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"At Least, at the Border, I Am Killing Myself by My Own Will": Migration Aspirations and Risk Perceptions among Syrian and Afghan Communities

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ABSTRACT

It is well-documented that border controls make migration journeys riskier for people on the move. Policymakers construe deaths in migration journeys as resulting from the individual risk-taking attitudes of migrants. However, risks involved in migration journeys are not only related to border control measures. Based on the analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with Syrian and Afghan migrants in Turkey, we embrace a social constructionist approach to unpack how migrants form their aspirations based on their risk perceptions. Our findings explain why some migrants would still move onwards despite violent borders while others stay or search for "safer" ways for onward migration.

KEYWORDS

Migration aspirations; Syrian migrants; Afghan migrants; risk perceptions; border crossing narratives

1. Introduction

This paper explores how migrants' risk perceptions shape their aspirations during migration journeys. Recent research and media accounts show that creating a hostile environment identified with restrictive arrival policies does not deter migrants from taking arduous journeys. Rapid developments at the border of Turkey and the European Union (EU) create fertile ground to explore this topic. After the introduction of the *EU-Turkey Statement* in March 2016, academic, public, and political debates hailed the "success" of the deal, evident in a decrease in the number of migrants who try to reach the EU countries (Lehner, 2019; Spijkerboer, 2016; Van Liempt et al., 2017). Despite increasing securitization at the Greek and Bulgarian land borders and deteriorating conditions on Greek islands, the undocumented border crossings from Turkey continued (IOM, 2019, 2020). Considering the developments at the EU-Turkey borders and the protection framework in Turkey, this paper initially draws on the migration aspirations literature to answer the following question: Why do some migrants move onwards, venturing all the risks in their journey, while others do not?

The primary conceptual relevance of the paper is its engagement with the concept of risk in the context of forced migration. In the migration aspirations literature, migrants' decision to move onwards or stay in their residence country is explained by the interaction of various factors in the contexts of destination, transit, and origin countries (De Haas, 2011; Koser & Kuschminder, 2016; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014; Wissink et al., 2013). To a lesser extent, a few migration scholars explain why migrants take the risk of border crossing (Belloni, 2016; Hernández-Carretero

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& Carling, 2012; Kaytaz, 2016). The relationship between perceptions of risk and aspirations for secondary migration is understudied within the discussion of migration aspirations. The notion of risk is used interchangeably with dangers *en route* and primarily describes either the initial impetus to flee the conflict zone (Schon, 2019) or the effect of border externalization policies (Dávila et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2016). Previous findings exhibit that border externalization policy have made migrant journeys longer and costlier rather than eradicating undocumented border crossings (Collyer et al., 2012; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016). Nonetheless, these dangers *per se,* or exposure to death and violence on migration routes, do not necessarily deter people from moving onward (McMahon & Sigona, 2021). As a result, a new approach to studying aspirations for secondary migration and perceptions of risk is needed to unpack how migrants' aspirations are shaped during their journeys.

Our research design includes the two most sizeable migrant communities in Turkey: Afghans and Syrians, to generate a micro-level understanding of fluctuating yet continuing border crossings at the EU-Turkey borders.[1] Both nationalities constitute a sizeable group to cross the border through Greece and Bulgaria to move onwards to Europe.[2] At the same time, they have been subjected to different protection frames in Turkey, resulting in differentiated legal status (Üstübici, 2019). Around 3,7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey are legally categorized as Syrians Under Temporary Protection. Within the protection system, around 130,000 Afghans are considered under the category of non-Syrians under international protection.[3] Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention, but a ratification means they grant refugee status only to those escaping events occuring in Europe.[4] Hence, several Syrians and Afghans in Turkey's asylum system are waiting to be resettled to a third country as the only way to gain access to a fully-fletched refugee status (Yildiz, 2020). Plus, a high number of Syrians and Afghans are not registered with the authorities or have lost their status for several reasons. While we acknowledge this context of forced displacement and despite the various legal categories in Turkey's differentiated and multilayered protection system (Üstübici, 2019), we use the inclusivist umbrella term "migrant" to refer to asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in our research.[5] In addition, we use the term "forcibly displaced migrants" to refer to similar cases of displacement in the broader literature.

The paper first discusses the literature on migration aspirations and risk perceptions. The second section outlines the methodological background of the research. Then, we analyze migration aspirations and risk narratives under three categories: (1) to move onwards at all costs, (2) to move onwards with documents, and (3) not aspiring to move onwards or aspiring to stay put. The last section summarizes our main findings concerning our primary argument that risk perceptions in the context of forced migration are not only about survival in relation to border crossings but also about broader life assessments and aspirations for migration.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Migration aspirations

Why people migrate is a central question in migration studies, and there are various theories, from push-pull to neo-classical economic or structural theories, that have looked at the macro factors explaining migratory behavior (De Haas, 2014; Massey et al., 1993). In our current context where all migration is constrained, the research agenda on migration aspirations has delved into understanding the potential of out-migration, mainly from the developing parts of the world, as well as the implications of unfulfilled aspirations resulting in involuntary immobility (Carling, 2002, 2014; Carling & Collins, 2018; Carling & Schewel, 2018; De Haas, 2021). Within this literature, studying (secondary) migration aspirations in forced migration contexts has remained marginal. This is mainly because forcibly displaced migrants are fleeing to save their lives rather than the economic motivations seen at the core of migration

aspirations. In other words, migrants flee their places of origin not only out of an aspiration for a better life but to avoid being stuck in conflict and the danger of death (McMahon & Sigona, 2021).

Although the aspiration-capability model is based on a mobility bias where migration is considered preferable to non-migration, recent scholarship also calls attention to the importance of 'stay aspirations' (Schewel, 2020; Wyngaarden et al., 2023). However, aspirations to stay put tend to be left under-discussed in displacement and transit migration contexts (Üstübici & Elçi, 2022). In such contexts, the initial displacement, usually to a neighboring country, may also be followed by a secondary migration (Brigden, 2018; Kaytaz, 2016; Yildiz, 2020). Various factors have been associated with secondary migration aspirations, ranging from the legal status in the current place of residence (Jordan & Düvell, 2002; Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020; Van Hear, 2004; van Heelsum, 2016) to experiencing discrimination (Brewer & Yukseker, 2009; Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020) or persecution in the country of origin or transit (Syed Zwick, 2022), or from poor living conditions to fear of deportation (Kvittingen et al., 2019).

Our research aims to fill in two gaps in this emerging literature on aspirations along the migration journey. First, the dilemma of *moving onwards or staying put* in forced migration contexts begs one to revisit the concept of risk and unpack various forms of risks—as perceived by migrants—along with approaches to migration aspirations. Second, we identify a mobility bias in research focusing on journeys. While the literature acknowledges that onward migration aspirations are neither given nor unchangeable, "stay aspirations" have not been studied and conceptualized sufficiently. In our view, considering broader life aspirations and perceptions of risks concerning realizing these aspirations inform our analysis of aspirations for secondary migration in forced migration contexts.

2.2. Risk perceptions

Risk perceptions are predominantly defined in two dimensions in the literature: either as a term based on probabilities and expected values from a rational choice perspective (Blau, 1963; Homans, 1953; Neumann, 1944) and perceived gains and losses (Tversky & Kahneman, 1989, 1992) or from a social constructionist perspective, as a term based on personal preferences and beliefs (Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 1999a, 2013; Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). From the perspective of rational choice theory, the risk is operationalized in terms of human rationality in assessing and calculating the outcomes of the decisions at hand (Blau, 1963; Homans, 1953; Neumann, 1944). This technical approach portrays risk avoidance as rational behavior and risk-taking resulting from a lack of knowledge or misperception (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002).

The social constructionist approach challenges the technical approach by understanding individuals' risk perceptions from an emic perspective. Individuals' understandings of risks are socially constructed through their life courses and lifetime experiences (Brown, 2016; Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 1999b; Macgill, 1989; Zinn, 2016). Rather than calculating probabilities and utilities, people evaluate risks based on their personal experiences, membership in social groups, access to material resources, or their location with the life course and power relations (Lupton, 1999b, p. 125). Therefore, a risk is not static but a dynamic phenomenon constructed by social interaction (Lupton, 1999b). As François Ewald remarks in relation to risks: "Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger, considers the event" (Ewald, 1991, p. 199).

The social constructionist approach rejects the argument that people's responses to risk can be explained by the dualism of rationality and irrationality (Brown, 2016; Lupton & Tulloch, 2002; Zinn, 2008). Considering the construction of the meaning of risk, unsurprisingly, people may develop multiple and different rationalities in responding to risks in their everyday lives (Zinn, 2008). Accordingly, risk assessments function as a way of expressing subjectivity peculiar to one's unique life courses (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002; Van Voorst, 2014). Rather than an issue

of rational calculations of the issues at stake, the way risks are perceived becomes a matter of self-actualization or (re)constructing identity (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002).

Risk-taking behavior, despite all the dangers and uncertainty, thus, does not result from ill perception or ignorance. Risk-taking becomes a deliberate and agentic choice for lay people even when they are aware of the expert knowledge about the issue at stake but interpret it differently as an expression of their subjectivity (Michael, 1996, p. 119). As our findings indicate, social constructionist perspectives of risk enable us to unpack migration aspirations instead of technical views on risks of undocumented border-crossing, as widespread in the context of the 2016 Turkey-EU statement and elsewhere.

3. Methodology

In the context of 'Fluctuations in Migration Flows to Europe' research project , we interviewed 30 migrants, 11 from Afghanistan and 19 from Syria, for a month in April 2019 in different districts of the provinces of Istanbul and Gaziantep in Turkey. In this section, we first explain the recruitment strategy and reflect on the ethical implications of fieldwork with vulnerable populations with precarious legal status.[6] Second, we elaborate on the practical and ethical challenges of doing fieldwork caused by the fragile political context and the hardships of migration journeys. Finally, we explain the interview protocol, coding process, and data analysis.

First, the recruitment of interviewees was based on our networks by snowballing through our gatekeepers in the neighborhoods where Afghan and Syrian communities reside. As the overwhelming majority of initially contacted Syrian families aspire to stay in Turkey, we actively sought other informants with current intentions and/or prior experience crossing the borders. Our interviewees were predominantly male and split fairly evenly between middle-aged (40 and 50 years) and young (25 and 30). While we wished to create a gender balance in our sample, we were able to conduct interviews only with six females. The main obstacle was the invisibility of Afghan and Syrian female migrants on the streets to conduct one-to-one interviews. Also, when we visited households, men, as the head, tended to speak on behalf of their families. The interviews were conducted in Dari or Arabic with the help of translators who are themselves displaced Afghan or Syrian individuals and had previous fieldwork experience. We also conducted interviews in Turkish when the interviewee was fluent enough. All parties involved in data collection signed a code of conduct, and we informed them about the motivations, the research aims, and ethical challenges. Interviews generally took place in the interviewees' houses when possible. Since single men live in crowded apartments shared with several others, other places were sought. All interviews were audio recorded, except the two interviewees who preferred not to be recorded. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by native speakers of migrants' languages. Informed consent was verbally taken before each interview, ensuring all participants the confidentiality of their identity.

Second, the hardships of migration journeys and the fragile political context in Turkey posed practical and ethical challenges during the fieldwork. We conducted the fieldwork in April 2019, when the authorities tolerated undocumented migration. Nevertheless, we could feel the unease of interviewees due to increased security checks in public areas. The migration policy context in Istanbul became tenser after July 2019. On July 22, 2019, the Istanbul Governorate issued a statement and required Syrian nationals who were not registered in Istanbul to return to their province of registration and started the crackdown on undocumented migration. Thousands of migrants could not leave their homes; some even were afraid to go to work. The situation was completely reversed when we revisited the field sites on March 1, 2020, right after the Turkish government declared to open the borders with Greece and Bulgaria, where the streets were full of migrants actively looking for a smuggler to take them to the border. In short, looking retrospectively, the timing of the interviews was interesting. It was during a period when undocumented migration was not largely tolerated, but the crackdown on a daily basis was not in

place yet. This relative tolerance by the security forces enabled us to interview Afghans and Syrians who were not registered and potentially on the move but prevented us from reaching out to those who were about to take the journey.

Practically, it was challenging for us to find a safe place to interview in public spaces. For instance, most Afghan migrants in Istanbul were deprived of legal documentation and faced with the risk of deportation. Hence, we asked those to choose where they felt comfortable and safe. We often conducted interviews in cafes and restaurants that interviewees' acquaintances and friends run. Moreover, the possible harm due to emotional distress was another challenge during the fieldwork. Some interviewees cried during the interview when they recounted their migration journey. As the research team, we lacked the technical capabilities to mitigate traumas. However, we strived to provide information about legal aid and social and counseling services. Most interviewees expressed their gratitude for empathetically listening to their stories. At the end of the interviews, many said they felt much better after getting their stories off their chest.

Finally, the interview questions aimed to reveal migrants' aspirations at different phases of their journey. It explores migrants' current aspirations, including their initial decision to leave their country of origin, their experiences *en route*, and their current standing in Turkey. Detailed questions on how and why they crossed -or attempted to cross- the border(s) and how they changed their decisions *en route* enabled us to reveal migrants' risk perceptions on border crossing. We also asked questions about their living conditions, current legal status, and satisfaction with life in Turkey, which helped us understand how they perceive the risks in their everyday lives.

We analyzed the data on Atlas.ti by applying a flexible coding methodology. Flexible coding is known for its data reliability and validity advantages when analyzing in-depth interviews with QDA software (Deterding & Waters, 2021). In the first step, we connected transcripts to attributes (demographic variables as age, ethnicity, and gender) and indexed the transcripts to code line by line. The initial indexing of transcripts demonstrated that the push-pull and aspiration-capability models are insufficient to explain various migration aspirations. We created respondent-level memos to explore alternative explanations for migration aspirations. As a result, we explored a significant theme that was vaguely emergent during the interviews: risk perceptions. During our fieldwork, we had already observed that risk perceptions emerged as an important analytical theme. The data exploration process confirmed our initial estimation. In the second step, we applied analytical codes across transcripts to scrutinize multifarious risk perceptions in migration journeys. Ultimately, we could categorize the multiple ways of conceptualizing risks during migration journeys. In the final step, we used the intersection of risk codes and attributes to examine patterns in migration aspirations.

4. The narratives of migrants' aspirations and risk perceptions

Upon analyzing our interviews, three types of migration aspirations and risk perceptions arose. These categories emerged in a grounded way from the interviews, and the number of migrants in each category is balanced. The three types of migration aspirations are; (1) to move onwards at any cost, (2) to move onwards only with documents, (3) not aspiring to move onwards, or aspiring to stay put. Although the aspiration to return is also a possible choice and should be explored, the migrants in our research uttered very limited aspirations to return. Note that these categories are neither pre-defined nor mutually exclusive. For each category, we reflect on how migrants' reasonings interplay with their risk perceptions.

Needless to say, the interviewees were aware of the possible dangers and threats of border crossing. Their narratives were based on how these risks shaped their migration aspirations. As Brown (2021, p. 70) indicates, "risks never merely exist," meaning that what is risky varies across time and culture based on individuals' lived experiences. In this section, we present how understandings of risks vary across the lives of migrants who live, despite nuances, under similar circumstances in Turkey.

4.1. To move onwards at any costs: majbour risks and expressions of agency

It is widely documented that Syrians and Afghans endure dire living conditions in Turkey, barely earn a living, and have difficulties accessing education or healthcare (Karadağ & Üstübici, 2021). Considering these barriers in migrants' everyday lives, most do not see a future in Turkey. As a result, onward migration aspirations reflect the desire for a better life (De Haas, 2021). Our interviewees emphasize that they know the risks *en route* but feel they have no choice but to take the risk of border crossing. They feel obliged to take a risk in order not to lose time in "limbo." Two main factors influence this feeling of being obliged to take the risk. First, when risks of border crossing are inevitable, migrants feel compelled to take all risks during migration journeys. Second, these inevitable risks are perceived as a means to realize oneself and demonstrate agency. The act of crossing the border conveys a form of agency for migrants.

Migrants who aspire to move onwards at all costs feel compelled, "majbour,[7]" to take the inevitable risks to take the route to European countries to have a better life. Our interviewees were aware of the journey's dangers and limited possibilities of safely reaching EU countries. However, staying in Turkey was not an option. These migrants felt that they could not improve themselves in Turkey. For instance, Ali[8] left Afghanistan in 2015 to move onwards to Europe, where he believed that he could pursue his career as an electrical engineer. Ali went to Iran and worked as a construction worker to earn money to pay to be smuggled to Europe. However, he could not save money as he expected. After staying in Iran for 2.5 years, he came to Istanbul by the help of a smuggler, hoping that he could save money for his journey to Germany. Ali had to cross the violent border from Iran to Turkey under the threat of losing his life. He explains his decision to cross the border to Turkey and to move onwards at a time when undocumented border crossings into Greece through Turkey were becoming more difficult than before:

> Migration policies and risks on the route did not affect my decision-making because I had to come to Turkey to move onwards. For example, you must wear a jacket during winter to avoid cold. It is the same. I had to come to Turkey to go to Europe. It does not matter what happens in Turkey. I had to come here—I was *majbour*. (Ali, Afghanistan, male)

At the time of the interview, Ali had not been able to move onwards because he could not afford a reliable smuggler, not because he was dissuaded by the risks involved in border crossing. Migration policies and risks on the route do not dissuade migrants, as Ali, from moving onward because risks on the route are inevitable in migration journeys. In a way, risks on the way to Europe are not deterring migrants. Rather, migrants perceive these risks as obstacles that they need to resist and improvise in their journey. Therefore, risk-taking is a natural part of the journey, such as wearing a jacket during winter.

Single young men were more likely to express this notion of *majbour*. Nevertheless, the aspiration to move onward at all costs is also observable among females and elderly migrants whose lives are full of hardships. For instance, among our interviewees, two Afghan females who aspired to move onward at all costs were exposed to domestic violence. They were ready to take risks on the route, including the risk of death in the sea. At the time of the interview, Zahra, a young Afghan female, was staying in a smuggler's house with her toddler, waiting for the right time to move onwards to a Greek island via boat. Zahra was receiving death threats from her ex-husband, who was deported to Afghanistan. She came to Turkey with the hope of escaping domestic violence. When her ex-husband's relatives in Turkey attempted to kidnap Zahra's toddler, she decided to move onwards at all costs, despite all the risks: "I know that there is a 90% chance of death. Nobody likes to put her life in danger, but we have no other option. I really must take this risk. I do not have any other choice- I am *majbour*." Zahra knows the low possibilities of safe entry and dangers on the route. Echoing the famous lines by the poet Warsan Shire, "no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land," migrants such as Zahra have no choice but to take the risks of death on the route.

Ultimately, we do not know whether she succeeded to cross, as she was preparing to take a boat from Izmir the day after our interview.

Ali and Zahra aspire to move onwards but their main motivations diverge. While Ali venture the risks on the route to realize himself in the European countries, Zahra is compelled to take risks to protect her toddler and herself from domestic violence. While Ali could not move onwards due to the lack of financial resources, Zahra was waiting for the right time to cross the border in the smuggler's house. In both narratives, risk-taking demonstrates migrant agency.

Qasim is a middle-aged man from Syria living in Turkey and his narrative on why he is determined to moving onwards exemplifies this willingness to exercise agency despite the high cost involved: "A risk/bad experience for a few days of border crossing is better than the risks and a difficult life forever here in Turkey." Despite the possible danger or death along the journey, by taking the risk of crossing, migrants manifest an agency to decide and struggle to achieve a "normal" life. A "normal" life, from migrants' perspective, is to live without the threat of death and to be able to make their own decisions: "If I went back to the regime, Assad would have put me in jail, or kill[ed] me. At least, at the border, I am killing myself by my own will." Here, Qasim perceives his risk-taking as a form of control over his own life. By taking risks, migrants find an opportunity to manifest their ability to make decisions and for self-improvement (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002).

As displayed in the narratives of migrants aspiring to move at all costs, risks are not only about control measures at the border. Staying in dead-end jobs, facing discrimination and injustice, or living under poor conditions are also perceived as risks experienced along migration journeys. Interviewees emphasized that as living expenses increase, they aspire to move onwards more than before to have a satisfactory life in another country. Only by moving at all costs, interviewees argue, can they have an opportunity for self-improvement and self-realization, even if there is a risk of death *en route*. For some migrants, however, moving at all costs is not an option, despite these unfavorable living conditions in Turkey.

4.2. To move onwards only with documents: dangerous journeys vs. everyday risks

The second category is based on the narratives of migrants who aspire to move onward only when a legal opportunity emerges. Aspiration to move onward only with documents is neglected, and the literature is focused on clandestine journeys, especially when discussing risks. However, as with thousands of conditional migrants in Turkey, some migrant families invest their time to be resettled in a third country instead of taking clandestine journeys. Compared to migrants aspiring to move at all costs, they have to endure longer years of living in Turkey. Most families, at the time of the interview, were waiting for resettlement or family reunification. These families perceive leaving Turkey as the most viable option knowing that the actual number of those getting access to resettlement is indeed very low (Karadağ & Üstübici, 2021). Migrants' narratives in this category display two reasons they do not move at all costs. First, most families aspire to move with documents to protect their families from border crossing risks. Protecting the family is not only related to the risks associated with border crossing. So, as a second reason, they want to protect their family because of the risk of starting from zero again in Turkey if they fail to reach the EU countries.

Being with a family versus being single significantly shapes migration aspirations. While migrants such as Qasim have the agency as single men to take the chance of getting hurt, even killed or apprehended on the route, heads of families cannot make this decision readily on behalf of their families. Zahra—trying to save her child from being kidnapped—was an exception rather than a rule. Risks involved in Turkey are perceived and evaluated differently by families. Living with their family and children, men emphasize their role as the protector of their families. They feel responsible for possible dangers along the route. Most male migrants with their families in our research stated that they could have overcome the risks on the route if they had been

alone in their migration journey, but as heads of the household, they weigh the risks of the journey differently and preferred to wait for resettlement.

Sardar is one of these migrants who wait to be resettled to Canada. He was a public prosecutor back in Afghanistan, came to Turkey with his family in 2016, and registered under international protection. Sardar works in a grocery store, dissatisfied with his job and treatment as an Afghan grocery man in Turkey. Still, Sardar does not aspire to move onward at all costs because he does not want to risk his children's lives on a boat on the perilous route to Europe. Sardar perceives the risks of living in Istanbul to be as high as crossing the border, but he cannot move onward due to his role in the family as the protector:

> My first plan was to stay in Turkey, but if the situation continues like this, it will not be possible for us to live here. It is too difficult. Especially in the last two years, food has been getting too expensive. For example, one-kilogram potato or onion was 1 Lira, and now 5 Lira. Our life here is getting much more difficult every day. My income is not enough to cover our expenses. Because of this situation, we cannot continue living here. Many families had already moved onward, but I did not take that risk to move onwards because of my children. (Sardar, Afghanistan, male)

Being a family and feeling like the guardian of the family shapes the perceptions of risks in migration journeys. Migrants dissatisfied with their lives in their current country of residence are not always willing to take clandestine journeys. Nevertheless, they do not aspire to stay in their country of residence. Thus, the aspiration to move legally is another type of aspiration that needs to be unpacked.

The second reason for migrants aspiring to move onwards with documents is the risk of "starting from zero" if they fail to reach European countries. The fear of starting from zero is frequently emphasized by migrants who endeavor to make a life for themselves out of Nothing. In addition to the physical dangers *en route*, migrants perceive losing their job and accommodation as a risk. When migrants decide to move onward after making a deal with the smuggler, they avoid informing their employers and landlords. If they cannot reach Europe safely or are deported back to Turkey, they do not want to risk losing their work and employment in Turkey. In most cases, the journey takes longer than expected, and the employers or landlords eventually become aware of the situation. Thus, a clandestine journey is not only perceived as risky regarding the dangers *en route*, but regarding the penalties of returning having failed.

Hassan came to Turkey from Syria in 2015 and considered crossing the border on a boat. It was the time when borders were relatively open and many families crossed into the Greek islands. However, it was also when the body of a Kurdish baby, Aylan Kurdi, hit the shores of Bodrum, becoming an iconic image of the risks involved in border crossings. Hassan decided to leave and emptied their house and planned to inform the landlord when they reached Greece. They met with the smuggler to take the bus to the Aegean Sea. At the last minute, Hassan gave up taking the bus to the coastline. He says he had to cancel the journey because he could not put the image of Aylan Kurdi out of his mind. The fact that his children might not be safe on a boat to Greece and that he could lose everything he owned in Turkey motivated Hassan to change his mind. Hassan, as opposed to Qasim, did not perceive the journey only as an individual (risking their own life, drowning, being detained, or deported):

> I will not move onwards if there is a 1% chance of danger for the children! But, if they call me and tell me that I can legally go there (to Europe)… And, if I found that life in there is better than here (Turkey)… Then, I might go there for a better future for my children! (Hassan, Syria, male)

Hassan decided to move onward to provide a better future for his family. When he changed his mind, he realized that even a very low possibility of risk on the route is not tolerable. Of course, the fear of border crossing by boat is not peculiar to migrants with families. Some single migrants living in precarious conditions also avoid clandestine journeys due to fear. However, migrants with families were the most concerned group among our interviewees who took the

responsibility of protecting their families. In other words, our interviews suggested that border measures deter the more vulnerable families with young children, more than single men.

Moving only with documents implies waiting to be resettled for an indefinite period. The uncertain process of waiting elicits another aspect of risk-taking for many migrants. They do not know how long they will wait for a new life in another country. Plus, they cannot entirely settle in Turkey with the hope that they will move to another country. Thus, many migrants express their life in Turkey as being in limbo. Despite remaining in limbo, migrants do not aspire to settle in Turkey or move to the European Union countries at all costs. First, staying in Turkey is also perceived as a risk due to the hardships in everyday life. Migrants face precarious work and housing conditions or the risk of not having access to services such as education and healthcare. In other words, the duration of stay in Turkey does not alter their migration aspirations. Second, they do not aspire to move at all costs because they want to make sure that they protect their families from the dangers *en route*. These multiple rationalities induce the aspiration to move onward only when a legal opportunity arises.

4.3. Not aspiring to move onwards: the risk of "losing one's culture"

Concerning Schewel's (2020) research on voluntary immobility, aspirations to stay put are also at the center of our analysis. The third narrative emerged from our findings, where interviewees explained their aspirations to stay in terms of the risks of not being able to pass on their culture and religious identity to their children in the European Union countries. Rather than the risks involved in violent journeys, they consider the risks of post-migration experience. The more migrants spend time in Turkey, the more convinced that moving onward to another culture involves risks. Migrants perceive staying in Turkey, where they feel religiously and culturally affiliated with, as a way of protecting their identity. On the other hand, migrants perceive moving onward to the European countries as a risk to identity erosion.

Previous studies show that when migrants feel closer to the culture in their country of residence, the aspiration to stay is reinforced (Müller Funk, 2019; Rottmann & Kaya, 2021). In addition, satisfaction with employment and educational opportunities, safety, and social networks in the host country are also significant drivers for aspiration to stay (Müller Funk, 2019). Yet, in our research, migrants who aspire to stay often expressed dissatisfaction with employment or educational opportunities. Migrants aspire to stay not because they are satisfied with living conditions in Turkey but because they fear losing their culture in other European countries. Furthermore, feeling close to the culture in Turkey *per se* is not sufficient to grasp aspirations to stay. Migrants narrate cultural affinity with Turkey as interrelated with the risk of identity erosion in European countries. Whenever they explain their reasoning to aspire to stay, they compare the cultural affinity with the society in Turkey *vis a vis* Europe. Thus, migrants' feeling of cultural affinity with Turkey should be reciprocally unpacked with the risk of identity erosion in European countries.

The migrants who aspire to stay indicate that even if they can move onward with their documents, they would prefer to stay in Turkey, as their priority is to protect their religious and cultural identity. Being able to hear the call to prayer, the *azan*, and living in a Muslim country—or at least in a country where traditions are similar—are significant reasons among these migrants' narratives. Salah is one of these migrants who does not consider moving onward from Turkey: "I would not go to Europe because I have a family here. In Europe, Islam is not as widespread as it is in Turkey. Here, you can at least hear the prayers being called in the mosques."

Despite the perceived cultural affinity with the society of Turkey, Salah and his family of seven have been struggling with financial and social hardships in Turkey. Arriving from Syria in 2014 and after three months of living in a city close to the Syrian border, Salah and his family moved to Istanbul, hoping they could have better opportunities in terms of education and work. At first, Salah and his family had to live in his sister's apartment in Istanbul for three

months until Salah found a job as a textile worker. Yet, even after finding a job, Salah's family continued to experience financial difficulties. First, given the conditions in the informal sector, he risks losing his job and not being able to bring food home daily. Second, Salah's family is not eligible for benefits because the children are over eighteen. Third, Salah was the boss of his workshop back in Syria. As a textile worker in Turkey, Salah experiences downward mobility, making adapting to his new life in Istanbul particularly hard. Alongside financial difficulties, Salah expresses that he feels resentment when he is treated differently by locals in Turkey. Although he feels close to the culture, he feels discrimination: "there are some points where I feel a little like an outsider. For instance, whenever a conflict occurs between a Turkish and a Syrian person, I am immediately blamed, even though I have nothing to do with the conflict."

Salah still does not consider leaving Turkey for another country, despite his dissatisfaction with the living conditions in Turkey. Plus, for practicing religious migrants like Salah, the main reason to aspire to stay in Turkey is not the existence of social networks and family in their current country of residence. When asked why he aspires to stay, Salah answered: "Mainly religion. In Turkey, you can at least hear the prayers being recited." Comparing the risks of staying in Turkey to living in Europe, these migrants perceive moving onward as a risk of identity erosion. From Salah's perspective, like other interviewees who aspire to stay in Turkey, living in Turkey is already full of hardships due to the lack of economic resources and social networks. Even under these circumstances, some interviewees still do not consider leaving Turkey. Rather than a calculation of utility maximization, migrants aspiring to stay in Turkey perceive the risks of losing their cultural and religious identity as a significant factor in shaping their migration aspirations (Lupton, 2013; Van Voorst, 2014).

In line with the previous studies, the narratives of our interviewees indicate that cultural and religious affinity with the host country is an essential factor in shaping aspirations. However, feeling close to the culture *per se* is not sufficient to understand the reasoning for aspirations to stay. First, migrants' feeling of cultural affinity with Turkey should be reciprocally unpacked *vis a vis* the risk of identity erosion in European countries. Second, evidence from Turkey shows that Syrians generally think they are culturally similar to locals, whereas Turkish nationals generally hold the opposite view (Erdoğan, 2020). Regardless of the realities of the existence of cultural and religious affinity, migrants' *perception* of these similarities shapes their migration aspirations. When Europe is perceived as a cultural and religious antithesis, the risk to identity erosion are very real, and aspirations to stay are reinforced. Finally, the narratives of aspiration to stay pose a significant example for illustrating how people constitute the meaning of risk based on multiple and different rationalities (Zinn, 2008). Considering migration journeys which inherently consist of multiple risks, migrants attribute different meanings to risks that cannot be solely explained by the dualism of rationality and irrationality (Brown, 2016; Lupton & Tulloch, 2002; Zinn, 2008).

5. Conclusion

Why do some migrants move on despite risk at the borders while others do not? We unpacked migration aspirations by exploring risk perceptions to answer this central question. Using a social constructionist approach to risk helps us to explore migration aspirations concerning perceptions of risk at various stages of the migration journey and settlement. First, considering the other driving factors for migration aspirations, we aim to contribute to the literature by highlighting that migrants' risk perceptions are not peculiar to survival. Risk perceptions are also related to life aspirations which feed migration aspirations. Second, our analysis shows that migrants do not perceive risks as solely hinging on the dangers *en route*. Instead, for some, risks along migrant journeys are constant and naturalized, such as "wearing a jacket during winter." Thus, rather than the 'mere existence of risks' (Brown, 2021), how migrants perceive these risks determines migration aspirations. As a result, a hostile environment created by stricter

migration policies could not deter all migrants as they form their aspirations based on risk perceptions.

Based on the evidence from the qualitative interviews, this research explained migration aspirations through the following risk perceptions: (1) feeling compelled (*majbour*) to take risks to express agency, (2) oscillation between dangers of migration journeys and everyday risks of living, and (3) preponderance of fear of identity erosion in the European countries over everyday risks of living. Migrants' narratives in all three categories have indicated different views on the interconnection between time and risk. Migrants aspiring to move at all costs perceive losing time in Turkey as a risk, whereas migrants aspiring to move only with documents must spend more time in Turkey, despite the risks of staying. As migrants aspire to stay, they spend more time in the country and are more convinced that moving onward is a risk to their culture and identity.

Our conceptual framing and discussion contribute to debates on onward migration aspirations, putting migrants' risk perceptions at the center of analysis. First, we have shown that aspirations to move on arise when migrants perceive the risks of immobility as greater than the risks along the journey. When migrants perceive staying in their residence country as impossible to achieve life aspirations, they feel compelled, *majbour*, to take the dangers on the route. This compulsion to take risks also connotes a necessity, similar to wearing a jacket during the winter, as Ali suggested. Most of our interviewees aspiring to move onwards at all costs emphasize that they are "not living but only surviving" and struggle to make ends meet in Turkey. Hence, in such circumstances, taking a risky journey may look reasonable (Zinn, 2008, 2016) beyond the dichotomy of rationality and irrationality.

Second, our findings revealed that not all migrants in Turkey take the risks of border crossing, although they may still aspire to move onwards. Through a grounded approach, we showed that some migrants aspire to move only in with documents without risking their own or their family members' lives on the route. The idea of putting their family in danger deters these migrants from moving onward through undocumented means. This finding is especially valid for heads of households making decisions on behalf of their family. Nevertheless, aspirations to move onward still exist because staying in Turkey is also perceived as a risk due to the hardships in migrants' everyday lives.

Third, the narratives of migrants aspiring to stay in Turkey add another layer to explaining how risk perceptions play a role in shaping aspirations. Migrants aspiring to stay in Turkey also face difficulties in their everyday lives in Turkey. Nevertheless, experiencing difficulty is not enough to push migrants to move on. Instead, migrants aspiring to stay in Turkey perceive moving onward as a risk to their cultural and religious identity. The interplay between risks in everyday life and risks of losing identity presents multiple reasoning to respond to risks during their migration journeys (Zinn, 2008). As a result, all three narratives reveal that the responses to various risks along the journey allow migrants to assert their agency (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002; Van Voorst, 2014).

The paper aimed to contribute to the literature by considering the multidimensionality of migration aspirations. Showing the difference between the aspiration to move onwards "at all costs" and "only with documents," our analysis goes beyond a dichotomous model of moving onwards and staying put. The literature's almost exclusive focus on border crossings prioritizes clandestine journeys over other types of migration aspirations. Thus, we highlight that the motivations for moving onwards from Turkey only with documents, despite the bureaucratic hurdles it involves, provide an additional analytical lens to study migration aspirations. Rather than taking clandestine journeys, migrants can aspire to move with documents or stay in their current place.

The research has some limitations. Given the changing policy environment in Turkey,—entailing a more securitized and exclusionary approach toward migrants of different legal statuses and the increasing focus on return policies (Kayaoglu et al., 2022; Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2020)—it is still yet to be researched whether migrants' motivations to stay in Turkey are continuing or not. Moreover, we acknowledge that return aspirations are not covered in our research.

Including risk perceptions of return could provide a complete picture of migration aspirations. Secondly, we did not notice social network effects. We would expect that the existence of social networks would reduce the cost of adapting to a new place. However, the number of migrants with family members in Europe or Canada was limited in our research. The wish for reunification of the extended family can also influence migration aspirations. Despite the limitations, our insights on aspirations for secondary migration may provide a starting point to discuss the interplay of socio-economic conditions, family-related factors, and risk perceptions in shaping aspirations.

Further research can unpack factors leading to different risk perceptions among migrants. Along with a spatial dimension, that is, the violent experience of the border crossings, risk perceptions also have a time-specific dimension. Some consider the current situation in the host country as a risk (of losing time), while others consider the secondary migration experience a potential risk. Moreover, we acknowledge that a deeper intersectional reading of risk perceptions among migrants running from different forms of violence is needed to explain migration aspirations better. We invite further research to consider aspirations for mobility and settlement in conjunction with migrants' perceptions of risk. In addition, we hope our paper inspires other research on the formation of various risk perceptions, taking into account individual, contextual, and structural factors.

Notes

1. See Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) website: https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration Last access: 11.08.2022
2. See ibid.: https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration Last access: 11.08.2022
3. See ibid.: https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration Last access: 11.08.2022
4. For the details of Turkey's geographical limitation, see: https://rli.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2021/06/22/on-the-difference-that-turkeys-geographical-limitation-to-the-1951-convention-makes-in-the-protection-of-non-european-refugees/ Last access: 03.04.2023
5. Not using blurred legal categories is a conscious choice to avoid implying a hierarchy between those, mainly refugees who deserve protection and those who do not (Carling, 2017).
6. We use vulnerability to connotate to individuals' diminished autonomy and lack of power due to structural factors (Winfield, 2022). As also shown by our interviewees, migrants may lack the resources but they still have agency and strategies to cope with disempowering structural factors (McLaughlin & Alfaro-Velcamp, 2015).
7. Afghan migrants use the word "*majbour*" when explaining their reasoning for taking risks during their journeys. The word can be translated from Dari into English as "being compelled to do something."
8. All the names written in this paper are anonymized by the authors.

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