccine preventable diseases
"Happiness has a different meaning for every person. I perceive happiness as the ability to materialize your dreams, to be free.

To be able to study, to learn and become what you want. And this is exactly what I want for my kids, to be successful, to help poor people, to help those in need.

In Greece, you live in a democracy, a very important factor, an element you value more when it is something your homeland lacks; when you got used to living in constant fear. It vital for my kids to go to school; knowledge is the main ingredient of dreams, it allows you to be free and independent.

I don’t know whether I’ll stay here permanently. What I am sure of is that I will do anything in my power for my kids to grow up in a democratic society with security, to attend school, and to become successful individuals.

I always tell my kids to respect and be appreciative. To be optimists. After all, I flew away from my own country when I realized that (there) my kids didn’t have the right for the life they deserve. I left my homeland keeping in mind the nostalgic feeling of returning when democracy prevails. I want to thank Greeks for being open and friendly towards me and my kids; for allowing us to dream. This, for me as a father, is the most important thing”.

Bahoz, father of two, 36 year old Kurdish asylum seeker
Hello, my name is Mahnaz. I am 12 years old and I come from Afghanistan. The things that make me happy are the health of my parents and sister. I want to go to a safe country to study and become a doctor, to help people who are sick. I like people to be friends. My dream is to have a beautiful home. I wish that I will be able to see my grandmother for a last time.

Fatima Hassani, 11 years old, Afghanistan
I will be happy when my parents and my whole family live together, the one next to the other. [I will be happy] when there is PEACE in my own country, as well as when people are friends in the whole world. I want to go to Austria, next to my mother. My dad’s back hurts. I wish my dad’s back gets well. In the future, I want to become the President of the country and a doctor. [I want] to become president, so as to develop the country and bring Peace, and to become a Doctor, so as to be able to help people who are sick. For others to live in Peace.

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Zakia, 12, Afghanistan!
What makes you happy? What makes me happy is PEACE in Afghanistan, that all people are friends and well. I want to go to Sweden so that we are all together, to study. I wish for Afghanistan to calm down, in order to be able to go to Afghanistan. I have many Dreams!

Hello! My name is Sonita. I am 11 years old and I come from Afghanistan. The things that make me happy are: my parent’s health and the health of the whole family, lessons and friendship. I wish I could go to Germany to my father, so that the whole family lives together. To be able to study and become a doctor so that I can help all these sick people and examine them.
Hi, my name is Nargis. I come from Afghanistan and I am 12 years old. In life, the things that make me happy are peace prevailing all over the world, and my parents being together. I will be glad when I go to school, which will make my parents happy too. In the future, I want to become a doctor. Wherever I am, I want to have a quiet life, I want my father to work and for me to be able to read, so that I become a doctor. My father is sick, I wish he was well. I wish that my teachers are always happy. I thank my instructor who teaches me. I also thank the whole organization.

My name is Hadi. I am 10 years old. I am from Afghanistan. In the future I want to become a Doctor. I hope I will be able to get next to my father. I hope to study to get somewhere. I want to have a bright future. The things that will make me happy is to study and for my parents to be happy. I want my country to be liberated from WAR, the people of Afghanistan not to having enmity and war between them. From you, the Europeans, I ask that you send me soon next to my father. I hope to get to Germany quickly. Next to my family, to be healthy and happy to live with my family.

I wish that Germany gives us a home, I wish my father to be recognized soon as a refugee in Germany. This is my only Dream.
Sources

Page 4: The decision to flee
UNHCR, This is who we are: A study of the profile, experiences and reasons for flight of unaccompanied or separated children from Afghanistan seeking asylum in Sweden in 2015, October 2016, http://bit.ly/2vhAsnr

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