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The tragedy of irregular migration: the case of Afghans in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses irregular Afghan migrants in Turkey based on a qualitative field research study conducted in the cities of Ankara, Bursa, Malatya, Kayseri and Istanbul (see Note 1 on use of the term 'Afghan'). It focuses on their migration journey, the factors driving migration and post-migration challenges. This research seeks to answer why Afghan irregular migrants are mainly male adults and how the employers in Turkey treat them. Afghan migrants in Turkey are mainly unskilled members of the labour force, typically working in construction, in supermarkets, as shepherds and in kitchens. This study argues that Afghan migration motives are mainly driven by humanitarian and economic deprivation. However, when they arrive in Turkey, migrants have no legal protection and are thrown into despair by their employers' mistreatment.

KEYWORDS

irregular migration; labour force; migration push and pull factors; Afghanistan; Turkey

Introduction

Migration has a strong social bond with the communities living in Afghanistan (Monsutti 2007). The diaspora from Afghanistan has spread into 75 countries around the globe (Schmeidl 2016, 106). The wealthiest portion of society have second homes overseas, fleeing in times of insecurity and instability (Bowley 2013). The migration trend in Afghanistan has dramatically increased due to decades of foreign occupation, civil war, the Taliban regime, suicide bombings and the government's failure to provide political goods for society. Despite all the efforts by the international community, as well as a tremendous amount of funding for a better Afghanistan (Swenson 2017, 115), many young (both educated and uneducated) members of the labour force have been migrating abroad in recent years, particularly to Turkey.

Afghanistan has a high proportion of young people (with 63.7% of the population under the age of 25) struggling with serious health, literacy and unemployment challenges (UNFPA 2019). This scenario has largely contributed to the migration of the young from Afghanistan to other countries. However, the current wave of migration from Afghanistan dates back to the 1979 Soviet invasion, with rates of migration increasing throughout civil wars, foreign intervention and because of the Taliban regime in the 1990s. Statistics show that in 2018, Pakistan and Iran hosted over 88% of Afghan[1] refugees

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(UNHCR 2019). Nonetheless, Turkey has been hosting thousands of Afghan refugees since the early 1980s (Icduygu and Karadağ 2018). Before the humanitarian decline in Iran and Pakistan, these two countries were the primary host for Afghan migrants since the 1970s. After 2007, Turkey became a better alternative to host an increasing number of immigrants from Afghanistan (Kaytaz 2016).

In Afghanistan, men are the primary breadwinners for their families and are mainly considered to be the country's labour force (Echavez, Mosawi, and Pilongo 2016; Moghadam 1992). Therefore, male migrants coming from Afghanistan consider themselves to be the only authority in the family who are allowed to migrate, and women are meant to be accountable for housework.[2] Although this patriarchal cultural phenomenon has rapidly shifted towards a more positive and inclusive understanding of gender equality of income, men's proportion within the labour force is still relatively high. For this purpose, this study focuses on male migrants with the analysis of female migrants being beyond the scope of this study. Based on the UNHCR (2020) report, Turkey is the top refugee-hosting country with nearly 3.7 million refugees, and Afghanistan the top third sender state with 2.6 million refugees, and this is a crucial case study with which to analyse the irregular migration trend.

This article is based on qualitative research conducted in Turkey to explore migration factors between Turkey and Afghanistan, and to highlight the risks and challenges of migrant employment in the labour market. Existing scholarship often refers to the patriarchal nature of Afghan migration (Echavez, Mosawi, and Pilongo 2016; Moghadam 1992). However, the fact that the irregular migration of Afghan males constitutes an absolute majority has received little scholarly attention. Moreover, the difficulties and hassle that Afghan irregular migrants face in the labour market is understudied. This article, therefore, poses the following research questions: Does avoidance of payment by employers cause Afghan migrants to leave Turkey? Why are irregular Afghan migrants in Turkey mainly male adults? To better understand the participants' narratives, the migration experience of 43 migrant participants are contextualized through a thematic analysis. Most of the interviewees explained similar migration driving factors. The prominent push factors that formulated the ground for Afghan irregular migration to Turkey were driven by human insecurity, dire poverty and unemployment. The driving pull factors were cultural, religious and linguistic proximities, comparably higher wages for the unskilled labour force, and social media and television channels that served as a source of inspiration. The combined push and pull factors reveal the motives for irregular migration to Turkey. While experiencing horrific and traumatizing journeys, these migrants were looking for a better future in Turkey but were exploited and exposed to post-migration traumas.

As opposed to regular migrations, irregular migration studies encompass irregular labour migrants, transit migrants, and asylum seekers and refugees (İçduygu and Aksel 2012). According to Cvajner and Sciortino (2010, 394), irregular migration is a 'structural mismatch between the social and the political conditions for migration'. In the context of irregular migration push and pull factors, they argue that there must be a mismatch between the capacity of the sending country and the push factors, and the understanding of the receiving country and pull factors. This means that 'the development of an irregular migration system is never only the consequence of the control weaknesses of states. States' claim of control over a territory is just a claim with various, but never complete,

degree of implementation' (394). Criticizing critical theory of irregular migration studies, they define 'irregularity' as "a specific relation to political power" and argue that '[t]he adjective "irregular" does not belong to the descriptive domain of whole migration flows, but only to their interactions with states' actions' (395). Referring to the historical records on migration, Cvajner and Sciortino observe the alterable nature of regularity and irregularity of migrants' status by the states. They advocate for a differentiation theory, claiming that the general theory of modern society 'as differentiation helps to highlight how the structural preconditions of irregular migration are not to be seen as pathology or an imperfection but rather as part and parcel of the very same organization of world society' (400).

Echeverría (2020), in a recent theoretical argumentation on irregular migration, argues that the theoretical account that has been proposed to explain irregular migration has evolved within two theoretical frameworks: irregular migration as states' choice (the discursive and implementation gap) and irregular migration as states' failure (the efficacy and knowledge gap). He further argues that:

> The efficacy and knowledge gap explains the mismatch between policy goals and outcomes as the result of state failure, despite its efforts. The discursive and implementation gap, on the contrary, suggests a certain degree of complicity on the part of the state, and the mismatch as a somewhat intentional outcome. (46)

Echeverría problematizes irregular migration studies within the general theory of modern society, arguing that '[t]he systemic understanding of society not only excludes the possibility of political systems to dominate social transactions; it also excludes that of every other system' (118). He also challenges the group of theories relating to the state (Table 1). In his words, '[t]he relation between politics and irregular migration cannot be interpreted in linear, straightforward, oppositional terms (the state vs irregular migrants)' (117). After contextualizing each of the existing theories about society, state and irregular migration, Echeverría proposes the systemic theory of irregular migration. A systemic theory of irregular migration, he argues:

> [A]llows one to understand the phenomenon as a radically differentiated, structural outcome of modern world society. Once the idea is disregarded that any actor or institution can control all social transactions, the whole focus changes. The query is no longer about actors' real intentions or covert plans, failure or success, domination or irrelevance; instead, it is about actors' decision-making processes and compromises, degrees of success or disappointment, and complex and dynamic interactions. While this hermeneutic approach would certainly offer less deterministic and clear-cut accounts of irregular migration, its multi-causal and differentiated explanations would certainly reach the aim of being more congruous with social reality. (123)

Observing the Afghan irregular migrants' 'decision-making processes and compromises', this article builds upon Echeverría's theoretical approach toward irregular

Table 1. Theories of irregular migration: the gaps.

Discursive gap	Irregular migration as states' choice
Implementation gap	
Efficacy gap	Irregular migration as states' failure
Knowledge gap	

Source: Echeverría (2020, 46).

migration. This research supports İçduygu's (2006) findings regarding comparable higher labour wages as a pull factor, Alemi, Montgomery, and Stempel's (2018) focus on a 'humanitarian need for protection against persecution and economic deprivation' as push factors, and Karadağ's (2021) emphasis on the exploitative treatment by the employers.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of the existing literature and the methodological approach used. The third section describes the key migration factors between sending and receiving countries. The fourth section illustrates the risks and challenges migrants encountered with smugglers and police patrols throughout their journey. The final section describes the main findings by illustrating the despair of irregular Afghan migrants in Turkey as a post-migration challenge.

Current debates within Afghan migration studies

Recent studies on Afghan migration have focused on how Afghan irregular migration varies from one region to another. For example, in an analysis of ethnic Hazara male migrants in Iran, Monsutti (2007, 168) argued that '[c]hannels of pre-established transnational networks exist between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, as the movement of individuals to seek work, to escape drought or to flee war has been a common experience in Afghanistan', which, through creating network support and remittances, they tried to survive poverty and insecurities. Monsutti concluded that '[b]eing predominantly Shiites, the Hazaras have established large-scale transnational circuits with Iran' (171) which indicates the linguistic and cultural proximity factor as this paper builds on the case of Turkey. As could be observed within the extant literature on migration journeys, he found a strong solidarity network among ethnic Hazara in Iran but found the journey perilous and traumatic. Safri (2011) studied the linguistic and social articulation and re-articulation of Afghan immigrants in Pakistan and Iran and concluded that high unemployment rates and comparably higher labour wages in Pakistan and Iran were the push factors. Safri's findings with regard to labour wage are also supported by this research.

Scalettaris (2010) analysed the UNHCR's comprehensive approach to Afghan mobility in Iran and Pakistan, questioning the status of Afghan immigrants in these two countries. She argued that Afghan migrants' presence in Iran and Pakistan had become a political tool that does not apply to Afghan migrants in Turkey. Nevertheless, limited attention has been given to Afghan migrants in Turkey. Kaytaz concludes, 'most of the focus remains on the Syrians despite the fact that Afghans constitute a significant proportion of the migration flows' (Kaytaz 2016, 300). According to statistics from the Directorate General of Migration Management, almost half of the captured irregular migrants by 29 July 2021 were Afghans, and they constituted the highest portion of migration to Turkey from 2017 onwards (DGMM 2021). Nonetheless, a limited amount of scholarship focuses on Afghan migrants' migration factors, risks and challenges, kinship–friendship and network impact, and the historical context of migration from Afghanistan (Bozok and Bozok 2019; Alemi, Montgomery, and Stempel 2018; Icduygu and Karadağ 2018; Karadağ 2021; Kaytaz 2016; Mixed Migration Centre 2020; Schmeidl 2016).

A few other studies have focused on different areas. For instance, Schmeidl (2016) argues that in addition to the poor economy, political instability and insecurity in

Afghanistan as push factors, rapid population growth and hoping to enter a high-wage labour market were other migration drivers. Examining the role of Turkey as a transit country, Icduygu and Karadağ (2018) argue that Afghan migrants constitute a *sui generis* case. Their argument is based on the duration of Afghan migrants' flow to Turkey that traces the historical context of the Afghan case. Network–kinship–friendship and state failure are also considered as the root causes of Afghan migration. In analysing Afghan migrants' journey to Turkey, Kaytaz (2016) emphasizes the non-linear travel pattern and highlights migration risks and challenges, including repeated deportations and a lack of financial means. Moreover, Bozok and Bozok (2019) focus on the homosocial solidarity network among male Afghan migrants as a survival strategy in Istanbul. However, little attention has been given to the irregular Afghan migrants' post-migration challenges that mainly target Afghan migrants in Istanbul, with these findings echoed to the whole of Turkey.

The literature on Afghan irregular migrants mainly focuses on the determinants of irregular migration from Afghanistan, this study will also contribute to the evolving literature in this regard. Few other studies, including Kaytaz (2016) conducted on Afghan migrants in Iran and Turkey, show that deportation has caused circular migration, and the migrants were able to re-enter once deported (Schmeidl 2016; Schuster and Majidi 2015; Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2012). However, little is known about the post-migration challenges of Afghan migrants in Turkey. A recent study conducted by the Association for Migration Research (GAR), with the support of the Embassy of Switzerland in Turkey, focuses on the precarious living condition of Afghan migrants in Istanbul. The research findings highlight the profoundly rooted network theory embedded within the sociocultural aspect of the Afghan migrants, and sheds light upon the exploitation of these irregular migrants by their employers (Karadağ 2021). This report concludes that the Afghan migrants are:

> Working under extremely cruel conditions, living a totally isolated and invisible life, earning money to remit back home to support their families as their resilient body allows them, and being completely abandoned by the international community and civil society, the Afghan population stands at the margins of precarity. Their bodily labour becomes the one and only capital they have. While the heaviest working conditions turn them into docile bodies, the legal precarity intimidates them with all-pervasive fear of deportation. Accordingly, they become subjected to extremely self-enclosed and invisible life within the hidden corners of Istanbul. (46)

Similar to the GAR (2021) report findings, the Mixed Migration Center (MMC) research has partially covered migrants' post-migration challenges in Turkey in their extensive 2020 report. Their findings related to Afghan migrants' post-migration challenges, notably issues pertaining to housing and shelter, education, healthcare, and employment. GAR's report highlighted the lack of legal access to the job market, language barriers, long working hours and payment issues as employment challenges.

Although comprehensive in nature, the MMC (2020) report findings related to housing and shelter contradict the literature on Afghan migrants in Turkey. The kinship and friendship network element among the Afghan migrants in Turkey is strong enough to provide housing and shelter for each other. As Karadağ (2021) and as Bozok and Bozok (2019) demonstrated in their research, the solidarity network among Afghans is a survival strategy. Since the push factors for the undocumented Afghan migrants are driven mainly by security and unemployment, factors such as education and healthcare may not be the

primary concern for the irregular migrants. However, employment is a serious post-migration challenge in Turkey that has been highlighted by the GAR (2021) report. In particular, 'due to the structural, institutional and bureaucratic barriers in front of registration and access to international protection', the irregular Afghan migrants are isolated and have a stranded life that makes employment intangible (Karadağ 2021, 46). Although the GAR (2021) report acknowledges the importance of bureaucratic obstacles in front of irregular Afghan migrants, which makes undertaking research more difficult due to their distrustfulness to outsider researchers, out of their 50 research participants, only 34 are undocumented. Furthermore, this report, like the rest of the literature, focuses only on Istanbul.

A similar study conducted on 15 male Afghan migrants residing in Istanbul concluded that adaptation to new settings, the hosting society's unfair treatment, a lack of residency status and right to work, and moral injury are among the prevalent challenges Afghan migrants endure in Turkey (Alemi, Montgomery, and Stempel 2018). With a small number of participant migrants from Istanbul only, this research generalizes the findings to the whole of Turkey. However, the unfair treatment of the hosting society towards Afghan migrants and the moral aspect have not been studied. Hence, Alemi, Montgomery, and Stempel make a critical contribution to the literature on Afghan migrants. Nonetheless, most of the literature on Afghan migrants fails to include a reliable number of participants, and the research has mainly been conducted in Istanbul only.

This article builds on the GAR (2021), the MMC (2020) and Alemi, Montgomery, and Stempel's (2018) work by stating that post-migration challenges are crucial to understanding the Afghan irregular migration trend in Turkey. Since migration from Afghanistan to Turkey is mostly due to security and employment factors, the employers' refrainment of labour wage payment to the Afghan irregular migrants leads to despair and represents an employment hassle. Therefore, this study will focus on employers' unfair treatment of irregular Afghan migrants related to payment issues conceptualized as a post-migration challenge.

Methodology

Framework

This article is based on a qualitative study conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 43 irregular Afghan migrants residing in the cities of Ankara, Bursa, Kayseri, Malatya and Istanbul. These cities were selected based on the authors' contact with irregular Afghan migrant residents and their accessibility. The rationale behind choosing a diverse range of residential areas is to understand the homogeneity of the solidarity network among the Afghan irregular migrant labour force in different cities. Participants were male labour force migrants ranging from 16 to 38 years old, with experience of residency in Turkey of between one and 11 years. The respondents were daily and monthly workers in construction, restaurants/cafés and shepherding. The data collection took place between March 2018 and August 2020. Due to the availability of participants and the author travelling to and from the different regions, the research process was lengthy. This study was conducted through face-to-face interviews. The selected participants were from Afghanistan's Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces.

Although the research participants were selected based on their consent and availability, their province of origin is in the northern flank of the country, predominantly ethnic non-Pashtun inhabitants, which is reflected in the research with 40 non-Pashtun respondents out of 43 participants. This is due to the fact that the ethnic distribution in Afghanistan is polarized geographically. Ethnic Pashtuns are the majority in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan, and ethnic non-Pashtuns inhabit mainly central, northern, and western parts of the country. As such, the literature on Afghan migrants indicates the migration distribution tendency towards linguistic proximity with Iran hosting predominantly Persian native-speaking migrants and Pakistan the Pashtun native speakers, particularly in the Pashtun-dominant region of Pakistan (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2015; Monsutti 2007). Ethnic affiliation draws the refugee distribution to the neighbouring states. The Persian native Afghans seek refuge in Iran whilst ethnic Pashtuns prefer the Pakistan and Turkic groups affiliating themselves with Turkey.

A snowball sampling method was used to identify potential participants. As the literature on undocumented Afghan migrants indicates, many irregular migrants reside in Istanbul because of the prevalent existing kinship and friendships networks (Icduygu and Karadağ 2018; Karadağ 2021; Mixed Migration Centre 2020). The inclusion of other cities in the sample was a way to comprehend the survival strategies of irregular migrants outside of Istanbul. The ethnic composition and number of participants are shown in Table 2. The selected provinces, in both Afghanistan and Turkey, were based upon the accessibility of migrants from these provinces. To provide a friendly environment for the participants, open interviews with similar questions were conducted.

Out of 43 participant migrants, only two of them were under international protection. Eight interviews were conducted in Ankara, one in Bursa, 13 in Kayseri, three in Malatya and the remaining 18 in Istanbul. Interviews in Ankara, Malatya and Kayseri were conducted in public areas such as local cafés. All interviews in Istanbul were conducted in migrants' living quarters at their consent. Participants were comprised of two skilled and 41 unskilled male labourers.

The medium of interaction throughout the interviews was Uzbek and Persian. Based on the author's fluency of communication in these languages, no third-party translation was involved. BenEzer (2002), Gardner (2002) and Kaytaz (2016) emphasized the importance of stories narrated by migrants. Conceptualizing these narratives into academic language requires the ability to comprehend the native language spoken by the participant migrants. The reason behind such comprehension is that the translation of a narration loses the originality of the stories told by the migrants (Eastmond 2007). Although most of the participants were able to communicate in the Turkish language, to narrate

Table 2. Research participants' information.

Province (Turkey)	Number of participants	Ethnic composition
Ankara	8	Uzbek: 27
Bursa	1	Tajik: 13
Malatya	3	Pashtu: 3
Kayseri	13	
Istanbul	18	
Total	43	43

the migrant's original story conveniently, the native language of participants was preferred. The time taken to conduct an in-depth interview per migrant was between 45 and 90 minutes. The number of interviews in the public sphere was shorter than the rest of the interviews conducted in private spaces.

Procedures

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before conducting the interviews. Due to the illiteracy level of respondent migrants, verbal consent was obtained, and to protect their anonymity, voice-recording was excluded (Alemi, Montgomery, and Stempel 2018). A paper-based friendly questionnaire method was implemented for the entire study period. Participants were asked to answer: What was the reason for your migration? How was your journey to Turkey? What were you doing back in Afghanistan? Which kind of tasks do you do here in Turkey? How much do you earn daily? How does your employer treat you? Are you satisfied with your life in Turkey? These questions were followed by a set of probing queries according to the flow of the participant's speech. A conversational way of communication was carried out throughout the research. As personal stories are imaginative constructions of history that are created in particular circumstances for the listener (Eastmond 2007), the maximum effort was given to provide a safe environment for the respondents to have a fluent expression of their narratives.

Analysis

To contextualize the narration of the participants' emotional experiences, the collected data were analysed through a thematic coding method (Saldaña 2013). The interviews were identified in themes. The thematic categories include migration push factors, migration pull factors, migration journey and post-migration challenges. To avoid confusion and eliminate thematic overlap, each theme was included within the migration driving factors, the journey and the subsequent sections of this study.

Main push factors: reasons leaving Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been at the centre of conflict for centuries: from Alexander the Great to the British Empire, the Soviet Union and the United States. However, the policy of foreign intervention beginning with the British, then the Soviets and the United States has changed little. Afghanistan is constantly experiencing invasion because of its geopolitical and geostrategic location connecting Central Asia to South Asia and the Middle East with China (Fergusson and Gerald Hughes 2019). As a result, the nationalist movement in Afghanistan began with the policy of invaders in the country. Russians, for example, began to provoke the Islamist group of the country to fight for their freedom against the involvement of the United States. Similarly, the Britain and United States directly formed the 'freedom fighters' or the Mujahidin faction to fight against the Soviets. The Mujahidin group was funded and trained by Western countries, mainly the United States and the UK. The group then started their violent presence to oust the Russian regime in Afghanistan, which they succeeded in doing, thus causing civil war (Carpenter 1986; Ewing 2017; Gasper 2001; Saifullah 2017). Now, after years of conflict, the Taliban

has defeated the US-backed Afghan government and has taken over the country. Hence, such aggressive groups present themselves in different formats to resist the foreign presence under national or religious identity banners. Adding to the topic, participant migrants addressed insecurity as the main priori factor of their migration.

> After high school graduation, I joined the Afghan army. I was selected to be a signalman in Helmand province, where everyone speaks in Pashto language […] I do not remember a day without an ambush on us […] I served the army for a year, but I had to quit if I wanted to be alive. (Ahmed, 26 years old)

Reference to the dire security situation was unanimously addressed by participants. Rasoul, a 38-year-old migrant from Kunduz province, held the ruling elites accountable for what he considered to be the fundamental cause of insecurity in the country. In his words, 'Our politicians are foreign agents making millions of dollars. […] Nobody cares if you are kidnapped or killed. […] Afghanistan was never safe.' The 29-year-old Yasin from Jawzjan province argued that security was his only concern back home. Unsatisfied by his earnings as a shepherd in the city of Kayseri, he stated, 'If there is no war in Afghanistan, I will not stay in Turkey for a day. I can work and make even more money than what I am earning here.'

The interviewed migrants mentioned being victims of war. Their narratives are individual experiences quoting the same dark scenarios of protracted conflicts and state failure to provide political goods and services to society. They carry the emotions and the tragedy of violent clashes. As Yakub, a 23-year-old from Takhar province, said: 'My childhood went by playing with bullets as toys […] now I am an adult but still frightened with the everyday horror in my country.' The absence of human security in Afghanistan has pushed these young adults to migrate to a more developed country (Castles 2013).

The second migration push factor is poverty. This factor is related to prolonged war and instability in the country. Migrants also attached corruption as a driving cause of poverty in Afghanistan. As narrated by the migrants, scholars such as Swenson (2017) have also emphasized the corrupt predatory Afghan politicians that inflamed Afghan state failure in 2021. Most migrants come from low-income families that rely on daily income. Jamil, a 31-year-old participant from Takhar province, said: 'I used to sell vegetables on a wheelbarrow […] there were days that I could not make enough money to buy food for my family.' Jamil works on construction projects in Istanbul on daily wages. He earns approximately three times more than what he used to make back in his hometown. Like Jamil, Rashid, a 23-year-old respondent from Faryab province, narrated his family's economic struggle. 'I could not afford to finish school. My dad put me in a carpenter's house as an apprentice […] I worked there for a couple of years, but nothing changed for the better.' Omar, who is the same age as Rashid, works with Jamil in construction. Different from his peers, Omar comes from an educated family. As he narrated, 'My dad is a government employee. He earns less than I make here […] we are ten siblings, and daddy's salary is not enough to feed us […] I must work hard to help my family.'

The research participants' narrations support the existing literature on labour migration remittances (Barbora et al. 2008; Conway and Cohen 1998; Isabaeva 2013). In addition to human security, migration from underdeveloped countries to more developed states is due to economic incentives, driven by higher wages and the demand for

foreign labour (Olimova 2005; Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008). A majority of the respondents addressed poverty as one of the key determinant factors behind their migration to Turkey. The irregular migrants' daily and monthly earnings are sent to their families through the Havale exchange method.[3] Given the favourable exchange rate of the Turkish lira to Afghan rupees, it constitutes a relatively high-income level for the migrants.

The third push factor for irregular migration toward Turkey is the high unemployment rate in Afghanistan. As all the study respondents were members of the labour force, they were concerned with unemployment rates in Afghanistan; Turkey was also perceived as a more attractive destination than Iran and Pakistan due to its lower unemployment rates. Adding to the poverty, state dysfunctionality and security threats, migrants unanimously pinpointed the unemployment factor. Although the types of work they do in Turkey are accessible back home, their sociocultural pride and low wages in Afghanistan are key barriers. Hasan, a 26-year-old skilled labourer from Takhar province working in construction, said:

> I was 21 years old when I first came to Turkey. Everything changed from the day I heard about the working opportunities here in Turkey. My cousin was in Istanbul working in construction. Although he did not encourage me to come, I was fascinated that he was saving a good amount of money. He used to support his family financially. I decided to follow his path too. […] Now I am a labourer working in construction. Considering all the daily problems, I am not happy to be here living as an illegal migrant. […] However, it is much better than Afghanistan. I work hard, and I save money to send to my family. […] In Afghanistan, people like me cannot cross their pride to work in construction projects. Everybody knows each other. It is shameful for us to do the same work in Afghanistan that I am doing here in Turkey.

Although the research participants were primarily unskilled labourers, some respondents' reference to unemployment reflected their experiences with immediate family members. Agha, a 19-year-old migrant from Faryab province residing in Ankara, said: 'My elder brother is a university graduate and unemployed. […] When I finished high school, I decided to leave the country for a better future.' Likewise, the 28-year-old Khalid's response was emotional to the questions related to employment. He argued that:

> Everybody asks me why I came to Turkey […] I do not understand how they cannot see our situation in Afghanistan. You ask me about my job here and back in my hometown, or why I came here […] we do not even have access to proper electricity and health care in Afghanistan […] there is no government to create employment. […] They are all thieves.

The primary services that a functional state ought to provide for society runs the spectrum of security, poverty and employment. As illustrated by the participants, the Afghan government failed to comply with providing these basic services. Hence, a failed state would always be one reason for high levels of outbound migration. Although security, poverty and employment factors cannot be treated equally, it has potential to explain the foundation of the increasing migration influx from Afghanistan to Turkey and other third countries.

Main pull factors: attracting migrants to Turkey

Cultural, religious, linguistic proximity and comparably higher wages are factors that attract Afghan migrants to Turkey. Turkey considers Afghanistan a 'brother country'

and their ways of life are similar in many respects (Sengula and Sunbulb 2017). Afghanistan, dominantly following Hanafi-Sunni Islam, has a more similar way of practising religion with Turkey than with Iran. Additionally, Turkic minorities living in Afghanistan see Turkey as their motherland. Compared with other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, they have more affection and fraternity with Turks. More than half of the respondents were from Turkic minorities, which indicates their strong lingual affiliations. Their languages (Uzbek and Turkmen) have similarities with the Turkish language. As one of the participant migrants from Jawzjan province working as a fishmonger in Malatya said: 'I feel at home. […] I can proudly speak the Uzbek language and say I am a Turk' (Kareem, 22-year-old).

The linguistic proximity as an important pull factor between Afghanistani Turkic minorities and Turkey is supportive of the literature on the role of language in shaping migration (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2015; Monsutti 2007). An analysis of the immigration flows in 30 OECD countries over the period 1980–2010 indicates that migration rates increase with linguistic proximity (Adsera and Pytlikova 2015). The findings of this research suggest that:

> Language itself affects migration costs beyond the effects of cultural homogeneity or physical proximity between origin and destination countries. In the context of traditional economic push and pull factors found in the literature, the impact of linguistic proximity on migration flows between two countries is lower than that of ethnic networks or destination GDP per capita level but much stronger than that of unemployment rates. (Adsera and Pytlikova 2015, 74)

The literature on Afghan migrants also indicates the migration distribution tendency towards linguistic proximity, with Iran hosting predominantly Persian native-speaking migrants and Pakistani Pashtun native speakers, particularly from the Pashtun-dominant region of Pakistan (e.g., Monsutti 2007; Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2015). Although research on Turkic ethnic groups of Afghanistan in Turkey has yet to be studied comprehensively, the participants' narration supports linguistic proximity as an important explanatory factor. Moreover, the effect of cultural homogeneity between Afghanistan and Turkey is another pull factor highlighted by the respondents. Quyash, a 32-year-old migrant from Takhar province residing in Kayseri elaborated that '[…] I worked in Iran for one and a half years too. Although Iran is much better than Afghanistan, it cannot be compared to Turkey. The culture and religion here are almost the same as in Afghanistan.'

Another migration pull factor was comparably higher wages for the unskilled labour force in Turkey. Babur, a 20-year-old participant migrant working in construction in Ankara, said:

> In a day, I earn 100–120 TL. I cannot earn this much in Afghanistan. […] Mostly, I work in construction till we finish the work. Sometimes we get to another place immediately after finishing the first one, and sometimes we do not find any place to work for days.

The literature on migration pull factors indicates that the differences in expected individual wages are attractive for unemployed individuals (Rabe and Taylor 2012). Since the interview participants were mostly uneducated and unemployed individuals, higher individual earnings with comparably better job opportunities in Turkey were attractive. Hamza, a 26-year-old participant, stated that 'Migrant life in Turkey is comparably

better than Afghanistan and Iran. […] There are more job opportunities.' Considering the exchange rate and purchasing power parity in these two countries, earnings in the Turkish currency put Afghan migrants in a more desirable situation back at home. The geographical location of Turkey as a transit country to Europe is another crucial migrant driving factor. Turkey's neighbouring Iran has become a transit migrant hub for Afghanistan and other neighbouring countries (Wissink, Düvell, and van Eerdewijk 2013).

Another subfactor is the effect of social media and local television channels streaming Turkish series in Afghanistan. Interestingly, nine out of 43 participants emphasized that their migration was driven by seeing their friends' and villagers' provocative, filtered social media posts. They were attracted to the natural beauty of Turkey in general and Istanbul in particular. As Bozok and Bozok (2019, 101) pointed out, Istanbul 'is the bedrock of informal jobs, human trafficking, crime, pollution and an enormous population that makes the city an arena for wild competitive relations'. When I questioned Baba, a 31-year-old migrant working in construction, whether his decision was worth risking his life to visit Istanbul, emphatically his answer was yes. Some of these young migrants base their decisions on Facebook posts or television series, ultimately costing their life.

Bearing the fatal risks of irregular migration from Afghanistan to Turkey might sound outrageous. However, social media and other streaming platforms served as a source of imagination for migrants to undertake this precarious journey. These young men were convinced that they could find a better life away from home (Bal and Roos 2014). As Gardner (2008) concluded, migration has contributed to the locals' imaginations to aspire and dream of different places. As such, some of the migrants argued that the purpose of their migration was to experience a prosperous life. 'We are sick of war and poverty […] I have one life to live, and I choose to live in a safe place. You either die on the way to Turkey or make it happen. We risk our lives for a better future' (Asad, 25-year-old).

Scholars have studied the development of migration aspiration through the sociocultural aspect of migration (Massey et al. 1998; Massey et al. 1993). Bal and Roos (2014) noted that 'after all, people's imaginations both reflect and influence the shaping of their experienced realities' (254). This particular aspect of imagination is evident among the research participants in the context of exposure to Turkey through social media platforms. According to Ali (2007), 'the culture of migration is those ideas, practices and cultural artefacts that reinforce the celebration of migration and migrants. This includes beliefs, desire, symbols, myths, education, celebrations of migration in various media, and material goods' (39). The use of social media and Turkish TV shows could also be categorized under Ali's conceptualization of the culture of migration. Some of the young migrant labour force base their decision to migrate solely on imaginary beliefs and desires. Pasha, a 33-year-old migrant, said:

> My friends from our neighbourhood had come to Turkey 2 years before me. We were friends on Facebook. I used to talk to them almost every week through [Facebook] Messenger. I was fascinated by the scenes they were taking photos and sharing on Facebook. After that, I promised myself that I ought to experience life in Turkey at least once in my lifetime and now I am here.

As Salazar (2011) concluded, 'the images and ideas of migration to the West derive from and are perpetuated by information from two main sources: mass media and migrants or

returnees' (588). He also noted that internet and television were the most influential sources of encouraging migration. Therefore, social media and Turkish television series were potential pull factors to attract young Afghan migrants.

The risks and challenges

The irregular migration route to Turkey was through Pakistan and Iran. Although the routes are usually set before the journey, the migrants cannot always follow the smugglers' maps. According to their narratives, smugglers often change the routes if they have updates about the police patrols beforehand. The smugglers typically charge around US$1500 per individual. If the migrants are from the smuggler's network and know them personally or through their relatives and friends, they offer a discount. The smugglers secure the payments through their moneychangers (Sarraf) network before the journey and no money is handed over. The migrants then approve the payment to the smugglers once they arrive at their destination. Usually, the payments are made by remittances. This process works based on the migrant and the smugglers' mutual consent.

According to the migrants' narrations, the border between Afghanistan and Iran is mostly desert, and the border between Iran and Turkey is mountainous and extremely rocky. The routes can be fatal for older people, children and women. Therefore, male adults typically bear the risk of travelling. A participant migrant from Ankara, while telling the story of his journey with smugglers and the rest of the migrant group, said:

> After I agreed with the smuggler to take us to Turkey, along with my father's cousin, we joined a group of around 300 people […] I saw tens of dead bodies of children, men, and women in our way. It was disgusting. It looked like a massacre had happened there. All of them were the dead bodies of migrants like us. […] We had to rush the rugged-edged cliffs with sharp rocks in high mountains. Two of our group members fell from the rock in front of my eyes and could not continue. A teenage girl was hurt in her leg, and her family did not even notice. When I went to help her, the smuggler shouted at me not to stop and keep running. If you are weak, you will die there, and nobody will care for you. […] On our way to Tehran, the police noticed us and opened fire. Our driver was smart and quick to escape, but the police caught three other cars. In Zenjan, the police caught us too. They beat us like animals. Luckily, we escaped from them after a while. They opened fire, but we did not stop. […] We spend nights in the middle of cold forests and rocky mountains. I was lost two times then found the group members again. […] This journey is a struggle between life and death. (Ghani, 26-year-old)

The above narration is just one among thousands of similar stories. Migrants experience hunger, thirst and sickness. Most of the correspondents stated that the only source of help they could ask for was from their fellow migrants. Based on the respondents' narrations, among dozens of risks and challenges involved in this journey, the greatest risk any migrant must contend with is the smugglers themselves; they cannot be trusted and can be misleading. The second vital risk they face is police patrols. They can be shot in an instant. The third risk they encounter is the rugged-edged cliffs of the mountains. Anything can go wrong at any time on the journey. Migrants had witnessed families becoming separated from each other. Akbar, one of the participants, witnessed the loss of a man's wife and another's daughter. Some lost their relatives and close friends. All participants found the journey extremely traumatic. As found in Kaytaz and BenEzer's studies,

migration journeys had transformative effects on migrants' psychological well-being (BenEzer 2002; Kaytaz 2016).

The tragedy of the expected future: a tale of misfortune

Upon their arrival in Turkey, migrants usually contact their relatives, friends or anyone from their circle of contacts to transfer their payable debt to the smugglers so they can move forward. The newcomers are directed to other cities by a network of friends and relatives in Turkey. Due to these pre-existing solidarity networks, finding places to work and integrating into a new society is much easier. This was the preliminary stage that all the migrants went through. However, the real challenge started after they settled in Turkey.

The author observed that the high number of migrants in Turkey created a culture of distrust within the society. Irregular migrants' lifestyle created an unhealthy environment between the local community and foreign migrants, which created negative interactions and made the integration process difficult. As part of a large migrant community, irregular migrants from Afghanistan are visible in almost any corner of Turkey; they mainly work on construction sites. According to the *Milliyet* newspaper's 2015 report, in just the Küçüksu labour market of Üsküdar in Istanbul, 5000 male members of the labour force were from Afghanistan and looking for daily work. Such scenarios led the Turkish labourers to complain about the Afghan migrants, arguing that these migrants work for low wages under any circumstances, resulting in labour market domination by these migrants (Eser 2015).

Since migration affects native employment opportunities (Brücker and Jahn 2011), irregular migrants became a challenge for Turkey's labour market. Most of them crossed these borders to save money for their family and loved ones and were there to work. As Ashraf, an 18-year-old migrant working as a shepherd in Kayseri, said: 'If my employer pays me 3,000 TL a month, I would be happy, and if he pays 1,500 TL a month, I would not like it, but there is nothing I could do.' Another migrant from Ankara, working in a supermarket for seven continuous months, claimed that:

> Every time I asked for my payment, my boss said he would pay next month. By the seventh month, I realized that he would not pay me a penny, and his excuse was that I must work for him for the whole year to get paid. (Kadir, 27-year-old)

Migrants are not in a bargaining position with their employers. They have no option other than to agree with their employers' conditions whatever they may be. Although some of the participants stressed the sympathy and tolerance of Turkish employers, there have been many other cases where the employer's attitude towards migrants was inappropriate and caused moral injury. Yaqub, a 25-year-old migrant working in Istanbul, said:

> I worked in a construction building for three months, and I only got paid for one month. When I asked for money, my boss said he would pay me once he had money, but he never did. I knew he had enough money to pay me, but he was lying, and I could not do anything.

Zarif, a shepherd working in Malatya, said: 'my boss owes me 8,000 TL. I worked for him as a shepherd. […] Months went by, and still, he did not pay me. If I go to the police, they will deport me. So I cannot complain about him'. Bismil, another migrant who had experience of working in construction in different cities, including Ankara, Kocaeli, and Istanbul,

said: 'sometimes they pay you and sometimes they do not […] I know friends that got injured but were not taken to hospital because he did not have any document for registration'. Salim, who worked in a grocery in Ankara had similar claims. In his words,

> Three times I did not get paid. The first time, it was 600 TL. The second time it was 1,800 TL, and the third time it was more than 2,000 TL. […] I know a couple of my friends worked on a construction site and did not get paid too […] we have no choice but to carry on and keep working.

Migrants argued that the employers paid little to no attention to any potential legal consequences. The employers knew that the migrants were undocumented foreigners working illegally, putting their lives in danger to have a better life, an equal life with others, a life with justice and beyond the fear of being othered and threatened, and, most importantly, earning money. However, they witness similar scenarios of what they left back in their home country or in Iran and Pakistan. This was the tragedy of the bright future they expected.

Most participants were fed up with their poor lifestyle. Their expectation of the so-called 'better life abroad' was no more than a dream; they work hard and survive rather than thrive. Surprisingly, those interviewees who had migrated between 2010 and 2014 were welcomed by the local communities they lived in. Arif, a 29-year-old cook residing in Kayseri, said: 'we were welcomed by the neighbourhood we were residing. They were offering us food […] my neighbour used to treat me like his son. Nevertheless, things have changed now'. Arif argued that the hosting community's social behaviour towards Afghan migrants had changed negatively. It came to the point employers refrained from paying his wages.

The employer's refrainment from paying migrant wages brought despair. Since they are undocumented migrants, they have no legal power to sue their employers. However, when participants were asked whether the avoidance of payment by the employers had ever changed their decision to stay in Turkey, their answer was a plain no.

> If you tell me how I can get my money, of course, I will take it. But I am a migrant without voice […] the best thing I do is either fight or beg him. If he pays, then he pays. If not, that is it. […] Rather than wasting my time and waiting for days, I keep working in other places with other employers. (Tariq, 31-year-old)

The irony of complying with the sad reality of not getting paid is mainly related to the fear of deportation which has, apparently, been used by the employers. According to the migrants' narrations, employers withholding pay is practiced across the migrants' residing cities. It is more of an individual act by the employers rather than a prevalent practice in a particular city. However, in Ankara and Istanbul where migrants' solidarity network is stronger, there is a degree of resistance against payment abstentions. Nonetheless, the ultimate decision is taken by the employers' goodwill and their personal business ethics.

Conclusions

The study of irregular Afghan migrants in Turkey has received little scholarly attention. Moreover, research on Afghan migrants is merely focused on Istanbul and migrants residing in other cities are excluded from analysis. Although Istanbul holds many undocumented Afghan migrants, the research findings are generalized to the whole country (Alemi,

Montgomery, and Stempel 2018; Bozok and Bozok 2019; Karadağ 2021). This study, on the contrary, found that kinship and friendship networks vary across Turkey. As concluded by Karadağ (2021) and Bozok and Bozok (2019), the solidarity network among Afghans is a survival strategy in Istanbul. However, it is not the case in other cities with low numbers of migrant residents. Since Istanbul and Ankara host remarkably higher numbers of migrants, there is a network in these cities compared to smaller cities such as Bursa, Malatya and Kayseri.

Irregular migration in this article is conceptualized based on the responses of research participants. As such, this paper observed that irregular migration is better understood through the systemic theory of irregular migration put forward by Echeverría (2020). Hence, this article builds on Echeverría's extensive work on irregular migration by stating that the systemic theory of irregular migration has the potential to deal with the irregular migrants' individual scenarios that vary across and within the cases. Therefore, it allows for a better study of irregular migrants' individual success or failure narratives as well as their decision-making processes and compromises. In addition, 'the multicausal and differentiated explanations' (123) aspect of the systemic theory of irregular migration can enhance the case-dependent analysis of cyclical migration for future analysis.

The irregular migration journey from Afghanistan to Turkey is extremely perilous and lengthy. It takes migrants weeks to arrive at their destination country which often makes it unlikely for women and children to follow this path. Moreover, male migration in Afghanistan has a sociocultural aspect; men are the breadwinners and are responsible for the finances (Echavez, Mosawi, and Pilongo 2016; Moghadam 1992). Hence, male adults constitute the majority of Afghan irregular migrants.

As for the findings of this study, more than half of interviewed migrants experienced first-hand discrimination from their employers. These irregular migrants were 'exposed to countless exploitative treatments by their employers' (Karadağ 2021, 9). After months of intense work under oppressive conditions, they did not receive their wages in full. Irregular migrants are gambling with their lives to save for their survival and the survival of their families at home. They are working without any insurance, social security, or protection whatsoever. Despite knowing the risks of not getting paid, they switch from one employer to another, hoping that they can save some money to remit back home and because they have no other alternative.

Since the research participants were young male adults, the sole purpose of their migration was to send remittances back home. The failure to receive wages was considered the most annoying challenge that the irregular migrants faced. It is conceptualized as a post-migration challenge. They are forced to survive, and this is the tragedy of the bright future they had foreseen before migrating from a failed state to a prosperous one. They had risked their lives to have a better future. However, their dream stays far from reach, and they live precariously.

Notes

1. The generalization of 'Afghans' as a reference to the residents of Afghanistan is a contested referral. The term 'Afghan' is synonymous with 'Pashtun', which is the current majority ethnic group in Afghanistan. Hence, the generalization of population under the 'Afghan' banner is

perceived as an acculturation of Pashtun identity to a mass of diverse ethnic groups inhabiting in the country (Dupree 1980; Rubin 2020; Shahrani 2002; Thier 1999). Since the extant literature on Afghanistan is written as 'Afghans', the same understanding is followed here to avoid confusion.

2. For the other side of gender equality, see Moghadam (1992) and Tapper (1991).
3. Havale is an informal popular money transfer system that functions based on mutual connections between the sender and the receiver.

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