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# Origin and transit migration of Afghans and Syrians to Germany: The influential actors and factors behind the destination choice

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## Abstract

We use Process Net-Maps to visualize the irregular migration patterns of refugees and identify influential actors/factors shaping their decisions. A qualitative case study was used that included 87 Afghan and Syrian refugees (52 individual in-depth interviews and 35 participants in five focus group discussions) residing in Stuttgart, Germany. Results show a typical pattern for respondents to first migrate to a neighboring country, and then a mixture of decisive factors induce them to migrate onward. The perspective of refugees in the destination country covers the migration processes between transit and destination countries which is vital information for the stakeholders in international migration management, and policy developments on asylum migration, integration and repatriation.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020 a total of 70.8 million people had been recorded as forcibly displaced around the globe, of which 25.9 million are registered as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Approximately 60% of registered refugees come from three countries, including 6.7 million from Syria, 2.7 million from Afghanistan, and 2.3 million from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Afghans and Syrians are the two top asylum-seeking populations, not only globally, but also in the European Union (EU) (Eurostat, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Armed conflicts have continued for over four decades in Afghanistan and for ten years in Syria. The refugee migration and the proportions of Afghans

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and Syrians in comparison to the total number of first-time asylum applicants to the EU and Germany (DE) between 2011 and 2019 are indicated in [Figure 1](#).

[Figure 1](#) shows that Afghanistan and Syria are the top two countries of citizenship which played an important role in the total number of asylum applications in the EU 28. For instance, the increase and decrease in the total number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Syria caused either the rise or fall in the total number of asylum seekers in the EU during 2015–2019. Germany has been the main country of destination in the EU and has accommodated 37%–40% of the total EU28 asylum applicants during 2011–2019. Afghans and Syrians constitute on average 40% of the total asylum applicants in Germany and 55% of the total arrivals in 2016. Afghans are the second-largest group of refugees after Syrians, and they are consequently considered the second-largest contributors to the “refugee crisis” in Europe. In 2015, the number of Afghan asylum seekers in Europe increased by approximately five times as compared to previous years (Eurostat, 2019). The public and media discussions and migration debates in Germany and some other EU members consider the “European refugee crisis” a severe problem and emphasize the need for strategies to avoid similar cases in the future (Torfa, 2019). To understand this phenomenon, it is essential to identify the main determinants of asylum migration and the motivations behind the movements from and to specific destinations (see European Asylum Support Office [EASO], 2016).

The intervening German and European policies included trials to control the number of new arrivals by various means. For example, a political agreement between the EU and Afghanistan, the Joint Way Forward for Afghanistan (JWFA),<sup>3</sup> signed in October 2016, aimed to facilitate the return of Afghans from the EU. Another was the steady decrease in refugee recognition of Afghans in Germany from 72% in 2015 to 55% in 2016 and 47% in 2017 (see European Council on Refugees & Exiles [ECRE], 2017) which seemed to sharply decrease the number of new arrivals in 2017 and 2018. However, in 2019 Afghan asylum applicants in the EU surprisingly increased by 35% in comparison to the previous year while the number of Syrian applicants decreased by 7% (Eurostat, 2019).<sup>4</sup> The fluctuations in the number of new asylum applicants in spite of agreements for migration controls raises some questions such as follows: where do Afghan refugees in Europe come from? Do these refugees come from transit countries? What should migration policy developments take into consideration?

The literature on Afghan refugees focuses mostly on war and armed conflict as the immediate causes of migration to neighboring countries (Monsutti, 2008). The psychological effects of war on Afghan refugees in the

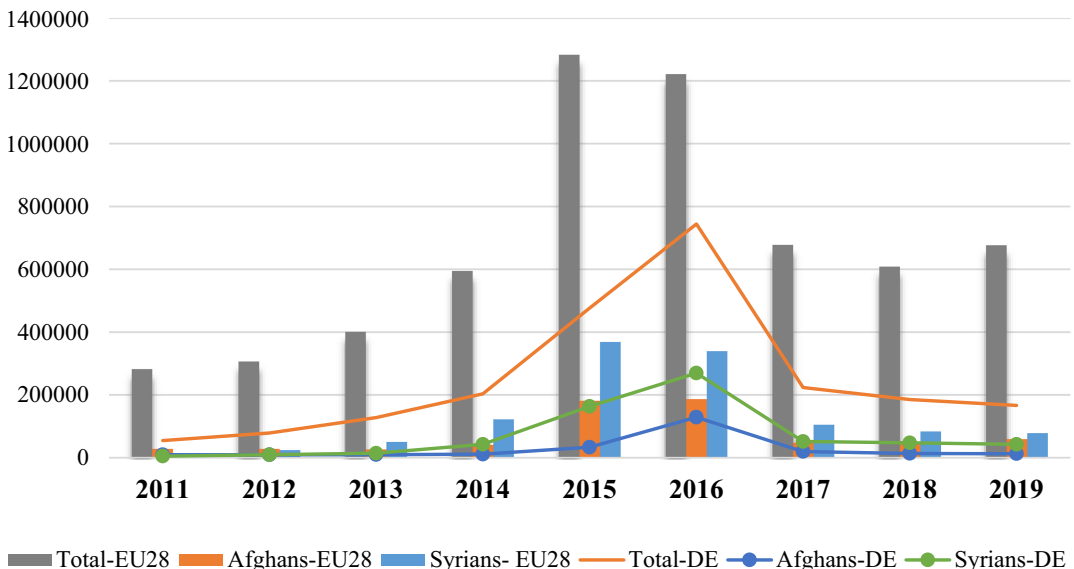


FIGURE 1 Asylum migration to EU28 and Germany (DE) over time (2011–2019). Source: Calculations by authors based on data from Eurostat 2020

United States have been explored by Mghir and Raskin (1999) and their integration challenges by Oeppen (2013). Afghans have been termed “transit migrants” and are reported as being the second-highest nationality in asylum migration in Greece (Dimitriadi, 2017). However, the case of Afghan refugees has remained relatively understudied in the academic literature considering their population in the continent and in Germany, in particular. Research has considered neither the migration patterns of Afghans to Europe nor the role of influential actors and factors in the process of migration.

We conducted in-depth qualitative research with a focus on Afghan refugees in Germany. To make a comparative perspective possible, Syrian refugees in Germany were also considered in order to identify similarities and differences between the two nationalities regarding their determinants of migration, the path to the destination and the role of different actors and factors in their destination choice. Syrians were chosen as a comparative case for the following reasons. (a) Afghans and Syrians constitute the two largest groups of refugees in Europe and in Germany. (b) Both Afghanistan and Syria have histories of armed conflict, and both countries are currently in ongoing armed conflicts. It is therefore interesting to compare the factors and actors behind their migration as refugees and the choice of destination. (c) The first author of this paper is from Afghanistan and the second author comes from Syria. Data collection was undertaken by authors who speak the languages of the participants and are familiar with their social and cultural backgrounds. This facilitated the data collection and prevented probable shortcomings that could occur during translation and interpretation. This study aims (a) to map and explore the trajectories of fragmented migration of Afghan and Syrian refugees, (b) to identify the influential factors and actors involved directly or indirectly in their migration decisions from their country of origin or transit, and to the destination, and (c) to recognize the strategic causes behind their secondary movements and the motives for a specific destination country choice in Europe.

This research was conducted in the city of Stuttgart, the capital of the state of Baden-Württemberg hosting around 13% of total asylum applicants, which makes it the third-largest recipient of asylum seekers in Germany (BAMF, 2019). The primary purpose of this research is to address the knowledge gap regarding the irregular migration of Afghans. This important phenomenon is explored from the perspective of refugees in their destination country, while most other studies explore the matter from a transit country perspective (Collyer, 2010; Kvittingen et al., 2018; Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic, & Vidovic, 2015). The destination country perspective allows us to cover the migration process between the transit and destination countries which we believe is important for the stakeholders including countries of origin, transit and destination as well as the policy developments on migration management, integration and repatriation. The relevant stakeholders in the destination country (Germany) include the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*, BAMF) affiliated with the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (*Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat*). The clear information on actors and factors behind irregular migration and fragmented journeys gives these authorities the opportunity to make well informed decisions for managing irregular arrivals, drawing safe pathways for migration and setting legal frameworks for integration. Moreover, the findings might be of interest to the states (*Länder*), city municipalities and local actors such as employment agencies, job centers and other private and non-governmental organisations who are ultimately in charge of administrative procedures and practical implementation of the integration policies in their localities.

Another important finding of the study is the fragmented journeys and secondary movements of Afghans after a long period of stay in the first country of migration and the challenges and opportunities for refugees and the receiving countries. We are aware of the specificity of our target group and the large groups of asylum seekers migrating to Europe during 2015–2017, which is regarded as a time-specific, short-term opportunity for asylum migration to Europe. There are reasons that make this group of asylum migrations a unique case. For instance, the escalation of violent conflict in Syria, the opening of the Turkish border to Europe, the *welcoming culture* of Germany and that of some other EU member states towards Syrians, the sudden unprecedentedly high number of asylum seekers from the Middle East to Europe, and the invalidity of Dublin regulations for Syrians in Germany. These unique circumstances may have influenced the determinants of migrants' movements, and their destination

in this specific time and context which is important to be brought up in the agenda of policy makers and help improve migration policies in Germany and the EU.

This paper is structured into five parts. Section 1 is an introduction, section 2 summarizes existing literature and section 3 describes data and methods. Section 4 presents the results, and the last section discusses findings and concludes with recommendations.

## LITERATURE

### Fragmented journeys and transit migration

Migration without a strictly defined point of destination and in several separate stages is designated as a fragmented journey (Collyer, 2010; Dankwah & Valenta, 2018). Collyer believes that fragmented migration is due to restricted immigration ("immigration controls") in attractive destinations such as Europe, North America and Australia. He uses the term "stranded migrant" for those who are unwilling to return to their countries of origin and unable to continue their migration.

A critical aspect of irregular migration is the secondary movements, specifically the onward migration of refugees from their first countries of refuge. Transit migration has been the focus of many researchers in different parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa and Europe (Collyer, 2010; Kvittingen et al., 2018; Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic, & Vidovic, 2015). Brekke and Brochmann (2015) explore the secondary movement of Eritrean refugees from Italy to Norway, and show the high motivation for secondary movements and the Dublin Regulation as a barrier in front of them that impedes them from applying for asylum in the second country. Mcadam (2013) states that "the absence of a legal framework to provide protection" has been a significant reason behind secondary movements of Afghan and Iraqi nationals. "The possibility to rebuild their lives, secure their wider needs, and work towards normality" are mentioned by Somali refugees who arrived in Australia in 2002 (Mcadam, 2013).

The recent refugee migration to Europe has made researchers and policymakers emphasize the necessity for more empirical research in this area (EASO, 2016). The studies focusing on destination choice, transit, and fragmented migration have been conducted mostly in transit countries. For instance, Kvittingen et al., (2018) focused on the experiences of Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan and explored their aspirations for onward migration. There are studies on Iraqi refugees in Jordan by Dankwah and Valenta (2018) and by Collyer (2010) on a very specific type of stranded migrants based in Morocco, and a study on reluctant and stranded migrants in transit in Croatia by (Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic & Vidovic, 2015). These studies were conducted on refugees in the countries of transit, whereas we study the matter from the perspective of refugees in the country of destination which allows us to explore the steps and process between transit and destination countries.

### Choice of destination

The destination country choice for asylum-related migration is a highly debated topic. Some researchers believe that asylum seekers are not in a position to decide, plan and choose their destination country but instead, some factors come together and specify certain countries as a destination for them (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Day & White, 2002; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). However, others challenge this idea and try to prove that even asylum seekers do not end up in a country without their own decision making in relation to the choice of destination country (Dimitriadi, 2017; McAuliffe & Jayasuriya, 2016; Tucker, 2018).

The current knowledge on reasons behind migration, in general, classifies destination choice into migration-related (visa policies, immigration and citizenship policies) and non-migration-related reasons (colonial relationships, cultural and language similarity or geographical distance) (Grogger & Hanson, 2011; Mayda & Rodrik, 2005).

Gilbert and Koser (2006) investigated the level of information the asylum seekers have about the UK before they enter the country. The results were surprising; since the majority of asylum seekers knew very little about the country or its asylum regulations, many had no family ties in the UK, and overall had a minimal role in choosing their destination country. Their findings recognize smugglers as the major players in the choice of final destination. Collyer (2010) and Dankwah and Valenta (2018) both found that technology and social links in the destination country facilitate the migration of poorer individuals from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. Some studies suggested a relatively complex mix of political, social, economic and personal reasons in origin or transit countries as factors that force people to migrate (Dankwah & Valenta, 2018; Dimitriadi, 2017).

Given this topic's importance and the scarcity of research, the need for further study has been stressed by esteemed migration studies scholars (Day & White, 2002; Gilbert & Koser, 2006). The EASO also suggested the need for more research to provide evidence for (1) the motivations behind irregular migration to and from specific countries; (2) the dynamics of migration journeys and migration decisions; and (3) migration and non-migration policy impacts on migration decisions (EASO, 2016).

## DATA AND METHODS

We applied a qualitative case study approach using an inductive method informed by the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach helped us to study peoples' experiences of complex irregular migration processes and find out how the process works in practice. The interview guideline was designed to include the process of participants' immigration from the country of origin to that of destination.

### Sampling and data collection

Theoretical sampling was used, which consists of a process of joint data collection, coding and analysis, based on which the researcher decides on the next steps, such as what additional data to collect. The sampling criteria included two groups of Afghan and Syrian refugees, diverse in terms of age, gender, arrival time to Germany and the type of legal status where possible. Data collection took place between August 2018 and March 2019. The profile of individual interviewees who participated in this research is represented in more detail in Table 1. Respondents originated from different parts of Afghanistan (Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Nangarhar, Herat, Ghazni, Ghor, and Bamiyan) and Syria (mostly Aleppo, Damascus, and the northeastern Kurdish region).

The interviewees and participants of focus group discussions (FGDs) were mainly accessed through social workers and integration managers in the refugee reception centers, voluntary organizations, social networks, and some snowball sampling.

### Process-Net-Mapping

The Net-Map method was developed and defined as a "low-tech and low-cost" technique by Schiffer (2007) which shows the actors involved in a network, the links among them, and the level of influence each actor has with regards to a specific outcome (Maya-Jariego & Cachia, 2019). A noteworthy benefit of process net-mapping is that the system boundaries of the network are automatically defined and only actors that influence the process somehow, are included in the map. An essential feature of this method that makes it suitable for our study is the possibility of mapping the process of origin/transit migration and visualizing the actors, participants, stakeholders, and factors in a sophisticated cycle. Moreover, this method was practical to use and easy to involve the interviewees by visually walking them through the process they had experienced.

TABLE 1 Profile of the interviewees

	Afghans (n = 24)	Syrians (n = 28)	Total (n = 52)
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	15	18	33
Female	9	10	19
<b>Age</b>			
≥18 years old	1	0	1
19–30 years old	10	15	25
31–45 years old	11	10	21
46–60 years old	2	2	4
<b>Year of arrival</b>			
2011–2014	4	3	7
2015	18	20	38
2016–2018	2	5	7
<b>Education level</b>			
Masters degree or PhD	0	3	3
Bachelor degree	4	18	22
High school	17	5	22
Lower than high school	3	2	5
<b>Marital status</b>			
Single	9	5	14
Married	15	23	38
<b>Legal status</b>			
Refugee protection	7	25	32
Entitlement to asylum	5	0	5
Subsidiary protection	0	3	3
National ban to deportation	5	0	5
Rejection	4	0	4
Other (asylum application under review or no response)	3	0	3

Source: Authors.

The interviewees were first familiarized with the process and tools of the interview. We tried to keep the discussions very natural and similar to the storytelling of one's migration journey, but we did guide the interviewees and FGD sessions by focusing on the following points:

1. When and why did you migrate from your country of origin/residence or country A?
2. Who made the decision about migration to country B/C, who contributed the financial resources, who helped with information regarding migration and living conditions in country B?
3. When and why did you decide to leave country B/C after a substantial number of years of residence there? When, how and why did you decide to go further, to Europe and Germany, and why during that period in particular? How well were you informed as to the repercussions of your decision?
4. What were the main events /occasions/ challenges in countries A, B, C,<sup>5</sup> and how did you overcome them?

**Data analysis**

The collected qualitative data, the Net-Maps of individual interviews and FGDs were coded and categorized for the main topics. The main categories were classified into a handful of categories for each theme, such as causes of migration from countries of origin/transit, influential actors/factors in migration decisions in the origin and transit countries, major challenges and strategies to overcome them. The frequency of the codes and categories were then quantified by the *(Count & Count If)* functions in Excel to identify the most influential actors/factors in different stages of the migration process. Furthermore, the main quotes related to each theme were translated and added to the themes and organized based on the research questions.

**Ethical considerations**

This research obtained ethical approval from the *Institutional Review Board of the University of Hohenheim*. The researchers made sure to maintain respondent anonymity, follow all ethical guidelines and confirm their neutrality.

**RESULTS**

**Origin and transit migration**

Figure 2 presents the time spent in transit countries by Afghans in part A and Syrians in part B. Nearly half of Afghans and one-third of Syrians spent more than one year (+1-48 years) time in a different country than their country of origin before their migration to Germany. The average time spent in different countries by Afghan respondents was 9.6 years and for Syrians 1.1 years. The first transit countries for Afghans are mostly Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Greece; and for Syrians Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Bulgaria, and Algeria.

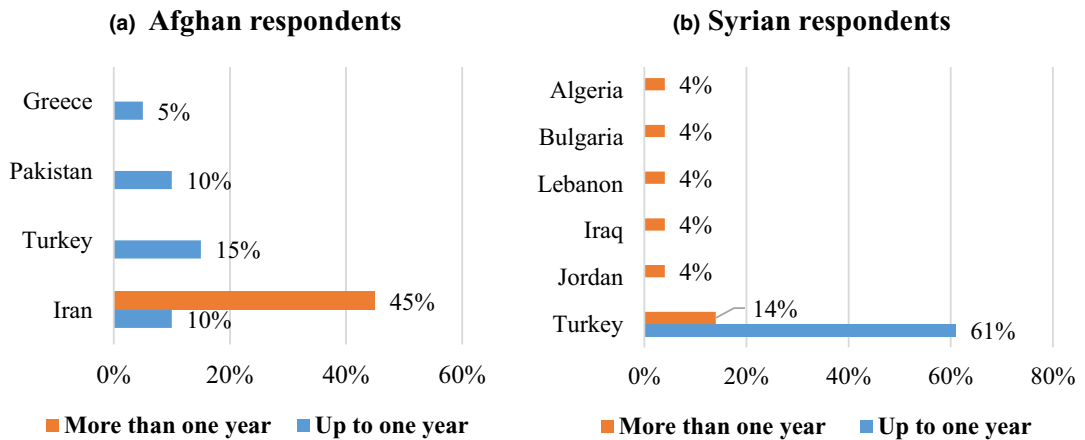


FIGURE 2 Time spent in transit countries by Afghans and Syrians. Source: Authors. Note: The diagram includes respondents with transit migration experiences only. The rest of the informants (7% of Syrians and 15% of Afghans) experienced direct migration to their destination and thus are not included in the diagram



## Process Net-Maps of irregular migration patterns

Figure 3 is a summary of Net-Maps showing all actors/factors behind migration from origin to transit and the destination. Political instability and insecurity issues were the most frequent and decisive factors for migration, and family heads were the leading actors for decision-making to migrate from the countries of origin. However, the level of influence of factors and the leading actors changes when they move to the transit countries. The first country of migration is visualized as a separate category in Figure 3 because (a) people have spent a tremendous amount of time there and (b) because it plays an essential role in the secondary movements. The main factors in the first countries of transit were mostly resident permit issues and the risk of deportation, discrimination, lack of long-term prospects, educational barriers, and lack of social and economic support. The most influential actor at this stage is not the family head, but the people smugglers and social links that facilitate the departure to the transit countries. The significant factors for onward migration were the intention for onward migration, lack of long-term prospects, and social support in transit. People smugglers, co-ethnics in transit, social media, and social networks also played crucial roles in the process of migration.

Figure 4 summarizes the Net-Maps of two real cases of irregular migration (an Afghan and a Syrian refugee). The figure lists the most crucial factors and actors behind their migration, the time spent in transit and the path to the destination. We have chosen the two cases as the most typical and frequent cases for both nationalities. The first case is a 32-year-old Afghan female respondent who had left Ghor city of Afghanistan to Tehran, Iran, together with her parents and siblings when she was only 12 and, the second case is a 24-year-old Syrian male respondent who left Syria to Turkey. Their onward migration to several transit countries, and to the destination, and the most influential factors and actors behind their movements through the pattern are identified and presented briefly.

### Main driving forces of migration

Different reasons have repelled people away from their countries of origin or from transit countries. For instance, some of the most frequent reasons for migration from the countries of origin were deteriorated political

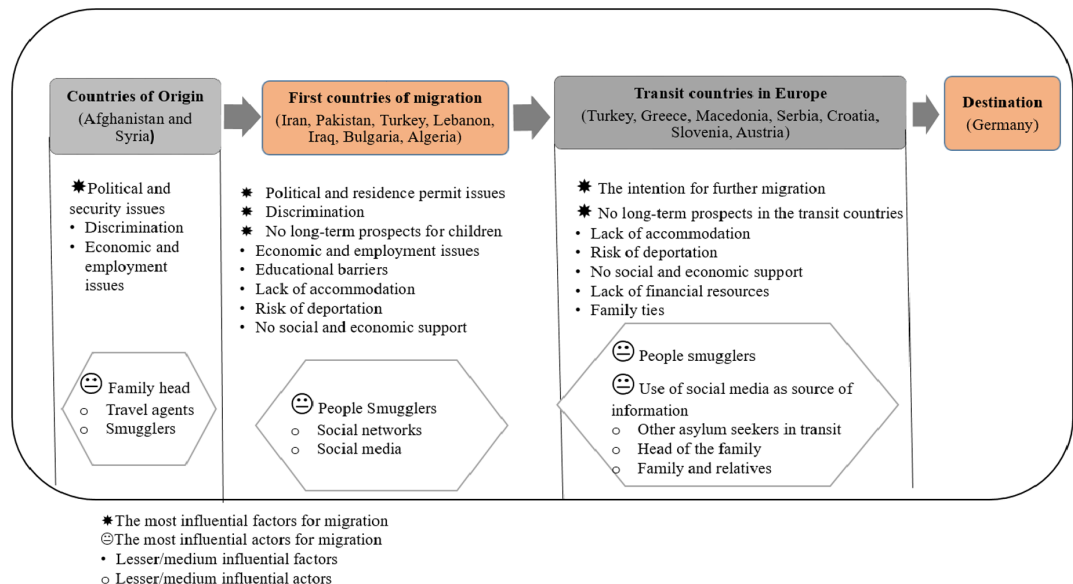


FIGURE 3 Process Net-Maps summary of influential actors/factors behind migration from origin/transit to the destination. *Source:* Authors

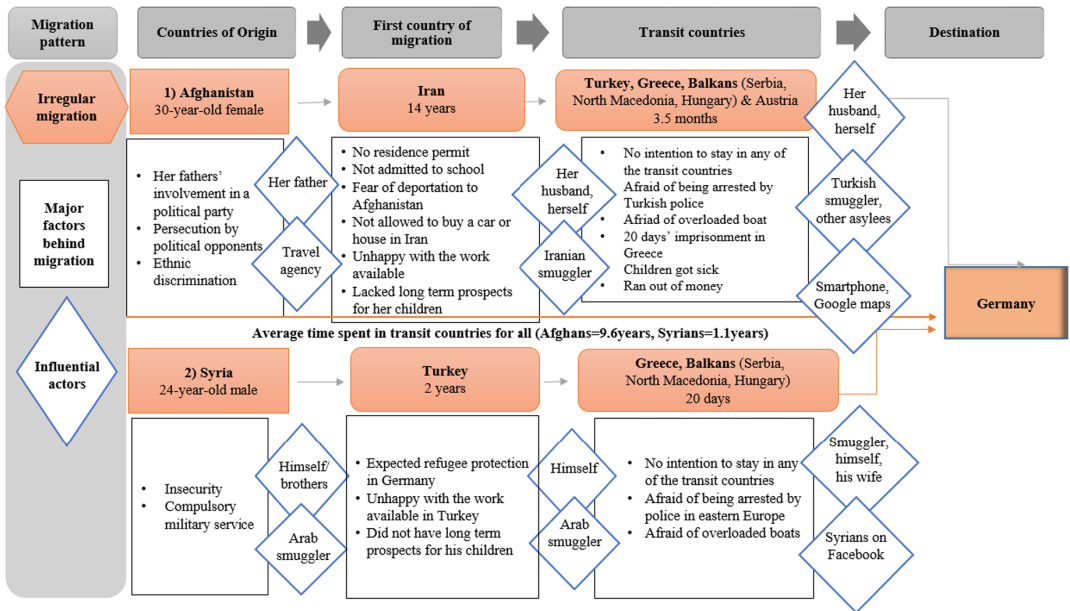


FIGURE 4 Process Net-Map of two real cases from the countries of origin to the destination. Source: Authors

situations, violent conflict, persecution, personal reasons and ethnic discrimination, particularly for people of Hazara ethnicity from Afghanistan and Kurdish ethnicity from Syria. The main reasons for migration in the countries of transit, however, differed. The reasons included legal or political reasons such as unfavorable reception conditions, discrimination and explicit racism, lack of a valid residence permit, fear of deportation to the origin country, and breaches of human rights. Furthermore, some socio-economic factors were exclusively associated with transit countries. For instance, unemployment due to work permit issues, exploitation of labor, lack of property ownership permits, the prohibition against opening bank accounts, and therefore limited job and employment opportunities.

Afghan men and women mentioned similar reasons concerning their driving forces for migration. However, there was a gender specific case that an Afghan policewoman had to leave Afghanistan as she was prosecuted because of her profession. There were some differences regarding age. For instance, hopelessness for their future due to lengthy armed conflict and deteriorated political conditions in Afghanistan was mostly mentioned by young Afghans below 30. Ethnic discrimination was a specific driving force for ethnic Hazaras from Bamiyan, Ghazni, Ghor and Kabul in Afghanistan and for the Kurds from northeastern part of Syria. War in Syria was the most frequent driving force of migration for both male and female Syrians. However approximately one-third of mostly young Syrians mentioned forced conscription as the main reason for their migration which was exceptional for Syrians.

Differing levels of education did not considerably alter the factors driving migration among refugees. However, there were some specific reasons mentioned by educated and employed Afghans. For instance, one journalist had to leave Afghanistan as he was politically prosecuted for reasons related to his job, and two more reported risks related to their job with German supported projects in Afghanistan. An engineer with a university degree, who was working on German financed construction projects in northern Afghanistan, and another high school-educated interviewee working with German troops both attributed the life-threatening risks to their jobs.

## Political instability

Persecution, violent conflict, and increasing instability are the most repetitively mentioned factors that approximately 50% of our interviewees, from both Afghanistan and Syria, pointed out as drivers for migration. These factors also have the strongest influence on the decision to migrate. The reasons included very general political and security related issues as well as personal security-related reasons. For instance, the long-lasting insecurity and loss of hope for the future in the countries of origin, the frequent explosions and attacks, or more individual reasons such as persecution for being a female police officer, an interpreter for German troops, or being a journalist (in Afghanistan). We experienced several cases where interviewees showed us the photos of destroyed houses saying that they have lost their family members, houses and belongings and were induced to leave because of that.

## Racial discrimination

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for the migration of Afghans was discrimination in either Afghanistan or Iran which was stated by one-third of interviewees. This included ethnic and religious discrimination including ethnic persecution by the Taliban in Afghanistan (for the majority of ethnic Hazara respondents) and, in Iran, discrimination against different ethnicities in employment and workplaces, discrimination against Afghan children at schools, no admission right to attend universities and explicit racism.

I was tired of injustice and discrimination in Iran and always wanted to go somewhere that I have a right to live in freedom... that I am not judged by how I look like or how I talk, or where I come from" ... It was hard to me to explain to my children why we were discriminated... why Iranians called us "Afghani Kasafat" meaning "stupid Afghan".

(Afghan female)

Christensen (2016) reports discrimination against Afghans, mentioning "Iran continuously treats the Afghans as disposable, second-rate human beings. Afghan refugees and migrants recount endless experiences of discrimination and racism, from the government as well as the population, police brutality, and the structural violence of state bureaucracy" (Christensen, 2016 p.6). It is important to note that many citizens of transit countries seek asylum in the EU. For instance, 11,423 Turks and 9,498 Iranians applied for asylum in Germany in 2019 (BAMF, 2019). Some Syrian respondents also mentioned explicit racism against themselves and their children, indicating that their Kurdish ethnicity was a problem for them in acquiring ID cards or getting a job in Syria and Turkey.

## The reception conditions in transit

Discrimination and bad socio-economic and political conditions in the first country of refuge were the additional push factors that caused people to migrate further. Our data show that a remarkable number of refugees spent a considerable amount of time in uncertain conditions in different transit countries before they migrated to Germany (see Figure 2). The main push factors behind secondary and fragmented movements from transit countries to Germany were the prolonged uncertain conditions in transit. For instance, the lack of work permits and employment restrictions in the first countries of refuge resulted in financial and economic challenges that made our respondents' lives difficult and compelled them to depart.

My parents left Afghanistan because of ethnic discrimination, conflict, and war. We are from a minor ethnic group (Hazara) in Afghanistan and were often prosecuted by the Taliban and other

terrorist groups. In Iran we had no ID card, although I was born and grown up there, I had no document, no education right, no work permit, and basically no human rights... I was always living with the fear of being caught by Iranian police at anytime and being deported back to Afghanistan. As a 17-year-old (child) I was deported from Iran back to Afghanistan twice, and each time I returned with my family's support to Iran because I had no one there in Afghanistan. I did not speak the language and did not know anyone and could not stay there.

(Afghan male)

Furthermore, some restrictions for opening bank accounts, lack of a license for property ownership, trouble at workplaces, exploitation of labor and violation of their rights in several countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Algeria and Turkey were the major reasons pointed out by respondents for migrating onwards.

In Algeria, I had no ID, no work permit, no bank account. I had to keep my money with my friends. I thought here is not where I want to live and be independent...

(Syrian male)

In addition to the factors from countries of origin and transit, some factors within the country of current destination forced people to stop onward movements and remain unwillingly. For instance, 11.5% of our respondents were stranded in Germany because they were either unable to move onward due to financial or legal restrictions, or were returned to Germany from the UK, Sweden or Switzerland.

I was planning to go to Sweden. I heard that Sweden is accepting Afghans. But we got registered at the border of Germany, my fingerprint was taken and I had to stay here.

(Afghan male)

Some had registered at the time of arrival to get urgent medical support, food and shelter. Others knew that registration and fingerprints were important and stopped them from onward migration once they were in the EU. Nevertheless, many interviewees did not know that, once they were registered, the Dublin regulation would apply to them and they could not migrate further. Mostly those who did not know and some who knew the regulation had also crossed Germany to Switzerland, Sweden or the UK and were returned to Germany after they were recognized as a Dublin case.

## Choice of destination

In terms of the destination choice, we identified factors such as the opening of the West Balkan corridor in mid-2015 which seemed to be an obvious factor that motivated some to accelerate their decision to depart. Furthermore, the pursuit of protection and the perception of an opportunity to be recognized as a refugee in Europe or Germany was particularly important for Syrians. Moreover, socio-economic motivations, educational opportunities, future prospects for children, and the perception of Germany as a free and democratic country are listed among influential reasons for not only migration decisions but also the choice of Germany as the destination.

Our findings show that most Syrian interviewees (26/28) and only a quarter of Afghan interviewees (6/24) had Germany as a destination at the time of departure from the countries of origin or transit. Syrian respondents referred to the welcoming culture (*Willkommenskultur*) of Germany or the exceptional opportunity for recognition of Syrians due to the political and security situation in their country as a motivating factor in choosing Germany as their destination country. However, the case for Afghans is very different. Three quarters of Afghan interviewees mentioned that they had not chosen Germany as their destination country at the time of departure; yet they

ended up there. We frequently heard Afghans telling us “We wanted to go to Europe” without planning for any specific country at the time of departure. The different actors such as smugglers, other asylum seekers in transit and information from social media played a role in their migration to Germany. Approximately one quarter of Afghans who had Germany listed as their destination, including those who came through family reunification, had expectations for recognition as a refugee, socio-economic opportunities, excellent living standards and educational opportunities for their children. Most of the interviewees who mentioned Germany as a destination at the time of departure emphasized that it was a preferred country of destination, not a planned choice. Many stressed the importance of their intention for migration to safe and secure places in Europe, but few mentioned explicit plans for their destinations at the time of departure.

We were not in a position to choose where exactly we go at the time of departure. First, we paid the smugglers to get us to Turkey, but we did not know if we were taken to Turkey or not? We again paid to be transferred to Greece and so on. We hoped to get to Germany, but you can never trust the smugglers. They leave you where they want, not where you want to go.

(Afghan male)

All six Afghans who wanted to migrate to Germany at the time of departure were male, between 18 and 45 years old with an education level of at least high school and one with a university degree. Three out of four Afghans with university degrees reported migrating without any particular destination country in mind. However, the difference in the age, gender or level of education of Syrian respondents made no substantial difference in their choice of destination. Except the two young Syrian men who wanted to go to Sweden but stayed in Germany due to the registration of their fingerprints upon arrival, the rest wanted to migrate to Germany.

All Syrian interviewees who wanted to migrate to Germany also had privileged status: “refugee protection” or “subsidiary protection”. Similarly, four of six Afghans who mentioned that they were planning to go to Germany had either “refugee protection” or “entitlement to asylum” status which were privileged statuses with three years of residence permits and access to integration facilities. They were more satisfied with their living conditions when compared to those whose asylum applications were rejected or were still under review. The FGD participants might have included different statuses including asylum seekers, but it is not reported here because we did not control for the status in our FGD sessions.

Our data show that the opening of the West Balkan route was perceived as an opportunity to migrate to Europe. For instance, while explaining their migration plan and decision for departure, many interviewees referred to the “open border to Europe” while one respondent mentioned “when we heard that Europe was accepting refugees” and others noted that “migration to Europe was not so risky” or that this is “the golden time” as a reference to 2015. The period between 2015 and 2016 was perceived “as a golden chance” for their migration to Europe which might not happen again.

It took us almost 3 months from Iran to Germany. We crossed Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Austria and... Except for Turkey, the police in most of the European countries helped us move on even without paying the transport tickets. It was actually a golden time to migrate.

(Afghan male)

This window of opportunity affected people differently, considering the time of departure and whether they migrated from their origin or transit countries. For instance, Afghans and Syrians who were already in the transit countries were geographically closer to the destination, faced fewer limitations and needed less time and resources to get to the Balkans when compared with those who had to depart either from Syria or Afghanistan. Our informants, mostly those from transit countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, are among those who arrived in Germany during late 2015.

## Supplementary migration factors

Supplementary factors in this research are the category of factors associated with the countries of origin, transit or destination that have either simplified or complicated Afghan/Syrian refugee migration to Europe. Our findings show that in addition to physical distance, transportation costs, cultural and religious barriers, and the refugee-friendly or unfriendly policies in the EU have been a major reason for motivating or demotivating people to move and have therefore largely affected the volume of migration. The EU-Turkey agreement in 2016 caused a 97% decrease<sup>6</sup> in irregular arrivals but has also caused an increase in the migration cost for the same distance which was not affordable for everyone who was migrating to Europe (Mandić, 2017). Furthermore, the EU migration agreement with the Afghan government<sup>7</sup> is another intervening policy obstacle that aimed to decrease Afghan migration to Europe and ease the repatriation of failed Afghan asylum seekers from the EU. Another factor that is emphasized mostly by Afghan respondents is the political tensions between the country of origin and the first country of refuge (e.g. Iran) that indirectly influenced their migration decisions. For instance, Iran's decision to deport Afghans due to political issues between Iran and Afghanistan caused some to migrate to Europe as they were terrified of being deported to Afghanistan. Moreover, the availability of smugglers and the affordable financial costs of irregular migration during 2015/2016 was another factor that was decisive for many to migrate. There were some reasons related to social and family obligations. For instance, interviewees who had no plan to migrate but migrated because everyone in their family, alongside their friends were migrating, and they joined them in order to not remain alone. Furthermore, a male interviewee migrated because he had to accompany and assist his sister with her children in their migration to Europe.<sup>8</sup>

## Facilitators of migration

### Smugglers

Our results show that people smugglers were among the most influential actors in the determination of destination countries. This is particularly the case for those refugees with no prior defined destination who therefore underwent a fragmented journey. For instance, 20% of Afghan informants with no defined destination followed smugglers' ideas and were consequently taken to Germany. Whereas with Syrians, the clear majority of who wanted to go to Germany considered smugglers as facilitators of their journey and sometimes as informants but not as decision-makers for their destination country. The smuggler's information and contact details were found via word of mouth, friends, or relatives in origin or transit, and their journeys were mainly planned, organized, and proceeded via phone calls with what they called "anonymous persons" behind the telephone. Many complained of misinformation by smugglers and some experienced violence, threat, and robbery. Most informants had unpleasant views of the smugglers. They used the terms "uncertain, violent, unexpected, cruel, untrustworthy" and described them as "people after money and indifferent to migrant's safety and health".

Irrespective of their level of education, male heads of the families mostly financed the journeys and were the primary decision makers for migration of both Afghans and Syrians. Both nationalities mentioned smugglers as the main facilitators of their journeys and made use of digital technology. Some educated female members of the families played stronger roles in the facilitation of transit migration than males. For instance, in two cases, Afghan females who could speak English were in charge of communication when needed and were involved in decision-making as well.

### Social networks and digital technology

Afghans rarely reported social networks or family ties as playing a role in their destination choice. Apart from those who were reunited with their families through regular procedures and were informed about reception and

living conditions in the destination by their family members in Germany. However, few Syrian respondents had social networks and family ties, and only some had contacts with their relatives in Germany before their departure. They were informed about the possible risks and challenges of irregular migration or were told about the reception conditions. Fellow asylum seekers and co-ethnic networks were important actors for Afghans and had major sway over the migration plan and destination choice. Some were more confident about their co-ethnic networks and believed in them due to a shared ethnicity and thus, considered them more reliable than anything else. Some put their trust in better-educated individuals in origin/transit countries and followed them or their suggestions for their next move. For instance, there was a family of six, who had moved to Switzerland after they had registered in Germany but were returned to Germany three months after they were recognized as Dublin case. When asked why they had moved to Switzerland from Germany, they answered.

We did not know; we just followed another family with whom we were together in the same reception center in Karlsruhe, [Germany]. Mr. A [the male head of another family] with his family wanted to proceed to Switzerland from Karlsruhe. He told my husband about it. So we thought Mr. A is educated and knows better. He said that Afghans had a better chance to get accepted [recognized as refugee] in Switzerland. It was not correct; the Swiss Police returned us back after three months. I wish we had not followed them.

(Afghan female)

In addition to smugglers and social networks, technology and social media played a crucial role in both migration plans, processes and paths to the destination. In our study, social media sites, including Facebook and YouTube, and technology such as mobile phones/smartphones, power banks, computers, Google maps and the internet were the initial sources of information, means of communication, and networking for most refugees on the move. Almost everyone we interviewed, male or female, young or old, poor or rich all used either a smartphone with a connection to the internet or simple mobile phones to facilitate their journey. Some carried extra charged batteries or power banks for their smartphones, and some wrapped their phones in several layers of plastic to avoid any damage to them in the boat.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study allowed us to explore the reasons behind irregular migration and secondary movements of refugees to Europe, particularly to Germany. Focusing the case study on Afghans, a relatively understudied refugee group and Syrians as a comparative case, we followed the paths undertaken by irregular migrants, the challenges they experienced, and the most critical factors and actors that affected their movements from the country of origin to the destination.

While collecting data, we noticed that many respondents spent a considerable amount of time in neighboring countries before their secondary movements in Europe. This initial result brought forth an additional aspect to our research, transit migration. Moreover, exploring the reasons behind the choice of Germany as the destination, we found out that the majority (three quarters) of Afghans ended up in Germany without a prior defined plan for Germany as a destination. However, the case of Syrians differed because most of our Syrian informants planned to come to Germany at the time of departure. We also discovered the dynamics of irregular refugee migration to Europe and elements and parties such as smugglers, helpers and influencers which played a role in their journey's beginning, transition and endpoints.

The primary drive of migrants from their countries of origin was to rescue themselves and their families via migration to a neighboring country which is in line with the findings of Dankwah and Valenta (2018) regarding further migration in search of a survival strategy. The onward migration depended, on one hand, on the unfavorable reception conditions in the first countries of refuge or the deterioration of the situation in their countries of

origin, and, on the other hand, it highly depended on the time, available resources and potential opportunities for onward movements.

A mixture of different factors and some influential actors made the irregular migrations of Afghans and Syrians possible. These factors included political persecution and violent conflict that impacted personal security and political freedom, as well as personal reasons and economic and social pressures in the countries of origin. The main factor behind the secondary and fragmented movements of Afghans to Europe was the prolonged uncertainty in transit, which is not necessarily security-related when compared with those coming from the origin country. Our findings on reasons behind transit migration of Afghans are lack of legal residence permits, fear of deportation, barriers to education and employment, exploitation of their labor, explicit racism, ethnic and racial discrimination, and lack of prospects, results which are partly in line with those of Dimitriadi (2017). Syrians mentioned similar, although less difficult, experiences in transit which are in line with the findings of Dankwah and Valenta (2018) about the insufficient reception conditions for Iraqis in Jordan and Kvittingen et al., (2018) findings on “protracted temporariness” and adverse reception conditions as the main push factor for Iraqi and Syrian refugees’ secondary migration from Jordan. In short, it is not only the physical threats, insecurity or war that lead to migration, but the pursuit of mental wellbeing and social, political and economic security, and the long-term prospects for families with children, that are considered as the major factors which have shaped people’s decisions to initiate secondary movements and to take the life-threatening path to Europe.

Some factors, including expectations for refugee protection such as the welcoming culture of Germany for Syrians and the rise and fall of the West Balkan corridor were seen as an opportunity for migration to Europe (Dankwah & Valenta, 2018; Mandić, 2017). These reasons were specifically stated by those who were in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan or Iran. The aforementioned policies were also the underlying reasons behind the choice of Germany as the destination for most Syrians and a few Afghans in this study. However, respondents had not made informed decisions based on the asylum and migration policies of the destination. It was instead the publicity of Germany as a democratic country, the chance for refugee protection in Germany, and expected high-quality living standards that attracted many. Besides that, the news on the “opening of borders to Europe”, which was highly prominent on social media influenced people’s decisions for migration and was facilitated by other influential actors.

Influential actors included people smugglers, other asylum seekers in transit countries and social media, which all spurred migration decisions and determined destination countries. Technology and social media were the initial source of information, means of communication and networking for almost all respondents, which is in line with Collyer’s (2010) findings on refugees migrating from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. Social networks and social capital were often reported as crucial role players by providing the necessary information, suggestions, smuggler introduction and means and motivations for onward migration (Collyer, 2010; Kvittingen et al., 2018; Mandić & Simpson, 2017). Similarly, the existence of family members in the destination is recognized as a significant factor in decision making for a destination (Robinson & Segrott, 2002). However, it was not the case for Afghans in Germany, because only a few Afghan respondents had family connections or relatives in Germany. Smugglers and co-ethnic asylum seekers in transit were instead the major actors in these cases. People smugglers were among the most influential players in the determination of destination countries particularly for those refugees with no pre-defined destination. While Mandić (2017) found a close relationship between refugees and smugglers in the Balkans, many respondents in this study complained of misinformation from smugglers, and some experienced violence, threats and robbery which is in line with Collyer’s findings (Collyer, 2010).

Based on our findings on the comparison of two nationalities, we hypothesize that the secondary migration of internationally displaced people depends on one hand on the length of the violent conflicts and civil war in the countries of origin, with longer periods increasing willingness for secondary movements. On the other hand, it depends on the reception conditions of the first country of refuge. The more unfavorable the reception conditions, the more likely there will be onward migration. The outbreak of violent conflicts in the countries of origin has caused the first outmigration of these two nationalities, mostly to neighboring countries. Afghans and Syrians



have shown different attitudes towards secondary movements which may be due to the length of the outbreak of war and the deterioration of insecurity that has caused people to lose hope for peace in their home countries. In line with Kvittingen et al., (2018), most Syrians we met had initially considered their first transit countries as temporary destinations and intended to return once the conditions in their home country improved. Nonetheless, Afghans who had spent a much longer time in the transit countries had a completely different view of their migration plans. Yet nearly all Afghans did not consider returning to Afghanistan from Iran, Pakistan or Turkey. However, different age groups had different views of their first countries of transit. The middle and older generations (40 and above) considered Iran or Pakistan as a destination, but the younger generation below 40 had a clear view that they would migrate further.

It is imperative for the destination societies, not only to identify migrants, but also to know where people originate and migrate from. Spending several years on fragmented journeys, people have different social and economic conditions, different reasons for migrating and may, therefore, require different measure for support during their reception and integration, and different policies are required for their deportation. For instance, many Afghan respondents who were born and grew up in Iran were provided with an Afghan translator in their asylum interview and had problems understanding the translators' accent. They were suspicious of their asylum application rejection due to translation issues. Some who were born and grew up in Iran/Pakistan could not provide documents to prove their Afghan identity and therefore had their asylum claims rejected and ended up on deportation lists to Afghanistan. There were cases where lawyers were employed to help, in either stopping deportation or, to intervene in seeking deportations to Iran instead of Afghanistan, as that is where certain applicants initially migrated from. Therefore, we believe that the cooperation of transit countries in the EU and agreements with the countries of origin will be very crucial. Furthermore, the return of failed asylum applicants from insecure countries such as Afghanistan created a lot of tensions and even psychological issues that in the worst case might be solved by their resettlement to a safe third country instead of deportation to Afghanistan.

Moreover, the limitations and restrictions in regular migration may increase the motivations for irregular migration (Collyer, 2010). If we compare the time spent for regular and irregular migration to Germany during 2013–2016, the entry visas for family reunifications took between 1 and 3 years while the irregular migration during 2015–2016 took some people 2–3 months to get to Germany through the Balkan states. We also witnessed a Syrian woman who had irregularly migrated with her five children, even though her husband was in Germany for 2 years but could not invite them.

This study's findings are of interest to German migration policymakers and some refugee-hosting EU member states and their allies in international migration management. More cooperation with the transit countries, especially the first countries of migration, is necessary to address the challenges sustainably. Furthermore, Germany and the EU should work together with international humanitarian and refugee supporting organizations such as the UNHCR, the IOM and transit countries to harmonize asylum and migration policies, particularly refugees' access to social welfare and labor markets, and should facilitate social and political participation of refugees in the first countries of refuge. This may avoid future mass arrivals in Europe and reduce unnecessary and life-threatening secondary movements.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.12900>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>
2. [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asyappctza&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en)
3. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_afghanistan\\_joint\\_way\\_forward\\_on\\_migration\\_issues.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_afghanistan_joint_way_forward_on_migration_issues.pdf)
4. [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asyappctza&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en)
5. A (Country of origin/residence before migrating), B (Transit country/countries) and C (Destination country/country of residence at the time interview)
6. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180314\\_eu-turkey-two-years-on\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180314_eu-turkey-two-years-on_en.pdf)
7. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_afghanistan\\_joint\\_way\\_forward\\_on\\_migration\\_issues.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_afghanistan_joint_way_forward_on_migration_issues.pdf) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2017-007189\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2017-007189_EN.html)
8. The term migrant is used for people who are on the move either in transit or across international borders. While “asylum seeker” refers to those whose asylum applications are still under review and, “refugee” is used as a general term for persons with different types of protection status.

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