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**Rejected Afghan asylum seekers in the Netherlands:
Migration experiences, current situations and future aspirations**

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Abstract

Afghans have been a central asylum seeking group in Europe, and specifically the Netherlands since the conflict in Afghanistan escalated in the 1990s. Many of the Afghan asylum seekers in the Netherlands since 2001 receive a negative decision on their asylum request, however, do not leave the Netherlands and continue to live irregularly. This paper provides a descriptive exploration of the experiences of Afghan migrants with regard to their journeys to the Netherlands and while living irregularly in the Netherlands. The paper is based on 47 interviews conducted with Afghans living irregularly in the Netherlands and 11 key stakeholder interviews, which were conducted from 2013-2014. The findings discuss the complexity of Afghan migration movements including root causes and transit experiences, the factors influencing the destination choice of the Netherlands, reception experiences and future aspirations.

Key Words: Irregular migration, Afghanistan, The Netherlands

JEL Classification: F22, J13, J15

Introduction

Afghans continue to be one of the largest asylum seeking populations in industrialized states, third in 2014 after Syrians and Iraqis, with a 65 percent increase in claims from 2013 (UNHCR, 2015). From 2007-2012 the number of Afghans seeking asylum in industrialized states annually steadily increased, with a decrease in 2013, and a rise again in 2014. The current instability in Afghanistan indicates that migration from Afghanistan will not decrease in the near future, particularly in the case of asylum applications in industrialized states (Koser and Marsden, 2013).

In addition to the predicted rise in Afghan asylum seekers, the majority of emigration from Afghanistan is irregular (Loschmann et al., 2014). Within the neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan, Afghans have been moving across borders without documents for centuries for familial reasons and livelihood opportunities (Monsutti, 2008). More recently, in a survey conducted in 2011 with household members of current migrants from Afghanistan that were primarily in Pakistan or Iran, 86 per cent of the migrants had migrated irregularly from Afghanistan without any documents (MGSOG, 2014). Clearly, asylum seekers also migrate further afield than Pakistan and Iran and it is reasonable to assume the majority migrate irregularly. Although irregular migrants, Koser (2005) suggests that asylum seekers should be excluded from the wider irregular migration debates and that their protection needs should not be overlooked due to their irregular status.

This paper examines the reasons, decision making factors, processes and experiences of irregular Afghan migrants in their migration from Afghanistan and/or Iran to the Netherlands. It is important to note that all respondents in this study were rejected asylum seekers. This was not a requirement for participation in the study, which sought to be inclusive of all forms of Afghan irregular migrants in the Netherlands, however, the only Afghan irregular migrants that were found were rejected asylum seekers. This provides a unique element as all respondents in this study did not have the right to stay in the Netherlands as their claim for protection was rejected. It is, however, important to also understand the processes and experiences of those that do not receive asylum or protection as these migrants may contribute to growing irregular stay populations in destination countries.

A second key element that is unique to our sample is that over half of the participants were former unaccompanied minors (UAMs). An UAM is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) as “a person who is under the age of eighteen years, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier and who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so” (1997: 1). UAMs are frequently defined as ‘children at risk’ and are a population of concern to the UNHCR (Vervliet et al., 2014). Again, it was not a specific objective of this study to have such a large proportion of former UAMs included in the sample, however, the resulting mixed sample of former UAMs (who also had asylum claims rejected) and adult rejected asylum seekers present a unique opportunity to make comparisons between the migration processes and patterns of these two groups.

The focus of this paper is thus on patterns and processes of irregular migration and entry of Afghans to the Netherlands. We specifically investigate their decision to migrate, the reasons or lack thereof for their destination choice of the Netherlands, the routes taken in their migration (including transit countries), experiences in transit countries (including instances of exploitation), experiences in the Netherlands, and their future aspirations.

The Afghan Context

Afghanistan has been engulfed in insecurity for the past 35 years. The 2001 NATO led invasion resulted in a decrease in asylum applications from Afghans in industrialised states, however since the rising insecurity from 2008, asylum figures have again increased. In 2014, the top five countries processing new Afghan asylum claims were Turkey, Germany, Hungary, Austria and Italy (UNHCR, 2014). Further, Afghans are the largest UAM group seeking asylum in Europe. According to Eurostat, in 2014 there were 23,150 asylum applications submitted by UAMs in Europe, of which 5,800 were submitted by Afghans, which is roughly 25 per cent (2015).

For both Afghan UAMs and non-UAMs, migration to Europe is frequently part of a household strategy wherein families make calculated decisions to send a household member abroad (Schuster and Majidi, 2013). These reasons can be either protection or economic based, or a combination of reasons. Studies have found that in the Afghan context the oldest son is often sent for migration to fulfil the responsibility of finding and providing a family income (Hoodfar, 2008). Notions of 'masculinity' are important in the Afghan context and the role of the son in providing for the family.

An increasing body of research has been conducted on Afghan UAMs, particularly to Europe. Key reasons cited for UAM Afghan migration to Europe include: family conflict, violent incidents including kidnapping, the death of a parent, or threats made against the family or individual family members (UNHCR 2010a; UNHCR, 2010). One study conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (2014) stated that in most instances it is the children that instigate the idea to migrate, however the decision is made with the head of the family. This study also found that European countries were frequently selected as the intended destination as they were perceived by the family to provide greater asylum opportunities (AREU, 2014). Other studies contradict this finding and state that the decision to migrate is generally not instigated by the minor (Vervliet et al, 2014). Boland (2010) found that frequently the final destination is not decided prior to migration and that children talk to other children in transport hubs along the route to decide their final destination. Previous work with Afghan migrants, and in particular UAMs, has argued that Afghans tend to want to migrate to 'Europe' more generally with less information on particular countries as their destination choice (UNHCR, 2010a; UNHCR, 2010).

Migration from Afghanistan is a complex process that can include different triggers within a long standing context of insecurity. Recent studies have started to provide insight into the dynamics of irregular migration from Afghanistan and the ways in which migrants determine their destination choices. This study contributes to this emerging literature by providing an overview of irregular Afghan migrants in the Netherlands.

Methods and Respondent Overview

This study is based on qualitative interviews conducted with 47 irregular Afghan migrants and 11 key stakeholders working with irregular Afghan migrants in 2013-2014. Respondents were accessed through a total of eight different entry points that included non-governmental organisations, Afghans in the Netherlands, and personal networks of the researchers. Through the different entry points, snowball sampling was used to obtain a total of 47 interviews with irregular

Afghan migrants. The majority of interviews with irregular Afghans were conducted in Farsi/ Dari and were simultaneously translated and transcribed into English. The transcriptions were all coded in Nvivo for analysis. Key stakeholder interviews were conducted with organisations working with either asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, or directly with irregular Afghans. These interviews provided further information on the current situation in the Netherlands for irregular Afghan migrants.

The majority of respondents were male with only two female respondents in the sample and the average age of the respondents was 26 years old. This is fairly young and reflects that the majority of participants were former UAMs. All respondents in the sample had applied for asylum in the Netherlands and at the time of interview had a rejected asylum claim. The majority of respondents had received a removal order from the Dutch Government stating that they had 28 days to remain legally in the country. Most respondents had long exceeded their 28 days at the time of interview. Some respondents were working with lawyers to try to appeal their case, while others were undecided on their future objectives.

Within this group of rejected asylum seekers, respondents were further categorised as: rejected asylum seekers who arrived as adults (17), former unaccompanied minors (UAM) (26), and individuals with asylum claims rejected under the 1F status of the Geneva Convention¹ (4). An individual is classified as a former UAM if they arrived in the Netherlands prior to reaching the age of 18 years old. The assessment and reception process in the Netherlands is different for UAMs than for adult asylum seekers. The details of this will not be examined in this paper, however, a central point is that prior to becoming adult (18 years old) UAMs are protected and provided for by the state regardless of if their asylum claim being rejected or accepted. Upon turning 18 years old and in the event of a rejected claim they are given a removal order stating that they need to leave the Netherlands voluntarily or be subject to deportation, as is the case with all rejected asylum seekers. Former UAMs have, therefore, often lived in the Netherlands longer than adult rejected asylum seekers, particularly if they arrive in the country at a younger age such as 14 or 15 years old.

Individuals rejected under the 1F status are unique as they have generally been in the Netherlands for over a decade and thus their situation is significantly different than recently rejected asylum seekers. Individuals with 1F status are considered 'unreturnable' in the Netherlands and are not deported by the state (Reijven and van Wijk, 2014). Thus, these individuals live in a state of limbo without options for regularisation but not being returned.

The largest ethnic group in the sample is Tajiks (61%), followed by Hazaras (16%) and the most frequently stated religion is Shia Muslim (55%), followed by Sunni Muslim (34%) and Christian (11%). The ethnic make up of respondents contains an over representation of Tajiks and Hazaras compared to the populations in Afghanistan, where Pashtuns are the majority group with Tajiks following second and Hazaras a much smaller proportion of the population. The majority of respondents were uneducated with less than 20 per cent having completed secondary education.

¹ The Dutch Immigration Services (IND) assesses an individual under article 1F of the Geneva Convention as having a 'serious reasons for considering' they had committed war crimes, crimes against humanity or other gross violations of international (criminal) law such as serious transnational crimes and terrorism. Since 2000, asylum claims can be refused based on this article.

The majority arrived in the Netherlands between 2008-2011. Half of the sample were from urban areas in Afghanistan.

Finally, it is noteworthy that many of the respondents interviewed had spent substantial time living in Iran. Ten respondents lived most of their lives in Iran having come to Iran as children with an additional six that were born in Iran or came as babies and spent most of their lives there. Thus, one third of the sample made their migration from Iran, not Afghanistan.

The majority of respondents arrived between 2008-2011 in the Netherlands, with the exception of the 1F respondents that arrived in the late 1990s. This means that at the time of interview questions regarding the decision to migrate were on average 2-5 years post-facto. One of the major challenges in researching migration decision making is post-facto realisation, meaning that “people justify their migration on the basis of what has occurred since their movement” (Skeldon, 1994: 3). It is thus difficult to disentangle decision making factors. This problem has long been acknowledged in the migration literature as Bedford (1975: 30) states:

“As a number of researchers have found, motives adduced by migrants for moves in the past may hide, rather than reveal, underlying causes of movement. Not only do memories get blurred, but a concrete objective or some dramatic event may stand out in a migrant’s narrative, rather than the cumulative effects of hopes and fears which are probably the real causes pushing a man to leave his home for another. There is simply no way of overcoming this problem.”

At the same time, migrants post-facto realisations of their migration experiences and decision making have value in understanding their current perceptions of their situation. Migrants current situations should be viewed within their life-cycle (Cassarino, 2014), particularly when considering future ambitions and decisions such as return. The results presented in this paper therefore should be interpreted with caution in terms of post-facto decision making, however, are still of value in representing how irregular Afghan migrants perceive and understand their migration experiences and current situations.

The Decision to leave Afghanistan

The decision making factors for migrating from Afghanistan are often multiple and complex. Fifteen respondents cited multiple reasons for influencing their decision to migrate, whereas the majority of respondents cited one central reason. The three most commonly cited reasons for migration were first, problems with the Taliban (15 respondents), second, family problems (10 respondents) and third, problems that occurred living in Iran (10 respondents).

Individuals that cited the Taliban as a central reason for their migration, most commonly had migrated as an adult, that is, they were generally not UAMs at the time of migration. Only one third of respondents (5 individuals of 15) citing the Taliban as a key factor influencing their migration were former UAMs. Three main reasons were cited for having problems with the Taliban. The first reason was having worked for foreigners, such as the US Military, or in one case a travel agency owned by an Indian national. A second reason was that they had a family member (most commonly a father) that worked for the Afghan police and this led their family to be targeted by the Taliban. A

third reason was that they had disobeyed the Taliban. This was a reason more commonly cited by former UAMs. For example one respondent explained:

“On my way to school, the Taliban stopped me and asked me to quit studying in Dari, they asked me to study in Pashtun, they took my books and tore my books and gave me some books in Pashtun. I got another Dari book and kept them in school, while I was going to school I was carrying the Pashtun book but in the school I studied my Dari books. Still they stopped me and beat me on the way to school, then I decided to leave Afghanistan and I came here.” (Former UAM, 18 years old)

The second reason of familial problems was most frequently cited by former UAMs (7 of the 10 respondents). Two key familial problems were first, involving marriage, and second, involving the death of a family member. Marriage or relationship problems included that an individual was being forced by their family to marry someone that they did not want to marry or that they wanted to marry someone that was not approved of by either their family or the females’ family. The reason for the disapproval was often related to ethnic and/or class lines, such as one family being Shia and the other Sunni. One respondent described their experiences as follows:

“They suspected the girl, and made her marry to her cousin. After her marriage, she came to our shop one day; they always came to our shop to order new cloths for ceremonies. That day, I hugged her in the shop, I really loved her, and she loved me back. I did not do anything, I just hugged her. I was really in love with her. What they did to me was cowardice; they said you committed a sin by hugging a married woman. I was in love; love does not care about these things. On that day, her mother-in-law was chasing her, she suspected her. She attacked me with a knife, there was a sewing knife there, she wanted to kill me, she cut my hand, but I could escape.” (Former UAM, 22 years old)

Returning to the second reason of death of a family member, examples were provided of former UAMs being sent to live with uncles or aunts that did not like them and abused them.

The third most frequent reason for migration was problems that arose while living in Iran. Half of the respondents that cited this were former UAMs (5 respondents) and half were adult migrants (5 respondents). Respondents faced several challenges in Iran including not having documents, harassment and discrimination, and no future opportunities. The situation for Afghans in Iran is complex and has been increasingly negative since 2001.

Many of the difficulties in Iran had to do with being Afghan and the discrimination faced was intensified when they were undocumented. One respondent described his experiences in Iran as follows:

“I started working, there were many problems, I did not have an ID card in Iran, I always had to live in the same place, I could not enter the city.....I was living and working in a factory. It was very difficult; I could not go to the city because I did not have any documents.” (Former UAM, 20 years old)

A second key challenge for those born in Iran, is that they have no right to citizenship:

“Honestly even my father did not even visit Afghanistan. My grandfather used to live in Iraq; when Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq, he left Iraq to Iran. At that time my father was just 3, 4 years old. He grew up in Iran, in Mashad. When my father married, my parents moved to Tehran. I was born in Tehran. I told the IND that I am Afghan, I am really Afghan but I was born in Iran.” (former UAM, 18 years old)

Although the situations in Iran are troubling and show a clear situation of danger, they may not be issues perceived as persecution as per the Geneva Convention.

Two additional reasons cited for migration that were specifically cited by former UAMs were ethnic/religious based problems (5 respondents) and more disturbingly buggery (4 respondents). Ethnic/religious based problems were cited by a total of 6 respondents (one non former UAM as well), of which five were of Tajik ethnicity and one was of Hazara ethnicity. The problem was most commonly attributed however to differences between Shia and Sunni religious backgrounds. One respondent stated:

“My father has problems with Sunnis. In Afghanistan, it is not the way that only the father is involved in the problem; they [also] take revenge on his children. I had this problem, which is why my father sent me here.” (Former UAM, 20 years old)

Although the decision making factor of buggery only represents nine per cent of the sample, this presents a fairly large proportion for such a specific issue. A report from the US Marines on Pashtun sociology in 2011 highlighted the prevalence of pedophilia in Afghanistan wherein young boys are required to dress up like girls and dance for older men (Goldman, 2011). Most other studies conducted on UAM from Afghanistan have not raised the issue of buggery (UNHCR, 2010a; UNHCR, 2010b; Correa-Valez, Nardone, and Knoetze, 2014; Buil and Siegel, 2014), however, sexual abuse was raised in one study conducted with UAMs in Sweden (UNHCR, 2010b). The author of this report highlighted that UAMs gave two staged answers wherein they only spoke more freely once trust was established with the researcher, at which time the issue of buggery was raised. This suggests that instances of sexual abuse may be more prevalent than currently noted in the literature as the topic is taboo and requires high levels of trust between the respondent and the researcher. One respondent explained their experience as follows:

“Buggery is prevalent in Mazar Sharif. They take children from their houses to a place where music is on, they forced boys to dance, and they make up boys... Several times, the commanders took my brother and me to their place. When we complained, they started beating us. We had to go, we had no other choice...They forced us to dance, and wear anklets, such things. We were really tired of that life. We could not live that way anymore. I escaped one night and went to Kabul.” (Former UAM, 18 years old).

It appears that individuals that became involved in this practice were either orphans, or sold by their parents to older men for this purpose. This was an unexpected finding in the study and further research would be required to better understand this situation.

It is evident that the reasons for migration from Afghanistan or Iran are diverse for this group and

that there are some differences between the reasons for migration between UAMs and adult rejected asylum seekers. The decision making factors leading to migration are not only regarding the Taliban, poverty, or economic conditions, but also include family problems, challenges in Iran, ethnic problems and buggery.

Experiences in Transit

The majority of respondents had a transit experience, with only six respondents coming more or less directly to the Netherlands by air and/or train. For instance, a few of these respondents flew from Kabul to Dubai, then to Germany, and took a train from Germany to the Netherlands. For those having a transit experience these ranged from a short duration of two weeks or up to two years with the transit experiences most commonly being between 6 months and one year. Most migrants initially went to Iran or Pakistan and then continued their journey from these border countries. The most common countries of transit were Turkey (71%), Greece (65%), and Italy (33%). This is unsurprising given the geographical location of Afghanistan. According to Frontex (2012) the eastern Mediterranean is the most common route of irregular entry into the European Union.

The poor conditions of Afghans have been well documented in Greece and Turkey (Hurd, 2012; Estrin 2012). In both countries there are few services available to Afghans. The UNHCR has been mandated with processing of Afghan asylum seeker claims in Turkey, however in May 2013, the UNHCR stopped accepting Afghan asylum claims and froze all existing claims (Al Jazeera, 2014). The asylum system in Greece has become overloaded in recent years and due to the overload and backlog claims have also not been processed. The poor conditions in Greece have led the European Court of Justice to issue a directive to EU Member states to no longer return asylum seekers to Greece as is normally allowed under the Dublin II Convention. In addition, there is frequent abuse of Afghans in Greece by the right wing extremist group Golden Dawn and in some cases the Greek police (Estrin, 2012).

Respondents reported that their stays in Turkey were quite short of generally a few days to a longer duration of 3-4 months. Several respondents stated that they did not go out at all in Turkey and just waited for their smuggler to arrange transport to Greece. Some of the respondents, on the other hand, were given documents to travel within Istanbul. Respondents travelled by boat from Turkey to Greece, which was commonly an arduous journey. It was reported that boats were filled to over-capacity and people did not always make the crossing alive.

The majority of respondents cited negative experiences in Greece such as: being abused, living on the street, only being able to have food once per day, being arrested by police, and maltreatment in prison. Some respondents were able to stay in churches that offered support to migrants and others stayed in parks that were common gathering places for Afghan and Iranian migrants. Churches also provided meals, which was essential for many of the respondents.

The conditions in Greece were a shock for many of the respondents:

“Suddenly you find yourself among a community who does not refrain from murder, drugs, any kind of criminal acts, sexual harassment. You find yourself in the middle of this community while you used to living with your family, your mother, your

mother always took care of you. Suddenly you are in this kind of community that you have not even had any experience of how to get along with this new community, suddenly you lost your way.” (Former UAM, 21 years old)

Surviving in Greece was cited by many as a key challenge of the journey, especially when respondents did not have any options for funding their onward journey. In Greece some respondents had a short stay with their smuggler, however for the most part individuals were left by their smuggler and had to find another smuggler and resources for the onward journey. In some cases, upon arrival in Greece, smugglers would demand more money in order to continue the journey.

A few respondents were able to get day work in agriculture which assisted to provide them some small funds. Most commonly this money was used for onward migration. Respondents also mentioned the option that smugglers would bring them onward if they could get 10-15 other people to come as well. Essentially, the migrant was then coerced to become a smuggler:

“Sometimes you transfer another asylum seeker in a truck; you act as the smuggler to earn some money to move to another country. There are many people who started by transferring one migrant to earn money for their journey but after a while they became professional smugglers and stayed in Greece and run their business.” (Rejected Asylum Seeker, 25 years old)

None of the respondents in the sample stated that they engaged in such activities, however, respondents reflected that they were considering this if they became desperate enough. This suggests that the extreme vulnerability of migrants may lead to further widening and strengthening of smuggling networks.

A small number of respondents who were either families or UAMs at the time of their stay in Greece reported receiving assistance in Greece from UN organisations. These respondents were given a place to live, food from church groups and psycho-social assistance. In addition, a small number of respondents received assistance from other individuals in transit. For instance, one respondent received assistance from an Afghan he approached on the street:

“They [the smugglers] stopped at a gas station; they let me out, and told me, “Wait here, someone will pick you up from here.” I kept waiting there for a long time but nothing happened. I was scared; I did not have a phone, money. I did not know anyone there. I saw a private car there; I went and spoke with him. He had black hair; I guessed that he should be Turk, Moroccan, a migrant, in sum. Speaking with him, I found that he was also an Afghan who lived in Italy. He was on his way to France. I asked him if he can give me a ride to somewhere. He asked me do you have passport, I replied back to him, “Yes”. I lied to him because if I told him the truth he would never help me. At the border of France and Switzerland, I think it was Switzerland; the police stopped us and asked for ID. The guy showed his document, but I did not have any documents. Then I was arrested by French police there.” (Former UAM, 19 years old)

Although this respondent was detained by the police he was released the next day. He then went to

Paris, and eventually connected with another smuggler who brought him to the Netherlands.

Italy was the final primary country of transit. Respondents that went to Italy tended to go either in a van, truck or in a container on a ship. These methods were also high risk, although in a different way than travelling to Greece, in that respondents frequently travelled in refrigeration containers. Upon arrival they were instructed by the smugglers to make a lot of noise so that they would be let out of the containers:

“The smuggler had told us, ‘When you off-load, make noise so that the driver notices and opens the door.’ We started with other guys to hit the door and make noises, finally the drivers stopped at some point; I guess it was restaurant or something, when he opened the door, we, 3, jumped out of the truck and ran.”
(Former UAM, 20 year old)

From this method, some respondents were also caught by the police. One former UAM stated that when he was detained by the police: “They put our hands under a machine, it was like scanning. Then they told me and two other guys that since you are 16 years old we would not deport you to Greece”(Former UAM, 21 year old). The practice of X-raying the left hand as a part of an age assessment is a common practice in Europe (Keunen et al., 2013).

It is noteworthy that some former UAMs were unaware of the countries that they transited through and the routes they took to reach the Netherlands. For the most part, respondents stated being highly dependent upon the smuggler with little awareness regarding their situation and feeling that they lacked the ability to protect themselves with the smuggler. Several respondents reported being beaten by the smuggler during parts of the journey. One respondent stated: “When you are travelling with a smuggler, your life is in his hands, whatever he does to you, kills you, you do not know anyone else, wherever he takes you, you have to go.” (Former UAM, 20 year old). The vulnerability of minors is a key issue of concern in their migration journeys and raises concerns as to how minors can be protected in transit countries.

Destination Choice: When and how are destinations chosen?

This section examines the destination choice of the migrants, including when the decision was made to come to the Netherlands or another intended destination, and how the decision was made. We find that as noted by Pinkerton and Koser (2002), destination choice is commonly made in transit at the advice of other migrants and smugglers.

Twenty-one percent (10) of the respondents intended destination was the Netherlands. Six of these respondents made the decision to come to the Netherlands prior to departure. Of these six respondents, four made the decision based on a network tie in the Netherlands, one had family make the decision for them, and one person chose the Netherlands as they had read about the country and believed it had a good humanitarian reputation. All of the respondents that chose the Netherlands because of a network tie did not actually have contact with the network tie upon arrival. Often they had no contact information for this person and were just told by family to find them upon arrival. The other four respondents that chose the Netherlands did so in transit based on information that they received from other migrants. One respondent stated:

“Honestly, I did not know anything about NL; the smuggler told me that I would transfer you to one of the European countries from Greece. In Greece, I heard from people that NL is a good country and has good people; I really did not have any idea about NL. I talked with the smuggler along the way and told him, “I heard positive things about NL, I would be thankful if you would transfer me to NL.” The smuggler did so and brought me to Schiphol and left me alone.” (Rejected Asylum Seeker, 36 year old)

Nineteen respondents had an intended destination that was not the Netherlands, of which 17 of these respondents (89%) choose the intended destination while in transit based on advice from other migrants and smugglers. Twelve of these respondents were trying to migrate to Sweden. It appears that Sweden was commonly suggested as a good country to migrate to as one former UAM stated (20 year old): “I just heard in Greece that Sweden is a better country and they understand asylum seekers problems better”.

The majority of these 19 respondents that had other intended destinations were arrested in the Netherlands while in route to other destinations. For one respondent they were trying to get to Canada, but the smuggler never came to give them their ticket, and thus they instead claimed asylum in the Netherlands. For respondents trying to reach Sweden, Finland or Denmark, the Netherlands was thus intended as a transit country and not the destination.

It is also striking that 14 respondents had no intended destination at all; expressing that they were only trying to leave and it did not matter where they went. One respondent explained this as:

“I just wanted to go to a safe country, to build our life. It did not matter for me to go to Germany, Belgium or NL. I have never asked smuggler about the country of destination, they spoke in a different language.” (RAS, family, 30 years old)

Exactly half of the respondents that had no intended destination were former UAMs.

In total 18 respondents stated that the destination was chosen by the smuggler and that they were not involved in the decision. Thirteen of these respondents were former UAMs, suggesting that former UAMs are more vulnerable in determining their destination choice. A total of 12 former UAMs seemed to have very little awareness of where they were migrating at any given time. Some of these former UAMs were unsure as to if their family members that arranged their migration had chosen their destination or if the smuggler chose the destination. One former UAM stated: “The smuggler took me here, I do not know who told them to bring me to NL.” (Former UAM, 18 year old).

This section has highlighted three key points regarding the destination choice of the Netherlands. First, only one-fifth of the respondents actually intended to migrate to the Netherlands, highlighting that the Netherlands is not itself a central intended destination. Second, Sweden was an intended destination for 13 respondents (12 decided on Sweden in transit, and 1 respondent decided on Sweden prior to departure), and Finland and Denmark each for one respondent. Therefore, 32 per cent of the sample, almost one third, got stuck in the Netherlands, which was intended as a transit country to their destination. This presents an interesting picture of the Netherlands as a ‘transit’

country as opposed to a 'destination' country. Furthermore, there is also evidence as to the importance of networks and access to information provided by other migrants and smugglers en route. The information received primarily in Greece and Italy was that Sweden was the most desirable country, which is why so many respondents intended to migrate to Sweden. Third, it is striking that 30 per cent of respondents had no intended destination at the time of departure. This highlights the role of smugglers in making decisions regarding destination choice, as the respondents were not even intending to get to Europe, but would have gone wherever the smuggler took them. The majority of respondents in this situation were former UAMs and this also stresses the vulnerability of minors in the migration process.

Experiences in the Netherlands

Upon arrival in the Netherlands the majority of respondents identified themselves immediately to the police to claim asylum. A small number of respondents were stopped in the Netherlands by the police while en route to other destinations, such as Sweden. All respondents claimed asylum once in the Netherlands. All adults are referred to the asylum seeker reception centers for the processing of their claim. For UAMs, there are slight differences depending on their age. Children under 12 year olds are generally placed with a foster family under the guardianship of the organisation Nidos (EMN, 2010). UAMs over the age of 12 are placed under the care of the Central Agency for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) where the majority are placed into Child Residence Groups (CRGs). UAM children are permitted to go to school and move freely within Dutch society. Asylum claims are processed while UAMs are in the Netherlands as minors, however, rejected asylum seekers that are minors cannot be removed from the Netherlands until they are 18 years old. Thus, UAMs whose claims have been rejected know that when turning 18 they will either be returned to Afghanistan or become irregular migrants, also termed UAMs that 'go missing' or 'disappear'.

Some respondents stated, however, that they were not informed until they were 18 that their claims had been rejected. Upon turning 18, they were immediately transferred to an asylum reception center, wherein from there they received additional information on their asylum case. Several respondents, both former UAMs and rejected adult asylum seekers stated having challenges in the asylum reception centers, such as: not being very clean, overcrowded, and the high levels of stress and tension in the centers impacting their mental wellbeing.

At the time of interview, 19 per cent of the respondents were living in reception centers and the rest were living irregularly. Respondents residing in the reception centers stated that it was very stressful and difficult for them as they were unable to work and lived in fear everyday that the police would come and deport them. Those living irregularly were either supported by NGOs, living with friends, or frequently moving from place to place. The majority of respondents received support from NGOs, churches, or friends in the Netherlands. It is important to note that the NGOs providing support were organisations assisting refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants and not Afghan NGOs established in the Netherlands. Respondents had very little interactions with the regularised Afghan population in the Netherlands. Several former UAMs were able to receive

support from friends they met in the CRGs and a few rejected asylum seekers were able to receive support from friends from the reception centers.

Ten of the respondents were working in the black market and of these, eight of the respondents were working in day labour activities. When they were able to get work they were either paid five euros per hour or fifty euros for the day, however, the main concern was the high irregularity of this work.

Due to the lack of opportunities for informal employment in the Netherlands, support from NGOs and networks are critical to survival for the migrants. One respondent stated:

“I lived for 5, 6 months with difficulties: begging to people, crying to them, asking them to host me, there is no place for you when you are illegal until I found this church in which I live now. They provide housing for illegal people. They provide me with housing, medical supports, transportation costs, and food. Thank God. They are good people, now I feel better than at that time.” (Former UAM, 22 years old)

A key challenge is that the support from the NGOs is generally time limited. For instance, several respondents stated that they felt quite stressed as to what they would do when they had to leave the accommodation provided by the NGO: “I am living on the street, if [NGO] wants, they could kick me out of their place. Where could I go then?” (Former UAM, 19 years old).

For the most part, former UAMs were more likely to have made friends that were able to assist them as compared to the adult rejected asylum seekers. Former UAMs were able to make friends in the CRGs and at school. Although former UAMs also reported high levels of animosity and taunting from Dutch students in the schools, some were also able to make connections with both Dutch students and other UAMs. These network ties were essential for receiving support, primarily in terms of finding housing. One respondent stated that when a Dutch friend told their parents about their situation, the parent assisted to find accommodation for the former UAM. These types of situations were unique, but had a high impact on the migrant.

In terms of maintaining connections to Afghanistan while in the Netherlands, there is a fairly even split of respondents that are and are not in contact with their families. For those who are not in contact it is either because their families have moved, they lost touch, or are not able to afford to contact them. For those that are in contact with their family, some lie about their situation in the Netherlands to make it appear more positive to their families:

“Would you tell your family if you were in my shoes? I cannot tell them that I am living in Europe but I sleep on the street, I cannot tell them I am living in Europe but I am searching for EUR 1 everywhere. I am actually a beggar here while I am working because I ask people to let me work for them” (Adult Rejected Asylum Seeker, 33 years old).

Several of these respondents stated however, that they think their families can see through their lies:

“They know that I do not have status. I told them that although I do not have status, I have a good life here, the government serves us. But mothers always realise the truth; when her child speaks, she figures out if he is telling the truth or not. She always tells me, ‘I know that you are telling lie’” (Former UAM, 20 years old).

On the other hand, a small number of respondents do tell their families the entire truth. One respondent stated:

“Yes, they are aware of my situation here. I sent them some photo from the camps in which I lived. I told them, ‘These are camps in which you need to stay and wait until you get the result’...When my family sees my current life and situation, they are really worried. Even my friends, with whom I used to go to mosque, keep telling me that you should not accept your weekly money from COA because you are not sure if the money is Halal. They suggested that I work; I told them that I am not allowed to work. All of them are worried and unhappy about my life here” (Adult Rejected Asylum Seeker, 31 years old).

As is evident in the above quote, several respondents stated that their families do not understand the asylum system. Families offer advice such as going to another country or trying to submit a claim again and wait for a positive reply.

Access to information and advice from trusted networks is clearly critical in decision making factors of the migrants. Unfortunately, however, it appears that migrants are frequently ill-advised. This is often not because people are malicious, but simply do not appear to have access to the right information to advise people accurately. One respondent took advice from an individual they met in transit that was later perceived as detrimental to their asylum claim:

“In Schiphol I met a guy, I told him that I was in Greece and I was finger printed there. He told me not to say about your finger print in Greece to the IND, if they figure it out, they will deport you to Greece. I remembered my condition in Greece without any place to sleep, so I decided not to tell the IND about my finger print, I was afraid of being deported to Greece. When they figured out my figure printing in Greece, they did not believe even my true story, whatever I said; they thought that it was a lie. Then they considered me as a liar.” (Former UAM, 22 years old)

In another example, respondents received information that conditions in Sweden were better than the Netherlands, and therefore tried to migrate to the Sweden. Five respondents went to Sweden and tried to claim asylum in Sweden, reflecting that they do not understand the processing of asylum in EU countries. They left the Netherlands due to fear of deportation or that they felt asylum seekers in the Netherlands were not treated well. Eventually, all were sent back to the Netherlands from Sweden.

All respondents reported facing several current problems in the Netherlands with the most frequent and important challenge being not having status. Other challenges included: mental state, the repatriation office and fear of arrest and deportation, language, loneliness, unemployment and lack of money, missing family and friends in Afghanistan, and overall uncertainty regarding the

future.

Future Aspirations

Discussions regarding the future revealed high levels of uncertainty and frustration. However, many respondents still have hope to receive refugee status:

“One of my challenges here is not having the refugee status. I never look at having refugee status as the final thing; I rather look at it as the beginning of my life. If I had it, I could plan for my future, I could settle a life, I could marry someone, I could study, now I cannot do any of them. This is my major concern” (Former UAM, 21 years old).

The majority of respondents had plans to stay in the Netherlands; however, as illustrated above, their key concern was how they were going to live in the Netherlands. One respondent highlighted that he no longer thinks about the future and only today: “Honestly since I became illegal, I forgot my dreams; I used to have many plans and dreams for the future. Since I became illegal, I just think about today not tomorrow” (Former UAM, 20 years old).

This reflects the uncertainty and stress felt by the migrants. Simultaneously, the majority of respondents did not see return to Afghanistan as a conceivable option: “If they deport me to Afghanistan, it is like death; I deal with this feeling every day even while I am sleeping” (Former UAM, 20 years old).

The state of limbo is a key challenge for irregular migrants, especially amongst this group as they have very limited livelihood opportunities and are fully reliant on NGOs. In addition, clearly living in the Netherlands irregularly for the majority of this group is not a feasible option. There are highly limited opportunities for working in the irregular sector and people are unable to support themselves. On the other hand, there is evidence in the Netherlands that humanitarian actions of NGOs, local municipalities, and state employees ‘looking the other way’ allows for continued support to provide to irregular migrants (Leerkes, forthcoming; van der Leun, 2006). However, other irregular migrant groups in the Netherlands appear to fare much better than Afghans as they have stronger networks of support. The situation of the irregular Afghans is an area of concern due to their dire need and high levels of vulnerability.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a descriptive overview of the patterns and processes of irregular migration from Afghanistan to the Netherlands. The sample consists of 47 migrants that have all been refused asylum in the Netherlands, of which 26 respondents (55%) were former UAMs. There are several interesting findings from this study that can contribute to our understandings of Afghan irregular migration.

The unique composition of the sample between former UAMs and adult rejected asylum seekers allowed for comparisons to be made between these two groups. On the whole, it is evident that there are noteworthy differences between the patterns and processes of migration between these two groups.

The paper also elicits three central points for further consideration. First, emigration from Afghanistan continues to occur irregularly for a broad range of reasons. The drivers are multiple and complex, and often overlapping.

Second, Afghan migrants acquire significant information in transit countries that influence their destination choices. They rely on information from other migrants, and this study has shown that Sweden was a primary intended destination based on information acquired through networks. This has also highlighted the unique position of the Netherlands as a transit country instead of a destination choice.

Finally, it is clear that despite no longer having the right to stay in the Netherlands and the hardships and uncertainties that arise from being irregular migrants, the respondents in this study still choose to stay in the Netherlands. They live in a state of continuous limbo and uncertainty relying on assistance from NGOs and others. This raises key questions at the political, societal, and human rights level as to how to best address this group?

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