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Original Article

Stuck in a whirlpool? The role of hope and despair in dealing with risks during Afghan migration journeys

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Abstract

Migration journeys are full of risk, navigated not just by physical obstacles but also by emotional tides. This study explores how the fluctuation of hope and despair plays a role in dealing with risks. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with Afghans in Turkey, this paper demonstrates that hope and despair fluctuate along migration journeys contingent upon three elements: (1) empirical evidence about the future, (2) (un)certainty and potential in the future, and (3) the agency or capability to act. The research finds that hope arises when the future is perceived as uncertain, offering individuals alternative pathways and restoring a sense of agency by transforming uncertainty into potentiality. Conversely, despair sets in when individuals perceive their near future as certain, devoid of alternatives. This sense of certainty about the near future leaves migrants feeling trapped, akin to being stuck in a whirlpool.

Keywords: hope; despair; risk; Afghan; migration

1. Introduction

The migration journeys of refugees engaged in escaping from Afghanistan are becoming increasingly difficult, fragmented, and expensive because of authoritarian crackdowns in neighbouring countries, the lucrative nature of smuggling practices, and policies being implemented to prevent people crossing borders. The drivers of, and root causes for, their migration decisions have often been described (Carling and Collins 2018; Van Hear, Bakewell and Long 2018; Müller Funk 2019; Czaika, Bijak and Prike 2021; Hagen-Zanker et al. 2023a; Mjelva and Carling 2023). However, less is known about the influence of emotions such as hope and despair on how people deal with the increased risks involved in migration journeys. This article argues that hope and despair fluctuate, leaving Afghan migrants stuck in a whirlpool of emotions and influencing the way individuals deal with risks at different stages of migration journeys.

Previous research has addressed risk-taking during migration journeys from different perspectives, though not always thoroughly conceptualizing its meaning and implications. For

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instance, some authors have described the risks relating to individuals' legal and protection challenges in Greece, Italy (Linekar and Achilli 2022), and Turkey (Karadağ and Üstübici 2021). Other authors have focused on individuals' experiences and perceptions of risk during migration journeys (Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012; Kaytaz 2015; Belloni 2016; Kirisciogluand Ustubici 2023). The focus of these previous works has not been on the underlying emotional process that shapes risk perceptions.

There are several studies that explore the role of hope in dealing with (non-migration) high-risk situations. Hope has been researched in fields such as philosophy (Blöser and Stahl 2017), psychology (Snyder 2002), medical science (Corn, Feldman and Wexler 2020), bioethics (Simpson 2004), sociology, and anthropology (Crapanzano 2003; Brown, De Graaf and Hillen 2015; Parla 2019). The concept of hope has also been applied to clandestine migration journeys (Hagan 2008; Horst and Grabska 2015; Turner 2015; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016; Kleist and Thorsen 2017; Turner 2020; Kleist 2023). The concept of hope is relevant in the forced displacement context because the uncertainty inherent in these migration journeys often creates conditions vastly different from those of economic migration facilitated by visas. Authors who have focused on this subject have usually concluded that hope could be a driver of migration, while a lack of hope might stop migration (Kuschminder 2018; Bachelet 2019; Müller Funk 2019; Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey and Mazzilli 2023b; Müller-Funk 2023). In a sense, hope is considered a factor that motivates individuals to leave their country (Kleist and Jansen 2016). However, Crapanzano (2003) argues that hope can also lead to passivity and waiting for better times. In this paper, we take a step further to explore the changing nature of hope in different stages of migration journeys by showing evidence from interviews with Afghan migrants.

Based on this background, the central question this paper seeks to answer is: *How do fluctuations between hope and despair influence individuals' ways to deal with risks during migration journeys?*

To answer the research question, we focus on one of the most sizeable immigrant communities in Turkey: Afghans. In Turkey, there are around 160,000 Afghans holding international protection status (IPS), according to official statistics (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2023). In 2021, the Ministry of Interior estimated that around 118,000 Afghans were unregistered (Ministry of Interior 2021). However, pundits suggest that the largest Afghan population in the country remains unregistered (Buz et al. 2020). As we show in the result section, there are several reasons for Afghan migrants to remain unregistered. The protracted period during which they remain without legal status in Turkey puts many Afghans in an extremely vulnerable position, which heightens the importance of producing knowledge on their experiences (Schuster 2011; Kaytaz 2016; İçduygu and Karadağ 2018; Kuschminder 2018; Jurat 2022).

This article provides two contributions to the literature on migration decision-making. The scientific relevance of the article lies in the fact that we propose a new way of exploring hope and despair in relation to risks. We show that the assumption that hope leads to risk-taking and onward migration is too simplistic. We follow scholars who have looked further than the simplistic dichotomy between country of origin and country of settlement, and who acknowledge that a migrant's journey is not always planned from beginning to end: rather, the next step depends on experiences along the way (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016; Kaytaz 2016; Üstübici 2016; Müller Funk 2019; Lønning 2020; Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden 2021). The social relevance of this paper lies in the potential for policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of how Afghans navigate risks and to effectively identify the needs and challenges experienced by Afghan migrants in countries such as Turkey. The findings in this area can inform EU migration policymaking, which currently assumes that making border crossings more dangerous will stop unwanted migration flows.

2. How hope and despair function when dealing with risks

Jens Zinn, a leading scholar in risk studies, presents a general overview of risk management strategies, categorizing them into three main approaches: rational, nonrational, and those in

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between (Zinn 2019; Schulz and Zinn 2023). In this context, 'nonrational' refers to forms of knowledge that lack statistical foundation but involve constructing desired futures based on subjective beliefs, such as hope (Zinn 2008; Zinn 2019; Schulz and Zinn 2023).[1] While Zinn's framework offers insights into risk management, it is important to critically examine his conceptualization of hope as a 'risk management strategy'. This wording seems to imply a level of intentionality that is not always evident in individuals' feelings of hope. Therefore, we utilize Zinn's framework as a foundational overview of risk-related responses, acknowledging that hope is a psychological response to uncertainty, rather than a deliberate strategy. This paper investigates the role of hope and despair in relation to how migrants deal with risks throughout their journeys.

Hope has diverse meanings. We start with Ghassan Hage's definition, which describes hopefulness as 'a disposition to be confident in the face of the future, to be open to it and welcoming to what it will bring, even if one does not know for sure what it will bring' (Hage 2003). Hage's definition reflects diverse ways individuals navigate *uncertainty* and envision a potentially positive *future*. In a sense, Hage's definition represents an open-ended hope, as classified by Webb (2007), who provides a classification of hope. Open-ended hope reflects a general optimism or attitude towards the future, while in situations with more opportunities, goal-oriented hope can develop, which comes with concrete objectives. Webb's (2007) work contributes significantly to understanding hope's multifaceted nature, challenging the idea of hope as a singular experience.

For our definition, we introduce a new element specific to the circumstances of migrants who have limited options and face high risks. This new element relates to the dimension of hope that can provide agency in such high-risk situations. Therefore, we define hope as an emotion that enables them to navigate uncertainties and that may provide them with a sense of agency, and control over their lives as a result. Based on this definition, we explore the three elements of hope that we selected as the most pertinent to the forced migration context. We explore (i) how hope is not always empirically grounded and not easily influenced by expert knowledge or information, (ii) how hope is future-oriented, and (iii) how hope functions regarding regaining agency. We concentrate on these three elements of hope due to their significance in the context of forced migration. In voluntary migration contexts, different types of ways to deal with risks may be dominant. Therefore, we do not assert the universality of these three elements in other contexts. Below we will explain the three elements in more detail (Table 1).

First, hope tends to be independent of expert knowledge or statistical information about a dangerous situation (Schulz and Zinn 2023). As Webb's classification also reminds us, hope can persist even in the face of contrary evidence (Webb 2007). In a sense, hope can be empirically detached from reality and maintained even against all odds (Turner 2020; Schulz and Zinn 2023). Why, then, do individuals continue to feel hope despite contradictory evidence? Essentially, individuals overlook expert knowledge to mitigate their vulnerability. For instance, migrants who take risks by crossing violent borders are most of the time well-informed about the dangers *en* route (Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012; Bastide 2015; Kaytaz 2016; Kiriscioglu and Ustubici 2023). Nevertheless, they take the risk because they believe that moving to another country offers a pathway to realizing their dreams and escaping their current vulnerability. Consequently, hope emerges as a means of dealing with risks and resisting an intolerable situation. However, in certain instances, individuals may experience despair when they perceive no viable alternatives for the future, as elaborated in the subsequent section.

Second, hope is a future-oriented emotion (Simpson 2004: 431) and an 'imaginative extension of one's horizon towards a desired *future*' (Schulz and Zinn 2023), closely tied to potentialities and uncertainty (Crapanzano 2003; Turner 2020). Uncertainty in this context provides the person with a potential future that is full of possibilities, even though it is unknown. Hope possesses the

[1] It is important to note here that nonrational is not the equivalent of 'irrational' or the opposite of rational. Nonrational implies that the specific strategy cannot be evaluated based on the rules of instrumental rationality, it is out of the scope of rationality.

Table 1. Thee three elements of hope and despair in dealing with risks.

	Empirical grounds	Future	Agency
Hope	Against all odds	Uncertain and full of potential	Provides a way of regaining agency
Despair	No odds or possibilities are existing	Certain and (almost) no alternatives	Restricted agency

transformative ability to turn the negative impact of uncertainty into positive potentiality. On the other hand, certainty suggests that the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. Despair sets in when these possibilities close, and the future seems certain but leads nowhere. Turner's (2020) study on Burundian refugees in Rwanda provides evidence for this paradoxical relationship between certainty and uncertainty. Turner (2020) argues that an unpredictable future fuels hope for an end to refugees' present situation. Conversely, uncertainty about what comes after generates anxiety and complicates decisions regarding returning to Burundi or staying in exile.

Third, hope in high-risk situations is a way of exercising or (re)gaining lost *agency* (Brown, De Graaf and Hillen 2015; Zinn 2023). Zinn (2023) refers to Amaryta Sen's concept of 'capacity to act' to define agency (Sen 2010). The argument posits that individuals, when unable to exercise their legally granted (human) rights and faced with limited options to act, resort to risk-taking to overcome these restrictions. So, under these structural constraints, individuals may take high risks to realize their dreams and regain their agency. In essence, risk-taking can serve as a means to regain control over one's life (Zinn 2023). However, Zinn warns that even when faced with limited choices, individuals may engage in complex considerations about which hazards to accept. In doing so, individuals may maintain hope against all odds or evidence of potential harm.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that lacking agency can also turn individuals' lives into ongoing suffering without visible improvement (Wilkinson 2005). Therefore, we add the feeling of despair to our model. According to Turner (2020), despair occurs when 'the future seems certain to lead to nowhere'. As in the case of Burundian refugees in refugee camps in Kenya, when people see their near future without any possible alternatives, their emotions can oscillate between hope and anxiety which might turn into despair (Turner 2020). As Turner argues, anxiety is also an important component of hope and despair. While we acknowledge the significance of anxiety, we did not include it in our model of dealing with risks. In the below analysis, we will combine the above three aspects of hope, examine when it fluctuates with despair, and how this influences the management of risks during migration journeys.

3. Method

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Turkey between March 2020 and January 2021 within the AdMiGov project (Üstübici, Kirişçioğlu and Elçi 2021). We interviewed twenty-three Afghan migrants (fourteen females and nine males) in different districts of Turkey, including four face-to-face interviews conducted in Adana. Due to the COVID pandemic and lockdowns, the remaining nineteen interviews were conducted online. We reached the remaining interviewees by embedding a request in the online survey that we conducted for the research project. The survey participants were asked to contact us via email or via the project's social media platforms' direct messaging tools. The average age of the interviewees was 32.

One of the authors conducted interviews in Turkish, addressing the interpreter. The interpreter translated from Turkish to Farsi/Dari, and then translated the interviewee's responses from Farsi/Dari back to Turkish, using various (encrypted) digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, Skype, and Zoom (based on the preferences of the interviewees, preferably with video).

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The authors informed the interviewees about the research aims at the beginning of each interview. We obtained the interviewees' oral consent to record the audio of the interviews. The translators transcribed voice recordings in English. Atlas.Ti was used to conduct the analysis.

To minimize potential translation issues, the author organized meetings with interpreters before and after interviews, not only to brief them on the research objectives and ethical considerations but also to learn about their life experiences and perspectives on the research questions. The collaboration with interpreters, given their experience of displacement in Turkey, played a significant role in building trust. Following Edwards' (1998) suggestion, this approach essentially transformed each interpreter into a kind of 'key informant' within the research process, although it's essential to clarify that the interpreters were not considered experts (Edwards 1998).

To gain in-depth interview information, we asked interviewees to convey their narratives in chronological order (Rosenthal 2004). The interviewees usually described their migration journey including the following elements: (i) their everyday life in Afghanistan and their reasons for leaving the country, (ii) their migration experience in Iran [if applicable], and (iii) their current living conditions in Turkey and their future aspirations. To gain a deeper understanding of the role of the emotions experienced in each step of the migration journey, we asked the interviewees to explain how they felt at these moments.

Difficulties arose because most migrants had work schedules that usually lasted 10–12 hours a day, including weekends, so it was challenging to arrange the interviews. Second, arranging interviews using email, messages, and phone exchanges was time-consuming, and in such cases obtaining informed consent was more challenging than in face-to-face situations, leading to some potential interviewees dropping out.

The digital interviewing method had shortcomings and limitations. Firstly, it lacked the visual and contextual information typically available in face-to-face interviews, such as nonverbal cues and body language. Secondly, our reach was limited to individuals with access to the internet, a smartphone or computer, and social media accounts. Consequently, our sample may be biased towards more educated, literate, and affluent individuals, as well as those with online access. However, we opted for this method due to the challenges posed by conducting face-to-face interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened health risks. Despite these limitations, we were able to reach migrants residing in different cities where Afghan migrants were not densely concentrated.

Finally, we were able to interview Afghan migrants who successfully arrived in Turkey from Afghanistan. It is possible that some Afghans living in Iran chose to stay there because they could not envision alternatives in an uncertain future. Particularly, poorer Afghan individuals who could not afford smuggling fees may have experienced feelings of despair. For them, the near future may have seemed certain with minimal possibilities for change. Therefore, we emphasize that the scope of our research is limited to individuals who undertook the migration journey to Turkey.

4. Results: Afghan migration journeys—hope and despair

Investigating hope and despair together, we describe our results in five steps: (1) The start of the journey in Afghanistan. During this step, migrants typically move to the country's capital to find a smuggler. This is followed by (2), crossing the border into Iran. The next stage (3) is their stay in Iran, where life is often not as easy as expected. This leads to (4), the decision to cross the border into Turkey is accompanied by different emotions. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees had reached step (5): they arrived in Turkey, where they often found themselves in despair. In Turkey, many migrants struggled to hold onto a glimmer of hope, anticipating change in the near future. However, their prospects and opportunities for the future were limited in Turkey, leading many to lose hope entirely.

4.1 Afghanistan: hope for change by moving onwards and regaining agency

Most of our interviewees escaped Afghanistan in either the first or second period of Taliban rule. Ethnic discrimination has been a rampant feature of the Taliban's periods in power, as the Taliban is predominantly Pashtun, and other groups are seen as a threat to their power. The Taliban regimes have been oppressive and violent. At the same time, during the other periods reviewed above, the central government was inefficient and ineffective. In regions under the control of the Taliban regime, stiff behavioural rules and harsh physical punishment are prevalent. Any suspicion of disloyalty can lead to threats and intimidation. Women are banned from employment and the public sphere, and girls are prohibited from enrolling in school. As our interviewees told us, even in regions not fully controlled by the Taliban regime, people may receive death threats from the regime.

The interviewees reported that the challenges encountered in Afghanistan significantly enhanced their sense of uncertainty. They conveyed that they felt their sole hope lay in escaping Afghanistan but that they were fully aware of the difficulties that would occur while crossing the border. Nevertheless, they held on to hope even against all odds (Turner 2020; Schulz and Zinn 2023). Noor shared her lived experiences in Afghanistan, delineating how everyday life was challenging:

> Everything in Afghanistan is based on ethnocentrism. There is racism there. We are Hazaras. Our place in Afghanistan is surrounded by the Pashtuns. Moreover, most of the Pashtun people were Talibs and Al-Qaeda. When we pass through their areas, they take everything from us. For example, they consumed food bought from the city. Sometimes, they burn them in front of their eyes. At night, they used to come and knock on our doors and tell us to join them in their fights because they did not have enough men to fight. Sometimes, they forced us to carry weapons and food to them in the mountains. If people do not meet the Taliban's demands, they mistreat and punish people harshly. They beat people. (Noor, Afghanistan, Female, 36)[2]

The challenges encountered by our interviewees in Afghanistan extended beyond the rule of the Taliban. The interviewees told us about living in a high-risk environment, including violence related to family and domestic issues, clan feuds, and kidnapping. They said that family feuds frequently led to death. Women in particular are vulnerable to domestic violence and face significant barriers to seeking help. The legal system is weak, and people lack the resources to initiate legal proceedings. Female interviewees said that they lacked protection from the state when exposed to domestic violence.

The potentialities for an uncertain future and the desire to regain agency motivated Afghan interviewees to leave their country. Despite their awareness of the slim possibilities and associated risks, the hope of attaining a 'normal life'—one with access to education, employment, a secure home, and the ability to raise children without fear—prompted them to maintain hope and migrate from Afghanistan. Many interviewees expressed feeling constrained in their daily lives, with their livelihoods constantly under threat, and unable to meet their basic needs (Zinn 2023). Despite moments of despair regarding their country and its future, they remained hopeful, viewing moving out of Afghanistan as a pathway to explore possibilities. Confronted with these structural constraints, individuals were willing to undertake significant risks to pursue their aspirations and reclaim agency.

4.2 From Afghanistan to Iran

According to the interviewees, the journey to leave Afghanistan usually starts with a trip to Kabul, the capital city, where migrants engage with smugglers. According to these accounts, payments usually occur after migrants reach Turkey. From Kabul, the smugglers transfer migrants to border cities in Iran and Pakistan by car or truck. The specific route taken may vary

[2] All names in the following quotes are pseudonyms given by the authors.

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depending on the smuggler's choice or availability of routes, considering factors such as weather conditions, security checks, transportation options, and financial constraints.

Border crossings occur primarily in mountainous regions. When heading towards the southern border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, our respondents reported that the Chagai Hills or sometimes the Ras Koh Hills in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province are often traversed. After hours or days of trekking through the mountains, migrants cross the border between Pakistan and Iran, typically in the Zahedan Province of eastern Iran. This part of the journey is particularly dangerous as they must navigate the rule of the Taliban and evade detection by the Iranian authorities.

4.3 Iran: no legal status, discrimination, and fear of deportation

When our interviewees arrived in Iran, they reported that they discovered that the situation was not as straightforward as they had expected. Without obtaining a visa in advance with an employer for a work permit, Afghan migrants cannot easily obtain legal status in Iran. Requesting asylum often results in rejection. Accessing the formal job market or essential services is difficult without proper documentation, and there are limited prospects for obtaining this documentation later on. Registered migrants holding blue cards also face limitations, with only provisional access to public services. Our interviewees revealed that additional payments are required to enrol children in school. Despite paying taxes, blue card holders receive little to no services in return. In addition, many employers exhibit discrimination against Afghan migrants and offer low wages and exploitative working conditions. Hassan, an Afghan interviewee who previously lived in Iran, said: 'We could not do anything except work'.

These exploitative conditions create a sense of diminishing agency and reduce individuals' possibilities of reaching a desired future. The desired or imagined future at the beginning of the migration journey often fails in Iran. Therefore, many Afghans begin to feel they are unable to control their lives and consider all potential options. As Zinn (2023) suggested, individuals might consider taking higher risks under these conditions. Hassan's experiences in Iran exemplify the significant erosion of agency among Afghan migrants as they experience discrimination and the constant threat of deportation in this high-risk environment. Discrimination and fear of deportation contribute to profound challenges and the limited ability to control one's own life and destiny. Despite the fact that Hassan had lived in Iran since he was a 6-month-old baby and spoke the language well, he never felt accepted; he was bullied and was even expelled from school:

> They expelled me from school several times just because I was an Afghan. They called us *strangers*. However, they still cannot distinguish between *Afghani* and *Afghan* people. They call us by our currency. Because of these issues, I was not able to study. I used to work for a year and study the following year. I could not complete my university. (Hassan, Afghan, Male, 30)

Hassan experienced deep humiliation when he was referred to as 'Afghani'—the currency of Afghanistan—rather than simply as an 'Afghan'. The discrimination he faced impacted his life aspirations and provoked the desire to become a film director to show the world in a movie about how Afghan migrants live. However, he realized that achieving his aspirations would be difficult in Iran, which led him to migrate to Turkey.

Hassan's decision to migrate to Turkey was also driven by his persistent fear that he would be deported from Iran. Despite possessing legal status, Hassan and his wife remained vulnerable to the constant risks of persecution and expulsion. This predicament is particularly dire for individuals, like Hassan, who have no prior experience of living in Afghanistan. The prospect of being repatriated to an unfamiliar country, where they would be devoid of any sense of belonging, increases their distress. Despite being aware of the challenges and difficulties associated with border crossings, Hassan maintained a sense of hope for his future.

The high-risk environment for Afghan migrants in Iran, characterized by insecurity and uncertainty, is further exacerbated by factors such as insecure legal status, the risk of deportation, and discrimination against migrants. Many of our interviewees expressed facing difficult times in Iran due to this uncertainty, particularly regarding their legal status. Despite these challenges

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and the possibility of moments of despair, they held onto hope. The uncertainty about the *future* presented them with possibilities. In a sense, hope served to transform the negative impact of uncertainty into a positive potentiality (Crapanzano 2003; Turner 2020). For families like Hassan's, the prospect of their children encountering discrimination in Iran became unbearable, prompting them to take risks in pursuit of a better future. Thus, motivated by the desire to *regain agency* and alleviate their current vulnerability, they chose to take the risk and attempt to cross the border into Turkey (Zinn 2023).

4.3.1 Border crossing to Turkey

The dangers along the migration route from Iran to Turkey are enormous, including the risk of falling in the snow-capped mountains, drowning in rivers, suffering hypothermia, or encountering violence by authorities or smugglers. Our interviewees usually reported that they travelled via Tehran, where they negotiated with smugglers who could facilitate their passage. Once arrangements were made, they travelled to Iranian border cities, such as Maku, Khoy, and Urmiya, and from there they crossed the border through the mountains into the eastern Turkish city of Dogubeyazıt, or they crossed Lake Van by boat. The interviewees described the challenges they faced, such as waiting, hiding, and surviving in the mountains without access to food or water. Even after they managed to cross the border, some said that they then returned to Iran, whereupon it was necessary to start the journey again. As described by the interviewees, the border-crossing experience is full of danger and uncertainty.

Some interviewees reported that they witnessed deals being struck between smugglers and border police and that they were subjected to violence. According to the interviewees, smugglers, and border police may work together through bribery. According to Farman, in certain situations, smugglers intentionally allow a specific number of migrants to be apprehended by the police, to create the appearance that the police are stopping migrants:

> The smugglers make agreements with the border police. For example, if the smugglers attempt to transport 40 individuals across the border, they deliberately take 50 people. Then, the smugglers allow 10 migrants to be caught by the police, which enables the collaborating police officers to demonstrate to the government that they have made arrests. (Farman, Male, 21)

Upon arrival, migrants are taken to 'safe houses' organized by smugglers, where they are accommodated alongside other migrants from Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These safe houses are typically overcrowded. The smugglers demand money transfers and those who fail to make the payments may be held captive for weeks, during which they are subjected to inhumane treatment. Conversely, migrants who can fulfil the smugglers' monetary demands are released, allowing them to continue their journey into Turkey.

Even those who reported being able to continue their journey said their border-crossing experience was profoundly traumatic. Despite the immense hardships and dangers, they encounter along the way, migrants take these risks because staying in their home countries means being trapped in a perpetual state of suffering. Staying in their home country was likened by the interviewees to a 'dead end', where they would be subjected to constant hardship. This sentiment was captured in the words of Mahnaz, who equated staying in Iran with 'dying every day', symbolizing the insecurity that pervaded her daily life there:

> There was a constant threat in Iran. In other words, my life was in danger. The journey was dangerous for just one night or day. Only the area where we had to cross the border was dangerous, and everything could happen. For example, we could be shot by the police, or we could be arrested and sent back. We knew that if we risked putting our lives in danger for only one night, our lives would be better after that. Once we reached Turkey, we would get help from the UN and other organisations. So, if we were to stay there, there would be a constant danger every moment, but the journey had short-term risks and dangers. (Mahnaz, Female, 31)

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Mahnaz, like many others, expressed her inability to exist and thrive in Iran or Afghanistan. She believed that migrating to another country would allow her to reclaim her identity as a woman with aspirations regarding personal growth. In her quest to regain agency amidst uncertainty, she embarked on a migration journey, recognizing that while it entailed short-term risks and dangers, hope was a factor in dealing with those risks. She held on to the hope that upon reaching Turkey she would receive assistance from the UN and other organizations. Conversely, she said that to have stayed in her home country would have exposed her to constant danger and despair.

Paradoxically, migrants' most traumatic experiences become a source of hope in regard to attaining a 'normal life' that is devoid of the perpetual fear they experienced in their country of origin. This narrative highlights the uncertainty inherent in hope. While migrants like Mahnaz aspire to cross borders, they simultaneously choose uncertainty over unbearable certainty in their current place of residence. The migration journey is full of risks, yet it offers a future with potentialities, confirming that hope can be fuelled against all odds, regardless of the hardships in the present (Webb 2007; Turner 2020; Schulz and Zinn 2023).

Here, a dilemma expressed by many migrants becomes apparent. The border-crossing experience proved immensely challenging for most individuals, with moments where they struggled to find the resolve to continue their journey. Yet, many voiced that remaining in Afghanistan or Iran would mean resigning themselves to a lifetime of suffering, and feeling a lack of control over their own lives (Zinn 2023). Despite the manifold risks involved, crossing the border emerges as a preferable option, as it offers the prospect of a life where they do not have to endure daily suffering. Their emotions, marked by hope and despair, fluctuated throughout the border-crossing journey. However, many held onto hope as a means to manage and overcome the risks along the way and reclaim their agency.

4.4 Turkey: feeling stuck in a whirlpool and feeling despair

Upon successfully crossing the border into Turkey, the next step differed for each interviewee. While some people strove to reach the cities where their families and relatives lived, those without any social networks travelled to cities to which they were directed by the police. Our interviewees often reported that they found almost all their financial resources depleted, having expended them on smugglers who facilitated their passage. For migrants who lack financial means and/or social networks, their initial days in Turkey are precarious. They find themselves in parks or on the streets, relying on the kindness of strangers to help them secure accommodation and employment. Despite the circumstances, they persevere, having survived the journey thus far. During this period, they only hold on to a glimmer hope, as their near future is not filled with alternatives and potentialities.

Hage's (2003) definition of hopefulness is reflected in the narratives of the interviewees just after crossing the border: at this point, they are open to what the future will bring, even if they do not know for sure what it will bring. Despite this hopefulness after border crossing, over time, their hope gives way to despair as they begin to feel trapped in a future devoid of potentialities. We demonstrate that this fluctuation of hope and despair is primarily caused by the structural constraints they face, as many migrants in Turkey struggle to meet their basic needs. Four significant factors emerge as major challenges in Turkey: (i) the limited possibility of obtaining legal status, (ii) harsh living conditions, (iii) the prevailing sense that there is no alternative but to attempt to cross the border once again, and (iv) discrimination. The discrepancy between the possibilities they had expected, and what is likely to be possible, expands, leading to the erosion of hope. The signs of despair become apparent.

4.4.1 *Legal status*

After finding a first place to stay, the big dilemma for migrants in Turkey is whether or not to apply for *international protection status*. Remaining unregistered exposes migrants to illegality and

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the risk of deportation, while registering carries the potential that they will be rejected, deported, or have limited agency in selecting their place of residence in Turkey.

Eligibility for international protection is determined on a case-by-case basis, considering factors such as the individual's experiences, past political activities, and the level of threat they have encountered. In 2018, UNCHR stopped receiving asylum applications from Afghans in Turkey and the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management took over the refugee status determination process. The handover of registration was accompanied by the systematization of a non-transparent and slow refugee status determination process (Karadağ and Sert 2023). This registration process leaves many Afghan migrants in Turkey without hope, as Mahnaz described:

> I think everything has become so much harder after the takeover of responsibilities by the Turkish government to process the refugee applications and resettling them in a third country. Most refugees now have almost no hope. No one knows what will happen tomorrow. (Mahnaz, Female, 31)

Those Afghans who have obtained IPS may lose hope over time due to the highly limited and selective process for resettlement to third countries. Afghan migrants with IPS often endure years of waiting without any assurance of being resettled in a third country. Thus, what Mahnaz is conveying here is that migrants lack hope because there are only a few alternatives for the future. Many of our interviewees are almost certain that their situation in Turkey will not improve anytime soon and the probabilities for third country resettlement is very low. Consequently, they find themselves with only one option: to wait, knowing that their situation will not improve in the near future. This relative certainty about the future makes many feel despair. Their protracted situation is similar to that of refugees who live in the UNHCR camps in Africa: they live in the moment, just hoping that they get out one day in the future (Loescher, Milner and Newman 2008).

Among our interviewees, a few were born in Iran, their parents having moved there from Afghanistan. These individuals faced even more limited prospects of receiving asylum status in Turkey, as Iran is considered a safe country. As Parveen expressed, their only option is to misrepresent their migration journey during the asylum interviews: 'We are compelled to state that we originated from Afghanistan. What other choice do we have? Do we have to lie about it?' (Parveen, Female, 21).

Many Afghans opt to bypass the asylum application process in Turkey entirely and remain unregistered. One reason for this is that if a person registers, the authorities compel them to reside in designated satellite cities. They are not granted the autonomy to select the city where they will live and work. The lack of autonomy in selecting the city becomes particularly problematic as employment opportunities are disproportionately concentrated in industrial cities such as Istanbul. The ambiguity surrounding their legal status in Turkey further amplifies these migrants' stress and uncertainty. They live with persistent anxiety, due to fear of being apprehended and deported.

Even migrants with IPS live in a state of anxiety, as they must endure a waiting period before being resettled in a third country. The potentialities of the future evaporates into an endless wait, and their near future is certain almost with no alternatives (Crapanzano 2003; Turner 2020). They are compelled to hide their identity throughout this waiting period, to avoid discrimination and prejudice. The lack of internal mobility further exacerbates their feeling of being trapped. Many migrants expressed a profound sense of despair, feeling that they were stuck in Turkey, without the ability either to progress or go back, due to the fear of crossing borders again; indeed, returning home was often impossible for them. Now, they see less or almost no alternatives in the near future, the odds of them moving onwards is very low, and they feel they have no control over their lives which restricts their agency. At this stage, we observe that despair is bound to occur.

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4.4.2 *Dire living conditions, housing, and employment*

Many interviewees had ended up in dire living conditions, including living in overcrowded housing, experiencing poverty, being unemployed, being subject to abusive work environments, having restricted access to healthcare, and facing discrimination. Regardless of their legal status, most interviewees were forced to work odd jobs in Turkey. Obtaining employment was not sufficient to end poverty for most. They worked in precarious jobs in the construction or textile sectors, and often struggled to make ends meet, despite working up to 12 hours a day. Moreover, many interviewees reported being exploited by their employers, who withheld their wages or paid less than promised. Rabi stated:

> There is no ideal working place for us [Afghans] here, and there will never be … because, here, the employers know us as 'yabancı' [foreigners]. Employers hire us because we are foreigners; we are paid less and have no rights. That is how they look at us. (Rabi, Male, 39)

These conditions make them susceptible to feelings of despair. They find themselves unable to overcome these structural barriers or find alternative avenues to improve their living conditions. For instance, due to fear of losing their jobs, many interviewees reported that they remained silent in the face of discrimination, low pay, and unfair working conditions. Working in such jobs can be even more challenging for individuals with health problems. For instance, Abdullah, who suffered from a herniated disc, was employed as a cleaner and had to carry heavy objects, exacerbating his health issues. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic also left many Afghans unemployed, exacerbating existing economic inequalities.

4.4.3 *Accessing healthcare, education, and social services*

Migrants who have no papers must pay for health services on the spot and have no right to education or social services. However, even those under international protection face provisional and restricted access to these services. While they have the legal right to access free healthcare, their access can be limited, and the insurance system can be unpredictable (Karadağ and Üstübici 2021). Health insurance is suspended one year after registration with the authorities, whereupon people are forced to pay for medical treatment from their own pockets. If they do not have sufficient financial resources, they must wait until their health insurance card is reactivated. This inaccessibility of healthcare adds to the precarious nature of migrants' migration journeys.

The precariousness of their access to healthcare services further triggers migrants' despair. Given that many of these migrants may not have had proper access to healthcare in Iran and Afghanistan, chronic illnesses or diseases may have remained untreated for years. Zahra described her 12-year-old daughter's struggles with renal impairment and her desire to die rather than continue to suffer:

> My child undergoes dialysis for seven years. When we were in Iran, we were more hopeful because we spoke the same language as people in the hospital. Since we came here, my daughter kept telling me, 'Mom, I do not want to live at all. Why am I still alive?' (Zahra, Female, 44)

The challenges in accessing medical care reinforce individuals' belief that their living standards will not improve in the near future. Consequently, this sense of relative certainty about the future, coupled with the lack of alternative possibilities, contributes to feelings of despair. This despair disrupts the flow of everyday life and undermines aspirations.

4.4.4 *Discrimination*

Many interviewees reported that they had initially felt welcomed within the social fabric of Turkish villages and towns. However, they noted that this welcoming attitude had diminished, and had become more and more contingent on their ability to remain invisible within society. They reported that while living on the margins may shield them from discrimination, it also serves as a way to deal with the risk of deportation.

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During the presidential elections campaign in 2023, notable political figures and media outlets voiced negative sentiments towards Syrians and Afghans. The prevailing sentiment among the general public, exacerbated by the economic downturn, high inflation, and the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquake, is that Turkey is overwhelmed by the influx of refugees. This sentiment, combined with the exploitative practices within the housing and labour markets, directly exposes Afghan migrants to discrimination. Even before recent developments, Afghan migrants in Turkey frequently reported violence, physical and psychological abuse, and labour exploitation. These factors further compound the complexity of their already challenging circumstances.

5. Stuck in a whirlpool: the future with almost no alternatives

After experiencing the above challenges in Turkey—limited legal documentation, fears of deportation, harsh living and working conditions, inadequate access to services, and discriminatory treatment—many of our interviewees feel trapped in a vicious cycle. Despite overcoming the challenges faced in Afghanistan, Iran, and en route to Turkey, moments of despair were often overshadowed by hope. The oscillation between hope and despair was predominantly influenced by hope, fuelled by the potential alternatives in the uncertain future and individuals' ability to take high risks to regain their agency. However, in Turkey, despair often preceded and perpetuated a sense of circularity for many of our interviewees.

Due to these challenges in Turkey, many Afghans contemplate onwards migration and crossing yet another border to reach Europe. The lack of viable alternatives left our interviewees trapped in what they perceived to be a situation of despair. For them, the fear of embarking on another journey to reach EU countries had intensified significantly, mainly due to the immense suffering they had experienced during their previous journeys.

The option to move on to Europe was not deemed attractive by our interviewees, not only because taking a rubber boat to Greece or crossing by land into Bulgaria is extremely dangerous, but also because they had received information about the situation in the Greek hotspots and of human rights abuses by border guards. Life-threatening experiences while crossing the border between Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey had profoundly impacted their lives, and they continued to carry this trauma. Health issues, a lack of financial resources, and the physical challenge of crossing borders were perceived as even more difficult for interviewees with children. Nevertheless, their living conditions in Turkey were highly challenging, and their future was unknown.

As captured by Muhammad, coping with the many challenges in each stage of the migration journey is like navigating a *whirlpool* (*gerdap*). He highlighted the mental and emotional strains caused by the constant unpredictability of the future that migrants face. This description makes tangible the sense of despair these people feel. Muhammed aptly described their predicament as like being trapped within a whirlpool, unsure if they will ever escape its grasp. The uncertainty of his life in Turkey bred a circular despair, leaving Muhammad to question how to move forward:

> From one side, there is the mental pressure of not knowing what will happen. On the other side, there is a lack of determination we are in. I feel like we are in a whirlpool that pulls us down. I do not know whether we will get out of it. However, it is difficult to survive under these conditions. I do not know how to continue. (Muhammad, Male, 24)

Muhammad's statement encapsulates the collective sentiment of the Afghan migrants we interviewed, shining a light on the complicated nature of their existence in Turkey. The phrase 'not knowing what will happen' underscores the constant struggle against the unknown, enduring a sense of indeterminacy. They were suspended in limbo, caught between their past and future. This prevailing ambiguity weighed heavily on our interviewees' minds, leaving them feeling helpless, as if a whirlpool was relentlessly dragging them down.

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On the other hand, paradoxically, many Afghan migrants find themselves trapped in a sense of certainty about the near future: they are ensnared in a whirlpool, unable to move to the EU due to structural factors such as border policies or the financial barriers of smuggling, and returning to Afghanistan or Iran is not feasible. This paradoxical situation is supported by evidence from Turner (2015), suggesting that the perceived security in refugee camps made Burundian refugees' lives predictable and deprived them of the ability to hope for a better future.

Similarly, Afghan migrants in Turkey also anticipate that the situation will remain unchanged. While some still cling to a glimmer of hope for change in the near future, the likelihood is so slim that many have lost hope entirely. Conditions fluctuate, leading to moments of hope followed by despair. Despite their efforts to break free from the whirlpool described by Muhammad, Afghan migrants find themselves trapped in the same challenges day after day. This is why despair is most pronounced in Turkey. Although it was not the final destination for many migrants, they had the option to move to EU countries. However, with the impact of COVID-19 measures and the escalating political tensions surrounding the refugee stigma in Turkey, feelings of despair have outweighed hope.

6. Conclusion

This paper has described the challenges faced by Afghan migrants throughout their journey to Turkey and posed the question: *How do fluctuations between hope and despair influence how individuals deal with risks during migration journeys?*

Our primary conclusion is that hope and despair fluctuate along migration journeys depending on three conditions influencing dealing with risks. Hope arises when there is uncertainty about the future, offering individuals alternative possibilities and providing room for the reclaiming agency even when the odds of achieving one's goals are low. Conversely, despair sets in when individuals perceive that their near future holds few or no alternatives, thereby limiting their control over their lives or agency. We observe that as these migrants anticipate fewer alternatives for their future in Turkey, their feeling of being trapped in what Muhammed described as a 'whirlpool' intensifies.

Second, we align with other scholars' working on hope, showing that hope serves as a means of dealing with risks (Hayenhjelm 2006; Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012; Schulz and Zinn 2023). We add that migrants often take greater risks driven by the hope of reclaiming their agency. However, this observation does not suggest that individuals lack the capacity to act or have no agency left when they experience despair or hopelessness. Despite feeling ensnared in a whirlpool of hope and despair and diminished agency, our interviewees exhibited remarkable resilience and perseverance in confronting challenges in their everyday lives, confirming earlier research on Afghan migration journeys (Kaytaz 2016). Even while feeling trapped, they endured continuing challenges, such as lack of legal status, lack of income, housing, and health care while facing discrimination and prejudice. Hence, our analysis indicates that while despair may constrain agency, it does not render individuals devoid of agency.

Our findings complement earlier research conducted with Afghan migrants in Turkey, which has also highlighted their aspirations and challenging living conditions (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018; Kuschminder 2018; Buz et al. 2020; Karadağ 2021; Karadağ and Sert 2023). Afghan migration motives are highly influenced by the lack of legal possibilities, economic deprivation, and exploitative labour conditions, leading to despair in Turkey, as previous studies have also demonstrated (Jurat 2022). However, these studies did not explore the effects of emotions such as hope and despair when dealing with risks along migration journeys. They also did not explain how hope was facilitated during migration journeys. Our research highlights the role of hope in navigating risks and reclaiming diminished agency in Afghan migration journeys. This aspect of agency in our research aligns with Amartya Sen's work on freedom, arguing that in situations of limited freedom or capability to act, individuals will seek to regain their agency, even if it requires making extreme decisions (Sen 1999).

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Our findings contribute to the scientific literature on risk and hope in migration journeys in two main ways. First, our findings align with Zinn's (2020) work on risk and show that individuals respond to vulnerability by taking high risks fuelled by feelings of hope. Our analysis provides a deeper understanding of Zinn's (2020) general argument regarding the nonrational management strategies (i.e. hope and faith), by showing precisely how hope and despair fluctuate. While Zinn employs the term 'risk management', we emphasize that dealing with risks is not necessarily a deliberate or instrumental strategy; it can be spontaneous and serve as a coping mechanism when confronted with a difficult situation. Our analysis provides further evidence for the argument that hope assists individuals in protecting or regaining their limited agency by taking higher risks (Schulz and Zinn 2023). However, based on insights from our interviewees, we add another layer to this argument. Even in the absence of hope, individuals can still resist and persist through challenges in their everyday lives while experiencing despair. As a result, we argue that this fluctuation between hope and despair, despite the whirlpool effect, helps migrants navigate their future and manage risks accordingly.

Second, we contribute to the literature on hope in migration journeys. Our findings resonate with Turner's (2020) examination of the changing experiences of hope, anxiety, and despair among Burundian refugees. Burundian refugees in Turner's (2020) research find themselves in prolonged waiting, devoid of any prospects, merely hoping for better times. This situation mirrors the lives of Afghan migrants in Turkey, who are increasingly faced with a certain lack of opportunities in the near future, evoking a sense of being caught in a whirlpool. On the other hand, we also observed that Afghan migrants in Turkey aspire to reclaim their agency, either by attempting to improve their situation in Turkey or by making another high-risk migration decision, such as moving onward to Europe. Therefore, as the analysis has revealed, the role of the agency component in our model is exceedingly significant.

The social relevance of this study lies in its provision of insights for migration governance. Our findings demonstrate that governance strategies aimed at deterring refugees by making their lives almost impossible are ineffective. First, because life in Afghanistan is the most dangerous prospect for them, returning to their country of origin is not a viable option for many. Second, even in conditions of extreme vulnerability, individuals will still strive to regain agency to maintain themselves. They will seek any physical or financial option, find other routes via other countries, and undertake tremendous risks, as they are forced to find alternatives. Therefore, we highlight that prioritizing the provision of basic rights to migrants in their current place of residence offers a more ethical and humanitarian approach. This insight should be heeded by policymakers seeking to strategically allocate their resources.

Finally, our study has a few limitations that call for further research. First, our analysis reflects a specific snapshot of the situation of Afghan migrants at a highly precarious moment during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This was a situation of compounding crises (Kuschminder and Rajabzadeh 2022). COVID-19 precautions added another layer to the feeling of despair in Turkey, as migrants were disproportionately affected compared to locals (Elçi, Kirisçioglu and Üstübici 2021). However, the post-COVID-19 situation has not mitigated the vulnerability and uncertainty of Afghan migrants' journeys, because of the increasing anti-immigrant discourse in the media and in public deliberations. Second, our observations and evidence are insufficient to show the effect of despair on the decision around the next stage of the migration journey. We were only able to interview Afghan migrants who were currently residing in Turkey. To explore the effects of hope and despair on Afghan migrants' management of risks, further research should be conducted on migrants who have moved to EU countries or the USA.

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