

Article

# From Conflict Zones to Europe: Syrian and Afghan Refugees' Journeys, Stories, and Strategies

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## Abstract

This article explores the journeys of Syrian and Afghan refugees to Europe, looking at two of the largest and politically most salient flows of asylum seekers during the 2010s. Following political disturbances in their home countries, millions of Syrians and Afghans have been forcibly displaced or had to seek safety elsewhere. In search of protection for themselves and their families, some of them had to cross multiple borders to reach European destinations or hope to be resettled there. This article looks at the factors that shape the journeys of asylum seekers and the uncertain features of the process of moving from one unexpected location to another, with an emphasis on the overlapping role of information, social networks, resources, and pure chance. Our aim is to locate the refugee journeys in the context of significant social institutions that may determine their decisions, migratory trajectories, and consequently their entire journeys. The present research involves in-depth qualitative interviews. Drawing on an ethnographic approach and a multi-sited methodology, we bring together diverse refugee voices and narratives and focus on the role of information in their mobility. The results help us verify assumptions about different aspects of migrant journeys, mechanisms involved in the decision-making of the actors involved, the role of networks (or networking) and information exchange, and other relevant aspects expounded throughout the article. Our findings suggest that social networks, family status, age, disability, human, social, and cultural capital, their intersections, and, in the end, chance, play an important role in the shaping of the asylum seekers' migration trajectories.

## Keywords

Afghanistan; capital; chance; decision-making; migration journeys; refugee voices; social networks; Syria

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

This study explores journeys of Syrian and Afghan refugees to Europe, looking at two of the largest and politically most salient flows of asylum seekers during the 2010s. We observe the factors that shape the journeys of asylum seekers and the uncertain features of the process of moving from one unexpected location to another, with an emphasis on the overlapping role of information, social networks, resources, and pure

chance. Our aim is to locate the refugee journeys in the context of significant social institutions that may determine their decisions, migratory trajectories, and consequently their entire journeys.

Following political disturbances in their home countries, millions of Syrians and Afghans have been forcibly displaced or had to seek safety elsewhere. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022), by mid-2021, about 6.8 million Syrians and 2.6 million Afghans left their countries. In search

of safety and protection for themselves and their families, some of them had to cross multiple borders to reach their European destinations or hope to be resettled there. The focus of this study is on two groups of asylum seekers: those who relied on international organisations such as the UNHCR to take care of them, and those who chose to draw their own pathways by travelling legally or illegally via long, often unknown and uncertain routes.

Millions of migrants reached Europe through different entry points, such as Turkey, Greece, and Italy (Gillespie et al., 2016; Korkut, 2016; Squire et al., 2021). According to Squire et al. (2021, pp. 3–4):

Between 2014 and 2016, arrivals [from Iraq, Iran, and more recently Syria and Afghanistan] in Italy were primarily via the central route across the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa, and in 2015 arrivals in Greece came through the eastern route (usually via the Aegean Sea).

Many others, meanwhile, opted for the Balkan route to Germany. The painful images of displaced and desperate individuals, including children, compelled European governments, asylum services, international and non-governmental organisations, and activists as well as volunteers to offer help (Iliadou, 2019).

In their study on migration decisions, Czaika et al. (2021, p. 16) argued that they are “often made in the context of idiosyncratic personal needs, stress, urgency and, above all, uncertainty and limited information about livelihood opportunities.” In this article, we argue that in addition to the elements identified in prior work, different forms of capital, social networks, information, and chance also exert a role in shaping the individual’s migration decisions and experience. To that end, this article aims to address the following research questions:

- What factors informed the asylum seekers’ migration decisions to leave their countries?
- To what extent do capital, social networks, and information influence the journeys of asylum seekers to Europe at different stages?
- How does chance interact with the asylum seekers’ plans, decisions, and journeys?

This article contributes to refugee and asylum studies. While most work in this field focuses on the refugees’ experiences in refugee camps or the host country, this article focuses on the factors that shaped the journeys—the *process* of moving from one place to another. Existing work in this area has looked so far into routes, drivers, and trajectories (e.g., Crawley et al., 2016; Squire et al., 2021), the role of networks, especially mediated through modern technology (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2016), management of risk (Press, 2017), and information available during the journey from a range of sources (e.g., Gilbert & Koser, 2006; UNHCR, 2016).

In addition, this study brings together both capital dynamics as well as network dynamics to explain the refugees’ migration processes. Our work aims to add to this literature by contextualising the journeys and choices available to migrants in light of various notions of capital and social networks, as well as how they intersect with the availability of information en route, migrant agency, and susceptibility to chance events (e.g., Gladkova & Mazzucato, 2017; Havinga & Böcker, 1999). Furthermore, it also reveals the challenges as well as the opportunities refugees have faced during their mobility, notably those engendered by their social networks and socio-economic status.

## 2. When Capital, Networks, Information, and Chance Intersect

This study focuses on the refugees’ agency in migration decision-making based on the information they receive, capital, social networks, and chance. We look closely into the role of networks, and in particular of social media, in sustaining the refugees’ bonds and influencing their decision-making. We argue that four key elements—capital, networks, information, and chance—are at the crossroads of refugee journeys, and also facilitate the decisions and integration patterns in the host society. The theoretical background is predominantly based on the literature available in English, including writings by prominent French authors, such as Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu (1986) borrowed the term “capital” from economics to a “wider anthropology of cultural exchanges.” He employed it in the sense of “a wider system of exchanges where assets of different kinds are transformed and exchanged within complex networks or circuits within and across different fields” (Moore, 2014, p. 99). He distinguished three forms of capital: economic (monetary wealth), cultural (in its three forms: institutional, objectified, and embodied), and social, with special reference to social networks. Institutionalised cultural capital refers to educational qualifications; objectified capital to cultural artefacts, such as books, or works of art “that require specialised cultural abilities to use” (Swartz, 1997, p. 76); and embodied capital is acquired from the broader cultural environment and becomes a part of the self.

From the diverse approaches to migration studies, it has been agreed that “personal networks enhance and facilitate migration by decreasing costs and risks and [providing] information as well as social, emotional and financial assistance” (Ryan & Dahinden, 2021, p. 460). Many scholars have used the term “network” to explain migration in the age of information (Castells, 2010; Ryan & Dahinden, 2021; Schapendonk, 2015) and the complex transnational links built between migrants (Armbruster, 2002; Basch et al., 1994; Portes, 1998), allowing the exchange of resources, information, and knowledge (Belabbas, 2020). As shown in this article, maintaining ties with family and friends who have already escaped

the war significantly informs the asylum seekers' migration decision-making process.

Expanding on pioneering and existing literature on social networks, Larsen and Urry (2008) coined the term "networking" to refer to the "spatio-temporal performances that help to sustain networks" (Schapendonk, 2015, p. 812). This definition suggests that social networks are situated and dynamically evolve in specific contexts, spaces, and times, involving active interactions, efforts, and engagement (Pathirage & Collyer, 2011) from the participants to build new links or maintain existing ties with migrants as well as non-migrants, which implies the changeable feature of networks (Bourdieu, 1986; D'Angelo, 2020; Schapendonk, 2015). In this article, different forms of capital are considered, with special reference to social capital that is best acquired through transnational networking (Larsen & Urry, 2008). We look at the interplay between the three forms of capital but focus on the dynamics of networks to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the factors that shape the refugees' and asylum seekers' migration decisions and their trajectories.

Networks are said to be "conduits of information" (Ryan & Dahinden, 2021, p. 460). In fact, Putnam (1993) expanded the concept of social capital by including relationships within families and communities, and by focusing to a greater extent on trust and reciprocity norms. Putnam (1993, p. 35) suggested that social capital refers to "features of social organisations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit." Indeed, trust and reliable information, and sometimes even rumours, are important in sustaining asylum seekers' social capital, offering multiple migration options and allowing for a relatively less complicated journey. Therefore, this study understands social capital as an asset or resource that is generated and accumulated from a reliable and trustful network (Behtoui, 2022), allowing for circulation of information and therefore informing the actors' migration decisions and journeys.

The important role of chance in the migration process, highlighted already by Havinga and Böcker (1999), received a fuller theoretical treatment in Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017). Their analysis refers to "the role of chance encounters, structured by the interplay between environmental and personal factors, [whereby] how people deal with chance [as] an influential factor in the ways people migrate...and manage their lives in transit" (Gladkova & Mazzucato, 2017, p. 1). Other studies have focused on how social and cultural capital should be considered by the host societies to ensure migrant integration and "weaken situational problems" (Pacífico, 2009, p. 37), which motivates our focus on the intersection of social capital and chance.

The pivotal role of risk and uncertainty in shaping migrant decisions and individual trajectories is well established (Czaika et al., 2021; Williams & Baláž, 2014), as is the importance of access to resources (includ-

ing money), social networks, and other forms of capital in mitigating risk, reducing uncertainty, and helping migrants establish greater control over chance events. Another relevant factor is the locus of control—whether the decisions are made autonomously by the migrants themselves, collectively by the groups to which they belong (families), or whether they are beyond their control and are essentially due to chance. This is another important dimension of migrant decisions (Czaika et al., 2021). In this article, we look at the intersection between these themes through an ethnographic lens, attempting to identify the relevant themes—and strategies—in the participants' accounts of their journeys.

### 3. Methodology

This article draws on an ethnographic approach (Wall, 2018), which relies on following the participants' narratives and experiences closely and thoroughly. This approach offers a fine-grained understanding of their decision-making processes. A core aim in using a multi-sited methodology is to provide a richer analysis of the individuals seeking asylum by selecting multiple profiles and looking into their diverse backgrounds, circumstances, experiences, narratives, and contacts, all of which inform their migration trajectory decisions.

According to Dörnyei (2007, p. 126), the main aim of sampling in qualitative research is "to find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn." Accordingly, we selected a total of eleven participants for this study. This research has applied the University of Southampton's ethical guidelines and received institutional approval (Ethics and Research Governance Online/ERGO number 67139). Considering the privacy of the participants, all names provided are pseudonyms, and referential information has been either fully anonymised or deleted. The participants were Syrian individuals or families, as well as one Afghan family, who arrived in the UK and two EU countries (Germany and Spain) over the last five years through either the UNHCR programme or by charting their own course.

It was important to hold first meetings with participants in the UK face-to-face in order to build a relationship based on trust. However, for EU-based participants, the interviews were conducted over the phone. The participants recruited in this study represented different ages, migration trajectories, educational, social, and economic backgrounds, which offered a wider perspective and enabled more flexibility in analysis and interpretation. To this end, the study relies on ethnographic research methods for the collection of data, notably participant observation (Shah, 2001), fieldnotes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982), and interviews (Patiño-Santos & Márquez Reiter, 2019).

The lead researcher (first author) was invited to some of the refugee families' homes. It was important to behave as a guest but also as someone who shares

certain commonalities such as language (Arabic) and culture (especially food culture) to build a relationship based on trust and comfort, while maintaining a high degree of reflexivity. At the same time, taking detailed notes on the whole environment, including the participants' openness during the interviews, their hospitality, and the cooking activities during visits, helped in remembering details or observations that were crucial to the research objectives. However, to avoid distracting the respondents and their guests, it was necessary to write a description of what was observed after leaving the field-work setting, relying on memory.

Another way of gathering data was conducting follow-up interviews through telephone calls with the participants over a period of five months. During this phase, participants responded to follow-up questions and engaged in informal conversations with the lead researcher. The aim was to create a balance between the scientific aims of the study and the social aspect of the interactions. By doing so, a comfortable atmosphere was created for the participants that allowed them to freely share their lived experiences without feeling embarrassed or under pressure. This approach enabled a richer exploration of the participants' told, but also untold, stories.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, several strategies were considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, a prolonged engagement with the participants was necessary to maintain reflexivity (Berger, 2013). Second, data triangulation through applying different methods (interviews, participant observation, fieldnotes) was key to provide a holistic picture of the participants' accounts. Finally, the findings were discussed with the participants to make sure they echoed their reflections (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### 4. From Country of Origin to an "Ideal" Destination: An Ethnographic Account of the Participants' Journeys

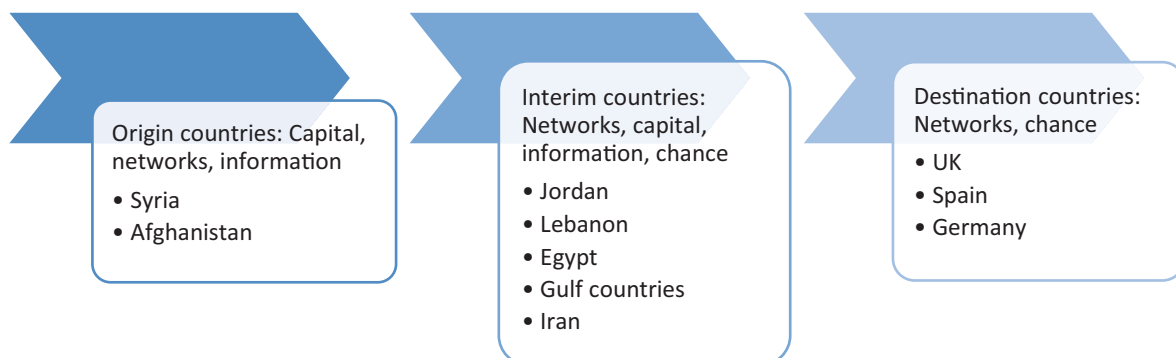
In this section, the findings from the ethnographic fieldwork are organised into three major themes that arose from the respondents' narratives of their journeys from Syria or Afghanistan to their current place of settlement.

We focus on capital and networks (Section 4.1), conscious decisions (Section 4.2), and the lack of choice (Section 4.3). In addition, Section 4.4 briefly discusses the participants' plans following their settlement. The three research questions underpinning this study are interwoven common threads in each part. The themes represent recurrent as well as unique shared stories and lived experiences among the informants. As the stories of the participants' journeys and their profiles are different, they can offer a richer account of their movement and provide a clearer picture of their decision-making based on the quality of information they had, rumours, social networks, capital, and other factors.

To begin with, we briefly introduce the participants' profiles and their narratives regarding their journeys. Delving into the participants' journeys that were punctuated with difficulties, hesitations, and fear can allow the reader to gain a holistic picture of their experiences and decisions along their entire trajectories, which typically involved several different countries and aspects, as depicted in Figure 1.

The study's ethnographic fieldwork started with Syrian families living in Hampshire, UK. The families were very welcoming and open to discussing different topics, including their sometimes harrowing journeys (usually due to their border crossing experiences), their lives in the UK, and occasionally their lives in Syria before the war. All Syrian participants came to the UK through humanitarian aid offered by their initial host countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt, fostered by the UNHCR's resettlement programme, ultimately leading to their successful arrivals in the UK. Afterwards, we extended the fieldwork scope to include Afghan refugees as well as Syrian refugees in two EU countries, namely Spain and Germany. The aim was to offer a richer account of the refugees' migration experiences and related decision-making. Table 1 outlines the profiles of the participants included in the study, showing their age, marital status, and itinerary. For privacy protection reasons, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and age is reported exact to the decade.

In the subsequent sections, we explore three analytical and explanatory themes that reflect participants'



**Figure 1.** Key aspects of participants' migration trajectories from point of departure to "final" destination.

**Table 1.** An outline of the participants’ social status and migration itinerary.

Participants	Age	Family status	Itinerary
Samia & family	50s	Married with five children (two sons in the UK, one in Jordan, one in Saudi Arabia, and one daughter in Turkey)	Syria—Jordan—Saudi Arabia—back to Jordan—UK
Amina & family	30s	Married with four children (all in the UK)	Syria—walked to Jordan—UK
Amal & family	30s	Married with three children (all in the UK)	Syria—walked to Jordan—UK
Neïla	30s	Married with four children (three in the UK and one in Jordan)	Syria—Saudi Arabia—Egypt—UK
Iman	30s	Married with four children (all in the UK)	Syria—Lebanon—drove to Jordan—UK
Ayzan	30s	Married with two sons (all in the UK)	Afghanistan—Iran—UK
Malik	40s	Married to Ayzan	Afghanistan—walked to Iran—Turkey—Greece—Bulgaria—Italy—France—UK
Camilla	40s	Married with three children	Syria—drove illegally to Lebanon—UK
Fadi	30s	Single	Syria—flew to Spain—plans to move to Germany
Sarah	20s	Single	Syria—Algeria—Spain—Germany
Ayman	40s	Married	Syria—Jordan—UK

journeys. These themes shed light on the interplay between capital, social networks, information, and pure chance that allowed the participants to cross the border(s) either voluntarily or by being de facto forced to do so. Through these themes, we hope to answer our three interrelated and complementary research questions and offer insight into the participants’ experiences, from the departure point to the first safe transit country, and finally to their “potential” final destinations as portrayed in Figure 1.

#### 4.1. Capital and Networks: Where, How, and Who Is Going To Help?

Over the course of the fieldwork, both Syrian and Afghan participants shared a common worry amid the war: What to do, where to go, and who is going to help? This confirms observations by Czaika et al. (2021, p. 13):

The actual migration event is preceded not only by the decision, but also by a period of careful planning and preparations for the actual move. At the same time, migration decisions are anticipatory: they take into account what can be gained by moving in the future, as compared with the counterfactual scenario of staying.

The ambiguities and uncertainties throughout this process of negotiating their decisions to resettle were, in fact, reinforced by the migrants’ lived incidents and experiences, the seriousness of the situation, and/or a feared loss of hope. They had to manoeuvre through

their social positions and the options they had to move out of Syria or Afghanistan in the first place. Perhaps surprisingly in a refugee context, the cases presented in this article demonstrate careful and planned movement at the start of the migrants’ journeys, particularly after reviewing their different forms of capital (resources), social networks, and quality of information. However, the journeys became unplanned once in the transit countries, which was usually shaped by both individual and country-specific circumstances. Involuntary changes in the refugees’ itineraries are best explained by pure chance, leaving the locus of control of migration decisions largely beyond the influence of migrants themselves.

Capital, social networks, information, and chance are at the crossroads of refugees’ migration capability and decision-making process. Already established social networks in other countries or creating face-to-face or digital ties dynamically on the move (i.e., networking) were key to the success of the refugees’ resettlement. Indeed, social networks enabled by digital connectivity and smartphones play a crucial role in the “planning, navigation, and documentation of journeys, enabling regular contact with family, friends, smugglers, and those who help them” (Gillespie et al., 2018, p. 1). Moreover, from the participants’ stories, the importance of a specific form of social capital became apparent—knowing someone overseas or someone who has recently crossed a border. This detail has strongly influenced the participants’ choices of destinations.

Samia’s migration started as a well-thought-out and planned journey. However, later it became shaped by

many other factors, which resulted in her relocation to the UK, along with her husband and son. In the end, a successful relocation required Samia and her husband to reach out to their extended social network through Samia's cousin's friend. This is what Pathirage and Collyer (2011) referred to as "network work," indicating the degree of active engagement and effort of the family to create the link allowing them to cross the border(s), relying and expanding on their already existent social capital:

Once we felt the danger in Syria, we decided that I join my parents in Saudi Arabia with one of my sons, and my husband [would stay] with my other two sons in Jordan, leaving our daughter behind. She later joined her husband in Turkey. My husband is an accountant and he worked before in Jordan, so he thought of seeking job opportunities there, after he had received some suggestions from friends in Jordan. When I was in Saudi Arabia, my little son became ill, so my husband wanted me to join him. After I did, we visited the hospital in Jordan and did the necessary procedures for my son. It turned out that he had cancer and he needed urgent treatment. My cousin is a doctor in Jordan, and she works with the UNHCR. She forwarded my son's case to her friend and helped us with the application for resettlement...she even chose the UK for us because we were told that we were going to the USA. That woman thought the UK would be better in terms of social experience.

It is apparent from Samia's account that economic and embodied cultural capital acted as key motivations for leaving the country. Samia's resettlement application to the UK was approved thanks to the reliable network her family was engaged in. She could only go with her husband and her ill son, since he was the main reason for their application being processed, leaving behind another son in Jordan—the illness itself being an example of a chance occurrence shaping the journey. Therefore, adjusting or expanding their social network in the host society was important to increase their other son's chances of joining them. Indeed, upon their arrival to the UK, like many Syrian families, they received support from volunteers who helped them adapt to their new environment and assisted them with administrative tasks, daily activities, or English courses.

Samia's family was, as Samia and her husband pointed out:

Fortunate to meet this lovely British woman who assisted us from day one. She assisted our sick son with his medical treatment as well as schooling. She wrote many letters to the Home Office until she managed to get our [other] son from Jordan to the UK...This is why we invite her with a neighbour every Thursday for a meal to keep the links alive, thank them, and acknowledge their efforts.

From the family's own accounts, they were willing to further invest in developing social capital, creating and expanding their network in their country of resettlement to better understand the functioning of the host society, reach the desired aim, and navigate their social positions, echoing again Pathirage and Collyer's (2011) work on networks. Moreover, such networks are clearly changing over time and space (Ryan & Dahinden, 2021), while other social factors, such as individual ambitions, age, and family status, also determine the nature of networks needed in specific contexts.

Similarly, Neïla's case involves an interrelation of various forms of capital (Moore, 2014) and dynamic social networks (Schapendonk, 2015), with her journey additionally shaped by information—often in the form of rumours—as well as chance. Neïla's interview narrative was mainly about the pathway from Syria to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and finally, the UK, foregrounding the different factors that shaped their decisions. Initially, when her family realised that their movement was inexorable, they started reviewing their options. At this moment, her husband joined our conversation and commented on the main reason that pushed them to leave:

I took my 10-year-old daughter with me to the shop to buy some groceries and on our way back, a couple of armed men with long swords pointed down at us and shouted: "We will kill you all, we will eliminate you all." We were lucky to escape death that day. It was at that moment that I decided to leave Syria and find a safer place for my children. How could they say such horrific things to her? [Pointing to his daughter who was sitting on the sofa]

Neïla's family relied heavily on the information they had and the rumours they heard about potential countries for resettlement after their first movement to Saudi Arabia, which was a familiar destination as the husband had worked there. Afterwards, they decided to move to Egypt. In Neïla's own words, Egypt was "a sound choice to be honest. My husbands' friends were right and realistic about life in Egypt and how Syrians are treated there." Again, Neïla's claim demonstrates the importance of networks, the information they carry, as well as capital in the individuals' migration choices. When the family received a phone call from the UNHCR about the possibility to be resettled to the UK, they accepted. Interestingly, upon arrival, the family's "already established network was not supportive, which entailed the necessity to look for alternative [ties] and build new links with the locals in order to find a job," Neïla's husband explained.

Following the war, Camilla's family decided to leave Syria, with no choice but drive illegally to Lebanon—the closest country to their place of residence. Camilla mentioned their unpleasant experience in Lebanon after moving there, due to Syrians being viewed as a threat to the Lebanese's jobs. Following the economic crisis in Lebanon, Camilla and her family registered with the

UNHCR. She said: “We were really lucky to be relocated and brought [to the UK].” Although Camilla did not have relatives or friends in the UK, she relied on her brother’s recommendations, showing an interplay of social capital and the role of information: Camilla’s brother, who moved to Germany during the war, recommended the UK by reassuring her how peaceful life is there.

#### *4.2. Conscious Decisions: When There Is Choice, There Is Hope*

From the participants’ stories, it becomes apparent how social networks and other forms of capital interact with the quality of information, allowing them to better choose their destinations. Having a choice of where to go and whom to contact, as opposed to being largely driven by chance, makes a considerable difference in refugees’ decisions to leave their war-stricken country, first for an interim country and then for the final destination. Their choice is usually influenced by economic, cultural, or social capital that is acquired via their social network before and after leaving their departure country, as well as other external factors, notably family status, age, and disability as in the case of Samia discussed above.

Compared to the Syrian families who were mentioning options they had before they left Syria, Azyan’s painful journey from Afghanistan illustrates a case of deprived individuals, for whom chance played a much larger role, and yet who lived on a glimmer of hope. It also demonstrates how harsh lived experiences in transit can trigger a vivid ambition to continue the journey against the odds, and thus demarcate a major factor shaping the refugees’ migration decision-making.

Azyan described her difficult life as an Afghan asylum seeker in Iran, being denied schooling due to her undocumented status. Back in Afghanistan, her father was wealthy, with economic capital allowing him to escape the war and settle in Iran. He married a second wife to have a son (heir), and eventually lost his goods and properties when he left the country. Believing that education could help his daughters have a better life—acknowledging the role of investment in human capital—he falsified their documents to gain access to school:

Upon his [her father’s] death, I was in the UK, they didn’t tell me about it. I only knew that he was sick, and my sister wrote letters non-stop to the UNHCR, the UN, and any organisation concerned with refugees and humanitarian aid. An American organisation came to finally read one of her letters and responded positively to it. I was so happy when my sister managed to leave [Iran] along with my mum, step-mum, and my stepbrothers. (Azyan, interview 1)

Azyan was the first family member to leave Iran by joining her husband, Malik, after he received his British residency. Azyan’s experience in Iran was negative on all sides: socially, economically, and educationally.

Understanding her experience in Iran as a marginalised asylum seeker explains her determination to study diligently in order to leave the country. Her story justifies her sister’s struggle and persistent attempts to reach humanitarian organisations, as she finally managed to find refuge in the USA. Although the family did not appear to have many options for leaving Iran at first, Azyan and her sister worked hard to create options for themselves by improving their (embodied and institutionalised) cultural capital and expanding their social network.

In short, in addition to strategic, conscious capital investment (Schapendonk, 2015) and perpetuated attempts of the family to build and sustain social networks, and to some extent thanks to chance, the Afghan family managed to increase their multiple destination options. As is apparent from Azyan’s case, access to social capital and networks—transnational ties with friends, family, and international organisations—enhanced the individuals’ chances of finding a suitable place to live and a job in a new unfamiliar place. At the same time, compared to Syrian families, the limited initial capital of the Afghan family made their journey riskier, more complicated, and further exposed to chance.

#### *4.3. No Choice: Leaving at All Costs*

Treacherous journeys could also be the result of risky decisions. Azyan’s husband Malik had to escape not only the war in his country but also injustice in some interim host countries along the way. Azyan explained that “Malik imagined the UK as a final destination no matter what this would cost him, it took him a long hazardous way to reach his desirable land.” Malik did not have a solid link or a direct network in the UK, but he had an imagined picture fed by imperfect information: rumours—and British TV shows—on how life could be there. Although he passed through several European countries, such as France and Italy, he did not stop there and continued taking risks to reach the UK. Although Malik’s journey looks unplanned and had to be decided on the go, it was driven by his initial aim to reach the UK, intermingled with undesirable chance incidents and circumstances along the way.

Similarly, Sarah also decided to be smuggled from Syria to Spain, which she found to be a “culturally and linguistically different environment.” Sarah did not share her experience in detail, but she described the dangerous ordeal that involved crossing the Mediterranean to reach the Spanish shore, despite the information they had about the journey from previous asylum seekers attempting to cross the border. Settling in Spain was not as easy as Sarah and her friend expected. On the border, Sarah explained:

We were offered to either stay in Spain and be paid about 150 euros for a job they offered us or leave to a different desirable destination....My decision

honestly depended on my friend, who preferred to stay. We found a job [which] was very tough, so my friend decided to go to France. For my part, I preferred to stay in Spain as my aim was to go to Germany.

Opting for clandestine migration routes suggests how desperate Malik and Sarah were to leave their countries. Taking such a risk was in this case considered to be a safer option than staying (see Mironova et al., 2019). This type of risk-taking has been described as a desperate response to an unbearable situation in which there are no other desirable alternatives and is therefore highly contextual and dependent on external factors (Zinn, 2019). With the caveat that respondents were free to withhold potentially incriminating information, choosing to be smuggled was not reported by Syrian families interviewed, except for Camilla's family who drove illegally to Lebanon, which is less dangerous compared to the hazardous route Sarah and Fadi followed. Sarah further explained:

I had so many problems. Problems never ended in my family on top of the war, which pushed me to leave without, actually, thinking of the consequences. Samir [a good friend met in Algeria] was a trustful guy, he helped a lot in Algeria. Although he let me down in Spain....I kind of understand him....I had to leave Algeria because I needed a new place. I wanted to go to Germany. You have more freedom there. I was lucky to meet my present husband on Facebook. He is also a refugee, but he arrived there a long time before with his family.

In addition to the hostility of the war, Sarah also indicated problems she encountered, which pushed her to leave and adumbrate her own route. Again, relying on strong social networks (friendship ties) and chance, Sarah managed to reach her desired destination—Germany. Finding stability did not seem to be a straightforward process. The war destroyed the present and the future of many families whose members are scattered, hoping for a reunification one day.

#### *4.4. Plans for the Future: After Resettlement*

All participants shared a common feeling of loss, confusion, and psychological stress upon their arrival in Europe. Despite that, they were aware that it was a safer destination compared to the countries they left and gradually accepted their new reality and environments. At the same time, they explained how it took them time and additional information to understand the functioning of their new host societies. Language represented the main obstacle because most of them were monolingual (in Arabic) and struggled to master the language of the host country. For families, after a couple of years, when their children had access to school and acquired the language quickly, they expressed a significant level of relief

(Ayman, Iman, Ayzan, and Amina with her two younger daughters). Conversely, others, such as Neïla and Amina, were more concerned with their teenage children finding it difficult to adapt to the UK school system, especially the lower high school exams (GCSEs), and discussed their struggle with the school programme. The parents' continuing worries suggest that their children's safety and education—human capital—occupied a large part of their decisions and thinking.

Many participants shared their plan to leave their current country of residence (UK) after they receive residency rights, and relocate to, for example, one of the Gulf countries. This could be driven by their familiarity with the area, language, culture, and religion in these countries or existing family bonds—social networks. It could also be due to their lack of proficiency in English, as the majority of middle-aged participants found it difficult to adapt to the British social environment, which often negatively impacted their wellbeing. This perspective on onward migration can be further explored in future research.

Nevertheless, it was different for families whose young children managed to quickly acquire language skills and did well at school. For example, Amina proudly told us about how her daughter's short story was selected at school to be published in a book in London. At the same time, despite better integration of children into the host society, a desire to either stay in the UK for longer was not as strongly expressed as a possible relocation to Gulf countries; it was not considered possible to return to Syria, either to visit family or to settle there permanently.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

Refugees and asylum seekers are at the centre of the contemporary world's social and political thought. However, most of the qualitative literature has focused on the refugees' lived experiences in their host countries. Considering the participants' narrative accounts, this article has addressed the different sources of uncertainty and factors that shaped their decisions to leave Syria or Afghanistan. It depicted their journeys that were full of emotions, stress, and hesitation, but also determination. The results strongly suggest that different forms of capital, most notably social networks, information, and pure chance, as well as their mutual interactions, are critical for understanding the complex dynamics of refugee journeys and the decisions made in their context. The intersection of capital, social networks, information, and chance was clearly outlined across the cases, providing important clues for answering the study's research questions. Regarding chance, unexpected circumstances, such as disability or health issues, were identified as a particularly important factor alongside the more established migration drivers, such as marital status and age.

The experiences of the respondents in their interim destinations—which for them turned out to be transit



(“entrepot”) countries (DeVoretz & Ma, 2002)—were largely positive, but did not meet their expectations or aspirations. The feeling of being unwanted or having to deal with a source of threat put pressure on the respondents and pushed several of them to look for another place of resettlement. For example, although most Syrians who passed through Jordan shared positive feelings and quick and fluid integration, both socially and economically, they all preferred to go to Europe as it was seen as a better destination for health, education, or socio-economic purposes. At this stage, the role of networks and networking (Larsen & Urry, 2008), manifesting itself through actively attending gatherings and joining online platforms and groups, was also found to be important for building and sustaining social relations and transnational links, which facilitated the refugees’ decisions and migration process at different stages of their journeys.

We also noted the role of social networks (Schapendonk, 2015) and their role in influencing the circulation of information and capital dynamics (Bourdieu, 1986) to ensure relatively less complicated journeys. Overall, maintaining ties with different groups of people, not limited to compatriots, allowed the respondents to generate different forms of capital, notably social, cultural, and economic. This proved useful in shaping the migration and resettlement trajectories, helping manage the associated risks in the receiving societies, and, in the end, mitigating the role of chance on their migration outcomes. This confirms the intuition that in many cases, the locus of control of asylum-related decisions lies—at least to some extent—beyond the migrants themselves or their most immediate networks (Czaika et al., 2021).

One of the main arguments advanced in this article is that networks are dynamic and space—and time-based. Social networks tend to either expand or shrink (Wilson, 1998). Indeed, as commonly noted in all the participants’ stories, their involvement with the Syrian community has reduced because, for example, “their domestic responsibilities increased and there is no time to accept somebody else’s invitation” (Amina, interview 1), but also because already established links became less effective, which required the creation of new advantageous links. Arguably, once the individual refugee or family secures a degree of socio-economic satisfaction and integration, they can end up mixing less with their compatriots and look at building new networks with the local residents in order to integrate better, benefit from a wider range of services offered in the receiving society, and gain knowledge on how this society works in general.

One important remark that emerged from the analysis is that the openness of participants and how the narratives were presented during the interview depended on gender: men’s narratives were more direct compared to women’s. Women tended to attenuate the hostility of the journey and either intentionally or unintentionally avoided talking about sensitive details and conflicting situations. Given the limitations of the focus of this article,

this idea could be explored further in future studies, possibly enhanced by adding the children’s perspective.

Another possible area of future research is to study the importance of the context and possible legal routes (or lack thereof) enabling or hindering migrant journeys. The takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have led to different patterns of migration than those explored in this study. This was largely due to different legal opportunities for migrating. For this reason, future comparative studies could further elucidate the complexity and constraints of migration decisions and journeys.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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