



Decentring the Study of Migrant
Returns and Return Policies

Country Dossier Turkey

WP7: Return Aspirations and Trajectories of Migrants

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List of Abbreviations

ABRS	Area-Based Return Support
ACHR	Access Centre for Human Rights
CAT	Convention Against Torture
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DG-ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG-HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DG-NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EU	European Union
Euromed Rights	Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
GSO	General Security Office
HDC	Higher Defense Council
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICMPD	International Center for Migration Policy Development
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IP	International Protection
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISF	Internal Security Forces
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PMM	Presidency of Migration Management
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
TP	Temporary Protection
TPR	Temporary Protection Regulation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
VASYR	Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

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Summary

Turkey currently hosts a significant number of migrants due to a variety of historical, geopolitical, and legal factors, and particularly as a result of the Syrian Civil War and ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan. As of 2024, Turkey is home to over 2.9 million Syrians, approximately 150,000 Afghans, and small numbers of other nationalities (e.g. Sudanese, Iraqis, Palestinians) who experience varying treatment due to their legal status and integration opportunities. Syrians have temporary protection status but experience legal and social vulnerabilities that force their returns. Afghans are subject to Turkey's securitized agenda, manifested via increased border controls, deportation, and pushbacks, at the expense of due process and human rights. Yet, both groups exhibit resilience amid economic, socio-cultural, and legal challenges. Many are experiencing exploitation and limited access to legal employment. The precariousness of their legal status compounds vulnerabilities, with the uncertainty surrounding temporary protection for Syrians and the lack of documentation for Afghans engendering an atmosphere of fear, stigma, and discrimination. This report reveals a significant gap in resources that could aid integration and the urgent need for tailored policies that facilitate integration. However, it also emphasizes the importance of recognizing migrants' agency in the migration process. We model trajectories - to provide a true picture of migration and return experiences and to highlight how onward movements, re-orientations, rest periods, and intermediate settlements develop.

A close look at the integration situation of both groups shows the importance of social networks, which can provide essential support but may also lead to disappointment and isolation when expectations are unmet. Decisions regarding return or migration to third countries are shaped by political and economic dynamics, with many migrants expressing a conditional willingness to return only if home conditions improve. The report shows that more effective policies are crucial for supporting the integration of Afghan and Syrian migrants while providing safe and dignified return options.

We further explore the impact of return and readmission policies on migrants' rights and living conditions, showing that Turkey has become a buffer zone for migration, sealed by the EU-Turkey Statement, which is itself emblematic of the externalization of migration governance to third countries. Financial and technical support from the EU reinforces the return management infrastructure in Turkey while simultaneously solidifying coercive practices and the erosion of migrants' and refugees' rights.

Keywords: migration, integration, return policies, Turkey, Afghan migrants, Syrian migrants

GAPs Project and WP7

GAPs is a Horizon Europe project that aims to conduct a comprehensive multidisciplinary study on the drivers of return policies and the barriers and enablers of international cooperation on return migration. The overall aim of the project is to examine the disconnects and discrepancies between expectations of return policies and their actual outcomes by de-centering the dominant, one-sided understanding of "return policymaking." To this end, GAPs:

- examines the shortcomings of the EU's return governance;
- analyses enablers and barriers to international cooperation, and

- explores the perspectives of migrants themselves to understand their knowledge, aspirations and experiences with return policies.

GAPs project combines its decentering approach with three innovative concepts:

- A focus on return migration infrastructures, which allows the project to analyse governance fissures;
- An analysis of return migration diplomacy to understand how relations between EU Member States and third countries hinder cooperation on return and
- A trajectory approach that uses a socio-spatial and temporal lens to understand migrant agency.

GAPs is an interdisciplinary 3-year project (2023-2026), co-coordinated by Uppsala University and the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies with 17 partners in 12 countries on 4 continents. GAPs' fieldwork has been conducted in 14 countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Sweden, Nigeria, Germany, Morocco, the Netherlands, Afghanistan, Poland, Georgia, Turkey, Tunisia, Greece and Iraq.

WP7 investigates migrants' experiences in transit countries during the pre-return phase, emphasizing how they navigate their return decisions within broader im/mobility experiences.

Led by Özyeğin University (OzU) in Turkey and Association Migration Internationale (AMI) in Morocco, respectively, with support from the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII) in Turkey, Ethniko Kentro Koinonikon Erevnon (EKKE) in Greece and the University of Warsaw (UW) in Poland, WP7 employs anthropological and sociological methods to study prospective returnees. This includes irregular and settled migrants, those in voluntary return programs, individuals facing forced return, and those who have already returned and can reflect on their experiences.

The project examines return trajectories through a multilevel lens:

1. **Micro Level:** Focuses on personal experiences, including how social contexts, networks, and media influence decision-making. Factors like labour market integration, personal connections, and local or transnational media play a role. Particular emphasis is placed on gender dynamics in deciding and planning return, along with past return attempts and encounters with pushbacks or return infrastructures linked to the EU.
2. **Meso Level:** Examines the role of actors such as diaspora and migrant organizations in shaping trajectories, utilizing contextual knowledge and connections.
3. **Macro Level:** Analyzes how policies impact trajectories, either encouraging or inhibiting return and reinforcing settlement patterns.

Data was gathered in Greece, Turkey, Poland, and Morocco, with additional interviews in Sweden and Germany to capture the role of diaspora groups. This comprehensive approach seeks to illuminate the complexities of migrant experiences and contribute to more effective, humane migration policies. The collected data are coded and analyzed by country teams, leading to the creation of country-specific reports and a separate research digest on diaspora groups. The results will also be synthesized into a thematic report, accompanied by a policy brief and a workshop with diaspora stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

This report investigates migrants' experiences in the transit country of Turkey during the pre-return phase, examining how they consider, decide, and communicate their return decisions within broader im/mobility experiences. It aims to enhance understanding of migrant agency and offers a micro-analytical perspective on governance. It also explores how return and readmission policies affect migrants' rights and living conditions and how diaspora groups shape migration decisions. The report discusses how the governance of migration and return in Turkey was deeply transformed by an ever-growing number of refugees and migrants between 2015 and 2023. The country moved from a relatively open-door policy to restrictive measures with the aim of border control and the facilitation of returns.

Given this background, a broader objective of the report is to model trajectories - to provide a true picture of migration and return experiences by highlighting how onward movements, re-orientations, rest periods, and intermediate settlements develop. The report also shows how diaspora organizations and transnational networks impact migration trajectories. Finally, a key focus is on migrant agency and particularly how states of 'limbo' or 'liminality' and intergenerational and transnational relationships impact trajectories.

2. Methods

This study employed a combination of anthropological and sociological fieldwork methods to examine migration dynamics among prospective returnees, including irregular migrants, short and long-term migrants, and individuals involved in voluntary or forced return procedures.

At the micro level, the study explored the influence of personal experiences on return decisions, encompassing changing aspirations, social embeddedness in family and friend networks, access to information from local or transnational media, and the migrant's labour market position and integration experiences in the host or transit country. Gender was a significant factor, with particular attention to how it affected decision-making and return planning. The research also examined past return attempts (both voluntary and forced), experiences with pushbacks, and interactions with readmission and return systems, particularly in relation to the EU, assessing the impact of risks on individual return trajectories.

Preparation for fieldwork included team discussions on qualitative research practices, interviewing techniques, and ethical considerations. Researchers utilized a WP7 discussion guide structured to facilitate mapping migrant trajectories and examining agency, governance, networks, and integration contexts. The guide provided four primary questions with optional sub-questions, ensuring a clear focus while allowing flexibility during the interviews.

Recruitment of participants was flexible in terms of dates of entry to Turkey, location of residence in Turkey, and nationalities, but we specifically targeted individuals at risk of return, including irregular migrants, those with removal orders, and voluntary returnees. Participants were recruited via partnerships with organizations, researcher contacts, and fieldworkers' pre-existing connections. Interviews were conducted with participant consent and included measures to ensure anonymity as well as the option for participants to skip questions or end the interview at any time. When permission was obtained for doing so, interviews were recorded, securely stored, and deleted post-transcription. The interviews were conversational, generally lasting around an hour and focused on capturing participants' perspectives. In Turkey, 42 micro-level interviews were conducted with the following participant categories:

- Migrants at risk of return or removal, including irregular migrants (those unregistered or registered in a different city from the one in which they live and work)
- Migrants likely to face removal due to political shifts or geopolitical developments in their specific country
- Individuals who experienced pushbacks at the border
- Migrants denied entry or rejected for asylum in Europe and returned to Turkey
- Migrants with removal orders, those briefly detained, and returnees who re-entered Turkey
- Voluntary returnees (as classified by IOM)

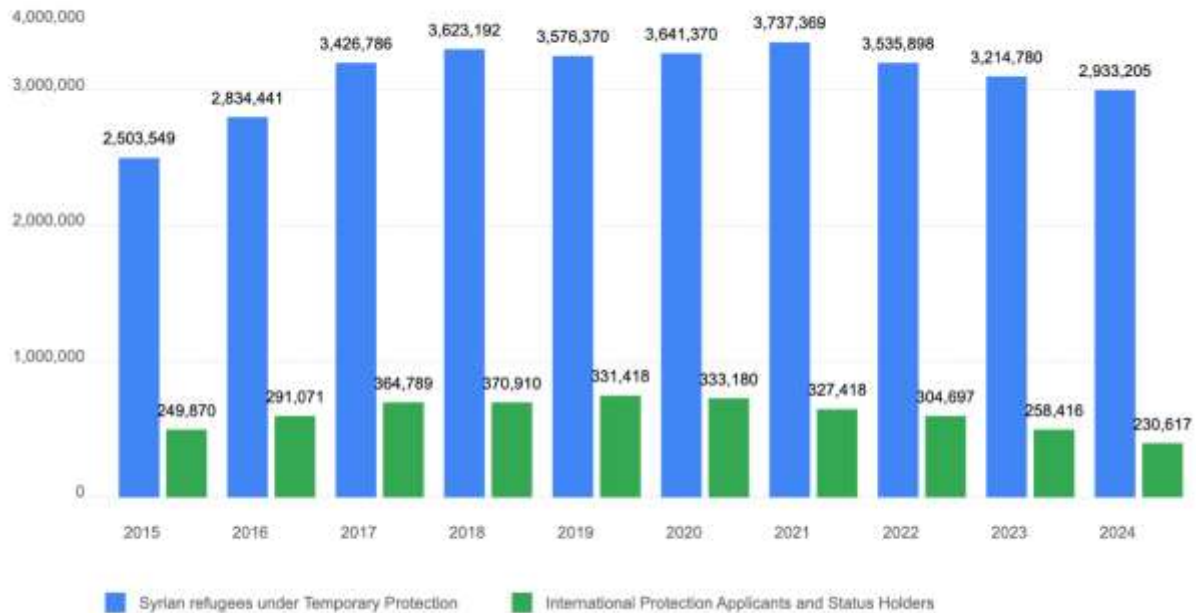
These categories reflect the specific conditions in Turkey regarding return and deportation, aiming to capture a diverse range of at-risk populations. Sampling focused on at-risk individuals, prioritizing socio-demographic diversity within and across groups. Given the fluid nature of refugee return dynamics to Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries with new policies and practices emerging frequently, it should be noted that our empirical analysis for Turkey concluded in September 2024, and any developments since then are beyond the scope of this report.

2.1. Sampling Criteria

Nationality and Legal Status: Nationality and legal status were not the sole criteria, as many migrants without permanent residence or citizenship in Turkey face heightened vulnerability. However, Syrians, as the largest migrant group in Turkey (as of 21 November 2024, 2.9 million, primarily under Temporary Protection Status) (PMM, 2024), were a primary focus. Our sample aimed to reflect the ethnic and regional diversity within this group. We also interviewed Afghans, Iraqis, and Turkmens, who have the highest numbers of international protection applications or are irregular migrants. As of 2024, 230,617 persons of concern from other nationalities are under international protection in Turkey (UNCHR, 2024). Due to their distinct political perception and lesser targeting by political discourses, and a relatively lower number of Ukrainians, they were excluded. In sum, the sample focuses on Syrians (19 micro-level interviews) and Afghans (18 micro-level interviews) but also includes individuals from other nationalities, including those with international protection or humanitarian residence permit beneficiaries and irregular migrants (5 micro-level interviews).¹ The following figures provide an overview of Turkey's current migration statistics.

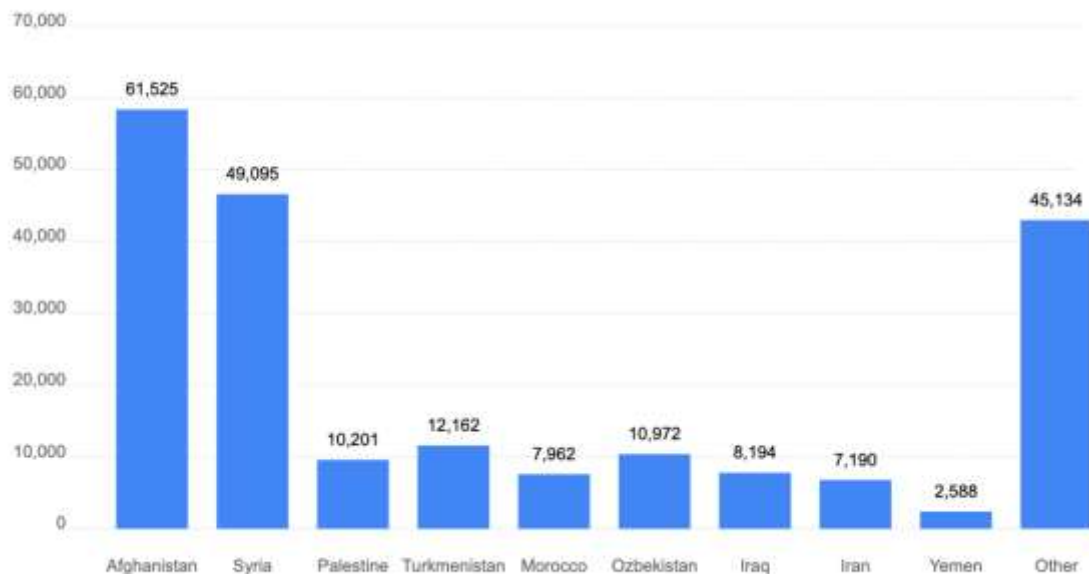
¹ Please see Annex 2 for the further information regarding the respondents.

Figure 1: Number of Syrians Under Temporary Protection and International Protection Applicants/Status Holders (2015-2024)

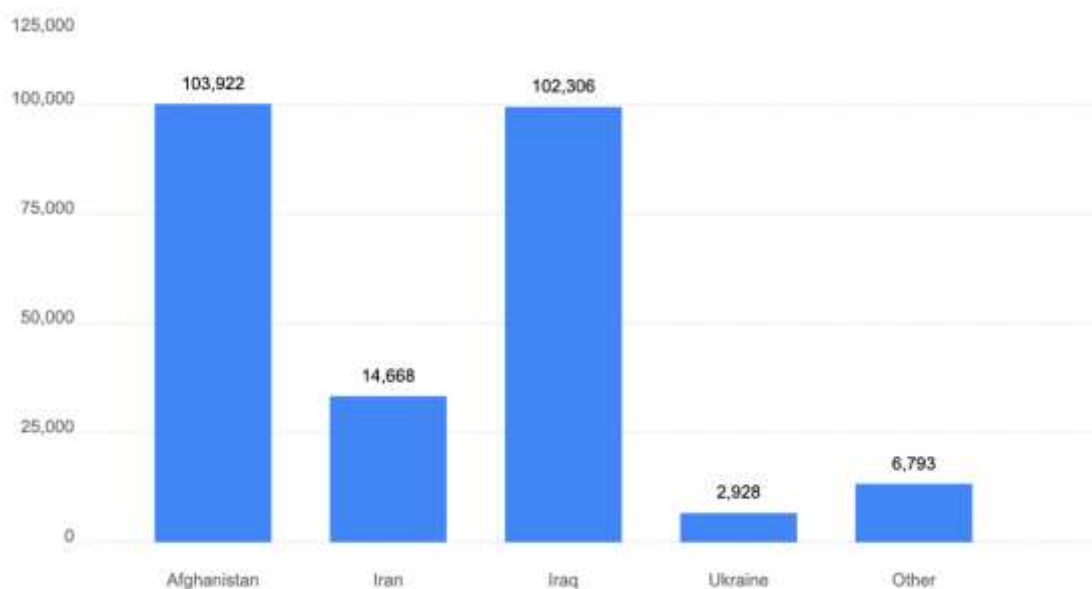


Source: Prepared by the authors based on PMM. (2024). “Temporary Protection Statistics” 2024, Available at: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638> [last accessed Dec 12, 2024]; UNHCR. (2024). “Refugee Data Finder”, 2024, Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=1M1Dak> [last accessed Dec 3, 2024].

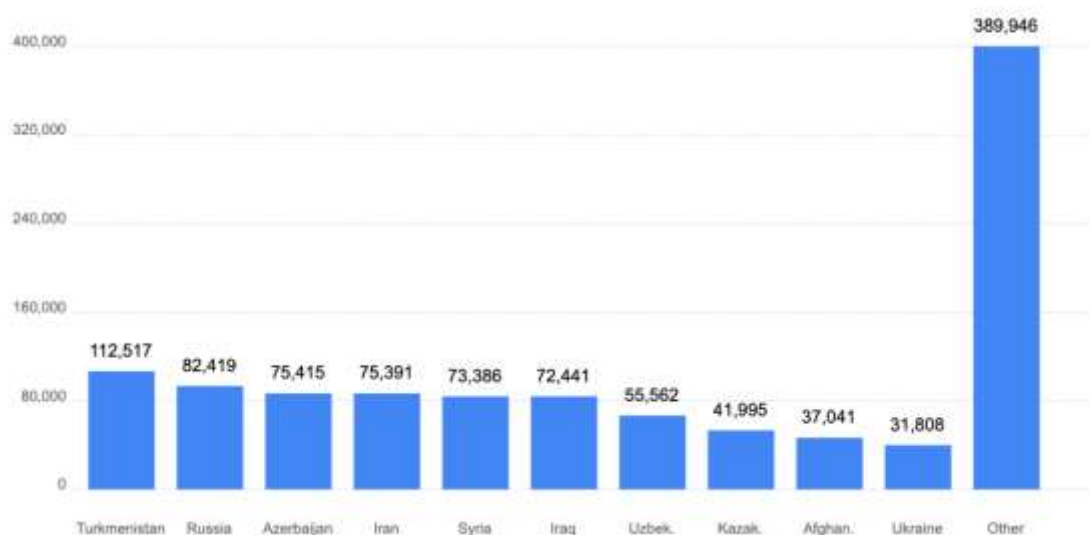
Figure 2: Irregular Migrants Recorded by Nationalities in 2024



Source: PMM. (2024). “Irregular Migration Statistics” 2024, available at: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikler> [last accessed Dec 12, 2024].

Figure 3: Nationalities of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Türkiye (2024)

Source: UNHCR. (2024). “Refugee Data Finder”, 2024, Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=1M1Dak> [last accessed Dec 3, 2024].

Figure 4: Foreigners Who Have Been in Türkiye with a Residence Permit In 2024 (Top Ten Countries)

Source: PMM. (2024). “Statistics”. Available at: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/residence-permits> [last accessed December 19, 2024]

Arrival Time: We consider arrival time to be an indicator of return aspirations. Thus, the study balanced early arrivals (2011–2018) with late arrivals (2019–2022) .

Gender and Socio-Demographic Factors: A gender balance was sought when it was logical to represent group demographics (e.g., a near 50-50 gender split for Syrians and Iraqis was obtained. However, we focus predominantly on male Afghan migrants as they are by far the majority). Within our sample, there are 25 male and 17 female respondents. Only adults (18+) were sampled, with ages ranging between 18–50. Other criteria included variable employment statuses, education, social class, and family situation .

2.2.Data Collection Locations

Interviews were conducted in Istanbul, Gaziantep, Van, and Izmir. Istanbul, with Turkey's highest migrant population, was a key location; research there was conducted by Ozyegin University). The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII) covered Gaziantep, Van, and Izmir, allowing for the exploration of border dynamics. Gaziantep and Van represent the southeastern border with Syria and Iran, while Izmir represents the western maritime border (Greece).

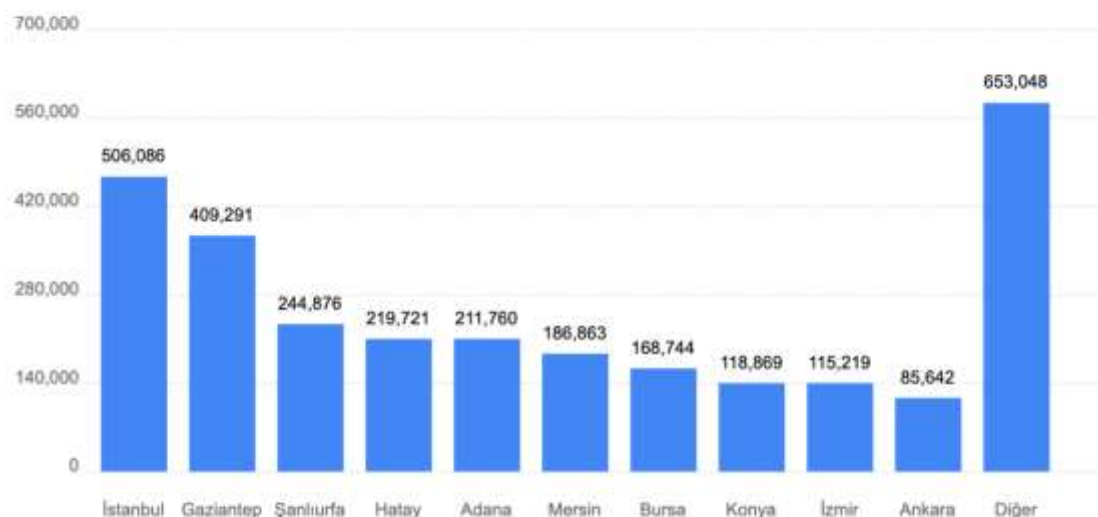
Figure 5: Map Of Turkey and Its Borders



Source: Accessible from: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cc/Turkey_regions_map.png [last accessed March 20, 2023]

The following figure (6) shows the provincial distribution of Syrians, but we do not have data for the numbers of other migrants in specific locations.

Figure 6: Distribution of Syrians under Temporary Protection by Top Ten Provinces (19 December 2024)



Source: PMM. (2024). “Temporary Protection”. 19 December 2024, Available at: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27> [last access December 19, 2024].

Table 1: Interview Locations, Cities

İSTANBUL	GAZİANTEP	VAN	İZMİR	TOTAL
20	7	8	7	42

3. Context

3.1. Historical Background of the Arrival and Reception of Syrians and Afghans in Turkey

Given the country’s geopolitical positioning and policies, Turkey has been a significant destination for refugees and is currently hosting large populations of Syrian and Afghan migrants. While Syrian migration surged after the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Afghan migration has deeper historical roots, linked to conflict-induced displacement since the late 1980s (İçduygu and Karadağ, 2018). Afghan migration has fluctuated during different periods due to political instability (Barlas, 2022), with migrants seeing Turkey as a stop on the way to Europe. Such movements were initially affected by Turkey’s EU accession talks in 2005, which resulted in tightened border controls; however, migration began to increase significantly after 2011 as border policies relaxed (İçduygu and Karadağ, 2018). By 2015, Turkey had become a key crossing route for migrants, and Afghans constituted 25% of the nearly one million people crossing into Europe (İçduygu and Karadağ, 2018). Meanwhile, Syrian refugees were given Temporary Protection following the 2013 LFIP law.

Based on the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive in managing mass displacement (Canyaş, 2023), TP status ensures non-refoulement and access to services like health care and education, but it does not grant avenues to permanent residence or citizenship. The protracted nature of the Syrian crisis was accompanied by challenges in transitioning from emergency responses to sustainable integration policies. Socioeconomically, Syrian refugees represent a wide array of people, including professionals such as engineers and doctors, as well as those with little or no education or job qualifications. Most are below the age of 35, and many others are children and youth (Pinedo Caro, 2020). Most Syrians remain in the informal sectors of agriculture and construction even when there is legal access to work permits because of systemic barriers (Nimer and Rottmann, 2021). Initiatives such as vocational training, educational programs, and community-building initiatives have seen limited success.

The migration policy for Syrians evolved over time. From 2011 to 2014, an open-door policy accommodated refugees on a temporary humanitarian basis. However, from 2014 to 2016, border controls were tightened in such a way that there was the construction of a 911 km long border wall and a rise in security-related apprehensions during that time (Gökalp Aras and Şahin Mencütek, 2015, 2016). From 2016 through 2019, due to Turkey's policy of non-arrival, they began to manage the displacement internally and strengthen security as the cornerstone for border operations in Northern Syria (Ibid.). Since 2019, the focus has been on returns, driven by both political and economic pressures, along with rising anti-migrant rhetoric. These dynamics were further complicated by recent events, including the earthquakes in 2023 that displaced 1.7 million Syrians internally within Turkey. Meanwhile, between 2021 and 2024, nearly a million registered Syrians vanished from the records; it is not known how many of these were voluntary returns and how many were cases of irregular migration to Europe.

By contrast, the Afghan refugee population in Turkey is small but growing.

Forced displacement from Afghanistan has been ongoing since the 1980s due to continuous conflict in this period (İçduygu and Karadağ, 2018). Initially, Turkey was resettling Afghans of "Turkish origin," including Uzbeks and Turkmens, but it later became a country of transit for irregular migrants moving north to Europe (GAR, 2021). Afghan migration peaked during regime changes and Taliban rule in the 1990s, and after the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, returns briefly rose but fell again by 2009 (Field and Ramsha, 2011; Barlas, 2023). Starting in 2018, Afghan migration picked up significantly, and they surpassed Syrians for the first time in irregular migration apprehensions. Another wave of Afghan asylum seekers was triggered in 2021 after the return to power of the Taliban. Compared to Syrians, Afghans have much more limited legal protection and related services. For example, there is limited access to health care during the year following their protection applications, and work permits are not available, which automatically pushes many into informal labor. Ethnic diversity among Afghans is vast, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Hazaras (Karadağ and Sert, 2023). By 2024, there were close to 125,000 Afghans with IP status in Turkey awaiting resettlement, while around 120,000 are estimated to remain undocumented (Ridgwell, 2022). Turkey also imposed more stringent security over its Eastern and Iranian borders; over 1,160 km of security walls have been built up to 2023, partially thanks to funding from the EU (MoI, 2018). Voluntary return programs were expanded, with Amnesty International voicing concerns about coercion (AI, 2018). Deportations have also increased to 90,000 in 2022, reflecting Turkey's return policy emphasis (PMM, 2023).

The geographic reservation by Turkey to the 1951 Refugee Convention limits refugee status allocations to European nationals, hence forcing Afghans into third-country resettlement. Due to their large number, Afghan applications have been frozen by the UNHCR in 2013 and taken over by the DGMM of Turkey, which is responsible for their registration and RSD as of 2018 (Almasri, 2023). The DGMM's capacity to ensure fair RSD procedures has been questioned (Jimenez, 2019).

Turkey's wider migration policy has evolved under EU influence. The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement called for the return of migrants from Greece to Turkey with the objective of reducing irregular migration. Though the agreement initially targeted Syrians, it also had an effect on Afghans due to the tightening of border controls and rising numbers of deportations (Darvishahmadi Oshnavieh, 2022). Turkey has sought a balanced strategy between humanitarian commitments on the one side and geopolitical interests on the other.

The social integration issue affects both Syrians and Afghans. Syrians received the benefit of targeted NGOs and government programs, yet they are not free from societal tensions amidst economic crises and anti-migrant mobilizations. Afghans experience even more significant marginalization in light of restricted rights and fewer available services. The media also creates a narrative of Afghan men as threats to society, which bolsters public animosity towards them (Eken, 2019).

The migration landscape of Turkey focuses on immediate protection and long-term border security. While granting critical refuge for millions, the balance between humanitarian needs and national and regional priorities is in constant flux. Tensions between temporary protection and durable solutions are a core issue in the evolving dynamics of the country's migration governance.

3.2. Brief description of the migration and return governance system (2015–2023)

The peak years of migration, 2015–2016, were driven by the Syrian Civil War and, to a lesser degree, conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. In response, Turkey established the DGMM in 2013 to improve migration management, becoming a key frontline state during the global migration crisis. The EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 marked a turning point in efforts to stem irregular migration to Europe through increased cooperation between Turkey and the EU itself, with corresponding financial support and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. The agreement marked a shift for Turkey from a country of transit to one of containment.

The 2014 Law on Foreigners and International Protection revised the former legal framework for migrants and refugees, including regulations about work permit entitlements, residence rights, and social benefits. According to this law, Syrians received Temporary Protection that also provided access to healthcare and education, social services, and even labor market entry; however, at the same time, there were several limitations-such as limited opportunities for receiving citizenship. Starting in 2018, DGMM took over the responsibility for registration and status determinations previously conducted by the UNHCR, giving the country greater control over migration governance (Şahin-Mencütek, Gökalp-Aras, Kaya, and Rottmann, 2023).

The EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 reduced irregular migration flows into Europe due to increased border controls and the return of migrants who crossed into Greece from Turkey.

Even though it specifically targeted Syrian refugees, it has affected other groups, such as Afghans, who used the same route (Icduygu and Karadag, 2018). EU financial support underpinned the migration buffer function of Turkey for Europe. Based on the highly criticized assumption that Turkey is a "safe third country," Greece's policy of containment on the islands accelerated returns to Turkey despite inadequate logistical and service provisions. Reports documented the return of asylum seekers to conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, raising concerns about violations of the principle of non-refoulement (Amnesty International, 2016b).

Since 2017, Turkey started to move toward more rigid border controls and advanced refugee management systems. While Syrians continued to enjoy TPR, new policies targeted other migrant groups, particularly Afghans. The 2014 Strategic Cooperation and Friendship Agreement with Afghanistan enabled deportations by acting as a de facto readmission mechanism (GAR, 2021). Between 2019 and 2020, Turkey emphasized integrating Syrians through education and vocational training but simultaneously tightened control over migrants. Afghan migrants faced heightened detention and deportation, as Turkish courts classified Afghanistan as a "safe country" for returns (GAR, 2021). Despite the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, Turkey continued its deportations and reinforced border controls. Afghans often faced delayed registrations and then received irregular statuses that facilitated detention and deportation. Living conditions in pre-removal centers were also poor, with a lack of legal representation and common coercive practices. Many migrants reported forced "voluntary returns" or deportations. The country was also involved in pushbacks: violently returning migrants across borders, especially Afghans, with shooting with weapons even being mentioned at the Iranian border. There were also cases in which migrants were apprehended from cities, then detained and returned without orders, virtually transforming urban areas into informal borders.

Domestic political pressures, international agreements, and regional instability formed the landscape of Turkey's governance of returns in this period. Syrian migration managed via temporary status fostered a legal limbo and a certain number of "voluntary" returns, which may have had coercive elements. Factors such as economic hardships and rising anti-refugee sentiments in Turkey pressured many Syrians into returning. From 2019 to 2023, there have reportedly been almost 625,000 Syrians returned to northern Syria to Turkey's "safe zones" (AA 2024). Return mechanisms for Syrians entailed both voluntary and forced returns, sometimes induced by socio-economic adversity combined with a lack of prospects in Turkey. Address verification policies and stricter implementation of registration legislation pushed many into irregular situations and further limited legal protection. Exceptions to the principle of non-refoulement, introduced after 2016 on security grounds, instilled concerns about compliance with international standards (Gökalp Aras et al., forthcoming).

In stark contrast, Afghan migrants were treated mainly as irregular under the LFIP and did not benefit from any formal protection mechanisms. Programs like the National Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, supported by the EU and international organizations like ICMPD, had the goal of facilitating Afghan returns. In 2023, deportations increased by 146% compared to the previous year (PMM, 2023; TRT, 2023). Return mechanisms for Afghans included pushbacks and rapid deportations, often without due process.

It is against the background of such rather restrictive migration policies of Turkey that some integration-enhancing measures were adopted: education, health care, and support for communities aiming at social cohesion. Yet, the picture we see is rather more one of increased controls and securitization of migration governance via removal centres, mobile migration points, and reception and referral centres-all supported by EU funding. The return capacity of the country was augmented while at the irregularization of migrant populations increased. Between 2015 and 2023, Turkey emerged as a key actor in migration governance, balancing integration efforts with rigid policies of return conditioned by domestic and international pressures.

3.3.Social, economic and political conditions and the development of “return migration discourses”

The return migration discourse resulted from tensions on socio-economic and political planes simultaneously and resulted in a highly complicated and coercive migration management system with far-reaching implications for the rights and well-being of migrants. With the rise in refugee and migrant numbers, competition for scant resources, housing, and employment resulted in calls for better migration management and spurred discussions on return migration (International Crisis Group, 2023; Icduygu and Nimer, 2019). The reality of migrants' effects on societal resources is mixed. Hosting millions of refugees placed a high economic burden on the country's resources and public services. Spending required for health, education, and social care raised questions about long-term hosting versus promoting return migration if it was feasible. A good number of the refugees found jobs with very low pay and outside of the formal labour market, thereby aggravating tensions with some labour market segments. As Icduygu and Nimer (2019) have outlined, international agreements, regional conflicts, and domestic political pressures also overlapped in the process of framing return migration discourses. Naturally, the ongoing Syrian and Afghan conflicts, the security situation and dire humanitarian conditions in the conflict areas also influenced the Turkish government's policies. Return migration was discussed in view of hopes for the restoration of stability in those regions and the encouragement of refugees when conditions allowed, thus balancing immediate needs for protection with long-term solutions for their safe and dignified return.

In parallel, military incursions into northern Syria by Turkey, which were framed as anti-terror missions, had a bearing on return. President Erdoğan repeatedly linked the creation of a safe zone in northern Syria with returning the refugees back home (Icduygu and Nimer, 2019). Simultaneously, many political parties and policymakers urged the government to implement policies that stressed the principle of return. Anti-migrant rhetoric sharpened, and, broadly speaking, xenophobia, with social media further amplifying stereotypes. At the same time, obstacles to integration, such as cultural and linguistic barriers, made coexistence between migrants and the local population impossible. Economic problems in Turkey, including inflation and unemployment, escalated public resentment towards the presence of migrants.

Return programs of a "voluntary" nature are now widely considered solutions to alleviating the burden of social and economic pressures while, at the same time, addressing increased

public demands for greater control over migration. Field evidence suggests, however, that rather than voluntariness, economic hardship, social exclusion, and legal uncertainty are more common causes of returns. Recent events, like the collapse of the Syrian regime at the time of submitting this report, have catapulted the country into a period of deep uncertainty and raised critical questions about the possibility of a return of millions of Syrian refugees worldwide.

While the fall of the Assad regime opened an opportunity for political and social reconstruction and consequently encouraged return, uncertainty about governance, security, and infrastructure will remain a huge obstacle to large-scale returns. Many refugees are terrified of persecution or retaliation in the absence of stable and inclusive post-regime governance structures. Moreover, due to the protracted character of their displacement, refugees have established new social, economic, and cultural bonds with host countries.

4. Findings

4.1. Agency and movement

Agency analysis in forced migration demonstrates that individuals actively negotiate structural constraints when making decisions on their mobility and settlement (Triandafyllidou, 2018). The interviews we conducted reflect decision-making patterns that show the limits of agency, as well as creative exercises of agency under highly constrained circumstances. We explore three different patterns of agency in movement decisions: the initial movement decision, internal mobility constraints and strategic (im)mobility.

4.1.1. Initial Movement Decisions

The migration of Afghans and Syrians to Turkey reflects the complex interplay of security threats, economic hardships, and personal motivations, entwined with acts of individual and collective agency in adversity. Afghan and Syrian migrants, despite living in very bad conditions and fleeing violence, persecution, or economic collapse, make active decisions to ensure survival and look for a better future for their families. Attention to agency offers a more nuanced perspective on forced migration beyond victimhood narratives.

The initial migration reasons given by Afghans and Syrians both stress personal safety and family threats. For example, Samira, a 33-year-old Afghan woman from Kunduz, shared:

During these years, the situation in Afghanistan did not get better but got worse. I faced many threats in Afghanistan... I had to change the city where I was living. I left Kunduz for Kabul because of threats. When I got married, the threats got worse. I had to leave the country. They killed all of my family, but I survived. Two of our enemies who killed my family got arrested, and the other two escaped. But when the Taliban took power, the killers were released from jail .

Nasrin, a 40-year-old Hazara woman from Kabul, faced similar safety threats, recounting : *Because my husband used to work with foreigners in Afghanistan when the situation got worse, we had to move. We received threats from the Taliban, and we did not feel safe there.*

Many Afghans faced systemic insecurity and impunity, as Soraya illustrates:

In Afghanistan, you cannot walk outside and talk on your phone; it would get stolen immediately. If you try to defend yourself, they might kill you. You cannot go to the police for help. No one cares. It is unsafe. There are people on motorcycles who steal children. There is no legal system now in Afghanistan. Can you imagine living in a place like this, especially with children? Many young people have died and continue to die in suicide attacks.

Similarly, Syrian participants described pervasive conflicts involving multiple armed groups, forcing their flight. ISIS, in particular, was a key driver. Jamal, a 35-year-old Turkmen Syrian from Aleppo, explained his reason for migration to Turkey :

We decided at the last moment [to flee]. There were clashes with ISIS. There was not even water and electricity. We were buying water. I was either going to die there, or I was going to flee. There were even acquaintances within ISIS who joined Al-Bab and pressured us on behalf of ISIS. Let's say you came to Friday prayers and shaved your beard a little. They would recognize you, handcuff you and take you away. They would keep you in jail for 3 days. I just remembered one incident. My sister was newly married at that time. She stuck her head out of the door, and her face was seen. An ISIS member saw this. He came to our house and took my ID card. They forced me to take a course. At the end of the course, there was an exam, and if you failed the exam, you would either be imprisoned for 17 days or 2 months. My uncle tried to defend me, saying, "This boy is newly married." They said, "You can't interfere. Don't even try." They were collecting 16-year-old children and taking them to ISIS camps for training. That's why my sister took all of her children and ran away and came here.

Haroun also highlighted the fear and psychological pressure imposed by ISIS:

Because of the presence of ISIS, people always wanted to escape. You know, not only my brother or my sister-in-law, but everyone wanted to flee, even the elderly and the prominent people. Because ISIS was an organization built on discipline, it brought everyone to their knees with discipline. It played a lot with their psychology. I mean, for example, there were young people from neighboring villages and young people from Europe. They interfered with their lifestyle like how they used their mobile phones and the way they dressed. It was forbidden to wear tight trousers; it was forbidden to shave one's beard. There were no telephones, and there shouldn't be modern telephones. In other words, there was a lot of conditioning, and they dragged people into a life that was like a prison.

Afghans and Syrians alike fled due to conflict, violence, and persecution, navigating choices constrained by immediate security needs. Farooq, a 32-year-old Tajik man from Parwan, Afghanistan, shared:

Toward the end, I received written threats that I should either stop working for the government or my life would be in danger. So, I was basically forced to resign. Then, I could not find a job that would pay enough for our expenses. I did not have the private capital to start a business either. The situation in Afghanistan got worse, and it felt less safe.

Morsal, a 42-year-old Afghan woman from Mazar Sharif, detailed threats she faced in her clinic:

I studied midwifery and worked for a few years in my hometown, Mazar Sharif, in a clinic for 4-5 years... Once, I had a night shift at that clinic, and the Taliban came to the door... they came in two motorcycles and wanted to get in, but we did not open the door. They left. They did not enter, but we were very frightened. That was when I thought it was not safe for me and my children there... We left the village and returned to Mazar Sharif. Two days later, one of my colleagues said that the Taliban came and entered by force and attacked the people working there. They even killed the doctor who used to go to people's houses for treatments.

Syrian migrants' initial movements, driven by immediate security concerns, often involved strategic family decision-making. Khalil from Syria recalled: *"In Aleppo, the situation had become terrible. Bombs, conflicts... We lived in fear of death every day. My family decided to send me to Turkey for safety"*. The civil war starting in 2011 was the primary driver, compounded over time by worsening economic conditions. Ayşe from Hama said: *"This place was beautiful and safe. There was a war back there for the children, so we had to come. We are from Hama; it was so dangerous. Syria was a ball of fire and still is. We came in 2014. My husband passed away, so returning is not possible now. There is still the war, still death there"*.

Non-Syrian migrants, including Sudanese, Palestinians, and Ethiopians, also cited internal conflicts and war as primary drivers. Abdullah, a Palestinian from Gaza, shared:

The situation in Gaza was getting worse. We crossed into Egypt with a passport before the borders were closed. Egypt doesn't officially keep its doors open like that. It was really difficult because there are agreements with Egypt and Israel—like, don't accept everyone, etc. We faced those difficulties there, but we managed to cross. It was about our children. They saw their schools being bombed. It was a constant fear. In our house, there was a room with a bathroom and toilet. My daughter would go to the toilet but wouldn't close the door. There was no work. We couldn't manage with the expenses for six children. There were heavy sanctions. It was terrible. We never knew when the next explosion would happen. Our children lived under terror. That is why I wanted to escape.

For Afghans, economic hardships significantly influenced migration. Alan noted: *"There is no work, and when you do work, the pay is very little. The family is large, and even if everyone works, it's not enough. I came here to work."*

Restrictive policies for women in Afghanistan further exacerbated economic challenges. Soraya explained: *"In Afghanistan, it was not safe in general. Numerous suicide bombings occurred, and the presence of the Taliban posed a significant threat. Especially now that they have taken control of Afghanistan, women cannot work or go to school. They cannot go out without a man, making it more difficult"*.

In sum, security threats, economic hardships, and personal safety concerns drove Afghan and Syrian migration to Turkey. Although their movements are clearly forced by circumstances, their decisions also reflect agency, making calculated moves despite constrained realities.

4.1.2. Internal Mobility: Constraints and Strategic (im)mobility

In Turkey, TP beneficiaries—including registered Syrians and Afghans, are constrained through internal mobility restrictions. Beneficiaries of TP, most of whom are Syrians, need to reside in their province of registration and obtain permission to travel from the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management for those travelling outside these areas. They can get permits only for specific reasons, like medical needs or family reunification, and any movement without permission may be penalized, including deactivating their IDs, which also limits access to essential services and legal protections. These rules have been more strictly implemented since 2019, especially in urban areas like Istanbul.

Correspondingly, IP beneficiaries, normally of other nationalities than Syrians, such as Afghans for example, are assigned to smaller "satellite cities" in which they are required to stay, and they must report regularly to the local PDMM. Any noncompliance with the rules of residence or travelling without permission may entail suspension of their protection status and loss of access to services. Through mechanisms such as address verification campaigns, these measures aim to control population distribution and ease regional pressures. However, the policies have been criticized for restricting migrants' freedom of movement, access to livelihoods, and social and economic integration, making many vulnerable to irregularization, exploitation, and detention.

GAPs research found that legal frameworks and documentation severely constrain refugees' mobility. For example, Mahmoud, a 32-year-old Syrian man who worked in Gaziantep, described his predicament: *"I have a Temporary Protection ID from Istanbul, but I can't transfer it to Gaziantep... Now I'm suspended between Istanbul and Gaziantep."* This case illustrates how administrative procedures not only impose forced immobility but also lead to irregularity.

Migrants lacking legal status are even more severely limited. Many interviewees expressed their desire or intent to travel to Istanbul for work but noted that heightened security measures have made such a movement increasingly challenging. Yusuf, a 38-year-old Sudanese IP beneficiary, shared:

I have to be in Eskişehir because my registration is there. But there is no job there. I came here [Izmir] because I can do telephone work. Before, I had to go there for the signature, but for 2 years, they did not ask, particularly after the earthquake. Now, controls are so strict again. After being here for 16 years, they can deport me. But I am black, and it is not possible to hide. Luckily after 16 years, everybody knows me, and if there are police, they tell me.

This narrative clearly shows the link between internal mobility limitations, address verification, and irregularity as well as how migrants build social connections to evade controls. TP and IP policies require migrants to reside in their registered province to access services like healthcare and education. However, economic hardships and better opportunities elsewhere often compel migrants to move without formal travel permits, rendering them "irregular" within the system. This unauthorized movement exposes them to penalties,

detention, and deportation (Gökalp Aras et al., forthcoming). Syrian interviewees, despite enjoying relatively greater internal mobility compared to irregular residents, expressed growing fears due to stricter controls and operations that began in October 2023. Many now avoid public spaces and fear being sent to removal centres like Harmandalı or Işıkkent, even with valid IDs. Interviews in Basmane (Izmir), once conducted freely, now take place in homes due to this climate of fear.

A 43-year-old Syrian woman there recounted:

"We are scared now. I do not go out, and actually, no one does. There was an operation; it was like Judgment Day in Basmane. They took everyone. They even took my neighbour, who was holding a pot of stuffed grape leaves [dolma]. My children are already in detention; they entered the country illegally. Now, we do not go to the city centre anymore. They are rounding everyone up now, whether they have an ID or not."

Azize, a 37-year-old Palestinian with a humanitarian residency permit, described her apprehension during a major operation: *"I showed my passport, but they still took me. At 1 o'clock, they released me. Now, we are cautious. I was even scared to come here. I have six children at home. Africans and Syrians were also detained, but many were released. Still, we are always on edge."*

For non-Syrians, particularly those with visible differences in appearance from locals, the situation is even more challenging. Many avoid public spaces due to fears of apprehension, amplified by the activation of Mobile Migrant Points² (MMPs) and sweeping operations.

Interviews reveal that some refugees adopt immobility as a survival strategy. Amira's family demonstrates this approach: *"We found work at a textile workshop close to our house. There are no checkpoints [MMPs] there... The work isn't daily, just two-three days a week, because we're still afraid of the police."* This form of "negative agency" involves consciously avoiding movement as a protective measure.

Afghan migrants often work in rural areas as shepherds or in industrial sites, perceiving these areas as safer than urban centres. Migrants in rural areas avoid city centres, while those in urban areas limit movement to work commutes. Fazal, an Afghan migrant, shared: *"The military is everywhere. If they ask for ID, I don't have one. Sometimes, the foreman tells me not to come, so I don't go to work. The police are reportedly visiting construction sites."*

Ahmed, 32, a Syrian, shared a similar experience of being told by his boss when to stay home so as to avoid police capture :

Being undocumented is bad-no ID, no nothing. What am I going to do if the police stop me? I had a case to go to Canada, but when my ID was taken and I was detained, that was closed, too. Now, I only work 2-3 days a week. My boss tells me when to come or not. Even coming here was so dangerous and scary.

² Mobile Migration Points (MMPs) are the units operate 24/7, conducting identity verification for apprehended migrants, especially in high-activity regions. As of September, 162 MMPs have been found in 30 cities (PMM 2024/ PMM. 2024c. Düzensiz Göçmenlerin Tespitini Kolaylaştıran ve Hızlandıran Mobil Göç Noktası Araçlarının Sayısı 162'ye Çıktı. 27 February 2024, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-gocmenlerin-tespitini-kolaylastiran-ve-hizlandiran-mobil-goc-noktasi-araclarinin-sayisi-162ye-cikti>).

Heightened security measures and threats of detention have forced many migrants, even including documented ones, to use invisibility as a survival strategy.

4.1.3. Information and support available/used for movement and initial settlement

Both groups of migrants rely very strongly on established social networks for information and assistance in their decisions to migrate and in shaping expectations about life in Turkey. Social networks, especially through relatives, were very important in terms of providing information about jobs, support systems, and living conditions. However, for many migrants, Afghans in particular, the gap between assurances and reality was very large. In this sense, promises of support usually proved over-optimistic or outdated and greatly disappointed them.

Syrians followed the advice of family members who had previously migrated, a sign that migration involves deeply personal networks. For instance, Abu Diab is a 48-year-old man who was displaced from his city, Deir El Zor. He told us how his relatives in Turkey facilitated his journey across the border: "Before we came to Turkey, there were some relatives. We were in contact with them, and they helped us at first."

In contrast, Afghans reported more challenges arising from reliance on friends and distant relatives. Many described receiving outdated or overly idealistic advice about job opportunities and assistance, leading to unmet expectations. Dariyah recounted her disappointment upon arriving in Turkey after being misled by relatives about the support available for families with young children:

Some of our friends who lived in Turkey told us that there is work in Turkey for immigrants. They mentioned that if you have small children, Turkey provides a lot of assistance. However, since our arrival, I have not received even a piece of candy from Turkey. We received no help... They told us it is a good place for people with small children, assuring us that Turkey would provide assistance and grant residence permits. However, upon our arrival, we discovered it was nothing but a lie. Later, they informed us that Turkey used to provide such support for immigrants. However, after our arrival, the number of migrants increased so significantly that Turkey ceased all assistance.

Similarly, Rashid, who migrated to Turkey based on positive feedback from earlier migrants, found the information outdated. He recalled how he was detained upon arrival in very poor conditions:

People already in Turkey gave good feedback about it, such as: "the police is not generally bothering migrants." My friends that moved here long ago, for example, 15 years ago and even more and more gave me this information. I was once caught in Uskudar by the police. They brought me to the Tuzla detention center. That place had 20 persons in one room and was extremely unhygienic. It is impossible to avoid sickness in such a place. I was feeling terrible and alone. The stress of this situation overwhelmed me. I even wished to get deported at the earliest moment. I became very sad because of all the trouble and the big amount of money wasted for me to come to Turkey and attempt to go to Europe.

Others, like Farooq, a 32-year-old male from Parwan who came with no prior connections or information, had an especially hard time adjusting:

We didn't know anybody here, and nobody informed us about this place. We came here like blind people without knowing anything about the place. We came here with the idea of going to Europe so that we would have a brighter future for our children. But when we arrived here, we did not have the ability to move further into Europe. Generally, if you don't have money to invest in Turkey, you can't have a quiet life. We didn't know anything when we first arrived.

These experiences highlight differences in community dynamics. Afghan migrants often had to put up with weaker communal bonds due to dispersion and isolation in satellite cities, which made social connections temporary. In contrast, Syrians enjoyed more robust support networks underpinned by tribal ties and closer proximity-based relationships. The fact that Turkey is geographically closer to Syria also contributes to closer ties between Syrians in Turkey and those who have stayed behind in Syria, further reinforcing their communal bonds.

4.2. Integration context - livelihood and socio-cultural context

This section explores the livelihoods and socio-cultural contexts of Syrian and Afghan communities, including their experiences in the labor market, housing, and negotiating the legal framework. Economic vulnerability characterizes their experiences, with accounts of grueling working conditions, exploitation, and low wages. While, in theory, Syrians under Temporary Protection have access to work permits, only a small number actually receive legal employment, leaving most of them to find informal work, as is the case with Afghans who do not have such legal protections.

Migrants' precarious financial situation is enhanced by a high cost of living, growing debts, and a housing crunch, driving many refugees to stay in substandard accommodations. The legal ambiguities of temporary protection and international protection status also expose migrants to exploitation, bureaucratic hindrances, and threats of deportation at any time, thus increasing their vulnerability.

4.2.1. Economic situation

Economic hardship, exploitation, and a continuous struggle for survival shape the experiences of Syrian and Afghan migrants in Turkey. Haroun and Jamal, both Syrians, vividly describe their challenges in the workplace: *"Our biggest problem was that our rights were violated. I was normally working when my employer began trying to cut some of my salary. The excuse was that my salary was high because of the economic crisis. He said, 'There is an economic crisis right now. I am paying you a lot of salary. Jamal shared his difficult work conditions: "I leave home at 6 a.m. in the morning, and sometimes I come home at 12 p.m. Our conditions are very bad. I work overtime to make ends meet... They shout and suppress us most of the time. It is difficult for people" .*

These accounts reflect a broader trend of systemic labour rights violations among refugees, who lack the means to defend themselves. Afghan migrants face similar challenges. Rashi detailed the exploitation he faced upon arriving in Ankara: "After two days, I started working on a farm, where I worked for 8 days, putting in 16 hours a day. The job required me to work 7 days a week with no days off." Farooq, employed in a textile factory, experienced reduced job

opportunities in an unstable and competitive market, while Morsal emphasized the risks for Afghan men in securing jobs due to police presence and legal insecurities. The absence of insurance exacerbates these vulnerabilities. For example, Zahra is an Afghan migrant who was burdened by documentation issues and a medical condition, meaning that she had to leave her job.

Both Syrian and Afghan refugees endure harsh working conditions for inadequate pay. A Syrian family working in a textile workshop earns collectively less than their living expenses despite long hours: 12-hour days, six days a week. Nayla, another Syrian refugee, works in the women's underwear sector for 12,000 TL per month—approximately two-thirds of the minimum wage. Ahmed, a 24-year-old Syrian, shared the dire circumstances his family faces: "My children collect plastic and garbage from the street to sell. Sometimes, I collect food from garbage bins. A person in need would even eat soil." The high cost of living and accumulated debt place additional pressure on refugees. Asma, a Syrian participant, explained: *"We already borrowed money to come here. We said, 'We will pay it back as soon as we start working.'"* Similarly, Dariyah, an Afghan participant, described his struggle as follows: *"It is only me who works in this family, and it is just enough to buy food for my kids. After paying 8,000 TL for rent from an 18,000 TL salary, nothing is left by the end of the month, leading me to borrow money to make ends meet."*

Housing poses significant difficulties for both groups, with high rents straining limited incomes. Asma, a Syrian mother, lives with her children in a damp, poorly maintained-basement. They pay 5,000 TL in rent, set to increase to 7,000 TL while earning a combined weekly income of approximately 10,500 TL through grueling textile work. Yasmin an Afghan migrant, described the financial burden of housing as follows: *"Renting a house has become incredibly expensive, particularly in Zeytinburnu. My husband earns 20,000 TL, which barely covers the rent, food, bills, and sending some money to Afghanistan."* Yasmin's home is structurally unsound, forcing her to consider relocation despite the scarcity of affordable options.

Afghan migrants frequently mentioned bearing the burden of supporting families both in Turkey and back home. Yasmin noted, *"My husband works at a textile workshop and sends a portion of his salary to Afghanistan to his family."* Rashid echoed this sentiment, describing the responsibility of aiding his parents in Pakistan despite his own struggles.

The socio-economic precarity of refugees is further compounded by systemic factors. In Izmir, where the impacts of an earthquake and economic crisis lingered, single Syrian mothers increasingly resorted to irregular migration to Europe. Diminishing livelihood programme budgets and rising unemployment intensified their vulnerabilities, with community-based assistance becoming a critical safety net. A Syrian refugee in Izmir lamented: *"I'm struggling. Right now, there's a small grocery store owned by our neighbour, and I borrow from them. I currently owe 700 liras there. I can't keep up—with payments or anything else."*

These intersecting challenges—economic hardship, inadequate housing, familial responsibilities, and legal vulnerabilities—show a multi-layered precarity for Syrian and Afghan migrants in Turkey, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and marginalization, leaving little space for agency.

4.2.2. Residence permits and fear of deportability

Although most Syrians have temporary protection identity cards, getting one or renewing it might turn into a big headache, especially for those losing them due to various unpredictable circumstances—for instance, being caught during inspections without them. As Asma, a Syrian refugee, explained, *“Life has become difficult for us here as we do not have the ID cards. My husband was deported to Syria as he did not have an ID card during the inspection”*.

Refugees often face exploitation by intermediaries while attempting to navigate the bureaucratic hurdle of getting a card. Nayla shared, *“They [officials] do not issue identity cards to us even if we offer some money. Intermediaries demand exorbitant sums that we cannot afford.”* Adding to their struggles are frequent policy changes that leave refugees uncertain about their future. As Samira lamented, *“We never know if we can get a renewal next year or what will change in the migration laws and rules. This creates hopelessness because you think after all the effort and time, I might lose everything suddenly.”* Haroun highlighted the informal networks that have emerged, stating,

“We are trying to get an appointment to renew the temporary protection ID, but we cannot get an appointment; we are trying to pay someone to make an appointment in an unofficial way. There are intermediaries, and we pay money after they make an appointment. Getting an appointment is on the black market now.”

The absence of documentation leads to a pervasive fear of deportation. Abdelfattah explained, *“People like me who came here in the last three years do not have ID cards. We are under risk; we are under threat. If I go out at this moment, if the police stop me and catch me while I am walking, they will deport me directly to Syria. I feel like an expatriate, and there is no security for me. There is no future for us.”*

Arbitrary detention and deportation also emerge as recurring issues, often stemming from administrative errors or misrepresentations. Abu Rida recounted how *“my son and nephew were apprehended at the border. They incorrectly registered my son’s age as 17 and sent him to a deportation centre in Urfa.”* His son was deported to Syria, only to be smuggled back to Istanbul at great financial cost to the family. For others, deportation seems inevitable. Afghan migrants face even steeper challenges, including the cancellation of identity cards without clear explanations. Morsal shared, *“The authorities provided vague explanations, mentioning a problem with their system. As a result, we have been without active identity cards for the past two months.”* For Farooq, the unpredictability surrounding residency renewal is a source of constant anxiety: *“Each time we apply for the renewal of our residency permits, we don’t know if it will be approved or not. It all depends on the government here.”*

This uncertainty has consequences for Afghan migrants in terms of their job prospects. Morsal, who used to work at a textile factory, explained, *“Since our IDs have been cancelled, I can no longer go to work.”* Others similarly reported that it was challenging to continue working without legal documents. The threat of forced returns is another factor influencing daily life. Jamila explained, *“To be honest, my life is difficult here. It is like hell for me. I don’t have documents here, and I’m afraid every time I go somewhere.”* Simple activities become anxiety-ridden: *“I am afraid that the police will catch me every time I leave my home. Last month, there were many police officers here in civilian clothes looking for migrants without IDs.”*

Deportation fears have intensified among Afghan migrants following recent operations. Rashid noted, *"Now, there is a high chance of deportation by the Turkish police. In Zeytinburnu, where I used to have many friends from Afghanistan, most of them have been deported. This has left me feeling hopeless and scared."*

Afghan migrants often face the difficult trade-off between pursuing asylum and securing economic survival. Zahra explained how her husband's refusal to leave Istanbul hindered their compliance with UN registration requirements. *"The requirement to live in designated cities and adhere to weekly reporting and the barriers to obtain kimliks (identification cards) in Istanbul makes it more difficult for us."* Repeated unsuccessful attempts to formalize their cases leave migrants feeling trapped. Soraya summarized this sense of entrapment: *"We cannot go back under these circumstances, cannot stay here without documents, and it is difficult to go to Europe. We are stuck in this situation and cannot plan for the future."*

Fear of deportation dominates the lives of both Syrian and Afghan migrants, dictating their choices and behaviours, including limiting mobility, carefully selecting workplaces, and restricting access to services. The lack of legal protections not only hinders stability but also subjects migrants to exploitation and coercion. Pushbacks and immediate deportations, often carried out without due process, were a recurring theme for Afghan participants. One noted, *"They detained us, took everything, and then sent us to Iran."* Sarwar shared how even minor interactions with law enforcement feel precarious: *"Every interaction with the police feels like a risk; even a minor stop could lead to detention or deportation."*

These findings underscore the profound vulnerabilities faced by migrants in Turkey. Despite their efforts to comply with legal frameworks and contribute to society, these migrants find stability and safety perpetually out of reach, raising critical questions about the systemic factors limiting their choices and undermining their dignity.

4.2.3. Access to services

Education and healthcare are essential areas of concern for both Syrian and Afghan migrants. Syrian refugees constantly stressed to us that education is a key priority for them and their children. Many described how the war disrupted their own education. Haroun related: *"I was going to university, and my school was hit by bombs during the war. I was studying in a place connected with Al-Bab, and then I came back home and studied high school again in Turkey."* Syrians with TP status are able to attend public schools and universities (though with some difficulties accessing registration) but, Afghans do not have the same right to access, especially if they lack legal documentation. Soraya expressed her frustration with the situation: *"We have no future here. My children cannot go to school because we lack proper documents."*

Access to healthcare is another critical issue for both groups, but especially for those without legal status. Haroun illustrated the difficulties for Syrians without TP status via the story of his brother: *"My brother is sick and has no health insurance. I'm trying to secure a disability report and register him with ASAM for better medical care abroad."* Fatima, a Syrian mother with a heart condition, described her struggle: *"I have a heart condition and can get treatment because I have ID, but my daughter can't. Can you imagine how this feels for a mother?"* Jamila, an Afghan migrant, recounted: *"I cannot go to the doctor. I have to use a medication*

that is not suitable for pregnant women, but it is all I can get. I cannot get proper medical care without papers."

Between issues with documentation and access to services, both Syrians and Afghans are affected.

Syrians who once had free health treatment started having to pay for some medicine costs like their non-Syrian counterparts. Ahmed, a Syrian man who was deported and re-entered irregularly, described his family as being caught between constraints. *"We had no support. Now, my wife gets 450 a month for the children, but we had nothing for 8-9 years. At first, we would only get coal. The Red Crescent started giving us money two years ago. Also, the municipality has the Süt Kuzusu sending milk over for the kids ... For healthcare, we have been paying as well for the last two years. Some medicines are not free anymore."*

For some, like Yusuf from Sudan, international protection status brings little relief when registration requirements conflict with health needs: *"I have health issues, but I don't go to the doctor. I manage by taking painkillers. After the last ID checks, I have to forget about healthcare; if they catch me, they'll deport me. I've been waiting for 16 years. Thankfully, my health is good at the moment, but if something happens, I endure it."*

Narratives reveal barriers to education and healthcare for many. While Syrians with TP status enjoy slightly better access, Afghan migrants, Syrians and others without documentation face overwhelming challenges, leaving many to navigate precarious futures without adequate support.

4.3.Social Dynamics and Support Structures

Social dynamics refer to experiences of connection, isolation, and reliance on both formal and informal support networks. While the communal bonds for Syrian refugees are closer because of their larger and more cohesive presence in Turkey, challenges also persist in family relationships, with some being rejected by settled relatives. Afghan migrants report being more isolated and their social life being limited to acquaintances and just a few family members. Both groups report that the challenges they face in terms of social stigma and limited access to formal organizations contribute to their poor integration and sense of belonging.

4.3.1. Family Bonds and Community Support

Syrians, who arrived in large numbers over a shorter period of time, often developed a stronger sense of community, but some still faced rejection from settled relatives, reflecting the variability in family support. Jamal, a 35-year-old man from Aleppo, shared his experience:

"We had relatives in Antep, but they did not even open the door to us. They used to come to us every holiday before the war. We used to host them. Later, they said that they did not know who to host. They said, 'If we host you, there is someone else; if we host them, there is someone else, so we will not host anyone.' So, their situation is bad."

Although Jamal claims that his relative's situation that is bad, it has also had a negative impact on him as he has lost a source of support. This kind of familial rejection was also echoed by Abdelfattah, a 25-year-old male from Hasakah:

“We helped our family a lot. They used to visit us before the war when it turned out that we were relatives. We used to offer them gifts/sacrifices every day, and we used to give them treats; we used to send them gifts. We sent them off in a very nice way. Then, unfortunately, I am sorry to say, the civil war broke out. Then, when we came here, they did not take care of us.”

Afghan migrants, on the other hand, face significant social isolation, with many focused solely on work and their immediate family. Farooq explained the nature of relationships: *“Whenever we see each other outside, we say hi. It's not a deep relationship.”* He also reported being separated from most of his relatives, who remain in Afghanistan, while a few are in Iran and Germany. Similarly, Morsal noted: *“I have a few friends here. Many of them have left for Europe.”* Afghan migrants are also separated from their families in the process of being randomly assigned to different cities in Turkey while waiting for resettlement. Morsal, a 42-year-old woman from Mazar Sharif, shared her experience: *“It is just us here in Istanbul. My sister lives in Manisa, another city in Turkey. She has an international protection card. My parents are in Afghanistan... .”* Morsal's situation illustrates the loneliness many Afghans face. Familial separation is a major theme, Dariyah expressed: *“My parents and the rest of my family are in Afghanistan, and they wish to come here and join us. However, the irregular route has become extremely difficult.”* Family separation through deportation can destabilize the entire family. Amira emotionally explained her son's deportation to Syria: *“My son was arrested and immediately deported to Syria... He stayed at Darkush for 15 days, trying to enter illegally, but failed each time. We have no one in Syria; our house is destroyed.”*

While some Afghan migrants have relatives in other Turkish cities, many rely on newly formed friendships for support. Yasmin (30-year-old, from Faryab) mentioned the importance of her friendships *“I have two friends who are also from Afghanistan. We meet at home regularly.”* However, our participants claim that the Afghan community does not have as much solidarity as Syrians. Jamila, an Afghan migrant, explained:

“Afghans usually do not want to help other Afghans... They would not even give an address, for example, of the hospital if you ask them. I do not even trust Afghans. You see, the Syrian community trusts each other and helps each other. This is not the case with the Afghan community here. When I go to the Syrian clinic here, I see their solidarity. They help each other and are kind to one another.”

Syrians often organize within tribal or familial circles to provide mutual support. Haroun, a 27-year-old male from Aleppo, described: *“We usually meet among ourselves, with the members of the tribe, and discuss things. We try to show solidarity among ourselves and support each other in case of need.”*

Although our interviews show how family networks provide support, we also found that they add to the burdens members face. Amira, for example, discussed her family's situation: *“Only my youngest daughter and I have ID cards... We're a partially registered family, so we can't even get the Shopping Card distributed by Kızılay. Ten of us live in the same house because we can't afford two houses.”*

Economic hardship, a key reason for migration, is tightly connected to family obligations. Migrants often work with the aim of sending money back to their country. Reza's story exemplifies this: *“I will keep working as long as I live. Back home, I have a daughter and a*

son. *We're building a house for my son. He wants to come too, but I don't know how it will happen. I need to work and send money home.*" Sarwar shared a similar experience: *"The money is little, but I still send some home—it's enough somehow. I'm here, but my family is in Afghanistan. I want to bring them here too, but it's difficult."* Many migrants view sending money as a temporary phase, hoping to eventually bring their families to Turkey, as Rashid informed us: *"I came here to work and send money back, but hopefully when the situation improves, I'll bring my children here too. Living in Afghanistan is very hard, brother."*

4.3.2. Stigma, Discrimination, and Political Uncertainty in the Host Country

Syrians and Afghans are rejected as outsiders, either perceived as threats because they take jobs from the locals for cheaper wages or because they decrease societal safety and change the culture. Barriers in communication and perceived differences in social norms worsen tensions. Farooq, an Afghan migrant, explains, *"people like me working amongst the Turks may be talking to their Turkish colleagues inside work, but the moment they spot you outside work, they are turning their heads to not look at us."*

These relations are also shaped by a fear of deportation and challenges regarding residency status. This is exacerbated by political uncertainty, especially during election times. Nabila, like many migrants, says,

"We generally do not talk to or interact with many people except our relatives. We follow the news in Syria and Turkey among ourselves on social media. Elections are coming here. We are a little worried before the elections. As far as we can follow, before every election, they start talking about refugees and sending them back. This makes us very sad. It bothers us."

The research also brings to light the layered nature of discrimination and stigma. Afghan migrants face the strongest discrimination. Sanjar recounted: *"In Iğdır, people look at us badly. We work, we do their jobs, but still. In some villages around here, there were incidents where they said an Afghan shepherd killed the landowner or something like that. They think we're all the same. Just like there are good and bad Turks, we have good and bad among us, too."* This example shows how negative perceptions of Afghan migrants are often based on isolated incidents, which contribute to more generalized stereotypes.

The experiences of both Syrians and Afghans in Turkey reflect the compounded effects of stigma, discrimination, and political uncertainty, which marginalize them and reinforce their vulnerabilities, making social and economic integration challenging to attain.

4.3.3. Formal diaspora organizations

Access to and utilization of formal diaspora organizations represented in Turkey have been highly challenging for both Syrian and Afghan migrants. Many reported a sense of disconnection and a lack of knowledge about available support structures. For example, Asma, a 35-year-old Syrian refugee from Hasakah, reported, *"We do not know of any organizations or associations established by Syrians that provide help.* There are associations, but they cannot do anything. The state controls everything." Afghan migrants similarly reported low awareness, or if they recognized the existence of organizations, they had no substantial details on their activities.

Some organizations, such as the SEVKAR foundation, organize online meetings and educational sessions that provide much-needed information about rights and resources, and they go a long way in facilitating the integration of Afghan migrants into Turkey.

Yet, those who join these formal associations often experience disappointment and suspicion due to allegations of nepotism and favoritism. Nayla, a 45 year old woman from Deir Ez Zor in Syria, said, *"Even when I helped the association financially, they did not assist me in return during my time of need."* Some refugees regret not having taken an earlier interest in these organizations, while others have grown resigned to the reality that the formal associations will change little. Given the perceived inefficiency of formal organizations, informal networks and community solidarity have become an important source of support for both Syrian and Afghan migrants. Generally, Syrian refugees have more cohesive support structures, often rooted in tribal or familial connections, while Afghan migrants are much more isolated and lack such strong networks. While there are formal diaspora organizations, they are widely regarded as incompetent or untrustworthy; thus, both groups have come to rely more on informal social structures.

4.4.Perceptions about further movement

For most Syrian and Afghan refugees in Turkey, return is dependent on the improvement of the situation in their respective countries. Despite ongoing instability, shifting policies and difficulties faced in the labor market in Turkey and resulting feelings of marginality, they just cannot conceive of going back. In contrast, aspirations of migration to a third country are strong and driven by the hope for safety, stability, and better opportunities, especially for their children. However, financial constraints and restrictive migration policies present significant barriers.

4.4.1. Return

One of the major deterrents to return for migrants remains the security concerns that drove them to migrate in the first place. As Azize from Gaza recounted:

There's no electricity or internet there most of the time. If they get the chance, they call me, and I talk to them. But sometimes, days go by without contact. They don't have electricity. I still don't know where my mother is. My aunt's son passed away—during the conflict. I had a brother; he's injured, as I heard. But in the end, I can't always reach them because it's very difficult.

For Yusuf from Sudan, the situation is equally difficult:

Sudan... it's hard now. There was war before, and now it's happening again. There's war in Sudan. There's no internet on the phones anymore. It's hard. They're cutting everything off—it's not easy. Even with my family, we haven't talked much for over a year. Sometimes, we manage to talk on the phone when there's a network. I talk to them when I can, but sometimes I can't.

Manal, a Syrian man, described the situation of anxiety over possible persecution or conscription by armed groups controlling different parts of Syria in his home of Hasakah: *"Life in Hasakah is very bad; there is nothing, and the conditions are very bad. Everyone is living in fear."* Abdelfattah, a 25-year-old military deserter from Hasakah, elaborated on the pressures he had received from both the regime and the YPG: *"I am wanted for two things:*

firstly, I have been a military deserter for 6 years (by the regime), and secondly, I am wanted for military service by the party (YPG). I can't do either. Who should I go to Syria and fight for? For what should I kill?" For others, the impossibility of a viable economic and family life is the main reason they cannot return to Syria. Mahmoud, 32, explained, "I wanted to return, but there is nothing there-no work, no home. It's like going to death." Amira, a 42-year-old Syrian woman, echoed his concerns: "Syria is still unsafe. Even if we wanted to return, we fear for our children."

Afghans also describe political instability and security threats as a major reason that returning is impossible. For example, Fawad, a 28-year-old Afghan said, "Returning to Afghanistan means death. There is neither work nor security. We lost everything; even if we go back, how will we survive?" For some, like Yasmin, return would only be possible if the situation changes. *"If the Taliban leave Afghanistan, the schools reopen, a president is appointed, and the economy becomes active, I would want to go back."* This conditional willingness points to the need for political stability and effective state institutions for migrants even to consider returning home. As Reza noted, "Even if I am deported three times, I will come again because I have no alternative."

Another important reason for not returning home is the economic crisis prevailing in their homelands. Nayla, a Syrian refugee, explained: *"Conditions are zero. There is no work, and there is YPG. People need bread, and there is no electricity."* Afghan migrants also face similar economic challenges. Dariyah, 41, said, *"Here I can work in a textile factory as a woman. In Afghanistan, there is no work anyway."* Afghan migrants are also deterred by the issue of women's rights and safety; as Soraya expressed, *"Women are not supported at all now in Afghanistan"* For families, educational opportunities are crucial. The educational stability of their children is one of the most valued aspects for Syrian refugees, especially those with children. Jamal, a Syrian refugee, expressed, *"Even if I go back, my children do not know Arabic at all."* This concern is common among families who have been living in Turkey for over a decade. Afghan migrants also worry about educational opportunities in Afghanistan; as Soraya said, *"In Afghanistan, they cannot go to school anyway."* Attitudes towards returning home on the part of Syrian refugees and Afghan migrants reflect a variety of factors: security, economic conditions, and family. Some show a conditional willingness to return home if the conditions improve, but most do not see return as possible due to the harsh realities in their native country.

Meanwhile, migrants feel that they are hanging in limbo between a tough life of staying in Turkey or going home.

For both Syrian and Afghan migrants, return entails risks; hence, many people find staying in Turkey - despite its hardships - to be the lesser of two evils. An uncertain future is staring both Syrians and Afghans in the face. Many migrants, such as Alan from Afghanistan, share a common sentiment: *"There is no future in Turkey either, but I cannot go back."*

4.4.2. Migrating to a third country

Many migrants are contemplating migrating to a third country due to a desire for safety and security, coupled with aspirations for better opportunities. Ahmad, a Syrian migrant, epitomizes this hope : *"I heard that some Syrians can go to Canada. For example, if you applied 1 year ago, they are now calling you and saying, 'You will go to Europe, Germany*

or Canada." Afghan migrants similarly aspire to better opportunities for themselves and their children's futures. Jamila shares this aspiration: *"My son couldn't go to school in Iran or Turkey; I want him to have an education and a better life in Europe."* Both groups seek improved living conditions and educational opportunities.

However, there are quite significant challenges in achieving such aspirations. Another important limit is the financial constraints—the inability to pay an expensive smuggling fee or even to cover the basic expenses of the journey. Dariyah, an Afghan migrant explained, *"We do not have the financial means to move elsewhere; our focus is on basic survival now—rent and food."* As Khalil reflects, *"Sometimes I think about going to Europe, but it's too dangerous and expensive. With children, how can we go?"* Economic challenges form the backbone of decision-making, as Ali observed: *"I will keep working here and saving money. You need a lot of money for Europe. Germany later."*

Physical risks and logistical obstacles are associated with dangerous and uncertain irregular migration routes. Ahmad recalls the challenges he experienced in trying to cross the border illegally: *"During the third and fourth attempts, the Turkish side closed the border, and there were problems everywhere; it was very difficult to cross."* The complex situation faced by both Syrians and Afghans in Turkey is worsened by changing migration politics. Ahmad mentioned: *"Previously, I was confident I could cross to Europe, but now it's very difficult with a high risk of deportation."*

Given the risks, our interviews reveal a great urge to acquire information about migration opportunities. Yusuf explains: *"Sometimes I look up Canada's or Germany's refugee programs on the internet. But most are for Syrians with legal status."* Some are avoiding the risks of traveling via smugglers by patiently waiting for resettlement to a safe third country; as Azize shares, *"Our hope is through the United Nations to get us to a third country, especially Canada. We applied, but they said it takes 7 to 10 years; either you get approval or you don't. Right now, it's better to forget about it."* Resettlement takes a great deal of time, as Yusuf's experience also shows:

I have been here for 16 years now, waiting. I still have a case file at the United Nations; I'm under international protection. I cannot swim, and though many people who cannot swim get helped across, it is tough. Neither going nor staying nor returning is an option. ID controls are worse than ever. At the hotel here, doors got smashed down. I was explaining, 'Everyone has IDs'. They didn't listen. A boy jumped down from the second floor. When he hurt his leg and tried to flee, we put some bandages on him, and then he migrated to Europe by sea.

More often than not, migrants voice their wish to leave Turkey via third-country settlements that can give them opportunities to rebuild their lives and secure a future for their families. One Syrian migrant identified family stability and the education of children as important reasons for migration to third countries: *"I want to go to Europe. I can work there and educate my children. There's no future here. If Europe opens its doors, I would like to go."*

Migrants' determination to overcome challenges reflects their desire - and agency - to obtain better livelihoods and educational opportunities for themselves and their families. Yet, they remain sceptical of successfully migrating, affording the journey, or ensuring safety along the way. Generally, the outlook of Syrian refugees contrasts with that of Afghan migrants on the

issue of return and migration, with the former maintaining a more conditional hope for an eventual return . The Syrians, with the benefit of geographic proximity, can maintain more occasional contact with family members and, thus, a thread of hope and connection to a better reality. They enjoy better access to legal status and basic services, such as healthcare and education, and therefore have some sense of stability. Afghans, meanwhile, are typically more vulnerable, with little legal protection and scarce access to essential services. This lack of support fosters an acute sense of "stuckness" in Turkey, with few workable pathways to permanence or mobility. These factors shape the aspirations of Syrians and Afghans differently: Afghans feel an urgent need to escape their precarious situation, while Syrians navigate a more connected but still fraught reality.

4.5. Trajectories

The previous sections have demonstrated the precarious situation of migrants in Turkey and underlined the multifaceted drivers that influence decision-making processes with regards to how to organize life, plan, and survive. This section explores four varied trajectories that epitomize distinct decision-making processes and standpoints on movement, return, and policy within different groups of migrants who reside in Turkey. We have created these trajectories by tracing movement patterns, exploring migrants' creativity and agency regarding migration routes, and asking them to reflect on the qualities they attribute to their mobility. Through migrants' narratives, we gain insight into varying degrees of agency: some show resilience and ingenuity in pursuing opportunities for onward movement, while others adapt to long-term life in Turkey under precarious conditions. For some, the idea of return remains untenable due to ongoing security threats or economic instability in their home countries, while others face integration challenges with the hope of one day returning. These perspectives are key to understanding the complex interplay between aspirations to migrate, legal regimes, and everyday life.

4.5.1. The Trapped Aspirant

"Trapped Aspirants" are migrants who fled security threats and economic hardship in their home countries, arriving in Turkey irregularly, often with the help of smugglers, as a transit point on their way to Europe. Their trajectories are marked by significant challenges, with many feeling stranded and unable to return home or move forward.

Amira, a 42-year-old Syrian, shared her frustration: *"We came to Turkey to cross to Europe, but the border is closed. Now we are stuck here."* Mahmoud, a 32-year-old Syrian, described the barriers to onward migration: *"Crossing the border is now very expensive and dangerous. Even trying seems impossible. We lost everything trying to go to Europe, but it still didn't work."* Similarly, Fawad, a 28-year-old Afghan, expressed the dire consequences of returning home: *"Returning to Afghanistan means death. If I go back, my life is in danger. There is no place left to live there."*

Faced with restrictive policies in both Turkey and Europe, these migrants feel trapped in a state of limbo. Rashid, another Afghan migrant, summed up the sentiment: *"Every path we look at has a barrier. We can neither move forward nor live here."* The experiences of "Trapped

Aspirants" highlight their profound struggles with limited options, unfulfilled aspirations, and an uncertain future.

The case of Yusuf, a 24-year-old Syrian, illustrates the category perfectly. He continuously seeks migration opportunities while facing significant barriers, noting the limited options for those without legal status: *"Sometimes I look up Canada's or Germany's refugee programs on the internet. But most are for Syrians with legal status. For someone in my situation, there are almost no options."*

Afghan migrants face particularly complex challenges. Sanjar, a 28-year-old, describes the intricate balance of supporting his family while navigating uncertain migration prospects: *"I want to bring my family here. If I can't, then I have to go to Europe. But in this situation, it's very difficult."*

Ultimately, these "Trapped Aspirants" exist in a perpetual state of limbo - unable to return home, unable to reach their desired destination, and struggling to integrate into their current environment. Their stories underscore the urgent need for more compassionate and flexible migration policies that recognize the needs behind these migration journeys.

4.5.2. The Reluctant Settler

Reluctant Settlers also initially perceived Turkey as a stopover between their home country and a prospective future destination (mostly the EU). Eventually, they found themselves settling down, mainly as they had no other option, as a result of continuous instability in their respective countries of origin. They tend to have some legal status, such as temporary protection, thus somewhat shielding them from insecurity but still facing struggles. Their trajectory is a clear interplay between agency and constraint: Their once active decision to move in search of safety and opportunity has, over time, been reframed due to limited choices. The prospect of returning home is mixed for these people. While they miss their homeland and belonging very much, they are restricted by the instabilities which made them leave. As Khalil, a 28-year-old Syrian, recalls: *"I'm very uncertain now. I went back to Syria briefly for my parents' funeral. The situation there is still terrible, and it's not safe. But here, our life is also gone. Sometimes I think about going to Europe, but I don't know how we would go. I want to do what's best for my children's future, but I don't know what to do."* These migrants want to establish local connections despite initial temporary intentions, prioritizing children's education as a stabilizing factor and maintaining ambivalent feelings about permanent settlement. Their perspective on migration policies is critically nuanced. They view the existing frameworks as inadequate, especially with regard to employment, education, and long-term integration and strongly express a desire for more inclusive policies which would provide meaningful opportunities to build a stable future in Turkey. Most of them have established social networks, are settled in houses, and have planned the education of their children, factors that make resettlement a little more difficult. Their legal status in Turkey decreases the threat of deportation, and this is why a long-term settlement is more likely. Interestingly, the interviews brought out one clear point on which there was unanimous agreement: an absolute refusal to return home to a number of the countries represented, most of all Afghanistan. Beyond that, however, their journey is characterized by a mass of barriers and uncertainties: the responsibility of supporting family,

fear of possible deportation, the wish to reunite with family members still in the home country, and the ongoing need to save money in case of further migration. While initially Turkey was perceived as a temporary refuge, these migrants find themselves trying to adapt while maintaining their aspirations.

4.5.3. The Precarious Survivor

Precarious Survivors are often undocumented in Turkey, and their lives are characterized by vulnerability and survival. Without legal status, they experience the threat of deportation and systemic exclusion from basic services and social protection. Their daily experience is an intense struggle to survive. Unable to access either formal employment or basic amenities, these "Precarious Survivors" are obliged to work in the informal economy under exploitative working conditions. As 24-year-old Ahmed from Syria explained: *"The only hope is to save my children. We could never survive in Syria, and my children are too scared of war. There's no work or help there. At least here, we can survive by collecting and selling plastic."* Living in constant fear has a strong psychological impact on them, as related by Omar, 33, from Syria: *"I live in fear of being caught and deported at any moment. Sometimes, I'm even afraid to walk on the street. It's almost impossible to find work. It's like being invisible, yet I'm on edge all the time."*

They focus daily on their immediate needs to survive and develop informal coping strategies. They are vulnerable to exploitation and constantly fear deportation. Most of all, the prospect of return to their homeland is impossible, as many have fled due to personal threats or generalized instability. The policy landscape - with all its tensions - serves only to increase their vulnerability. Turkey is not like before," said Rashid, an Afghan, 33. *"Everybody has become so strict. We hear that the gendarmerie took many people from other villages and sent them back to Iran. Of course, I'm afraid."* They view migration policies with great frustration and feelings of powerlessness. They desperately seek pathways to legalize their status, viewing documentation as their only hope for accessing basic services and living without constant fear. The current system, with its strict enforcement and frequent policy changes, seems designed to marginalize and exclude them. Future prospects are not shining, either. The resources are limited, and without any legal documentation, the possibility of migrating to Europe is virtually inexistent. They stay in Turkey, condemned to life at the margin of society, balancing continuously between survival and the threat of being deported.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, the migrants show resilience. They support themselves and their families; they devise elaborate schemes of survival that reflect their remarkable human capacity to adjust and continue in impossible conditions. Their stories show a profound human rights challenge: people who are forced into permanent precarity, divested of fundamental protection, and reduced to struggling day by day, never more than a moment away from the possibility of displacement.

4.5.4. The Aspiring Integrator

The "Aspiring Integrators" represent a distinct group of migrants who have transformed Turkey from a temporary refuge into a potential permanent home. Unlike those viewing their

stay as transient, these individuals are actively and strategically working to establish deep roots in Turkish society, with a particular focus on creating opportunities for themselves and their families. Their journey is characterized by agency and decision-making. They approach integration not as a passive experience but as an active, intentional process. This involves learning the Turkish language, seeking stable employment, and strategically navigating legal systems to secure their status and future. Education emerges as a critical priority, with many seeing their children's schooling as the primary pathway to long-term stability and social mobility. Their perspective is fundamentally future-oriented, focused on building a sustainable life in Turkey rather than maintaining connections to their countries of origin.

A powerful illustration of this approach comes from Yusuf's narrative, which demonstrates the transformative potential of integration:

"Now I'm regular with my treatment. The doctors are very attentive, and they treat me like a human being. I'm getting monthly cash support from UNHCR so I can feed myself. I have a small but clean house... Most importantly, I'm not alone anymore. I met other people living with HIV here, and I joined a support group. For the first time in a long time, I can think about the future."

Aspiring Integrators are characterized by their proactive pursuit of stability, their deep investment in building connections within local communities, their strategic and forward-looking approach to planning, and their effective use of available support systems.

The prospect of returning to their home countries is rarely considered. While they may maintain emotional connections to their origins, their primary focus is on the opportunities and sense of security they have cultivated in Turkey. Their legal status provides a foundation for this commitment, significantly reducing the risk of deportation and increasing their potential for long-term settlement. Their approach to policies and legal frameworks is notably proactive. Rather than feeling victimized by bureaucratic systems, they actively engage with official structures, seeking ways to regularize their legal status. Many even contemplate citizenship as a commitment to their new home. Notably, these migrants show little interest in further migration to Europe. Having invested considerable effort in establishing themselves in Turkey, their strategy involves deep, meaningful integration rather than continued geographical mobility.

The Aspiring Integrators' story represents a powerful narrative of transformation, demonstrating how migrants can turn challenging circumstances into opportunities for growth, community-building, and personal reinvention.

4.5.5. Contrasting Migration Profiles: Syrians and Afghans in Turkey

When comparing the two largest groups, we observe that Afghans are more likely to align with the "Trapped Aspirant" profile, while Syrians tend to fit the "Reluctant Settler" category. This disparity in profiles reflects differences in migration contexts, displacement experiences, and Turkish policies toward these groups.

For Afghans, the predominance of "Trapped Aspirants" can be attributed to their limited access to formal protection mechanisms and legal pathways in Turkey. These constraints leave

many in a state of uncertainty, aspiring to move onward or find better opportunities. Conversely, Syrians are more frequently categorized as "Reluctant Settlers" due to Turkey's Temporary Protection regime, which, though not offering full refugee status, provides structured support for settlement and integration. Nonetheless, their "reluctance" suggests dissatisfaction with living conditions in Turkey or aspirations to either return home or migrate elsewhere.

These differences also underscore the varying geopolitical significance of these groups for Turkey. Syrians occupy a central position in Turkey's domestic and international policy agendas, while Afghans face a more precarious existence, often overshadowed and less visible in the public and policy spheres. These classifications are helpful for understanding broader trends, yet they might not fully reflect the diversity within these groups. For instance, Syrians who have acquired Turkish citizenship could also exhibit characteristics aligning with the "Aspiring Integrator" category. This reveals how structural conditions can influence individuals' opportunities and efforts toward integration.

These categorizations would benefit from further exploration of family dynamics whereby differences in return aspirations and attitudes would be analyzed based on gender and generational divides. This aspect will be further explored in academic papers.

5. Conclusion

Turkey has become a crucial destination for migrants. Its migration governance has moved back and forth between mechanisms of control and humanitarian obligations. Internal mobility restrictions and aggressive campaigns for address verification have increased migrants' vulnerabilities, in an actual sense pushing many into irregular status. Syrians under Temporary Protection enjoy limited legal protection and inconsistent enforcement, with securitized policies generating a condition of diffused fear and instability. Afghan migrants are even more at risk of complications because of papers that expose them to detention, along with risks of immediate deportation.

The social networks of migrants shape their migration experience and become crucial for survival. These networks offer vital information and initial support and, at the same time, may lead to unmet expectations and isolation. Economic, socio-cultural, and legal challenges also impact their experience of integration, as they involve exploitation, low wages, and limitations on legal employment opportunities.

The ambiguity of the temporary protection status of Syrians and the profound documentation challenges facing Afghans create an atmosphere full of fear that systematically undermines any potential feelings of belonging that migrants may develop. Added to this is widespread stigma and discrimination, which not only generates negative stereotypes but also ensures ongoing tensions locally.

Basic services' accessibility remains extremely limited and further exacerbates the migrant communities' isolation. Decisions about possible return or relocation to third countries are extremely challenging and nuanced by political and economic considerations. Some migrants report being willing to return if their host countries stabilize, but for the majority, return is unthinkable.

Migrants are resilient and receive support from informal networks, although such networks are usually insufficient and further entrench social isolation. The vicious circle of irregularity, deportation, and return must be replaced by a system of greater legal clarity and humane treatment. Reforms in this regard have to cover gaps systematically towards better integration, meaningful protection, and real ways of achieving stability and human dignity.

Instead of only focusing on return, Turkey can develop comprehensive policies that balance humanitarian considerations with practical integration strategies .

Policy Recommendations

1. Rethink the Geographic Limitation of Legal Status for Afghan Migrants

Turkey should revisit the geographic limitation of its asylum policy to offer Afghan refugees concrete opportunities for legal status and protection. Equal treatment for Afghan migrants would introduce fairness and raise protection levels.

2. Improved Integration Measures

Design specific programs that will promote the socio-economic inclusion of migrants through access to formal employment, vocational training, and language classes, among other programs for social support.

3. Improving the Protection of Human Rights

Elaborate clear instructions to avoid human rights violations, such as pushbacks. Provide detained migrants with access to legal aid and protection against arbitrary detention.

4. Greater International Organizational Cooperation

Work in close cooperation with the UNHCR and NGOs on the enhancement of registration processes, and provision of humanitarian assistance. Protection of refugees' rights should be guaranteed everywhere in Turkey.

5. Increase Access to Legal Employment

Simplify procedures for issuing work permits to Syrian and Afghan migrants. Simplifying bureaucratic procedures and reducing fees will raise awareness of legal channels for employment.

6. Enhance the Protection of Labour Rights

The vulnerabilities of migrants can be counterbalanced if decent wages and safety in employment are assured through robust labour rights policies for all migrants, complemented by frequent workplace inspections.

7. Increase affordable housing availability

Through collaborative efforts with NGOs and international institutions, the national authority of the host country has to develop various types of accessible residential facilities that aim particularly at the more vulnerable categories of immigrants through rent subsidies or any special housing programs.

8. Simplify family reunification procedures

Develop streamlined processes for family reunification, recognizing the emotional and psychological impacts of separation on migrants. Programs that prioritize keeping families together can significantly enhance their well-being.

9. Address Economic Barriers

Implement policies targeting the economic integration of migrants, particularly women and minority groups facing heightened challenges. Initiatives should include job opportunities, entrepreneurship support, and eased work permit restrictions.

10. Promote Community Awareness

Public awareness and anti-stigma/discrimination campaigns on migrants must be started. The various contributions of migrants in Turkish society could be put across to further advance social acceptance.

11. Informal Networks

Identify the informal networks present within migrant communities and deliver resources for self-organization. The initiatives which ensure mutual help and solidarity between migrants make a contribution to social integration by further reinforcing the structures already in existence.

12. Facilitate Safe Return Options

For those willing to go back, establish programs for safe and dignified repatriation; this also includes reintegration programs with the country of origin for an easier transition for returning migrants.

6. Annexes

6.1. Annex 1 - Interview guide

Presentation of the interview

Introduction

Hello, Sir/Madam, my name is _____ and I am currently affiliated with [name of institution]. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

Project Overview

We are conducting this interview as part of a project focused on the life experiences and aspirations of migrants. Our research aims to understand how migrants in transit countries (in the pre-return phase) consider, decide, and communicate their return options within the context of their broader experiences of mobility and immobility.

Duration and Consent

Our discussion should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. I will pose some questions, but please feel free to share any thoughts or ask for clarification at any point during the interview.

(Consent information will be provided) Please note that your responses will remain anonymous, and our conversation will be treated with confidentiality. You will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure that your identity remains untraceable in any published research findings.

You are free to discontinue the interview at any time without needing to provide a reason.

Closing Remarks

Thank you again for your participation. Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

May I have your permission to record this conversation for accuracy?

Interview Guides

We have two interview formats: a semi-structured interview guide and a life story guide. You may choose to use one or a combination of both. Generally, life story interviews take longer than 1 hour and may require multiple sessions, with a sample of 10 interviews sufficient for drawing conclusions. In contrast, semi-structured interviews typically last about an hour, and we expect to conduct around 20 to achieve saturation and reach conclusions.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Agency and Social Navigation

In this section, we aim to explore your choices, goals, and decisions regarding migration to [country] and your life in general.

1. Can you describe significant decisions or choices you've made regarding where to live and move in the past? What prompted you to leave a city or country? How do you approach important life decisions about staying or leaving now? What influences your decisions, and what are your goals? Why are you currently in [country of residence]?
D
2. id you have another location in mind to move to? If not your first choice, why? How do you feel about your past decisions—are you proud, ashamed, satisfied, or worried? Would you choose differently based on what you know now?

3. What resources or information facilitated your move? Whom do you consult for information or advice? What key factors influence your decision-making, and why?
4. Who accompanied you during your move? Were there others who chose not to move or who relocated elsewhere at the same time? What do you think influenced their decisions?
5. How do you feel about potentially staying or leaving? What are your reasons for wanting to stay or leave? What thoughts or emotions arise when you reflect on this place?
6. Have you or others (family, friends) considered further relocations? Why or why not? If yes, where are you considering moving (to a third country or back home)?
7. Can you share your hopes, plans, or aspirations for the future? What do you aim to achieve in the next phase of your life? What do you anticipate for your future across different aspects of your life?

Social Networks, Family, and Institutions

This section focuses on the social connections and networks that are significant to you, particularly in relation to your living situations.

1. Describe your friends and family, both here and in other countries or cities. Where are they, what are they doing, and how often do you communicate? How close do you feel to them? What insights do they share about their lives?
2. What obligations do you have towards relatives or friends in this country or abroad? How do you feel about those responsibilities?
3. What do you envision for your future regarding serious relationships or partnerships and children? What are your hopes in this area?
4. Are you involved in any diaspora or migrant organizations?
 - What role do they play in your experience in this country?
 - Could you describe these organizations (activist groups, solidarity groups, etc.)?
 - How did you become involved with them?
 - Do they influence your decision-making regarding your life trajectory?
 - Do they provide any valuable information?

Integration Context - Livelihood and Socio-Cultural Environment

In this section, we want to understand your feelings about your current living situation and life in [country of residence].

1. Where do you live in this city? What is your living environment like? Do you feel at home? How would you describe your feelings about this place (e.g., safe, vulnerable)? What contributes to those feelings?
2. Do you feel accepted or rejected by the local population or government? Has your perception changed over time? How?
3. Can you describe your daily life and how you spend your time? What type of work are you engaged in? Have you pursued any education here? Do you have local friends or acquaintances? What are your neighbours like?

4. What challenges do you encounter (e.g., discrimination, livelihood issues, health, working conditions)? How is public opinion in this country regarding migrants from your background? How does this impact you?
5. How does your current living situation compare to other places you have lived? How much do you feel you belong in those different environments?
6. Could you share how your religious, moral, and political beliefs have evolved over time? Have there been significant changes? Please elaborate if comfortable. (Sensitive question; feel free to skip.)

Changing Landscapes of Governance, Borders, and Institutions

Here, we will discuss how state laws and policies affect your situation and future plans.

1. How engaged are you in the political landscape of your current host country? What about your country of origin? Are you aware of any policies related to migrants? How did you learn about them? Who influences migrant policies in this country (government, international agencies, EU)? What policies impact your current situation? Would you be allowed to stay long-term if you wished? What restrictions do you face? What are the ideal policies for locations you would consider moving to?
2. What is your understanding of return policies? How do political changes and policies affect your feelings about your current living situation? How do they influence your decisions regarding migration or return?
3. If you chose to migrate again, what conditions would influence that decision? How would you envision making that move (e.g., mode of transport, travelling alone or with others, using smugglers)?
4. Would you consider returning to your country of origin? What conditions would have to be met for you to feel comfortable doing so? What is the situation for returnees in your home country? How are they perceived? What risks or dangers do you associate with returning, either for yourself or your family members? What thoughts, feelings, or images arise when you think of returning?
5. Are you aware of any programs or organizations that could assist you with further migration or return? What do you know about them, and how did you find out about them?

Final Question: What support should programmes or organizations provide to facilitate a potential return?

Life Story Interview Approach

To begin, could you share the story of your life from childhood to the present? As a social scientist, I'm interested in hearing your narrative, including your past as you remember it. There are no right or wrong answers—please share what you consider to be the most significant events in your life.

In the next part, we will focus on relevant life phases and events to reconstruct your life story based on the information you provide. Possible topics include high and low points, turning points, meaningful childhood memories, core beliefs and values, and questions of meaning and morality.

Following this, we will address the four key themes related to agency and social navigation, social networks, integration context, and governance landscape if they haven't been covered in your life story.

Annex 2 - List of Interviews

No	Pseud.	Interview code	Nationality	Age	Gender	City of origin	Interview Location	Level of education	Legal status	Work situation
1	Zahra	AFG231116SO	Afghan	28	F	Bamyan	İstanbul	5th grade	No legal status	Unemployed
2	Nasrin	AFG231116FA	Afghan	40	F	Kabul	İstanbul	Illiterate	No legal status	Unemployed
3	Jamila	AFG231117RI	Afghan	31	F	Herat	İstanbul	Primary school	No legal status	Unemployed
4	Morsal	AFG231117KH	Afghan	42	F	Mazar Sharif	İstanbul	Undergraduate	Cancelled IP card	Unemployed
5	Rashid	AFG231205HA	Afghan	23	M	Bamyam	İstanbul	high school	No legal Status	Employed- Tailor
6	Soraya	AFG231205SW	Afghan	33	F	Mazar Sharif	İstanbul	Undergraduate	No legal Status	Unemployed
7	Samira	AFG231205SA	Afghan	33	F	Kunduz	İstanbul	Undergraduate	Residence Permit	Unemployed
8	Yasmin	AFG231215RA	Afghan	30	F	Faryab	İstanbul	Undergraduate	No legal Status	Unemployed
9	Farooq	AFG240109FA	Afghan	32	M	Parwan	İstanbul	Undergraduate	No legal Status	Employed-Tailor
10	Dariyah	AFG240117MA	Afghan	41	F	Balkh	İstanbul	Illiterate	No legal Status	Employed-Tailor
11	Jamal	SYRA240114CU	Syrian	35	M	Aleppo	İstanbul	Uneducated	Temporary Protection	Employed-Textile
12	Haroun	SYRA240114HU	Syrian	27	M	Aleppo	İstanbul	Highschool	Temporary Protection	Employed-Textile
13	Abdelfattah	SYRA240212AB	Syrian	25	M	Hasakah	İstanbul	Primary school	No legal Status	Employed-Textile
14	Abu Diab	SYRA231210AD	Syrian	48	M	Deir Ez-Zor	İstanbul	Primary school	Temporary Protection	Unemployed
15	Nabila	SYRA231210NA	Syrian	40	F	Hasakah	İstanbul	Primary school	Temporary Protection	Unemployed
16	Asma	SYRA20240218AM	Syrian	35	F	Hasakah	İstanbul	Illiterate	No legal Status	Employed
17	Nayla	SYRA20240218NE	Syrian	45	F	Deir Ez-Zor	İstanbul	No Education	No legal Status	Employed

No	Pseud.	Interview code	Nationality	Age	Gender	City of origin	Interview Location	Level of education	Legal status	Work situation
18	Saad	SYRA231126SA	Syrian	18	M	Hasakah	İstanbul	Uneducated	No legal status	Employed-Shoes
19	Manal	SYRA231126ME	Syrian	37	F	Hasakah	İstanbul	Highschool	TP	Unemployed
20	Abu Rida	SYRA231126AS	Syrian	48	M	Hasakah	İstanbul	Highschool	No legal Status	Unemployed
21	Khalil	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Hatay_01	Syrian	28	M	Aleppo	Hatay	High school	Registered (Temporary Protection)	Informal /Daily Employment
22	Omar	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Hatay_02	Syrian	33	M	Idleb	Hatay	Primary school	Unregistered	Unemployed
23	Fatima	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Hatay_03	Syrian	38	F	Raqqqa	Hatay	Primary school	Registered (Temporary Protection)	Informal/ Daily employment
24	Yusuf	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Kilis_04	Syrian	24	M	Azez	Kilis	High school	Registered (Temporary Protection)	Unemployed
25	Ahmed	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Gaziantep_05	Syrian	24	M	Jarablus	Gaziantep	Primary school	Unregistered (Lost registration through border crossing)	Informal/daily employment
26	Mahmoud	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Gaziantep_06	Syrian	32	M	Tel Rfat	Gaziantep	High school	Non-transferable registration (Istanbul ID)	Informal/daily employment
27	Amira	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Gaziantep_07	Syrian	42	F	Jarablus	Gaziantep	No Education	Partially registered (Mixed family status)	Informal/daily employment
28	Ahmed	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_01	Syrian	32	M	Aleppo	İzmir	High School	Unregistered (Lost registration through border crossing)	Employed (working at auto-cleaning, in the past human smuggling)
29	Ayşe	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_02	Syrian	43	F	Hama	İzmir	Secondary School	Under temporary protection	Unemployed (housewife)
30	Azize	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_03	Palestinian	37	F	Gazza	İzmir	Associate Degree	Humanitarian residency	Employed (working at a café and domestic cleaning)

No	Pseud.	Interview code	Nationality	Age	Gender	City of origin	Interview Location	Level of education	Legal status	Work situation
31	Yusuf	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_04	Sudanese	38	M	Khartoum	İzmir	Secondary School	International Protection	Employed (selling phones/ human smuggling)
32	Ali	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_05	Sudanese	59	M	El Obeid	İzmir	High School	Irregular status	Unemployed
33	Alide	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_06	Ethiopian	22	F	Harar	İzmir	High School	Irregular status	Unemployed
34	Abdullah	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_İzmir_07	Palestinian	34	M	Gazza	İzmir	High School	Humanitarian residency	Unemployed (sometimes construction)
35	Alan	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Van_01	Afghanistan	27	M	Mazar Sharif	Van	No Education	Unregistered	Employed (salesperson)
36	Rashid	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Van_02	Afghanistan	33	M	Bamyam	Van	-	Unregistered	Employed (shepherd)
37	Fawad	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Van_03	Afghanistan	28	M	-	Van	-	Unregistered	Employed (industrial worker)
38	Fazal	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Van_04	Afghanistan	21	M	-	Van	Secondary School	Unregistered	Employed (construction worker)
39	Ali	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Van_05	Afghanistan	36	M	Bamyam	Van	No Education	Unregistered	Employed (shepherd)
40	Sanjar	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Iğdır_06	Afghanistan	28	M	-	Iğdır	No Education	Unregistered	Employed (shepherd)
41	Sarwar	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Iğdır_07	Afghanistan	42	M	Mazar Sharif	Iğdır	-	Unregistered	Employed (shepherd - home helper)
42	Reza	GAPs_SRII_WP7_Micro_Iğdır_08	Afghanistan	44	M	Kabul	Iğdır	-	Unregistered	Employed (shepherd)

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- University of Nigeria (Nigeria)
- Bilim Organization for Research and Social Studies (Afghanistan)
- Uniwersytet Warszawski (Poland)

- Migration Matters EV (Germany)
- University of Sousse (Tunisia)
- SPIA UG (Germany)
- University of Glasgow (UK, Associated Partner)