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Citation: Ben Attia, F., Brian, T., Heiermann, A. C., Grant, S., Jarvis, C., Kovras, I., Laczko, F., Mirto, G., Polychroni, K., Robins, S., et al (2016). 'Like a part of a puzzle which is missing': The impact on families of a relative missing in migration across the Mediterranean. Mediterranean Missing.

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Mediterranean Missing

Understanding the Needs of Families
and the Obligations of States

www.mediterraneanmissing.eu

***‘Like a part of a puzzle which is missing’*: The impact on families of a relative missing in migration across the Mediterranean**

Report on the situation of families

September 2016



CITY UNIVERSITY
LONDON



IOM's Global Migration
Data Analysis Centre
GMDAC

THE UNIVERSITY of York
Centre for Applied Human Rights

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The Project Team gratefully acknowledges the contributions of family members and survivors, NGOs and government officials who agreed to be interviewed, as well as IOM's officials for advice during the drafting of this report. Any errors remain the responsibility of the authors.

The cover image shows a Tunisian mother with photos of her two missing sons.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Deadly shipwrecks and the bodies of migrants have become the most iconic images of the contemporary refugee crisis at the EU's periphery. In 2015 and the first half of 2016, more than 6,600 are known to have died crossing the Mediterranean, with an additional number of unrecorded deaths.¹ The majority of those whose bodies are retrieved are never identified, while those whose bodies are not found cannot be. Although the media and solidarity groups have shed light on the plight of living refugees, and highlighted the shocking reality of shipwrecks, relatively little is known about migrants whose fate is unclear to their families. Authorities in the countries of reception (most notably Greece and Italy) have been unprepared to deal with the nature and volume of this unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Currently, there is a policy vacuum around the problem, marked by minimal cooperation among different state agencies, a lack of effective investigation, and little effort to contact the families of the missing. This results in bodies being buried unidentified, with little respect for religious and cultural expectations or the rights of the families. As such, thousands of families in countries of migrant origin remain unaware of the fate of their loved ones.

International human rights law (IHRL) applies in situations of migrant death and loss at international borders, and places duties on states, derived from international treaties, to identify the dead and respect the rights of the families of missing migrants. IHRL puts obligations on states to investigate all suspicious deaths effectively, including taking steps to identify the body, and secure evidence, and that there should be no discrimination between the deaths of citizens and of non-citizens. Effective investigation is understood to include efforts to retrieve the body, and to trace and inform families. The right to family life includes the participation of relatives in the investigation, and in the burial of a relative's body. The policy vacuum that exists in the states studied by this project suggests that not all these obligations are either acknowledged or acted upon by concerned states.

The families of missing migrants are the victims of this humanitarian disaster and yet the impacts on them are unknown. They remain unrepresented in discussions about the management of bodies and the broader crisis, and largely unable to engage with the authorities who can identify their loved ones. To address the problem demands that its victims – most notably the families of the missing – are a central part of such efforts. This report presents the results of interviews with 84 families who are missing loved ones who have migrated across the Mediterranean, from Tunisia, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. The study aims to give a voice to such families, to permit them to articulate the impacts of having a missing relative.

Families either saw their loved ones leave home to take a boat, or – in many cases from Iraq and Syria – travelled with them and other family members. In the latter case, many interviewees were themselves traumatised by the shipwreck they had survived. The majority of families have received no news of the missing and as such live in ambiguity, with no idea if loved ones are dead or alive. While those who have witnessed deaths in shipwrecks understand the missing may have drowned, others have a visceral belief that their family member is alive, believing that missing relatives are detained in Europe or elsewhere and so unable to contact them.

The primary need of families is to know: they seek closure, through information concerning the fate of loved ones. They want to know if the missing are dead or alive, and in any case where they are. If those missing are dead, families need their bodies to be repatriated so they can be honoured and buried where families can visit them, and they can take their place as a part of their community.

¹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>

The impacts on families of having a missing relative are many. While a death can be mourned, disappearance is something that cannot be understood in the light of everyday experience, trapping family members in a situation they struggle to make sense of. The families interviewed demonstrated a range of symptoms associated both with the impact of trauma and of ambiguous loss, including sadness, sleep disturbance and dreams of the missing, anxiety and hypervigilance.² They reported a sense of stasis, a feeling that life had stopped since the person went missing. A minority reported that they had psychiatric problems that they linked to the disappearance, and were receiving treatment for them.

Having a missing relative gave rise to family conflict, with individuals isolating themselves and neglecting relationships with family, to pursue an obsessive interest in the missing person. In many families there were divergent opinions as to what had happened to their missing relative, fuelling family conflict and preventing the missing person being discussed. Missing someone from the family was also seen to impact on family roles, with women in particular having to take on greater responsibilities in the home where men, particularly husbands, are missing. Women also reported becoming a target for harassment where a husband is missing, as well as seeing their identity challenged since their status as wives or widows is ambiguous. Wives of the missing reject any possibility that they could remarry without definitive news of their husbands.

Families also reported challenges to livelihood, most notably in Tunisia, where families were often left without the economic support of young men who were potentially their most productive members.

Families of the missing had mechanisms that helped them cope, and in most cases were able to function well, despite the pain and anxiety of their situation. Solidarity was considered a great support, where families were in contact with others in their community who were also missing relatives, as in Tunisia where a family association brought affected people together. The Muslim faith of most affected families is also a source of strength and resilience.

These data have been interpreted to both understand the severe impact of having a missing relative – and to emphasise the importance of identifying those who die seeking to cross the Mediterranean – as well as seeking routes to helping families live well despite not knowing. The lens of *ambiguous loss* is one way to interpret impacts on families, as well as offering a route to therapeutic approaches, and here is presented as a model that can aid understanding of the impact of having a relative missing in migration. Existing coping mechanisms can be supported by ensuring that family associations are able to bring affected families together and giving such family meetings an explicitly therapeutic element.

It is hoped that this report can encourage approaches that can minimise the numbers of migrants whose bodies are retrieved at the EU's southern borders, but who remain unidentified. The price paid for those buried unnamed in Lesbos and Sicily is the trauma of the families they have left behind. The invisibility of families however also plays a role in frustrating identification which demands that post-mortem data from the body be matched to ante-mortem data from families: as long as European states have no such contact with affected families, in states of migrant origin and elsewhere, this is impossible. This demands that families be put at the centre of the process, and efforts made to make them visible, not only for technical reasons, but politically – such that their voices can be heard and – as here – used to advocate for every effort to be made to identify the missing.

² *Hypervigilance* is an enhanced state of sensory sensitivity accompanied by an exaggerated intensity of behaviors whose purpose is to detect threats.

INTRODUCTION

There is a huge emptiness like a part of a puzzle which is missing. (TU27)

Deadly shipwrecks and the bodies of migrants have become the most iconic images of the contemporary refugee crisis at the EU's periphery. In 2015 and the first half of 2016, more than 6,600 are known to have died crossing the Mediterranean, with an additional number of unrecorded deaths.³ Although the media and solidarity groups have shed light on the plight of living refugees, and highlighted the shocking reality of shipwrecks, relatively little is known about migrants whose fate is not known to their families. Authorities in the countries of reception (most notably Greece and Italy) have been unprepared to deal with the nature and volume of this unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Currently, there is a policy vacuum around the problem, marked by minimal cooperation among different state agencies, a lack of effective investigation, and little effort to contact the families of the missing.⁴ This results in bodies being buried unidentified, with little respect for religious and cultural expectations or the rights of the families. As such, thousands of families in countries of migrant origin remain unaware of the fate of their loved ones.

The families are the real, yet invisible, victims of this humanitarian disaster. In the absence of a body to bury they are trapped in a state of ambiguity, not knowing where loved ones are, or if they are dead or alive. If they are dead, the location of the body is unknown. Families suffer from ambiguous loss: a traumatic loss that gives rise to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and family conflict. Ambiguous loss is the most stressful type of loss precisely because it is unresolved. Existing policies fail to maximize the prospect of identification, and inhibit any communication between authorities and families, guaranteeing that families continue to be trapped in ambiguity.

Aim of the project

This study, a part of the Mediterranean Missing project, seeks to make visible those victims who have largely remained unseen through this crisis: the families of missing migrants. The families are as absent from the discussion as those missing are from their families' lives. Through semi-structured interviews with families of missing Tunisians, Syrians, Iraqis and others, we have sought to understand the range of impacts on families of having a missing relative and the needs they express in response to their experience, through the voices of the families. Since families have no information about their loved ones, or even indications that the missing arrived in Europe, no assumption is made about a link between unidentified bodies and the lack of contact from their loved one. As such, families believe the missing may be alive but unable to inform their families of their situation. Whatever the fact in any individual case, a solution to the problem of the missing – including both the living and the dead – must largely be addressed in Europe. This effort must however be driven by the needs of the families of the missing, and indeed in most cases is dependent upon information only they can supply. This report seeks to begin to allow the impacts on families of missing migrants and the needs they express to be articulated and disseminated in a way that can demonstrate to policymakers on both sides of the Mediterranean the urgency and severity of the ongoing humanitarian crisis. The report also seeks to inform efforts to support families as long as they are without answers concerning loved ones.

The central aim of the Mediterranean Missing project is to offer evidence-based policy recommendations to effectively deal with the humanitarian challenge of missing migrants. To this end, the 12-month project has sought to map existing law, policy and practice in states of migrant reception and to understand how having a missing relative affects families. To identify local authorities' range of policy responses we focused on the two main entry points for migrants and refugees namely the Greek island of Lesbos and the broader region of Sicily in Italy, both of which have experienced a large number of deadly shipwrecks in

³ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>

⁴ See the Italy and Greece country reports of the Mediterranean Missing project.

recent years. Researchers conducted interviews with local actors, including municipal authorities, NGOs, coastguards, coroners, funeral offices and other stakeholders to map existing policy and practice. Lawyers were commissioned to prepare memos summarizing the national legal frameworks in Greece and Italy, with particular emphasis on the duties of the state and understandings of the rights of the families. To shed light on the needs of the relatives of missing migrants, we carried out interviews with families of the missing in Tunisia and among families from Syria and Iraq. In total we collected more than 130 semi-structured interviews from authorities, NGOs and families of the missing.

International Human Rights Law – The Obligations of States

International human rights law (IHRL) applies in situations of migrant death and loss at borders and places duties on states, derived from international treaties, to identify the dead and respect the rights of the families of missing migrants. This is summarised in a legal memo produced as part of the Mediterranean Missing project.⁵ States have a duty to protect the right to life of all without discrimination, to respect the right to family life of relatives of the missing who are in the country, and to take special measures to protect children of missing migrants. IHRL requires that there should be no discrimination between the deaths of citizens and of non-citizens, and that steps must be taken to prevent and investigate deaths. The implications of IHRL are that:

- States should investigate all suspicious deaths effectively, including taking steps to identify the body, and secure evidence. Effective investigation should include efforts to retrieve the body, and to trace and inform families;
- The right to family life includes participation by relatives in the investigation, and in the burial of a relative's body;
- The protection of children whose parents are missing includes respecting their best interests at all times, and taking specific measures to preserve their identity, including nationality, name, and family relations.

The policy vacuum that exists in the states studied by this project suggests that not all these obligations are either acknowledged or acted upon.

Methodology and sampling

The study sought to understand the impact on and needs of families of missing migrants, in their own terms, representing the families of those who have gone missing crossing the Mediterranean in recent years. These have recently been dominated by Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis,⁶ while large numbers fled North Africa in the aftermath of the Arab spring in early 2011. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were made with a total of 84 families of missing migrants and refugees, mostly from Tunisia and Syria, but including those from Iraq, Palestine and Egypt. These interviews sought to give families the space to articulate their own priorities and perceptions of what has happened to loved ones and the impact on those left behind. Interviews were made between November 2015 and April 2016.

Interviews were made sharing the cultural assumptions of respondents. Thus, whilst conclusions about emotional or other impacts will be drawn from interviews, the language used was that of participants themselves, rather than being framed in a clinical or sociological approach. Care was taken to use the language of respondents in describing the status of the missing, and to make no assumptions about their fate. This often threatened the ability to ask certain questions, such as perspectives on the return of the body: where a family denied death, this issue could not be raised.



Photo 2 Belongings and documents found on the shores of Lesbos

⁵ Grant, S. (2016) *Dead and Missing Migrants: International Human Rights Law – The Obligations of States*. York: Mediterranean Missing project.

⁶ <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> It is however worth noting that Eritreans who are well represented among those crossing the Mediterranean are absent here, due to challenges in finding communities of families that are readily accessible.

In Tunisia, all interviews were made face to face, by a researcher with several years of experience of working with affected families. Families with other origins were contacted largely through social media, by a Turkish and Arabic speaking Syrian researcher. The majority of these interviews were made remotely, using the phone or Skype, with family members who were either in Europe – often having travelled with those who are now missing – or in the Middle East. A number of refugee families were met in Turkey and interviewed in person. Interviews were recorded where consent was given, and transcribed and translated, and the resulting text analysed. In the few cases where consent to record was denied, notes were made.

Details of family members met are summarised in Table 1, and all respondents summarised in Appendix I.

Gender of interviewee		Nature of interview	
Female	55	Online	32
Male	29	In person	52

Relationship to missing		Nationality	
Mother	44	Tunisian	47
Father	16	Syrian	25
Brother / sister	10	Iraqi	6
Cousin	4	Palestinian	6
Wife	7	Egyptian	1
Son / daughter	2		
Aunt / uncle	2		

Table 1 Summary of the sample of family members interviewed.

Ethical issues

Research with vulnerable people will always pose ethical issues, and this research was dealing with individuals who were all suffering from the loss of loved ones, and in many cases were also struggling with the challenges of having been forced from their home. Whilst there is a literature on working with traumatised victims from a therapeutic viewpoint, there is little written on how researchers without an agenda to intervene therapeutically should proceed. Some researchers “believe that with skilful and sensitive interviewing, subjects actually benefit from talking openly about their experiences”,⁷ and there is some quantitative data to support this,⁸ largely regarding the emergence of new insights as a result of subjects’ participation. Negative effects of trauma victims participating in research have also been found: there is a danger that having reopened the trauma, the researcher can cause emotional distress and then leave the subject in an environment that is unsympathetic.⁹

The concrete issues to be understood and consented to by all subjects include confidentiality and the anonymous transmission of statements they gave. It also had to be

⁷ Bell, Pam (2001) The ethics of conducting psychiatric research in war-torn contexts. In Smyth, Marie and Robinson, Gillian (eds.), *Researching violently divided societies: Ethical and methodological issues*. London: Pluto Press: 185.

⁸ Newman, Elana and Kaloupek, Danny G. (2004) The Risks and Benefits of Participating in Trauma-Focused Research Studies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 17(5): 383 – 394.

⁹ Ibid, and Supra n.7 at p.9.

understood that the research did not aim to directly benefit its subjects, other than through the advocacy that will result.

In the Tunisian case, interviews were conducted by a researcher known to families, who had been working with them for several years, has psychological training and therapeutic experience, and who accessed them through a family association she was close to. In Tunisia, since those interviewed were a part of the family association they generally had access to support provided by other affected families around and after the interview. Families also have some experience of talking about their missing relative, and have had at least 4 years since the events occurred, increasing their capacity to cope with them.¹⁰

Potentially more problematic were those interviews made with families from Iraq and Syria, mostly remotely. Such families had lost relatives – and in many cases had themselves experienced a shipwreck while crossing the Mediterranean – in recent months. Most were also living as refugees far from their homes, increasing their vulnerability. The modality of using the telephone and online methods was driven by a lack of alternatives to access a highly dispersed population: families of those who had gone missing during the peak of arrivals by sea were largely spread across the EU, but also in camps and cities in Turkey and at home in Syria and Iraq. As such, the imperative to speak with such family members was driven by the inability to find any other route to ensuring that their voices were heard.

To ensure that the research was made with both informed consent of respondents and in ways that minimised the personal risk to them, several steps were taken. The first was to work with a researcher who was herself a refugee from Syria, with experience of many of the challenges that families were facing. Second was the fact that families were contacted via social media by the researcher, and in all cases had publicly shared their experience online in an effort to collect information about the disappearance. The agreement to speak to the researcher and to be recorded, as almost all were, was negotiated over social media or by e-mail, often over an extended period during which trust was built with the researcher. During this period the researcher had the opportunity to discuss the goals and methods of the project in some detail, including the nature of the research, who was involved, and any potential benefits. This amounted to what can be considered a process of “iterative consent”,¹¹ ensuring a degree of accountability to the researched. Some of those contacted did indeed decline to participate, since they saw no direct benefit in taking part. Some family members in Syria, for example, simply did not prioritise the issue of missing relatives, as long as ‘we are dying every day’.

In most cases talking about their experience was driven by a desire to ensure that their stories were disseminated as widely as possible, and was something they were desperately keen to do. As a result of the relationship built with respondents, when the formal interview was finished in many cases conversations with the researcher continued about other issues, which was itself evidence that the previous conversation had not been retraumatising. Those who took part saw their being interviewed as part of an effort to prevent the lack of information being the end of the story: discussing the missing appeared to begin to make them less absent.

The evidence that interviews had no negative impact on respondents include the fact that all interviews were completed: despite being invited to halt discussion at any point if they wanted to, all respondents completed the interview. Additionally, a number of those interviewed went on to refer friends with missing relatives to the researcher, suggesting that they had found the process worthwhile. An additional demonstration of the relationship with the researcher was seen when journalists sought to talk with respondents, and asked the researcher to act as a conduit. In all cases, such requests were refused, demonstrating that they found participation in the research something worth doing, whereas talking to the

¹⁰ Smyth (2001) draws attention to the timing of interventions with the traumatised: meeting subjects too soon after traumatic experience may report early shock and denial, in contrast to the true impact of trauma.

¹¹ Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C. and Pittaway, E. (2007) Beyond ‘Do No Harm’: The Challenge of Constructing Ethical Relationships in Refugee Research, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20 (2): 299-319.

media was not. Whilst there was no explicit effort to provide support as a part of the interview process, the researcher was able to direct families to other resources, such as interpreters or contacts overseas, as well as being someone with whom they could share their stories, while ‘crying with them’, a modest demonstration of the solidarity that is so important to families of the missing (see Section 0).

MISSING MIGRANTS: CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEPARTURE AND DISAPPEARANCE

The respondents from Tunisia and the Middle East represent two very different samples. In the Tunisian case, those missing are predominantly young men who left alone in 2011 and 2012, following the fall of Ben Ali, with the goal of finding better life opportunities, while many travelling from the Middle East fleeing violence and conflict travelled as families. In many cases they themselves are survivors of the shipwrecks in which relatives went missing.

Tunisia

The regime changes of the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, and the revolution gave young people both new opportunities and incentives to travel to Europe. As such they represent a classic migration population, fleeing poverty and primarily seeking employment and livelihood, as the mother of one missing man said:

My son didn't leave because he was a criminal or had problems with justice, my son left because he suffered from financial precariousness and unemployment, my son left because he had the ambition to work and to be able to feel active and accomplished. (TU29)

Such young men have now been missing for 5 years.

Tunisian family members mostly saw their loved ones, almost all sons typically in their early 20s, leave with little warning, and in many cases without informing their families. Most parents said that they had asked their sons not to travel, but were helpless to prevent them. All carried mobile phones that allowed those travelling to keep families updated with their progress, often calling right up until the point that they apparently entered Italian waters.

He came to see me in order to tell me that all his friends had left. I have tried to deter him since a very young age. He prepared his stuff in 5 minutes. I have always been against the *hégira*.¹² I could have died after him but, this time everything happened so quickly that I did not have time to think. We kept in touch by phone. Around 2am, he called his sister to tell her that they were on the open sea and that everything was alright. That was his last call. [...] We spent a year calling my son's number; it rings but always no answer. (TU06)

Syria and Iraq

In contrast to the Tunisian young men missing, those from Syria and Iraq typically travelled in family groups in recent months and years (i.e. mostly in 2015, see Table 2, although Iraqis have been travelling to Europe for many years) and were fleeing the extreme violence that has engulfed their region. The majority would have been likely to receive asylum in EU states once – and if – they had reached them. In many cases respondents are themselves survivors of the shipwrecks in which relatives went missing. Interviews reveal the cumulative trauma of being rescued from a sinking vessel and then learning that family members are dead or missing:

We travelled on the 13th of September from Bodrum in Turkey. Our boat carried nearly 152 passengers, which was a very big number.... It was stormy and the huge waves hit and pushed our boat backwards till it hit a rock and we

¹² Used here to mean irregular migration to Europe, but in the Islamic world traditionally referring to Mohammed's migration to Medina.

started to sink before reaching the island. My husband, I and other people next to us threw ourselves from the boat's windows into the sea, then climbed up the boat again when a monster wave hit it and pushed us far from it. My legs were stuck in water till my husband released them, then we decided to swim away from the boat before it capsized over us. We kept swimming in the dark for 4 hours, but the coastguards did not come to rescue us. After that, my husband got tired and decided to swim on his back. He was behind me, but we could not see each other in the darkness despite the beacon's flashing lights... Suddenly, I heard him yelling for me, then he disappeared in the middle of the sea and I have not seen him since. (TK16)

Then the waves got higher and the boat flipped. I held on to the side of the boat and cried for help, my wife my children. Seven children, five girls and two boys in addition to my wife. I have Qamar, nine years-old, Shahrazad, eight years-old, Jana, seven years-old, Sajda, six years-old, Islam, one month-old, Mohamed, five years old, Omar, three years-old and my wife, 28 years old. I tried to save them, but I didn't have a life jacket or a swimming ring. I dived under the water almost 10 times, looking for them left and right. I remained like this for two hours, flipping on my back and swimming, and I finally gave in and surrendered to God's will.¹³ Two and a half hours later a fishing boat came and shone a spotlight on us. They saved us. The survivors were six people out of 23. Three men and three women. [...] After 11 days my children started surfacing. The first was Sajda, two days later Shahrazad, Qamar and Mohamed. I said these are my children. Every day the translator and I would go to the police and the morgue and identify the bodies. After 40 days, I found my son Omar. He stayed in the sea for 40 days. I recognized him. If you saw him, it was devastating. I knew him from his clothes. I bought him the boots and clothes from Izmir. [...] I am still waiting for my wife and my daughter Janna, six years-old, and Islam who is one month old. They haven't come up yet. (TK30)

This suggests that whilst families from both Tunisia and the Middle East will suffer the impacts of having a missing relative, those from Syria and Iraq who have survived shipwrecks – and often seen the bodies of relatives who died in them – will also potentially be suffering from the traumatic impact of such events. Such families are thus exposed to two very different types of trauma: that of a single, traumatising event that can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the traumatic uncertainty of an ambiguous loss, being of a chronic nature that has emotional, psychological, economic and social consequences

ATTITUDE TO THE FATE OF THE MISSING

Families have a range of understandings of the fate of missing loved ones, impacted by the circumstances in which they went missing and any information they might have received since then. Whilst in most cases no official information has been given by either their own or European authorities, many have been told things that impact upon the meaning they give to their relative's disappearance by smugglers, those travelling with the missing, and others who claim they have information. This, combined with opinions in the community and among other relatives of the missing will ultimately determine how relatives interpret disappearance.

Those who were not travelling with their loved one often received information in the days following their departure. This could be from a smuggler confirming that a boat had sunk, but in many cases, smugglers maintained – even in the face of other evidence – that migrants had reached their destination.

¹³ The Arabic word Allah (الله) has been translated here as 'God', even though there are disputes as to the accuracy of doing so.

I read in the news that some people drowned while immigrating... I looked for them for six days, but did not receive any news... I called the smuggler who said: "your mother and brother reached the beach and were holding hands. Their phones are taken from them on the island, but will be returned to them after a while". (TK19)

In some cases, the sinking of boats was reported in the media and families could draw conclusions depending on what they knew to link that shipwreck to their relative's journey. Informal sources are however often much more important to families, with relatives of the dead and missing and survivors of shipwrecks often trying to inform the families of those they were travelling with:

We were able to talk with a survivor. He told us about the details of the crossing and that they had an engine breakdown and that the boat sank; according to what he said, he saw only drowning men and others trying to swim. That's all that we heard! (TU31)

In most cases however, no trustworthy information at all is received, leaving families subject to rumour. One coping mechanism for families with no knowledge of the fate of loved ones is to search for both evidence that they are alive, and a reason to explain why they have not been in touch (see below) and such rumours can feed this need.

Those family members who had travelled with those now missing and who had been a part of the shipwreck have seen exactly its consequences, including in most cases the deaths that resulted. As such, they are more likely to understand that there is a possibility that the missing have drowned, but still have a human reflex to believe they could have survived.

Ambiguity over the fate

Given that most families have no concrete information about what has happened, they remain unable to determine if missing relatives are dead or alive. Almost every family demonstrated some ambiguity about the fate of their loved one.¹⁴

I don't feel anything, anymore. My feelings are dead. I was waiting for a phone call, I was sure he was still alive. Do you want me to tell you the truth? Actually, I don't know anything about him. I don't know if he passed away or is still alive; unless I start believing in a miracle, hoping he would still be alive and in a good health! I was waiting for someone to call me on the phone or knock on the door. (TU01)

We don't know anything at all about him since that day. My heart is broken [crying]. He is my eldest son and I swear my heart is broken. I wish to see him or hear his voice and then I will die happy. I don't want anything from life but to hear his voice. [...] The problem is I don't know where he is. I would feel better knowing his location. The problem is he is missing. I lost him. It's absolutely hard. I would feel better knowing where he is. My heart is broken and there are thousands who are missing. We don't know where they are. If they are alive or dead. Completely vanished. (TK29)

In many cases, families demonstrate this ambiguity during the interview by saying both that they await the return of the missing and that they expect he is dead, demonstrating how they are trapped between hope and despair, seeking an answer but fearing it will be the worst answer. Families made many statements showing how they were constantly moving between these two contradictory understandings:

¹⁴ There is a significant body of work on ambiguity among family members of the missing, notably concerning those disappeared in conflict, e.g.: Robins, S. (2013) *Families of the Missing: A Test for Contemporary Approaches to Transitional Justice*, New York / London: Routledge Glasshouse; Wagner, Sarah E. (2008) *To know where he lies: DNA technology and the search for Srebrenica's Missing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

We would like his body, I'd like my brother. Even a part of him, it would relieve us to bury him here in his country among people who know him and love him. But I'm convinced that he's alive, and I need an unalienable proof so that I admit his death. I don't want to say that he's dead, my brother is alive... A person whom you didn't bury and about whom there's no proof concerning his death, we can't consider him as such. I hate any person who admits that my brother is dead! (TU19)

I can't fix myself on a position; dead / alive, I'm always oscillating between these two possibilities. As long I have no proof, I'll always remain in this condition. (TU32)

Believing missing relatives are alive

A significant number of family members stated unequivocally that their missing relative was alive, even with no evidence to support this assertion, articulating the incomprehensibility of their death.

I believe they are alive... I don't know where, but I am sure they are alive.. a mother's intuition... most people said they are in Egypt, but I believe they are in Italy, God Willing, I am one hundred percent sure of that. [...] 10 out of 10 I am sure they are alive. (TK09)

In many cases, mothers express a visceral, physical awareness of their belief that their son is alive:

My heart tells me he is alive in Turkey. But I don't know where. I wish I could. Because he is not in the sea, so where could he be? I am always dreaming of him and he tells me mom, I am alive and I want you. [...] My son is not dead. If he were, he would have been found with the rest of the boys, but he is not dead. (TK36)

The data collected from families included a large number of references to rumour and other sources whose reliability is questionable. In reaching out for information on social media, families have received information that has intrigued and frustrated them, as for this family looking for their seven year old daughter:

Some people said they saw her in Izmir in Turkey, while others said she was seen in Limbach in Germany. We are searching in both cities, and coordinating with the Red Cross... there was a family from Damascus with them on the boat, perhaps she left with them... Some people posted on Facebook that they found HH: we contacted them, while others said she was taken by another family as their daughter. Others posted on Facebook that she was seen in Izmir, we contacted them, but they deleted their post later. We posted on Facebook that H is missing, so they replied to us that they have HAH, seven years old, from A neighbourhood, and all the details, but they deleted it later... (TK08)

Such reports show that, whilst social media has a great potential in allowing information about the missing to be shared, it also has dangers for families in raising unreasonable expectations. In some cases, these people became the victims of those seeking to exploit their vulnerability (see below).

The most intriguing stories however concern those who have been shown photographs or videos of their loved ones, apparently in Europe. Among the Tunisian families, a significant number are convinced that they have identified their missing sons in video footage showing tens of thousands of Tunisians arriving in Lampedusa in 2011:

Later, we watched a video of an Italian TV channel that circulated on the internet. In this video, I recognized my son. There he is! [...] He is my son that all the family recognized. I cannot be mistaken about my son. These are his clothes! (TU01)

I recognized my brother on the videos repeatedly. I saw my brother sitting on the floor smoking a cigarette. I recognized him! (TU09)

This apparently irrefutable evidence has convinced many families not only that their children arrived safely in Italy, but that their failure to get in contact with families can only be because they are deprived of their freedom and unable to call home.

This can also be seen as families articulating their right to know the truth, to believe that their loved ones are alive until they receive evidence otherwise. It is however also interesting to compare the certainty of families that they have recognised their family members with the known inadequacy of visual identification of the dead.¹⁵ The trauma of ambiguity and the desire to find evidence of survival are likely to reduce the reliability of such identification. This does however also emphasise that the issue of missing migrants in Europe concerns not only the dead, but all those who are unable to contact family at home, including the thousands of potentially vulnerable unaccompanied minors.¹⁶

Tunisian families repeatedly suggested that their missing relatives were detained in Italy. Stories of the missing being in detention are widespread among families of missing migrants. They circulate and recirculate these reports among their networks, stressing a belief that detainees are not allowed to call anyone or seek help. They hope that their loved ones are in prison and as a result demand lists of detainees in countries such as Turkey, Greece, and Macedonia.

They are detained in prisons in Italy. There are people who have not called their families during 7 long years and have resurfaced later. (TU07)

I recently talked to the Red Cross in Damascus who said that my brother, AA, is in Al-Jalaa prison in Ismailia, or perhaps Azzori prison... a woman from the Nasr family from Gaza told me that our sons are there too. She also said that it is complicated and hard to contact Egypt, especially concerning the military prison. (TK09)

Many families reported dreaming of the missing – a common response to trauma – and one Tunisian mother interpreted this as indicative of what had happened to her son:

I know that my son is in prison. I dreamt of my son surrounded by black-suited guards [tears]. I see him at night and he tells me: Mum, I'm coming! (TU23)

The desperation of families is demonstrated by the large number who have approached fortune tellers and psychics seeking information about the missing. In most cases, such people are happy to tell families what they want to hear: that their loved one is alive:

Yes, we have tried and haven't spared any effort. They said they are alive. We went to psychics and they told us they are in a big place and assured us they are alive. (TK10)

Believe the missing are dead

In Tunisia, where families have little direct experience of the phenomenon of migrant deaths, very few believed that their loved ones were dead. However, in analogy with those whose 'heart' tells them their sons are alive, one woman had what she perceived as physical confirmation of her son's death:

They drowned, my son is dead. All that has happened convinced me that my son died. [...] I told you, the day they drowned, I was in the hospital and I had a high fever and a weird feeling. I had felt that something bad happened to my son [Tears]. The doctors didn't understand what I was suffering from. My whole body was shivering. It was awful. (TU24)

¹⁵ ICRC (2009) *Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders*, Geneva: ICRC.

¹⁶ The German Red Cross has for example received 3,100 tracing requests in 2015 and the first half of 2016, presumed to be from migrants, where either the enquirer is in Germany or the missing person is presumed to be (German Red Cross, personal communication).

Because they were either present at the shipwreck or had access to information from witnesses, some of those from Syria and Iraq were prepared to accept that the missing could have drowned.

From the day she left in the sea, she is with her God, and I am convinced she is with God because no one has time for anyone else or to take care of her.
(TK23)

However, there was still a clear difference in perception between those who witnessed shipwrecks, or travelled to Europe looking for information, and those who were waiting at home.

I can't tell them this because I did not see anything with my own eyes, and I am not 100% sure of what happened. I talk to my family and give them hope, but actually I don't see any hope.... When you called me the other day, my wife was at home so I could not talk to you the way I am talking now because even she does not know any of my information or opinions that they sank in water. I can only tell you this when I am alone and my wife is not home. Otherwise I could not have said that. Actually I did not see anything by my own eyes, but in my opinion, they drowned. (TK13)

My heart gives me hope, but my head – by putting emotion aside – tells me he is dead. [...] when I was in Greece, I was hoping that he is amnesiac and is rescued by some pilot, or sentenced for 10 years in detention to be finally released!! That would delight me, but actually I have very little hope... logically, it is very difficult to think in that way especially that we are in the 21 century, with all kinds of telecommunication, social networks are wide spread among people, and news on such things are fast spread, that is why I have very little hope. [...] [His family] have great faith that he is still alive, especially his mother.. no one dares to tell her about the trip details, the large number of corpses, and that many people died!! She still thinks that X and someone else died, but not her son.
(TK07)

This also shows that even within the same family there can be different understandings of what has happened, demonstrating the capacity for perceptions of the fate itself to generate tension within families (see Section 0).

NEEDS OF THE FAMILIES

While the above impacts suggest there is a need for a range of types of support to families, including the psychosocial, families also articulated explicit needs arising from their experience of having a missing relative. These are discussed here.

It is worth stating that the needs of families depends very much on their situation. There is a dramatic difference in the situation of families of Tunisian migrants, who may be poor but relatively secure at home, and those living under daily threat in Syria, for example, or who have fled the violence and are living as refugees elsewhere. In other contexts, such as Eritrea, families who remain can be at risk as a simple result of a relative having migrated. These limitations and potential divergences in needs relative to the sample studied here should be borne in mind when seeking to generalise these findings.

An answer

The need for information about the missing was the overwhelming priority of all families met, seen as the route to addressing the problems they faced. Most obviously they sought closure – to know if their relative was dead or alive:

Tell us if they alive or dead. [...] The least they can do is answer us and try to imagine how we feel, and just tell us if they are imprisoned or dead. To just feel what we go through. [...]. No one helped me with anything, I just want to get to the bottom of it. It's my right that if he, God forbid, is dead to know and to issue him a death certificate. It's my right to have full legal custody papers over

my kids. If he is alive, I want to know where he is and what he wants, I want to help him. (TK21)

To know where they are. If they are alive or dead. I am staying here just for this. It's fundamental I know. We are Muslims and we like to recite Quran for our dead and if they are alive we want to know where they are. (TK31)

I want to know the truth about the fate of my son. That's all. (TU04)

Beyond an answer it was also clear that families wanted an explanation as to what had happened, information not just about the fate but that communicates and demonstrates the how and why of their fate, and this links to the need to give meaning to their situation:

I want the truth about my son. How did he die? Was he killed? Has he drowned in the sea? I want to know! (TU24)

I want my son back even if he's dead, but I won't just accept the grave, I want the picture of how was he found dead, his clothes, proof of his drowning, everything! [...] We want them to call us if they're alive. [...] If he has been found dead, I know that experts photograph bodies they find. I want this proof. (TU25)

If the missing person is alive then families obviously want to know where he or she is; if they are dead they want a body so that mourning can begin:

I want to find my son, that's all I ask of you.... [Crying] Whether alive or dead, if he is living in Italy, give him a way to contact me, if he died, they must officially declare. [...] They must tell us where our children are. The truth will comfort us; I want him alive or dead. If they say that he's alive, they should tell us in which place is he and if he is dead, we will be able to do our mourning, bury him, after all it is the will of god. (TU11)

Retrieving the body and burial

In some cases, families' belief that their relative was alive prevented a discussion about the bodies of the missing. However, in many cases families acknowledged that a lack of information indicated that the missing could be dead, and were prepared to discuss their need to retrieve the body of their loved one. The body represented proof of death to families:

Yes, the corpses are important to determine their situation... We cannot constantly be worried about them while people spread different rumours. Any confirmed information is highly important to us. (TK20)

I won't believe his death without seeing his body! Bodies remain for years and there are those who dig them up and get out bones, I need proof. (TU20)

Receiving the body would permit families to 'honour' the dead, and to bury them locally so that they can be a part of family and community, and tradition can be respected:

We want to see him and honour him if he was dead... it certainly means a lot to us... (TK10)

In case my son is dead, I'd like to bury him here and, at least, I'll be fixed and I'd have a place where I pray. Even bones, I'll bury them. The cemetery is in front of my house. Every morning, I wake up in front of it. I recite the *Fatihah*,¹⁷ I do this daily. I don't have any hostility towards death. At least, if he's brought back to me, I'd look through the window to see his grave and I'd say that he's there. (TU16)

A traditional burial, and the presence of a dead loved one close to the family, is a comfort:

¹⁷ Sūrat al-Fāṭihah (Arabic: سُورَةُ الْفَاتِحَةِ) is the first chapter (Surah) of the Quran. Its seven verses are a prayer for the guidance, lordship and mercy of God.

I want him to be brought to me if he's dead, so that I'll bury him in front of me and I'll calm down my pains... But there's nothing. Absolutely, [his body's repatriation] it's very important for me, I'll calm down. I'll bury him next to my brothers and my mother and I shall find peace. (TU18)

Of course, it's important to bury him here in his lands. When his mother will go to the graveyard to recite the *Fatihah*, she will go home serene, that's why it's important. Secondly, if they're dead and bodies are buried there, we want them to be brought back. (TU20)

While some believe they will 'recognize' their dead loved ones, others were sceptical that confirming the identity of a body would be unambiguous, particularly where identification techniques such as DNA are poorly understood.

It's important to get my son's body and to bury it here in Tunisia. However, I'm the only one who knows my son perfectly, I'm the only one to be able to recognize him, even through his skeleton... I'd know how to recognize my own. (TU25)

This is all what I hope, to bring my son's body... {Silence} Even if they don't bring the body to me, I keep saying that the soul must be wandering. The body isn't important, who's going to prove me that it's my son in the grave once buried... We're never certain of anything, you see? (TU24)

In some cases the technical elements of confirming identity were understood at some level:

The first thing is to know that my brother is 100% dead and as long as I have not seen the body, I would still have hope and trust in God that he is alive, and I knew that in Italy they carry out a DNA test before they bury the bodies and if I hit the end of the road, I would do the DNA test and I would send it through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [...] The important thing is to know and go there, and if he is somewhere else other than Egypt, then I would go and I would carry out tests on the remains and I would seek what confirms the truthfulness of what is being said. (TK25)

Whilst exhumation in Islam is traditionally considered problematic, no-one among those interviewed said that they would rather the body was not exhumed and repatriated.

There was concern among families about how bodies were treated in Europe, particularly around autopsy, which is done to confirm the cause of death, even though in most cases this is clear.

At first I refused the corpses' autopsy, because reason of death is known and a relative is requesting the bodies. It was as if they were hypnotizing me. I knew the bodies were autopsied shortly before I entered. I would have done anything to not allow the autopsy. (TK01)

There was suspicion about how bodies were treated, including that in Turkey autopsy could be an effort to camouflage organ trafficking from bodies. A Syrian, living in Egypt, articulated a range of concerns about bodies being desecrated in Europe:

If you did not take the corpse or contact the municipality, the mayor, or those in charge of burials, the bodies would have been burnt or thrown in the sea. I would never let that happen to my relatives even if I had to take them from Greece to Denmark on foot [...] It is for religious reasons. If one died, he/she should be buried on the Islamic way, and nothing else. (TK10)

In summary, all families who discussed the issue in interviews seek that bodies are exhumed where identified and returned to their home communities. No opinions were received on details or timing of burials in Europe: it seems likely that families have not considered how the body of a loved one is treated, not least because most seek to avoid confronting the possibility of death. Whilst there is no demand for either a fast burial or long-term retention in a morgue, the implications of families' needs around the body are that the possibility of

identification and the return of remains should be maximised, implying that all possible data (both post and ante-mortem) should be collected and managed in a way that enables this. Whilst autopsy remains a common practice for migrant bodies and indeed all unnatural deaths, families are opposed to it, and it remains unclear – given that the cause of death is typically apparent – what goals it serves.

Livelihood

An overlooked but crucial element of the impact of having a missing relative is that on livelihood. Those migrating from Tunisia were overwhelmingly younger men from the poorest families, and as a result they left behind families that are often struggling to survive. A number of family members emphasised the economic impacts of losing their relative:

I have neither income nor free health care book. I have made an application several times for an allowance but in vain. My disappeared son used to work in Tunis and send me money to survive. I have a herd; every time I sell a sheep or a goat. My other son who works in the military visits me once a month and helps me as he can. (TU10)

The search for the missing, in terms of visits to Tunisia, also has a cost that drains a family's meagre resources:

I am retired. I receive a pension. Even the sheep I had, I sold in order to fund my trips to Tunis and my engagement with other families. I go to Tunis twice a month at the rate of 100TND each trip. You can imagine how I could spend. All this without any results. [...] He worked a lot and helped me. Now I alone provide the needs of my family. Even the government has not given us the material support and do not want it. (TU14)

The result is that families seek that the authorities offer them support:

So, we demand our government to support us and to bring us some help. The financial helps are merely perceivable by missing people's families. Generally, these families are in total need since the missing son or husband used to work and to satisfy the needs. Where do you want the mother to satisfy the needs of the rest of the family from? Does she have to beg for money in the street? (TU17)

Among those from the Middle East, where people of all ages were travelling, impacts have included the loss of pensions that were important contributors to household income:

We were living on my father's retirement pension. [...] Yes, [his pension] stopped. We do not know what to do or whether my father is alive or dead. [...] The retirement pension was in my father's name; therefore we cannot receive it since we don't know whether he is alive or dead. (TK02)

Many Syrians and Iraqis also reported the financial struggles typical of refugees in a strange country, trying to support their families.

The impact on families of missing a relativeWe live in mystery. My parents died, but I forgot them. However, my son's leaving is unforgettable, I can't get over it... (TU21)

The above quotation demonstrates succinctly the difference between the impact of a death on an individual and family, and that of a disappearance. A death that can be mourned is always a tragedy but one that can be comprehended, both personally and socially. Funeral ritual after death can construct meaning, formalise the departure of the deceased from the community, and create a space for mourning that allows both a processing of the new situation and a shared understanding of a family's pain. A disappearance however must be given a meaning, precisely because it is something that cannot be understood in the light of everyday experience. The trauma of ambiguity, as can be seen in the statements of respondents reported here, creates a challenge for families precisely because they cannot

make sense of a situation defined by uncertainty. Disappearance is of a chronic nature that has emotional, psychological, economic, and social consequences.¹⁸ The net impact on families and individuals of having a missing relative will be the sum of these effects, subject to the resources of individuals and communities to cope.

In the semi-structured interviews of this study an effort was made to probe the extent to which the stress of disappearance and coping with the resulting challenges was impacting on the family. Efforts were made to understand the psychological (cognition, emotion, behaviour), social, physical and material (i.e. economic) impacts of having a missing relative. The responses to these questions were formulated within a cultural environment that assumed the local values of the persons being questioned, and often gave information about the cultural specificities of that impact.

Families of the missing are mostly seen to suffer from normal emotional distress after extremely upsetting events, rather than psychiatric disorders. It is also key to understand that families and communities have resources to address some of their needs, and an effort was made to identify these, notably positive coping mechanisms that offered emotional support.

Psychological and emotional impacts

The families interviewed demonstrated a range of symptoms associated both with the impact of trauma and of ambiguous loss, including sadness, sleep disturbance and dreams of the missing, anxiety and hypervigilance. One of the most commonly articulated impacts of having a missing relative was the very present absence of the missing in their life. Families reported that they were constantly thinking of the missing, involuntarily dwelling on the life and disappearance of their loved one.

[My mother] wakes up every day asking about them. For example; you called inquiring about them now, she was alarmed that maybe you have any news about them... she is attached to the ringing of the phone, is depressed, has heart and pressure diseases which are aggravating even more... (TK09)

How do you imagine the feeling of a mother who lost her child? What I feel goes beyond the sadness, it is a wound that will never heal ... when I see his friends, his brother and his clothes, I remember him [crying] How can I forget? I try to avoid seeing the dresser containing his clothes, I'm afraid to smell him and remember how much I miss him and feeling weak ... [crying] When I'm alone at home, I began to turn around and call my son shouting his name [crying] if he was there and I call him... (TU34)

This generalised anxiety disorder was the most common symptom encountered, together with expression of extreme pain. This anxiety, and its prevalence, appears to allow the problems facing most families to be discriminated from PTSD. Whereas PTSD is linked to a specific *event* of trauma, the anxiety expressed by families was about the missing person, rather than the event of his disappearance: it concerned an ongoing situation that has no closure.¹⁹ It is however clear that in those who experienced a shipwreck and/or the loss of loved ones with whom they were travelling, PTSD is also a potential impact to be addressed.

In some cases this concern with the missing person becomes obsessive:

He often feels alone and when the house is empty, he began to call for our disappeared son by his first name ... Fortunately, he kept his job! His colleagues are very nice to him; they offered him a tableau with the photo of [his son] with a background of Mecca. [...] He talks to this photo all the time. I can tell you

¹⁸ Blaauw, Margriet and Lahteenmaki, Virpi (2002) 'Denial and silence' or 'acknowledgement and disclosure'. Int. Rev. of the Red Cross, 84:848.

¹⁹ Boss, Pauline (2006) Loss, trauma and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss. New York: Norton.

that my husband fringes lunacy. I sometimes hear him speak to our disappeared son disappeared, and saying: "Come on son! Come back home, you're too late! ". (TU05)

At its most extreme, this takes the form of neglecting all aspects of life to dwell on the missing person:

I don't want to eat, I don't want to wear clothes and I don't want to go out anymore. (TU18)

And this was seen to be associated with making an extra effort to include the missing as a part of the family:

Feasts have no sense anymore, neither Ramadan nor Eid. I place the pan on the stove to prepare something to eat, and then I start crying. Even while preparing the table, I put a plate and a glass for my missing son on the table. I'm keeping his clothes as they are as if he was still here. (TU16)

A common theme of family members was sleep disturbance, and problems of insomnia:

I can't sleep anymore, I'm always nervous and I can't stand my nieces nor my daughters anymore... I prefer staying alone. Even the doctor advised me to always go out to breathe some fresh air and not to isolate myself in my place anymore... {Tears} I'm talking to myself constantly and I don't know sleeping anymore... especially sleeping. I even went to a general practitioner. I asked him for tablets to be able to sleep... When I take my anti-insomnia tablets, I lose my bearings by getting up in the morning and I don't recognize my house, nor the way out. (TU18)

I suffer from disturbances in my sleep, I wake up several times during the night. I see my son in front of me there. I became anxious and scared to receive news about his death, I fear it but I accept. I feel destroyed [crying]. (TU36)

Many, when asked if they dream of their missing relative, reported that they had, reflecting their waking obsession:

Yes, first thing is insomnia and fear that someone would attack us, other than that, I always see my husband in my dreams, I feel him calling me or he is unable to talk to me, I know my husband and I see him in a strange way in the dreams. Then I wake up and I can't go back to sleep. I sleep for an hour or an hour and half and for the rest of the night I am an insomniac, crying or bored not knowing what to do, especially if I get news that he is alive. (TK21)

One common manifestation – associated with both PTSD and ambiguous loss - is hypervigilance, an excessive sensitivity to external stimuli:

I became very anxious and I can't bare noise anymore, I jump at every event... I became hypersensitive, you see? (TU25)

Others report the feeling of stasis, the impression that life has stopped or is somehow suspended pending resolution of the uncertainty around the missing:

Until today, I've felt that the world has stopped. Nothing moves. I do not feel anything moving in this life. Since my son is gone, everything has been frozen! The air, the sun, the wind, the rain, the night and day... everything has stopped until now and since the day of his departure as I still expect a call from my son. I am always on 6 September 2012 nothing has been advanced. (TU05)

Since my brother left, we have no life! Everything is stopped I swear, and the authorities do not want to help us find peace... (TU08)

I no longer live, I feel that my life froze suddenly. (TU33)

Memory problems suggest that the trauma of their loss can impact functioning:

Since my son is gone, I have more problems with memory, I often forget where I put things, I am unable to dress, clean, or cook [...] My brain is not in place, I have a lot of dark thoughts and I ruminate endlessly.

A significant number of those met reported psychiatric problems that go beyond distress and that appear to require expert intervention and pose a potential threat to individual functioning. In most cases, this was apparent because an individual had already seen a psychiatrist.

I go to a psychiatric hospital [...] since 2011. I don't sleep anymore, I always visit the doctors. I was even hospitalized in the psychiatric hospital. I don't sleep anymore, I have hallucinations and dark ideas. It's like a crisis, I start wandering in the house and sometimes I hit the furniture. I have a disrupted sleep. I usually wake up at 3 in the morning. There is a voice in my head telling me sometimes that my son is dead, and sometimes I tell myself that he is alive. I feel choked. I always ruminate and I usually feel afraid when I stay alone. The medicines that were prescribed to me are too strong; I can no longer wake up. I'm so tired because of all this, you know. (TU02)

I thought once about slaughtering my daughters with a knife [...] My daughters came to spend the night by my side. I thought that I was going to take the knife and slaughter them. I thought about the action and how I was going to suicide right after that... It remained as thoughts; [A] can go home and find nobody. So, I felt guilty. I always ask my niece to keep the knives far away from me. I'm afraid of knives and of myself. [...] I'm very nervous and very tired. Since [A] left, I've always had dark thoughts and a depressive mood. But it wasn't as strong as when I thought about killing my daughters... I feel exhausted psychologically. (TU18)

Such impacts can be truly debilitating, as well as serving to increase problems with self-isolation and societal stigma of the families of the missing. The sadness that was common, can be more extreme in some:

I'm always crying... My whole situation turned upside down! I feel persecuted, each look at me reminds me that I'm in pain because of my son's disappearance. [Tears] I don't sleep at night anymore, I see my son everywhere, I think and say to myself that my son is probably starving, thirsty or freezing [...] My whole life has been turned upside down... I'm not alive anymore, I'm becoming a body with no soul. (TU23)

Three mothers of young missing men in Tunisia have tried to commit suicide.²⁰

Many, particularly parents of missing sons or daughters, had severe health problems, perhaps unsurprisingly given the extreme stress such families are under.

For his family, his father keeps going to hospitals and he had a stroke but he survived but then he got it again, a light one, due to him doing a lot of thinking about A, the missing one, but he was unable to do anything [to help]. As for his mother, we used to try to get her to have patience and to comfort her and we lied to her saying that there were committees and search committees [looking for A] in order to protect her health. My wife was not able to adapt to this life and her mind is away all day and all night and this incident has had an effect on her psychology. (TK26)

This waiting period affected us negatively. On us, on our home and affected the health of my parents. The more time passes by, the harder it is for my father to be patient and not talk. He had a light stroke the first time. The second and third time, we took him to get a cardiac catheterization and cardiac stent was

²⁰ <http://nawaat.org/portail/2012/07/24/the-case-of-the-missing-tunisian-migrants-from-one-shore-to-another-lives-which-matter/>

implanted in his chest. These were long days. [...] One month later I received some news from Damascus. We heard that our father passed away. (TK28)

One concept that is useful in understanding psychosocial impact generally is that of the “intervention pyramid” (IASC, 2007). At the top of the pyramid will be a small fraction of the population who will be deeply affected and will require specialised services; at the bottom of the pyramid will be those for whom re-establishing security and access to basic needs is sufficient to retain wellbeing; the majority lie in between and may need support, from their community or others, to ensure they are not adversely affected.

Family impacts

The meaning given to the disappearance of a family member is socially constructed, emerging from how family and community interpret both the disappearance and any information received following it. As such, the impacts of ambiguous loss are seen to play out in such environments. The family is the most obvious social unit impacted, and whilst it can be a source of great emotional support, where there are tensions it can be the origin of extreme stress:

I still live as if it is still September 6th, 2012. Within our family, nothing is like before; everyone lives separately, on his/ her side. My husband is in a room, me in another one, and the youngest of my sons, if you saw him, his life was turned upside down since the departure of his brother. He cries all the time now, I constantly feel anxious about him. He is 20 years old and I feel that he seeks and looks for his brother in the friendships he tied and defeated in. Every day he introduced me to a new friend to end up choosing another one the next day; He looks for his brother in them! (TU05)

The impacts on individuals, particularly mothers of the missing who can be driven to neglect traditional home making roles, have served to alienate family members from them, even leading to divorce.

I've spent the worst moments of my life. I didn't cook anymore, I've abandoned everything in my house, and I've abandoned myself. That created conflicts between me and my husband who considers that I was useless and that I didn't have time left, nor taste. So, he left the house. I can't live in my house anymore; it has been deserted by my two sons (now missing) and my husband. (TU17)

The whole family is avoiding mention of our missing son, even conflicts between me and my wife have multiplied, we live in endless tension and communication is almost absent. My wife is much sicker than me, she cries all the time. (TU33)

Divergent attitudes to the fate of the missing within the family are seen to be a dominant source of family conflict.

We often fight. He is convinced that our son is dead. My other children are convinced that he is alive. They support and wait for the return of [AB]. I even asked them not to change their phone number; you never know if my son would try to contact one of us. (TU15)

Do not listen to her; she lost her mind since the disappearance of her son. I tell you, the children are gone and have arrived in Italy. (TU11)

Parents struggle to explain what has happened to missing brothers and fathers to children,

His children....[Crying] when they ask me; where's Dad? What do you want me to answer them? [...] I try somehow to explain to them that he is in Italy and he will come back. They know, however, that their father is gone, but I try to make them wait. I found no words to say to them ... I myself have not heard from him. If I told them that he is dead, my children will understand this word and that death is inevitable and that we will all die, and if I told them that their father

is alive and living somewhere and that we are waiting to contact him, I have neither proof nor the will to hurt them. (TU12)

Social impacts

One response of family members who are confronted with the antagonism of family and community is to retreat into isolation.

I don't want to do anything, I'm isolating myself from the rest of the world. I prefer being alone at home without seeing anybody. I'm always crying... [...] I swear that I'm not talking to anyone. My son is always trying to take care of me, to offer me a dinner outside. I don't want to tell anybody, because no one can feel my pain. (TU21)

I live alone, I do not talk to anyone and I no longer entertain relationships with my community or clients. I became very anxious and very angry, I cannot stand people, I isolate myself constantly. (TU33)

This is linked to those, notably mothers, who appear to be living their lives for the missing - or in searching for them – rather than for the living:

My daughter got engaged recently; I told her that I didn't want a wedding party. I can't imagine happiness and joy... Anything I hear reminds me of my son. I can't stand anything anymore. (TU21)

My psychology is deteriorating day after day because I can't find my children, learn Swedish, or work... I am always on the phone or Facebook groups and organizations' pages... and with my wife and daughter at home. I neglected our future, did not search for a job, and my asylum request might be refused due to my negligence. (TK15)

The often dramatic changes enforced on a household when someone is missing have also impacted women who are now heading families. Making some 'tougher' – demonstrating how some are very able to cope despite their distress - and challenging others.

My responsibilities increased. I am now the man of the house, so to speak. I have to secure the gas cylinder, vegetables and bread. If anyone gets sick, like my mother, I have to take them to the doctor. I do the paperwork like registering my newborn nephew, and bringing the family report from Ain Kirsh Organization for my daughter's college. I also call the plumber, TV repairman, sewage maintenance, and take care of water leaks. All duties of the man of the house are now on my shoulders, that is why I turned tougher recently. (TK09)

My life lacks moral, financial and emotional support...the children and I have psychological illnesses now. I cannot do anything without my husband; including school and residency papers. I am forced to do everything now without knowing how to handle anything [...] I have become the father, the mother, the nanny, the educator, and the servant (TK10)

Female family members, particularly the wives of the missing, who find themselves without a man at home, faced particular challenges.

For me most definitely harassment from men [is a problem], and I take it upon myself to run all errands. I wish I could ease the hardship of transportation on them, even rent a car so they don't have to suffer in crowded areas. Especially my elder daughters, they have no one to protect them. I try to get things done for them but I face harassment from people in the street, or taxi drivers. (TK21)

Women whose husbands are missing face some of the most difficult social environments, as the ambiguous status of their husbands – neither dead nor alive - has implications for their own identities. The result is that they are neither wives nor widows, but have a unique status that a largely conservative Muslim society often fails to understand. This is partially

driven by women themselves, who seek to deny at all costs that their husbands are dead, which necessarily means angrily rejecting the possibility of remarriage.

No one dares to suggest that to me not even in fifty years!!!!.... I am against that idea of course.... Even if people convinced me, it is impossible for me to get married unless he calls me and says: "Hello, I am dead - go get married". (TK10)

Of course I could not remarry unless I hear affirmed news about him... how could I remarry while my husband is still missing!! He might be alive!! [...] What if he came back and saw me married to someone else!!! My destiny is attached to his; I would not take any step unless I hear confirmed news about him. (TK16)

The result of this is that, as long as they have no answer concerning their husbands, such women will remain alone. However, one wife of a missing man saw remarriage as an area where the age and gender of the spouse of the missing person can affect the approach taken.

For me, no I don't think so. I want to raise my children and that's it. But as for my daughter's husband, he should remarry, he is only 25 years-old. (TK10)

Coping mechanisms and existing support

The ability of individuals to withstand the impact of traumatic events has been called *resilience*, defined as “good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development”,²¹ and there is a large literature discussing resilience in the face of bereavement,²² and investigating the situation of refugees and migrants.²³ Any intervention with families of the missing should aim to work to support and promote such resilience, building on existing coping mechanisms and support structures, and this is integral to the ambiguous loss approach.²⁴ Here, what emerged from the data in terms of such existing aids to resilience is discussed, with the intention of informing potential intervention.

It is first important to understand that whilst many affected family members are impacted to the point where their well-being is seriously reduced, in many cases individuals are able to cope with the resources at their disposal.

Actually, I was surprised with my strength, even though I was extremely dependent on my family and my husband... however, the incident made me stronger and independent... after that shock, I grew stronger. (TK16)

It is thus important, while advocating for support to families of the missing, not to pathologise ambiguous loss: in many cases with the support of family and community those affected can continue their lives, despite the distress they must live with.

Only our family [help us]. They are the ones who are there. We are from a big family in Gaza and the Gazans stood by us. (TK10)

For the predominantly Muslim communities who were engaged for this study faith is an important support.

Only reading Holy Quran and fasting every Monday and Thursday... even though I have my husband, my three daughters and son, yet only praying and reading Quran comfort me. (TK14)

²¹ Masten, Ann S. (2001) Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3): 227 - 238.

²² Bonanno, G.A. (2004) Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist*, 50(1): 20-28.

²³ Hutchinson, M. and Dorsett, P. (2012) What does the literature say about resilience in refugee people? Implications for practice, *Journal of Social Inclusion*, 3(2); Daud, A, Klinteberg, B. and Rydelius, P-A., (2008) Resilience and vulnerability among refugee children of traumatized and non-traumatized parents, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 2(7); Papadopoulos, R. (2002) *Therapeutic Care for Refugees. No Place Like Home*. London: Karnac, 2002. Tavistock Clinic Series.

²⁴ Boss, Pauline (2006) *Loss, trauma and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: Norton.

Sometimes, I put the holy book in front of me and, next to the book, the two pictures of my son and my nephew. So, I recite verses and I ask God to help me and to show us a sign, a truth. Everything is under God's will, I got over that. This comforts me. (TU16)

In particular the Istikhara,²⁵ a Muslim prayer linked to assistance with decision making, was mentioned by a number of respondents.

I pray Istikhara to God, and He sends me signs that my husband is still alive.. most of the times I see him healthy, while sometimes I see him tired... many times I imagine him next to me, and not in my dreams. (TK10)

We trust in God, and pray Istikhara for them to survive. My relation to God is somehow good. Sometimes, I lose hope, but God sends me signs that our sons are in a certain place, or someone calls and gives me information about them. God constantly puts faith in me that they are still alive. (TK09)

The most concrete support comes from the solidarity of others in the same position, particularly in Tunisia, where families have successfully organised (see below).

We call each other every day when we wake up, I go to her house or she comes to mine. We discuss, we cry, we laugh, we remember together. We discuss nothing except for the topic our disappeared children. We talk only about our children and the case of the disappeared at any time of the day! We brood and we repeat the same questioning thousand times, the same evocation every time. We are always looking for a bit of hope, a possible answer. (TU06)

I do not think about his death. I have a neighbour who often comes to visit me, this allows me to share, and empty my heart. That's all. The one who feels your pain is the one who lives the same. (TU13)

The empowerment of solidarity and collective action can transform experiences of victimhood, and help victims to "reinhabit the world".²⁶ Even where it leads to no action from the authorities, mobilisation allows victims to meet others in the same position and to construct the meaning and identities from disappearance that permit them to cope. The data show that the Tunisian family association, *Terre pour Tous*, allows family members to move from passive isolation to active engagement, and from there to concrete action that can influence the authorities: an example of 'active coping'.²⁷ Families from the Middle East, many of whom are dispersed around the region and Europe, generally however have no such access to others in the same position.

An alternative route, for those with severe psychological impacts, is professional therapeutic support. The few respondents who discussed this appeared to have a mixed perception of its role. Some are receiving both medication and counselling, and welcome this:

I am suffering more with every day and my hurt is bigger. I am seeing a psychiatrist. They provided me with one here. I am living on anti-anxiety medication. [...] I go there [the psychiatrist] and he lets me talk and cry and feel better. (TK36)

Others however appear to have received advice which is exactly contrary to an ambiguous loss approach, and rather than being told to find routes to living well despite not knowing

²⁵ See: <http://hadithoftheday.com/how-to-perform-salat-l-istikhara/>

²⁶ Das, Veena (2000) The act of witnessing: Violence, poisonous knowledge, and subjectivity. In Das, Veena et al. (eds.), *Violence and subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²⁷ Colic-Peisker, V. and Tilbury, F. (2003) 'Active' and 'passive' resettlement: The influence of support services and refugees' own resources on resettlement style. *International Migration*, 41(5): 61 - 91.

were advised to forget the missing, likely to be both distressing and hugely challenging for a family member.

He was psychologically shocked and lost 35 kilograms. He is losing more weight day after day. [...] A psychological counsellor visited him [in Germany], but he kicked her out. [...] She asked him to forget his dead family, they went to heaven, never mind.... Which provoked him, so he turned her away. (TK08)

Another family member received advice that was entirely inappropriate culturally, demonstrating the importance of ensuring that those seeking to support the families of the missing are at least aware of their culture and ideally share it.

They organized for me to meet with a psychiatrist. I sat with her and the translator and she said I advise you not to remarry, I told her it was out of line. She said get a girlfriend if you want, go out with her and go drinking. I asked the translator to translate my response and I told her this cannot be, have you forgotten that we are Muslims, and all this is forbidden in Islam. I feel a lot better reading the Quran. (TK23)

To intervene in ways that can reinforce resilience would appear to demand that the coping mechanisms families discuss be strengthened. This indicates, for example, aiding peer support and solidarity by ensuring that the family association is able to bring affected families together. With suitable resources a community-based approach could be taken to give such family meetings an explicitly therapeutic element, for example by training para-professionals (often called ‘accompaniers’), potentially affected family members themselves, to lead structured discussions with the aim of providing peer support, finding meaning and thus being able to cope with the psychological pain of ambiguous loss (see below).²⁸ The importance of faith suggests that an engagement with local religious leaders working with affected families could be a part of a more effective response to their suffering. Above all, it is clear that any effort to help families must be delivered in a relevant cultural context, accounting for the religious and social values and beliefs of families.

Ambiguous loss as a lens on impacts on families

“[...] ambiguous loss is the most stressful kind of loss. It defies resolution and creates long-term confusion about who is in or out of a particular couple or family. With death, there is official certification of loss, and mourning rituals allow one to say goodbye. With ambiguous loss, none of these markers exists. The persisting ambiguity blocks cognition, coping, and meaning-making and freezes the grief process.”²⁹

This study did not set out to demonstrate that a particular model best describes how families of missing migrants are impacted, but the data do support an interpretation that uses the insight of the ambiguous loss model. The lens of ambiguous loss is one way to interpret impacts on families, as well as offering a route to therapeutic approaches, and here is presented as a model that can aid understanding of the impact of a relative missing in migration.

Ambiguous loss is “a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present”,³⁰ and occurs when a family member is psychologically present, but physically absent. Ambiguous loss is an explicitly relational perspective that characterizes the stress as external and ongoing and as such differs from

²⁸ A programme in Nepal provided such peer support alongside economic and social interventions that sought to address all aspects affecting families of the missing: ICRC (2011) Hately Malo Psychosocial Support Programme, Kathmandu: ICRC.

²⁹ Boss, Pauline (2006) *Loss, trauma and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: Norton.

³⁰ Boss, Pauline (2004) *Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections After 9/11*. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66: 554.

individualized trauma approaches such as that of PTSD. A range of studies have indicated that situations of ambiguous loss predict symptoms of depression, anxiety, and family conflict. This research base has been used to develop a clinical theory in which the stress of ambiguity is seen to impact mental health and well-being, subject to the resilience of individuals and families. Specifically, the data reveal the need for closure for families of the disappeared to end the ambiguity of loss (see Section 0), but this is something denied to families. The ambiguous loss model confronts this perceived need for closure:

The goal is to find meaning in the situation despite the absence of information and persisting ambiguity. Here, resiliency means being able to live with unanswered questions. Instead of the usual epistemological question about truth, we ask, “How do people manage to live well despite not knowing?”³¹

The ambiguous loss approach can thus both represent an evidence base for the importance of giving families answers about the fate of loved ones, but also serve as a framework for the delivery of support in the absence of such an answer. The ambiguous loss model represents the most complete framework for understanding the impact of disappearance on families and formulating appropriate interventions to support them. This study has used qualitative research methods to understand the relevance of ambiguous loss to families of those missing in migration. It appears to resonate with what respondents reported, most obviously with some of the key elements of Boss’ ambiguous loss approach:

- Meaning: the need for meaning emerges very strongly in the data, with families consistently and almost universally seeking a route to interpret what disappearance means, most obviously in terms of the fate of the missing;
- Identity: disappearance provokes anxiety about the role of those left behind, as mothers without sons and wives without husbands seek to reconstruct an identity for themselves despite the uncertainty.

The value of solidarity and peer groups is precisely that they serve as spaces where meaning and identity can be negotiated on the terms of those most concerned.

- Normalising ambivalence: many family members live with ambivalence that results from ambiguity, and stress, anxiety and family conflict are symptoms of this. Whilst most of those met deny that they can move on in their lives without an answer, some are already doing so. Normalizing ambiguity and the resulting ambivalence primarily means acknowledging it.³² Resilience comes from recognizing ambivalent feelings and managing them. Boss describes this as letting go of the idea that a loved one is either dead or alive and trying to live with “both/and,” that is, with the paradox of both holding on to a sliver of the hope of return, although moving forward with life;
- Revising attachment: revising attachment means learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment. One very clear way to revise attachment was to move “from despair to protest”:³³ those Tunisian families who mobilised in response to disappearance (see Section 0) were forging a new relationship of solidarity with their loved one, without either denying or accepting his or her loss. Another way to do this is to commemorate the

³¹ Boss, Pauline (2007) Ambiguous Loss Theory: Challenges for Scholars and Practitioners. *Family Relations* 56: 106.

³² Boss, Pauline (2006) *Loss, trauma and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: Norton.

³³ *Ibid*: 168.

missing, to give them value and create shared meanings, without mimicking the treatment of the dead: a tribute not a memorial;

- Discovering hope: hope remains something that for those coping least well with having a missing relative is focused almost entirely on the missing person. Many individuals had however been unable to create goals that went beyond the disappearance. A therapeutic goal is to support families to find new hopes in their lives, beyond the missing.

Ambiguous loss appears to be generally applicable to the families met from both the Middle East and North Africa, and this suggests that global experience of working with families affected by disappearances in conflict situations can inform approaches to supporting families of missing migrants.³⁴

Beyond the personal and familial needs and impacts are broader demands of families that they be heard socially and politically. In some contexts discussion of the missing is impossible, or – in the face of conflict – simply not prioritised socially. In others, such as Tunisia (see below) whilst the authorities have taken some steps to recognise and address the fact that people are missing, families still feel unacknowledged. Whilst this is linked to the meaning families give – and those that are given by others – to their predicament, it goes beyond the ambiguous loss and the psychosocial, and emphasises the political position they wish the issue to have. Families seek that their stories are heard, and their position acknowledged by both the state and others, as a step towards the political action that can bring them news of loved ones.

SEARCHING FOR MISSING RELATIVES

I tell them that as long as I'm breathing, I'll keep looking for my son until my last breath. I'll never give up! (TU16)

All families had tried to find the missing, in any way they could. In some cases relatives lived in Europe or had survived the shipwreck in which their loved had gone missing and were able to engage with the authorities in Greece or elsewhere. Others remained at home and could only use social media in their search and – in some cases - try to work with their own authorities.

The action of families

Since many of those from Syria and Iraq managed to reach Europe, they were often in the place where the bodies of those who died in shipwrecks were retrieved, and could themselves look for a body.

We kept looking and searching in the sea thinking to ourselves that he might have drowned and that he might appear on the shore one or two days after. We searched the cliffs at the sea-side and between the rocks there but we found nothing. We even searched with the coastguards. After 2 or 3 days we went looking with them. [...] and the coast guards brought us close to this island and my father swam to the island and he searched there but he found nothing. (TK35)

Others travelled to Greece from elsewhere in Europe, travelling from island to island looking for both a body and in places of detention and hospitals.

I went by taxi to every island, and asked every taxi driver about hospitals, police stations, coastguards and refugee camps because I did not know the country at all... We searched everywhere.. Then I went to Rhodes Island. I went with

³⁴ e.g. ICRC (2013) Hatey Malo Accompaniment Program: ICRC's Comprehensive Support Program to the Families of Missing Persons in Nepal. Kathmandu: ICRC.

another group to Mytilene and Samos Islands... we searched in every island in Greece. (TK13)

However, the challenge of getting a visa was also articulated, and a plea received from one family about facilitating family visits in the search of the Missing:

I request, in such a case, a one week visa from the Greek government so I could go and look for my son, and they could do exceptions and take guarantees and they could keep my passport and my identification card. And I request that the Greek government gives me a visa for a certain period of time so that families could go and search for their sons and if they are worried that I will escape to Germany they could have guarantees. (TK24)

Those in Greece were also able to visit authorities to see photographs of the recently retrieved dead, or visit the morgue to examine bodies, as was a family in Turkey.

After that, the real tragedy started by taking us over ten days to identify the corpses from our boat. I have seen 84 corpses so far, four to five and sometimes ten or fifteen corpses a day. [...] Perhaps I did not recognize anyone because the corpses were deformed after 10 days in water. It was difficult to identify them. After nearly 20 days in Greece, I was in a severely bad psychological state. I could not wait any longer even though I felt it was my responsibility to find my cousin. I called his family 20 days later and asked them to send someone to Greece because I had exhausted all my options, even though I was seeing new corpses every day, but did not find anything. (TK07)

Families also tried to visit places of detention to see if a relative had been detained

I stayed searching in that area for 15 days. The Greek police advised me to file a missing person report for my brother and do a DNA test because, if God forbid, something bad had happened, we would know by blood. So I did the DNA test and the missing person report and gave them a copy of his identification and everything. (TK33)

Where no trace was found, families registered missing persons cases with the authorities and gave DNA samples.

In contrast, families who remained far from Europe faced greater challenges to searching directly in Europe, but were also able to investigate the possibility that bodies were found on the Tunisian coast:

I went to Gabes when bodies had been extracted off the coasts of Tunisia. I had to examine a dozen of bodies to see if I recognize my son but in vain... Can you imagine? I was spending entire days with bodies. That was destroying! Four months with dead people looking for my son among them. I used to go home deaf and sick because of what I was seeing. (TU23)

Otherwise, families could try to access the authorities in their home country, or use social media to look for the missing (see below). Some Tunisian families did give tissue samples for DNA tests on bodies found in Tunisia, but none had heard any news from authorities.

Social media and its uses for families of missing migrants

The results of this study reveal both the challenges to solidarity between families – there is no route for such a highly dispersed population to come together physically – that can offer both emotional support and political visibility, as well as the lack of routes for states managing migrant bodies to communicate with families of the missing. Social media has the potential to advance both elements, and families have been using and adapting existing tools in an effort to do so.

Syrian and Iraqi families were very active on social media, sharing photographs and other information on Facebook and other sites, even though many were aware that this was a desperate measure:

[Facebook] did not help me in anything. But as you said, a drowning man will clutch to a straw... the same applies to me and Facebook. We might receive any information or someone would help us. Facebook only benefitted me with some [phone] numbers. (TK04)

This reflected the large role that social media has in migration across the Mediterranean from planning trips, to contacting smugglers and planning routes across Europe.³⁵ One challenge of social media is that much information appears to be false, and that such public sites can be used by those with malign intentions to exploit desperate families (see below). Facebook was however a tool that allowed families to better understand the situation:

Facebook gave us a broader idea about what was happening. In the beginning we knew nothing and we did not care much about the issue of the disappeared people. After the incident happened, however, we started reading about the issue and we started knowing about it. But if you refer to someone calling us and saying that they have seen B - no, this did not happen. No one saw him. We benefited from Facebook in the sense of starting to have broader knowledge. (TK35)

Social media also have the capacity to generate solidarity among families with the same problem, to some extent creating online communities where physical ones are impossible:

I am very pleased with the young women and men at the missing networks and the Facebook groups, they were searching with me. (TK27)

It is clear however that the capacity of social media as a tool to identify the missing, either dead or alive, is constrained by the non-participation of states in sharing the data they have collected. One family urged that photographs of the dead be posted online so that families even far from where bodies are found could identify loved ones:

If there are pictures of the bodies of missing persons, why not publish them so the families know if they are alive or dead and not leave the families in the dark? There are a lot of photos of the missing and they can reach the families on Facebook if they post the pictures along with the name, and if there is no information about the missing, then post a picture of the clothes they were wearing. Why did the coastguard take photos of the bodies if they will not share it with the families? (TK22)

The challenge of identifying the missing is in bringing together data from the body – post-mortem data, such as identifying marks on the body, material effects, or DNA - with ante-mortem data – testimony from relatives about the missing, and their DNA data. Only by matching post and ante-mortem data, or by visual identification using bodies or photographs, can identities be confirmed. Whilst not unproblematic, the above proposal does show the potential of social media in shrinking the distance between authorities with post-mortem data and families with ante-mortem data.

One problem for families with the use of social media in seeking their missing relatives is that they have received calls from people claiming to have information about their children, apparently seeking to profit from their distress. Many families have posted a request for information on Facebook, or other social media, and this has opened them up to such extortion efforts:

Another man got in touch with me saying he knows where my husband is, but it turned out he was a liar and was after money and tried to threaten me. This man got in touch with the families of the missing who posted pictures of their missing family member. (TK21)

³⁵ RMMS (2016) *Getting to Europe the 'WhatsApp' way: The use of ICT in contemporary mixed migration flows to Europe*. Nairobi: RMMS.

I am being subjected to extortion because someone called me and said that my son is in prison in Greece because he is a smuggler and he was driving the boat, and this morning he sent me messages and he said that the lawyers can get him out and he wants \$20,000, and he said that they will get him out and they said that they are the family of the other young man who was with your son, his name is Mohamed and in the end they agreed with the lawyer to give him \$3,000 and they said that they will pay \$1,500 and I will pay \$1,500 and they will get him out and they asked me if I want my son back and I said that I do, and they asked “how much is your son worth to you?” (TK24)

This is just one example of how data concerning missing people being put in the public domain can be misused, and demonstrates the care that must be taken in sharing any such data publicly.

Response of the authorities

In some cases authorities have been responsive to the needs and demands of families, and these are described here. In many cases however, such as for refugees from Syria or Eritrea, there is no expectation that their governments will play a role in sharing information or supporting them in their search for loved ones.

Tunisia

Tunisia is one of very few states to have taken concrete action to investigate the issue of missing migrants. A Commission of Inquiry to investigate those missing was established in 2015, including a representative of the families, tasked with working alongside the Italian interior ministry to understand the disappearances. However, despite contact having been made with the Italian authorities, no concrete news of the missing has yet emerged.

Families had contacted a range of state institutions, but saw few results:

We knocked on all doors, Ministry of Human Rights, Ministry of Justice, as well as the Ministry of the Interior. They told us they would solve the issue, but nothing happened. Each time they announce the foundation of an investigation committee that will work on the dossier of the disappeared people, yet nothing has been reached due to the unstable situation of the country. (TU01)

In general among the Tunisian families, there is great disillusion with the authorities, even though some had met the most senior political leaders, including the President. One interviewee described how, in order to get photographs of the fingerprints of the missing to a senior Tunisian diplomat, families themselves had to pay his driver to pass them to him. This apparent disinterest had led to a widespread lack of trust in the Tunisian authorities.

The government has done nothing and I did not trust them. Whenever we meet a manager, we come back with zero new information. Nothing new. When I go to Tunis, I find myself in the process of thinking about what I could say to my neighbours and family, I really have no answer for them. Especially regarding my husband, he told me that I lose my money in transportation and I return every time with anything, he prefers that I keep the money I spend for my home and my daughters. (TU15)

Some families expressed bewilderment at how to contact the authorities, particularly rural people who cannot afford to travel to Tunis regularly. Two respondents were not aware that the Commission of Inquiry into missing migrants existed. Others had attached great hope to the Commission and understood that contact with Italy had been made and that DNA tests were underway. While some also mistrusted the Commission, others saw it as separate from government and with the potential to address their needs:

I think that the Tunisian authorities have that willingness to search and to investigate, especially that Italy seems open to cooperation. We hope therefore that the Commission of Inquiry solves this mystery. (TU20)

However, no-one had heard anything concrete from the Commission and there was concern at how much time had passed since people went missing with no concrete steps forward. The demands of the authorities were that the Commission does its job, and an understanding that liaison between Tunisian and Italy was the only route to resolving the issue.

I think that our government can work to find the truth about our children, they can cooperate with the Italian authorities to bring justice to the families. They tell us whether our children are alive or dead. (TU34)

Iraq

In terms of their home authorities, the Iraqi consulate in Greece was seen to have taken a proactive approach in some cases, including taking details of the missing from families and providing a declaration concerning the missing. In Iraq, the Greek consulate collected DNA data from families via the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and families were given a phone number at the Ministry with which to enquire about progress.

Europe

As is the experience of many migrants and refugees in Europe, the families of the missing reported often problematic interactions with the Greek authorities in their efforts to find their loved ones. Family members perceived that they were treated badly because of their race, and had great challenges to find out what procedures existed – such as being able to view photos of bodies – and were obstructed in their efforts to access these.

That is why my two friends – one was American and the other was Danish – helped me; for they were blond with blue eyes and that makes the Greeks there respect and answer us a little until we entered the office. Can you believe that we sat on the floor in front of a very small office for 3 to 4 hours, every now and then; someone goes out, closes the door in our faces and says "don't come again!" in the most racist and offensive way. (TK01)

Mobilisation and advocacy

One great challenge for families of the missing to assume their position at the centre of discussions around the phenomenon of those who go missing while crossing the Mediterranean is their invisibility. Affected families are dispersed across several continents and many tens of countries, some in their homes, some displaced internally by conflict and some refugees in Europe and elsewhere. This denies them both the solidarity of coming together for collective support (see above) and mobilisation to advocate for their interests. In other situations where people have disappeared – such as under authoritarian regimes – the political mobilisation of families has been crucial in ensuring an addressing of the issue.³⁶ Of the families met in this study, only those in Tunisia have been able to create organisations, with civil society support, that can both support and represent them.

The *Terre pour Tous* (Everybody's earth) association was formed in 2012 in Tunisia by families to provide a structure for their efforts to engage the authorities to address the issue of the missing.

This has allowed for a more organized and efficient mobilization because the first months after the disappearance, families were in a total wandering. They used to be mobilized in a random and unfocused way. Everyone was moving on his side and was doing his best to meet with officials to make their voices be heard. Since the creation of the association, families have become more concerned with the organization of events and meetings with members of the government. We've always had a contact way by telephone and this has facilitated our mobilization. We then became a large family. (TU03)

³⁶ The classic example is that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in Argentina: Agosin, Marjorie (1987) A visit to the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Human Rights Quarterly, 9: 426 - 435.

We didn't know each other from the beginning, but we all gathered during the mobilizations. The group got larger bit by bit. There was someone who came asking for news about her son, others who asked if I knew anything about their son who left with mine. The families of the missing people met each other by word-of-mouth. Then, I was able to meet [OM] who who's a member of the association TpT. (TU17)

In some regions where many are missing this has supported families to meet locally, as well as through national demonstration and events in Tunis. The association has also been a focus for advocacy, working with media organisations to tell their stories, as well as creating a representative structure such that they can send delegations to the authorities.

Many family members saw the association as crucial to their response to their missing relative, both in terms of creating a platform for action and as a mechanism to support their coping:

I feel happy when I participate in mobilizations with other families. I feel a sense of belonging, strength and courage. Sometimes while I'm at work, and I am called to participate in a march or meeting, I could leave everything to join them. (TU04)

Some families however are challenged to take part, living far from Tunis and having limited financial means:

No, this [mobilisation] is useless. Families have been moving for four years now and didn't get to anything... My husband has a heart disease and I can't afford transportation fees. Even if I can get some money, my husband is so sick and I can't go to Tunis alone... (TU32)

While this has been accompanied by disillusion as time has passed and no progress made:

I realized that it was useless to fight against a state that does nothing for its citizens. Members of the government are not supportive to each others, they do not treat the case of the missing with seriousness and constancy. Only parents suffer and pay the price... (TU33)

Others however believe that the existence of the Commission of the Inquiry is testament to the success of the mobilisation:

They met officials who didn't listen to them, they have simply neglected them and promised to deal with the case, but this was just rhetoric. They started demonstrations and sit-ins until they get listened. The missing people's parents held on well, which led to the constitution of the commission of inquiry. (TU19)

Despite this lack of clarity over the achievements of the family association, it is clear from these data that, even without concrete progress on finding information about the missing, the mobilisation has benefitted many families in terms of solidarity and support.

Beyond Tunisia, it is clear that for a range of reasons an effort must be made to bring families of missing migrants together to give them visibility. As long as the focus is on the EU border and the bodies, rather than suffering families, advocacy around the issue lacks the human element that drives the need for action. More than this, for families to be involved as central actors in addressing the issue, they must find a route to representing themselves and finding a voice. Ultimately, for identification to take place, the post-mortem data collected by states receiving migrant bodies must be matched to ante-mortem data that can only be provided by family members. Family associations represent one crucial route to accessing such families and collecting these data.

The situation in Tunisia however, of a democratising state very open to the possibility of family associations, is untypical of many states of migrant origin. In states in conflict or where the authorities are intolerant of both migration and dissent, such mobilisation is simply impossible, and likely dangerous. There would seem to be substantial potential

within the EU, if not in their countries of origin, for families to organise both physically in cities with large refugee populations and online.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important conclusion of this study is that the lack of clarity over the fate of those missing in migration has a dramatic impact on their families. Emotionally and psychologically, families are affected in ways which reduce their well-being both as individuals and collectively. Almost all those met articulated sadness, and a generalised anxiety disorder. Those worst affected see their functioning highly impacted, and sought professional psychiatric help.. A majority were experiencing sleep disturbance, dreams and nightmares of the missing, and memory and general physical health problems.

Findings confirmed the validity of an 'intervention pyramid' approach. A minority, suffering the effects of both the ambiguity of their loss and by the trauma of the journey to Europe they had undertaken – particularly where they had lost relatives in a shipwreck - need professional support. A majority however appeared to be able to cope while benefitting from the support of family, friends and others in the same position: this was seen in the way that Tunisian families articulated the benefits of solidarity with other affected families. It also reveals the dangers of isolation for those without such support.

Families also suffered negative social impacts. Family conflict was prevalent, with divorce sometimes blamed on a child's disappearance. Negative coping mechanisms included self-isolation, and an obsessive concern with the missing person that results in the neglect of other family members and the obligations of daily life. Women in particular, experienced a dramatic change in their role as head of a household in which a husband was missing.

The lens of *ambiguous loss* is here suggested as a framework to understand both the impacts of having a missing relative and potential routes to effectively supporting affected families. Where respondents discussed professional counselling support they had received, this appeared highly inappropriate, in both clinical and cultural terms, suggesting in both Europe and states of migrant origin there is a need for more targeted and informed practice.

The needs of families are clear: they seek an answer, a resolution of the lack of clarity over the fate of the missing – are they dead or alive? In either case, they also want to know *where* those missing are: if they are dead families want to retrieve the body and bring it home so that it can be honoured and buried in a space that returns a loved one to the family. Some family members have taken part in efforts to identify loved ones, including the often traumatic exercise of examining bodies in morgues or photos of the dead in search of family members. Many have shared DNA samples but very few have received a positive response. If loved ones are confirmed to be dead, families want to see bodies returned to them so that they can be buried and honoured in traditional ways in their communities.

Families have their own – often effective – coping mechanisms, including their family and their faith, and where they have been able to mobilise the solidarity with others affected in the same way both provides support and a route to advocacy to advance their interests. Any efforts to support families should build on and enhance these.

Recommendations

This study has tried to understand the impacts on families of missing migrants of having a missing relative, and their needs in terms both of addressing ambiguity and learning to live well despite it, as long as answers are not forthcoming. Whilst the sample is of a limited size and represents families from only two regions, those met are typical in many ways of the victims of the current crisis at the EU's southern border. (The most glaring omissions here are Eritreans and Afghans, both very well represented among recent populations travelling across the Mediterranean.) As such, in addition to the recommendations made to authorities concerning identification of the dead and missing as a part of the Mediterranean Missing project, here explicit recommendations are made concerning the role of the families in such processes and concerning support to families, and the treatment of bodies

and the need for their repatriation. These recommendations are to both the authorities in countries where families live, to those in states managing migrant bodies and data linked to them, and to EU states more broadly. Implicit in the approach taken here is that the EU and its states, whose border policies play a role in both the deaths of migrants and the challenges in their identification, have both a legal obligation³⁷ and a moral responsibility to identify the dead and ensure families are informed.

Family participation in the search and identification process

There is a consensus that family members of the disappeared and missing must be active participants as far as is possible in processes of search for and identification of the missing:

Efforts must be made to promote and facilitate the active participation of relatives in the processes of search for the victims of enforced disappearance [...], favouring the existence of spaces where individuals can organise and reaffirm themselves, as well as to take well-informed decisions in view of the technical and legal processes that affect their rights [...]³⁸

Whilst this concerns victims of enforced disappearance, it remains entirely relevant to the case of missing migrants, both in terms of ensuring that the process of identification has the most positive impact on families and to guarantee its technical integrity: only where families are engaged can ante-mortem data be collected that makes identification possible.

In the context of missing migrants in Europe, except where families are present in states where bodies are recovered and can play a role in identification, the families of missing migrants are both remote from bodies and highly dispersed. As such there are extreme challenges in contacting them, both to collect ante-mortem data that can aid identification and to engage them in the broader process. The impact of this is that most families play little or no role in the identification process and as a result are unable to be kept informed of the processes ongoing around their relatives. To address this, authorities in both Europe and in states of origin can play a role in engaging families.

Whilst governments of states of migrant origin can potentially make a large contribution to supporting identification and contact between states of reception and families of the missing, great care must be taken. Where individuals are refugees, whose protection cannot be guaranteed by their governments, or for states where migration is itself considered unpatriotic, it is inappropriate and potentially a security issue for their own authorities to be involved. Generally those who are not seeking refugee status are more likely to welcome such engagement by their government, but in all cases family members themselves should be permitted to decide if their government should be contacted, or even informed, in their particular case. All of the recommendations that concern the authorities in migrants' states of origin should be read subject to this caveat.

To states managing bodies and relevant data in Europe:

Strategies to be pursued to make contact with families in states of migrant origin, both to collect ante-mortem data and to inform families of general procedures and specific progress with individual cases. This to include:

- Proactive engagement with diplomatic representatives and governments of states of migrant origin;
- Proactive engagement with migrant communities in Europe who can act as a vector to families in both migrant states of origin and in Europe;

³⁷ Grant, S. (2016) *Dead and Missing Migrants: Obligations under International Human Rights Law*, Mediterranean Missing Project: York.

³⁸ Navarro, S. et al. (2011) *International Consensus on principles and minimum standards for psychosocial work in search processes and forensic investigations in cases of enforced disappearances, arbitrary or extrajudicial executions*, Geneva: UN OHCHR.

- Considered use of social media as a tool to both reach out to families and receive information and data concerning missing persons;
- Engagement with non-government organisations who are in contact with families of the missing, most notably the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement.

To authorities in states of migrant origin:

- A focal point to be assigned in government who can both receive and disseminate information about missing migrants from and to families;
- Provide institutional channels of communication and incentives to share data with associations of families of missing migrants such that information can be passed in both directions concerning ante-mortem data and any progress in identification of which authorities become aware;
- Diplomatic representatives in Europe to understand their responsibilities to citizens in terms both of supporting families looking for missing loved ones and of acting as a conduit for passing information between families and European authorities;

Management of the bodies of the dead and their repatriation

The way both bodies and data are treated in European states can have implications for the probability that a body is ultimately identified. As such, certain minimum standards must be fulfilled in collecting and managing such data: a discussion of this, and resulting recommendations, can be found in the accompanying reports of this project.³⁹

Families face several challenges in repatriating the bodies of the dead once they are identified and European states can ameliorate this:

- EU states to grant short-term humanitarian visas to families both seeking loved ones and those seeking to repatriate their bodies. Such visas must be granted quickly and without demanding fees that exclude the poor from benefitting;
- Regulations in EU states concerning the transport of bodies abroad to be reviewed and streamlined to enable families to readily repatriate the bodies of loved ones;
- The EU and its Member States to establish a fund to financially support families to repatriate bodies where they are unable to do so themselves.

Psychosocial support to families

In neither states of migrant origin, or in Europe, is there any dedicated effort to offer support to families of missing migrants around the ambiguity of their loss. As a result little professional help is available, and where it is offered it is both clinically and culturally inappropriate. Survivors who are also missing family members may be suffering from PTSD as well as having a missing relative and should receive appropriate support.

To authorities in EU states and states of migrant origin:

³⁹ These include country reports on Greece and Italy, and a general summary report. These are available at www.mediterraneanmissing.eu

- Identify professionals and/or paraprofessionals with the skills and background to support families of the missing, and ensure they receive the training required to address families' needs wherever families are located;

To authorities in EU states;

- Support the development and training of a cadre of professionals, in both EU states and beyond, with the skills to counsel families of missing migrants, including through the lens of ambiguous loss;
- Make funding available to support the training and practice of relevant professionals to counsel families of the missing in states of origin.

Support to mobilisation of families

One route to easing outreach to families of the missing globally – including to access ante-mortem data - is to support the creation of a network of family associations that can represent families nationally and internationally, and support them locally.

To authorities in states of migrant origin:

- Encourage and support the creation of associations of families of missing migrants;

To authorities in EU states;

- Encourage and support the creation of associations of families of missing migrants in Europe and find routes to support, financially and otherwise, associations in states of migrant origin.

Recommendations for future research

This report represents one of the first efforts to understand the impact on, and needs of, families of those missing in migration across the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ As such, it is hoped that this is the beginning of research that can both demonstrate how families are affected and be a part of advocating for greater action to ensure both that the dead are identified and support is given to the families of those missing. This project can identify the following areas and research questions as able to advance understanding of the phenomenon, and how to address it:

- How can families of the missing best be engaged such that they are at the centre of efforts to address the issue?
- How can outreach to and inreach from families to authorities best be driven so as to transmit ante-mortem data to states holding post-mortem data?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to allow irregular migrants in Europe, in particular the young and vulnerable and those in detention, to contact families?
- How can the huge potential of social media as a route to exchanging information about missing migrants be utilised in an effective and institutional way, without violating the privacy of families?
- What good practice exists in Europe and beyond in terms of successful collection and management of data that advances identification of migrant dead?

⁴⁰ The ICRC did however publish a study in 2013 presenting the needs of families of missing migrants from Senegal: ICRC (2013) *Barca ou Barsak: Etude sur les Besoins Actuels de Familles de Migrant Sénégalais Disparus*. ICRC: Geneva. The importance of the needs of families were also raised in the two 'Fatal Journeys' reports produced by IOM.

- How can non-state actors with expertise and networks that can aid identification of the dead collaborate with concerned states to develop data-sharing approaches?
- How can European states put in place both a rights-based set of principles around the issue of missing migrants to which they commit themselves, and a set of protocols that can facilitate data-sharing in practice?

Appendix I. THE SAMPLE OF FAMILY MEMBERS INTERVIEWED

RESPONDENT						MISSING PERSON			
	Relation to the missing	Gender	nationality	Country of residence	Religion/ethnicity	Date of diss	Time passed	Gender	Age
Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians and Egyptian									
online	Cousin	M	Syrian	Denmark	Muslim Sunni	28/10/15	35 days	M/F	10 / 12
online	Daughter	F	Iraqi	Iraq	Muslim Shia	28.10.15	46 days	M	52
Online	Sister of 2 missing	F	Syrian	Germany	Muslim Sunni	10/07/14	17 months	m	16/24
Online	Sister	F	Syrian	Syria	Muslim	20.06.15	6 months	M	29
Online	Father & uncle	M	Syrian	Germany	Muslim / Kurdish	11.11.15	40 days	M	children
Online	Father	M	Syrian	Iraq	Muslim / Kurdish	14.10.15	71 days	M	18
Online	Cousin	M	Syrian	Sweden	Christian/ Assyrian	28.10.15	2 months	M	26
Online	Aunt	F	Syrian	Syria	Muslim	30.10.15	2 months	F	7
Online	Mother & sister	F	Palestinian Syrian	Syria	Muslim	30.08.14	17 months	M	19 / 39
Online	Wife	F	Syrian	Egypt	Muslim	6.09.14	16 months	M	-
Online	Wife & mother (entire family missing)	F	Palestinian	Egypt	Muslim	6.09.14	16 months	M/ F	11+
Online	Cousin	M	Palestinian	Egypt	Muslim	6.09.14	16 months	M / F	11+
Online	Son & uncle	M	Iraqi	Sweden	Yazidi	10.12.15	1 month	M / F	10 / -
Online	Mother & Wife	F	Palestinian	Egypt	Muslim	6.09.14	16 months	M	11+
Online	Father of 2 missing	M	Iraqi	Sweden	Muslim	13.09.15	4 months	M/ F	6 / 7
Online	Wife	F	Syrian	Sweden	Muslim	13/09/15	4 months	M	20s
Face to face	Mother	F	Syrian	Turkey	Muslim	16.12.15	1 month	F	16
Face to face	Brother (confirmed dead)	M	Syrian	Turkey	Muslim	25.12.15	20 days	M / F	various
Face to face	Brother (confirmed dead)	M	Syrian	Turkey	Muslim	03.12.15	14 days	M	24
Online	Brother + uncle	M	Iraqi	Turkey	Muslim	10.12.15	40 days	M / F	various
Online	Wife	F	Syrian	Egypt	Muslim	03.09.14	16 months	M	-
Online	Sister	F	Iraqi	Iraq	Muslim	23.08.15	5 months	M	-
Online	Father	M	Syrian	Germany	Muslim	29.10.15	3 months	F	7
Online	Father	M	Syrian	Saudi Arabia	Muslim	14.09.15	4 months	M	-
Online	Brother	M	Egyptian	Egypt	Muslim	06.09.13	16 months	M	16
Online	Cousin and bother of law	M	Palestinian	Germany	Muslim	18.09.14	16 months	M	31
Online	Wife	F	Syrian	Germany	Muslim	29.09.15	4 months	M	32
Online	Brother and sister	M	Palestinian	Germany	Muslim	22.09.15	16 months	M	31
Online	Mother	F	Syrian	Syria	Muslim	12.09.15	4	M	21

							months		
Online	Father / husband	M	Syrian	Turkey/ Greece	Muslim	29.11.15	10 weeks	M / F	1 month, 6 and 28 years
Face to face	Father	M	Syrian	Turkey	Muslim	17/09/15	5 months	F	22
Face to face	Father/husband/ son	M	Syrian	Turkey/ Saudi Arabia	Muslim	24.12.15	2 months	M / F	various
Online	Brother	M	Syrian	Denmark	Kurdish	1.11.15	4 months	M	23
online	Father and husband	M	Syrian	Germany	Sunni	-	-	F	-
Online	Brother	M	Iraqi	Turkey	-	2.09.15	5 months	M	17
Online	Grandfather	M	Syrian	Sweden	-	20.09.15	5 months	M	3
Online	Mother	F	Syrian	Sweden	-	20.09.15	5 months	M	3
online	Father	M	Syrian	Sweden	-	13.12.15	3 months	F	4
Tunisians									
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	24
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	24
Face to face	Wife	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	38
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	24
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	22
Face to face	Father	M	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	23
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	31
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	28
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Wife	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Father	M	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	18
Face to face	Father	M	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	26.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	05.05.11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.04.11	5 years	M	19
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.04.11	5 years	M	33
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.04.11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Father	M	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-

Face to face	Father	M	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	29
Face to face	Father	M	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	34
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	27
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	28
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	06.09.12	4 years	M	24
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	29.03. 11	5 years	M	-
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	27
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	31
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	29
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	29
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	30
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	30
Face to face	Mother	F	Tunisian	Tunisia	Muslim	14.03.11	5 years	M	31

Table 2 Summary of respondents interviewed.

Mediterranean Missing

Understanding the Needs of Families
and the Obligations of States



THE MEDITERRANEAN MISSING PROJECT

The Mediterranean Missing Project is a one year research project running until September 2016, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom. Resulting from collaboration between the University of York, City University London, and the International Organization for Migration, the project is one of the first efforts to systematically collect data and comparatively explore current responses to migrant bodies in the Mediterranean, and the impacts of a missing person on families left behind. In 2015, over 3,770 refugees and migrants are known to have died at sea while trying to reach Europe. The majority of these people are not identified, and in many cases bodies are never found. In each case, a family is left in a state of ambiguous loss, unable to fully grieve for their loved one. Despite the magnitude of unidentified deaths and the suffering of families, states have done little to address this humanitarian imperative. This project aims to shed light on the policy vacuum at EU and national levels, through investigating the policies and practices in Italy and Greece regarding the investigation, identification, burial and repatriation of migrant bodies. Research with families of missing migrants from a range of contexts aims to better understand the impacts of missing persons on families, both psychologically as well as economically and socially.

Research findings include the following publications:

- Italy and Greece country reports, including summary versions.
- A report of a study on the impact on families of having a relative missing in migration.
- A legal briefing summarising the obligations under International Human Rights Law of states concerning the migrant bodies and the missing.
- Studies of the legal frameworks relevant to missing migrants and the management of the bodies of migrants in Italy and Greece.

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