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ARTICLE

From Iran to the Netherlands, and everywhere in between

Irregular migration and human smuggling from Iran to the Netherlands (1988–1989 and 2009–2010)

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Abstract

A migrant's journey is no linear trajectory from A to B. It is a fragmented and complex move over different regions with alternating periods of mobility and immobility. This article researches the complex dynamics of irregular migration from Iran to the Netherlands, and everywhere in between. Through a historical comparison of the life stories of Iranian asylum seekers in the Netherlands in two time periods (1988–1989 and 2009–2010), it studies the routes they took, their relations with human smugglers, and their interactions with immigration policies and border managements along the way. It shows migrants' and smugglers' flexibility and capacity to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Migration politics and border controls, along with their increasing limitations on legal migration channels, are indeed crucial in the understanding of irregular migration practices and the ever-growing involvement of facilitating services. Through a combination of this migration policy research and the migration trajectory research, the paper explores these dynamics and the interactions between migrants, smugglers, and state policies in every phase of their journey from Iran to the Netherlands, and everywhere in between.

Keywords: Irregular Migration; Migration Trajectory; Human Smuggling; Immigration and Asylum Policy

1. Introduction

The central question of migration studies of why people choose to migrate continues to occupy researchers' mind.[1] A popular distinction is still made between voluntary and forced migration, that defines refugees as migrants who leave their country of nationality due to a genuine fear of persecution.[2] In other words "migration is forced when staying is not an option."[3]

But the question remains: can you really discern voluntary from forced migration? De Haas et al. posit in this regard that all migrants see their agency as limited to some extent,

[1] Hein de Haas, "The Internal Dynamics of Migration Processes: A Theoretical Inquiry," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1587–1617; Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3–4.

[2] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 31–33; UN General Assembly, *Convention relating to the status of refugees,* 28 July 1951, United Nations.

[3] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 33.

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while many refugees lack the resources to flee in the first place.[4] Agency and freedom of choice are thus hardly clear-cut factors to distinguish migrants forced to leave a country from those who move voluntarily.

Moreover, motivations for movement are always mixed, complex, diverse, and thus not reducible to purely economic or political factors.[5] Rather, voluntary and non-voluntary migrants find themselves at opposite ends of the same continuum.[6] The distinction is therefore an artificial construction; one that cannot be upheld in practice.[7] Nonetheless, such views still form the basis of many rules and legislations and prompt policy makers to prevent migrants from entering their territory in the first place; despite people's fundamental right to cross international borders when seeking protection, irregular migration is thus often discouraged on the basis of this artificial distinction.[8]

The rising use of terms related to "illegality" to refer to irregular migration confirms a shift in domestic and international mobility politics.[9] Political salience on the topic has indeed grown significantly, despite the relative stability of global migration numbers since 1945.[10] While evidence thus refutes a sudden increase in refugees, this is perceived differently by politics and media, who link immigration to issues of national safety and crime.[11] Managing these arrivals should therefore allow these states to distinguish between "genuine" and "bogus" migrants.[12]

The history of irregular migration thus coincides with the history of state attempts to control the composition of their populations. These state actors try to gain control over who is part of their nation through a monopoly of the legitimate means of movement within their territory.[13] Irregular migration should therefore be understood as a by-product of migration control: as their access to formal migration channels is blocked, irregular migrants resort to clandestine migration tactics outside the "legal provisions of entry and residence."[14]

Strict migration policies thus tend to create illegality rather than prevent it.[15] Scholars therefore argue against the use of such terms. After all, illegality is a simplistic concept that denies the complexity and ambiguousness of irregular migration, or the fluidity of migrants who cross various legal environments.[16]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Cetta Mainwaring and Noelle Brigden, "Beyond the Border: Clandestine Migration Journeys," *Geopolitics* 21, no. 2 (2016): 246; Etienne Piguet, "Theories of voluntary and forced migration," in *Routledge Handbook of environmental Migration and Displacement,* ed. Robert McLeman and François Gemenne (London: Routledge, 2018), 17.

[6] Stephan Scheel and Vicki Squire, "Forced migrants as 'illegal' migrants," in *The Oxford handbook of refugee and forced migration studies,* ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 243–262.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 32–33; Scheel and Squire, "Forced migrants as 'illegal' migrants"; UN General Assembly, *Convention relating to the status of refugees,* 28 July 1951, United Nations.

[9] Scheel and Squire, "Forced migrants as 'illegal' migrants", 192–193.

[10] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 1–3; Hans-Joerg Albrecht, "Fortress Europe? – Controlling Illegal Migration," *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice* 10, no. 1(2002): 5; Sonja Fransen and Hein de Haas, "Trends and Patterns of Global Refugee Migration," *Population and Development Review* 48, no. 1 (2021): 98.

[11] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 3; Achilli, "The human smuggling industry," 6; Albrecht, "Fortress Europe?," 5; Lorena Gazzoti, "The 'War on Smugglers' and the expansion of the border apparatus," in *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling,* ed. Max Gallien and Florian Weigand (London: Routlegde, 2021), 444-446.

[12] Albrecht, "Fortress Europe?", 5–12; Scheel and Squire, "Forced migrants as 'illegal' migrants," 192–193.

[13] Gabriel Echeverría, *Towards a systematic theory of irregular migration* (Cham: Springer Open, 2020), 15.

[14] Anna Triandafyllidou, ed., *Irregular migration in Europe. Myths and realities* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2; Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 244; Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 33.

[15] Triandafyllidou, *Irregular migration in Europe. Myths and realities*, 2; Luigi Achilli, "The human smuggling industry: nuances and complexities" (working paper, Center for Law & Human Behaviour, The University of Texas at El Paso, 2018), 6; Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 244–246.

[16] Anna Triandafyllidou, "Migrant Smuggling: Novel Insights and Implications for Migration Control Policies," *Annals* 676 (2018): 12–13; Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 244–246.

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However, this illegality does reference the crucial interaction between migrants and state regulations.[17] As this central relationship cannot be ignored, this paper opts for the generally preferred "irregular migration." While this term still refers to this type of mobility as an act through the violation of a rule, it does not define the migrant as criminal or illegal.[18]

Moreover, the concept of irregular migration captures the modalities and variations within the topic: migrants can either enter a territory irregularly, by not being in the possession of the correct documentation, or they can become irregular migrants by overstaying their initially reglementary visa.[19] This article focuses on the former, following migrants who crossed the Dutch border irregularly, either clandestinely or by presenting false or falsified documents.

State attempts to discourage irregular migration by restricting their policies also contribute to the increasing use of facilitating services: when border controls are heightened but causes for migration continue, migrants resort to other tactics and help.[20] This is not a new phenomenon: smugglers have been crucial in managing migration flows throughout history.[21] They did, however, only recently gain a negative reputation, with media and politics portraying their activities as criminal and violent, exploiting vulnerable migrants.[22]

Since the 2010s, a new body of scholarship has taken distance from the conventional, state-centered, criminality-based perspective that highlighted this dichotomous contraposition between the brutality of smuggling networks and the vulnerability of migrants. These scholars argue against fear-driven and simplistic descriptions of migrant smuggling as a fundamental cause for irregular migration, rather than a reaction to or result of border control policies.[23] Instead, they emphasize the complexity of the phenomenon and its socio-economic, political, and ethnic realities.[24]

Migrant smuggling must be seen as a socio-economic transaction for which trust and community ties are essential.[25] Indeed, the act of human smuggling mostly relies on negotiations and trade. Not all migrants or smugglers perceive such activities to be illegal, nor necessarily exploitative; They rather view it as a service made otherwise inaccessible by global policies.[26] Recent studies have therefore focused on the complex relationships between migrants and smugglers. Not only can the initial motivation for smugglers range from altruism to exploitation, scholars have shown how these relationships may also be based on or eventually turn into friendships, romantic affairs, or other kinds of relations.[27]

Instead of passive victims, migrants are thus active agents in their migration journey: they are not just pushed by the conditions of their place of residence, but make conscious decisions based on several factors. Crucial in this process is their social capital, or mutual

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Alice Bloch and Milena Chimienti, "Irregular migration in a globalizing world," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 8 (2011): 1276.

[19] Ilse van Liempt, "A critical insight into Europe's criminalisation of human smuggling," *European Policy Analysis* 3 (2016): 2.

[20] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 35.

[21] Gabriella Sanchez, "Critical perspectives on clandestine migration facilitation: an overview of migrant smuggling research," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 1 (2017): 12.

[22] Ahmet Içduygu, "Decentring migrant smuggling: reflections on the Eastern Mediterranean route to Europe," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 14 (2021): 3293.

[23] Ibid., 3297.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Katie Kuschminder and Anna Triandafyllidou, "Smuggling, trafficking and extortion: new conceptual challenges and policy changes on the Libyan route to Europe," *Antipode* 52, no. 1 (2020): 213–214.

[26] Özge Biner, "Crossing the mountain and negotiating the border: human smuggling in eastern Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 59 (2018): 90; Achilli, "The human smuggling industry," 10.

[27] Gabriella Sanchez, *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings* (London: Routledge, 2014); Sine Plambech, "Sex, Deportation and Rescue: Economies of Migration among Nigerian Sex Workers," *Feminist Economics* 23, no. 3 (2017); Wendy Vogt, *Lives in Transit. Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

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social ties and relationships to others.[28] Responding to Akcapar's call to expand this research beyond the asylum country, the present article recognizes the importance of social capital in migrant-smuggler relationships throughout the migration journey.[29]

It more specifically contributes to this scholarship exploring the interactions between state policies, migrants, and smuggling networks through a specific geographical case study. The article studies irregular migration from Iran to the Netherlands, focusing on the routes followed, the modes of transportation taken, and the growing involvement of facilitating services in the process. Through this, the study engages with scholarship on the vicious circle of irregular migration and human smuggling encouraged by the tightening of border controls.[30]

1.1 Approach: The migration journey

Migration is a social process and should be studied as such.[31] It is not a one-off, direct move between countries of origin and destination after a momentous decision to leave.[32] Migrants make multiple choices before, during, and after the migration trajectory, according to which they actively develop their journey.[33] This is especially true for clandestine refugee migration, where there is less time to consciously draw up a detailed plan.

A migration journey is thus fragmented and non-linear, rather than a singular move between two distinct areas on a map. In reality, these arrows are not straight lines from origin to destination.[34] It is often a process of trial and error, with periods of mobility and immobility.

Furthermore, the migration experience cannot be limited to the actual crossing of borders, as the journeys to these frontiers hold just as much significance for migrants.[35] Transit countries are thus not insignificant time-in-betweens, but deserve equal attention.[36] Migrants' established interpersonal relations and social contacts can indeed not be reduced to a single space, but exceed the social life in countries of origin and settlement.[37]

The entire journey has important consequences for both migrants and the countries they pass through.[38] It impacts not only a migrant's world view and attitude, but also the physical and economic landscape of all traveled areas.[39] We should therefore move away from the idea of migration as a departure-arrival movement and towards an open paradigm that considers all spatial and temporal aspects of the phenomenon.[40]

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[28] Sebnem Koser Akcapar, "Re-Thinking Migrants' Networks and Social Capital," *International Migration* 48, no. 2 (2010): 161–162.

[29] Ibid., 162.

[30] Triandafyllidou, "Migrant Smuggling," 214.

[31] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 44.

[32] Ibid.; Joris Schapendonk, Matthieu Bolay and Janine Dahinden, "The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey'. De-exceptionalising mobility in the context of West African trajectories," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 14 (2021): 3243–3244.

[33] Özge Bilgili, Kim Caarls and Sonja Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time: a study among sub-Saharan African migrants in Europe," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 14 (2021): 3310; Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden, "The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey,'" 3243–3244.

[34] Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 244–247; Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden, "The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey,'" 3243–3244; Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3310; Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 27.

[35] Ibid., 243; Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3310.

[36] Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3310; Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 243–247.

[37] Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3312; Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden, "The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey,'" 3246.

[38] Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 245.

[39] Ibid., 247.

[40] Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden, "The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey,'" 3246.

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This article thus engages with recent migration journey research that openly challenges typical migration categorization and terminology, as (mis)perceptions indeed often begin with the language used by politics and media.[41] Such policy-inspired categories say little about the social groups they describe and are often simplistic and generalizing, without considering the complexity of migration experiences.[42] Rarely do they recognize that many migrants move back and forth between categories, or that their statuses are multiple and changeable.[43]

Still, some form of categorization and specific terminology remains crucial for research purposes, as this allows us to study phenomena and discern certain patterns.[44] Language thus indeed matters, as long as we realize that none of the concepts employed are strictly neutral or objective.[45]

While "country of origin" may have some essentialist undertones, it is used in this article as a synonym for Iran.[46] All participating migrants hold the Iranian nationality and explicitly name the country as the physical start of their migration to the Netherlands. However, this does not impede the possibility of migrants having multiple locations they consider as their "place of origin"; it simply designates Iran as the geographical starting point of this particular journey.[47]

As the article researches a very specific trajectory—from Iran to the Netherlands—it considers all the countries in between as transit regions for this particular journey. However, in accordance with migration trajectory research, these transit countries are not seen simply as insignificant time-in-betweens. Thus, this article focuses on the potential impact of the region's migration policies and socio-political contexts on the migration journey.[48]

Finally, this article does not refer to the Netherlands as the destination country, as it is impossible to determine for sure whether that is true.[49] Several migrants revealed that the country was not their envisioned aim and some even fled the Netherlands before their case concluded. Moreover, a destination is not set in stone.[50] The Netherlands is therefore referred to as an asylum country, as all migrants have applied for refugee status.

Moreover, not naming the Netherlands as the destination country is also a conscious choice and an attempt to dismantle the Eurocentric perspective that plagues (irregular) migration studies. Western countries are often presented as the ultimate goal for many non-Western migrants.[51] This has contributed to the underrepresentation of all places outside Western Europe in migration research, despite overwhelming evidence that the majority of international migrants move to neighboring countries.

Along with this Eurocentric focus, irregular migration studies and human smuggling research are also typically biased towards the present.[52] This article therefore adopts a comparative historical approach, studying the socio-historical context of irregular migration, smuggling practices, and their interactions with mobility policies.[53] Historical approaches to migration studies emphasize the great variation within migration practices across the

[41] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 21.
[42] Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 189–190.
[43] Ibid., 191.
[44] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 21.
[45] Ibid., 28; Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 191.
[46] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 30; Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border," 245–246.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3310.
[49] Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 30.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3310.
[52] Fransen and de Haas, "Trends and Patterns of Global Refugee Migration."
[53] Içduygu, "Decentring migrant smuggling," 3304; Theodore Baird, *Human Smuggling in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2017), 4-7.

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world. Rather than being universal, migration and human smuggling are inherently linked to political, economic, social, cultural, and legal factors that differ according to the regions and time periods under study. A historical perspective on the subject supports a thorough study of the socio-historical context in which certain migration trajectories are embedded, and acknowledges the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomena.[54] Studying the same migration journey (Iran to the Netherlands) in two different time frames (1988–1989 and 2009–2010) allows this article to fully explore the importance of the socio-historical context and its economic, social, political, and cultural influences.

Several scholars have therefore advocated such historical approaches to irregular migration studies, highlighting the historical context of migrant narratives, the changing socio-political factors conditioning smuggling and migration within various countries, the various migration regimes, and the centrality of socio-historical ties.[55] However, such research often employs a global comparative perspective, studying specific phases of the migration journey in multiple regions. This paper, on the other hand, opts for a chronological comparison of two key moments in recent Iranian emigration history.

Through a focus on an understudied, yet crucial region in Middle Eastern irregular migration, the aim here is to empirically contribute to this field of study and shed light on the regional diversity of the entire migration journey. This way, the paper places well-established research on irregular migration policies within a migration trajectory perspective by studying migration and smuggling practices throughout the entire journey in an attempt to move away from a Eurocentric and linear bias. Rather than merely focusing on the situation at the borders of—typically European—asylum countries, migrants are followed from their decision to migrate to their asylum request in the Netherlands. Discarding a state-centered perspective, it thereby acknowledges the agency of both migrants and smugglers, and studies their interactions with migration policies in Iran, the Netherlands, and everywhere in between.

1.2 Sources and methodology

This research was achieved through the use of a private archive that was transferred to the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam.[56] The archive was created by a Dutch lawyer who specialized in asylum law between 1988 and 2016. He was known for his methodology, which stressed the importance of life stories.[57] He thus insisted on taking the time to conduct lengthy interviews with asylum seekers, which he included in his folders. He primarily represented clients whose first request had been denied.[58]

All the files were constructed in a similar fashion and generally contained documents on the migrants' biographical records, journeys to and arrival in the Netherlands, and their asylum applications. This was then followed by one or more interviews by the Dutch immigration service (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, IND) and the decision by the Ministry of Justice. The lawyer also included his personal, hand-written notes as well as the complete typed version of any preparatory conversations.[59]

The article opts for two case studies: from 1988 to 1989 and from 2009 to 2010. This amounts to a total of thirty-one files, concerning thirty-nine individuals whose stories allow us to understand the complex dynamics of irregular migration. Gadi Benezer considers

[54] Theodore Baird, "Theoretical Approaches to Human Smuggling" (DISS working paper, 2013), 16–17.

[55] Sanchez, *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings;* Kyle and Koslowski, *Global Human Smuggling. Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Ilse Van Liempt, *Navigating Borders: inside perspectives on the process of human smuggling into the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); David Spener, "Mexican migrant-smuggling: A cross-border cottage industry," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 5 (2004).

[56] Archive P.B.Ph.M. Bogaers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

[57] Jurrien Dekker and Bas Senstius, "De methode-bogaers," *De Groene Amsterdammer,* April 23, 1997.

[58] Personal interview with Pieter Bogaers in Bussum-South, October 12, 2018.

[59] Archive P.B.Ph.M. Bogaers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

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such life stories to be an accessible and powerful tool to bring the historian closest to the actual migration experience. After all, it allows individuals to address the different layers of their story and combine outer with inner facts.[60]

Nonetheless, Marita Eastmond argues for a distinction between life as it is lived, experienced, recounted in textual form, and interpreted by both the researcher and subsequent reader. It should therefore be noted that the experiences in such life stories are never objective or correct representations of the past. This study's sources, too, should be approached with a critical attitude, while also remembering the author and their intentions.[61] In this case, the documents were used in legal proceedings with the goal of obtaining a refugee status. The storytellers therefore construct their narrative in a way that offers them the greatest chance of success. Additionally, the stories were written down by authorities or a lawyer, after being interpreted by a translator.

This discourse of recognition is acknowledged throughout the research, with critical discourse analysis ensuring an analytic reading and interpretation.[62] Despite the above mentioned comments, the narrative approach to these textual documents offers the opportunity to observe details on migration not readily available elsewhere.[63] Through comparing life stories from different angles, certain narratives emerge that shine light on the circumstances in which irregular migrants travel from the Middle East to Europe. This way, the article discerns trends within and across the research periods. Reading the observed evolution against the backdrop of political, economic, and social historical events allows for an assessment of the impact of context, public debates, and discourses on migration strategies.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Historical background: Emigration from Iran

Twentieth-century Iran was a country of origin, transit, and destination for migrants of various backgrounds. This attraction was mostly due to its geopolitical, demographic, and economic assets. Its location at the cross point of North and South, as well as East and West, made the region a popular meeting and transit point.[64] Iran therefore hosted one of the largest refugee groups in the Middle East, while simultaneously producing a major Iranian diaspora themselves.[65]

Emigration took on major proportions in the second half of the twentieth century. This recent migration history is generally divided in two stages, with the revolution of 1979 acting as a breaking point. Both periods showed different kinds of migration, generating different types of migrants.[66]

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's drive for industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s increased the need for skilled workers. However, the small number of universities could not host the growing number of high school graduates, prompting a rise in overseas

[60] Gadi Benezer, "Searching for Directions: conceptual and methodological challenges in researching refugee journeys," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 313.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma. An inquiry into the condition of victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 222.

[63] Marita Eastmond, "Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in forced migration research," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 249.

[64] Shirin Hakimzadeh, "Iran: a vast diaspora abroad and millions of refugees at home," Migration Policy Institute, accessed December 15, 2021, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/iran-vast-diaspora-abroad-and-millions-refugees-home.

[65] "Iran (the Islamic Republic of)," International Organization for Migration, accessed December 15, 2021, https://www.iom.int/countries/iran-islamic-republic.

[66] Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher, ed., *The Iranian diaspora. Challenges, negotiations and transformations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 25–26.

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education. Before 1979, the majority of Iranian emigrants were thus students, who would eventually return to the country.[67]

Iranian migration increased significantly in the following decades, with the largest collective emigration in Iranian history resulting from the events of 1979 that ended the industrializing Pahlavi dynasty. These migrants were mostly exiles, political refugees, and asylum seekers, creating a new profile of Iranian migrants.[68] The political suppression, violation of human rights, and censorship by the new regime catapulted Iranian nationals to the top ten of asylum applicants in industrialized countries.[69] The case studies in this paper (1988–1989 and 2009–2010) took place within this post-1979 emigration context, as this exodus after the Iranian Revolution lasted well beyond 1979.

While many political opponents of the new Islamic regime had left the country by 1988, emigration in this period was fueled by two critical events: the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. This prompted a new wave of emigration related to the political and social situation in Iran.[70] By adopting 1988 as the start of this research, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the resulting flow of young men fleeing military services are excluded, while still embedding the study in a politically tumultuous context.

In this period, the UNHCR counted approximately 110,000 Iranian refugees, most of whom settled in close-by countries, North America, and Europe. The United States was the most popular country for asylum, followed by the United Kingdom, Greece, and Italy in Europe and Pakistan, India, and Turkey in the Iranian surroundings.[71]

The second case study similarly involves a critical event in recent Iranian political history: in 2009, the largest popular demonstration since the revolution took place. This so-called "Green Movement" contested the presidential election of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over the reformer Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The apparent manipulation of the results by the former spiked the largest popular revolt in the country since 1979, leading to state repression and a subsequent increase in the number of refugees fleeing Iran.[72]

Between 2009 and 2010, the UNHCR noted around 171,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Iran, of whom 16,000 would apply for asylum in the European Union.[73] Similar to 1988 and 1989, Iranians mostly fled to neighboring countries, North America, and Western Europe. The region of Oceania constituted a new addition to this list, although these numbers remained modest. In this period, Iranians mostly migrated to Germany, followed by the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, and Sweden in Europe; Canada and the United States in North America; and Iraq and Turkey in the Iranian surroundings.[74,75]

A significant portion of these Iranians settled in the Netherlands. Since the 1980s, migrants from Iran have become one of the country's largest refugee populations.[76]

[67] Ibid., 26.

[68] Hakimzadeh, "Iran."

[69] Sebnem Koser Akcapar, "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites becoming Christians in Turkey," *The International Migration Review* 40, no. 4 (2006): 823.

[70] Nader Vahabi, "The origin of the different waves of Iranian migration in France," *Cultural and Religious Studies* 4, no. 8 (2016): 477–478.

[71] "Refugee Data Finder," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accessed on December 12, 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=HYJh9f.

[72] Karimi, *The Iranian Green Movement of 2009,* 1–8.

[73] "Refugee Data Finder," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accessed on December 12, 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=9VJFr4; "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex – annual aggregated data (rounded)," Eurostat, accessed on December 13, 2021, https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do.

[74] Ibid.

[75] As the UNHR did not have access to data from all countries, these findings should be approached carefully. This need for caution is also enhanced by the variations in measuring systems across Europe: per case or individual.

[76] Jaco Dagevos and Edith Dourelijn, eds., *Vluchtelingengroepen in Nederland. Over de integratie van Afghaanse, Iraakse, Iraanse en Somalische migranten* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011), 1–2.

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According to the Dutch Bureau of Statistics, Iranian citizens made up 8 percent of asylum applications in the Netherlands between 1988 and 1989.[77] While this number had decreased by 2009, 5 percent of all cases still concerned refugees from Iran.[78]

In both periods, the Netherlands was an important asylum country for Iranian refugees in the European Union. It is estimated that in the late 1980s, one in ten ended up applying for Dutch refuge. By the early 1990s, over 30 percent of Iranians who fled to Europe ended up applying for asylum in the Netherlands.[79] This trend continued in 2009 and 2010, when 7–8 percent of all Iranian asylum applications were submitted to the Dutch authorities.[80]

2.2 Social profile: A prosopography of the researched migrants

This article is based on a total of thirty-one files spread over two research periods. It studies twenty asylum seekers in eighteen files dating from 1988 to 1989, and nineteen life stories described in thirteen cases from 2009 to 2010. The difference in the number of files and individuals is due to the fact that several migrants applied for asylum along with their partner or children, whose cases were therefore handled together.

Table 1: overview of researched files

	1988–1989	2009–2010	Total
Files	18	13	**31**
Individuals	20	19	**39**
Women	3	11	**14**
Men	17	8	**25**

As with all historical sources, these documents should be explored with caution. Several elements, inherent to the juridical nature of the files, may cause bias. After all, only a very specific type of migration from Iran is tackled: irregular border crossings from Iran to the Netherlands. Migrants that never made it to the Netherlands are automatically excluded, making it a study of only successful irregular migration to Western Europe. Furthermore, the fact that this article's central case studies involve two political events affects the profile and flight narrative of the smuggled migrants.

Due to these biases, it is important to investigate how this set of sources relates to general statistical data on Iranian asylum seekers. The next section therefore examines how the social profile of this study's protagonists relates to Iranians in the Netherlands and elsewhere.[81] This way, the present paper reflects on who these smuggled migrants are and why they fled Iran.

A first wave of Iranian refugees in the 1980s consisted mostly of young, unmarried men from the urban middle classes, who typically enjoyed an education. This wave was generally comprised of Iranians of Persian (Farsi) descent, although the Iranian diaspora also included

[77] "Asielverzoeken; nationaliteit, vanaf 1975 [1988–1991]," Statline, accessed on December 14, 2021, https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/80059ned/table?ts=1641802765522.

[78] Asielverzoeken; nationaliteit, vanaf 1975 [2009–2010]," Statline, accessed on December 14, 2021, https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/80059ned/table?ts=1641802765522.

[79] Tetty Havinga and Anita Böcker, "Asielmigratie naar Nederland. Patronen van herkomst en bestemming," *Justitiële verkenningen* 24, no. 9 (1998): 29; "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex – annual aggregated data (rounded)," Eurostat, accessed on December 13, 2021, https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Myriam Carlier, Jan Dumolyn and Koenraad Verboven, *Prosopography approaches and applications. A handbook* (Oxford: Occasional Publications UPR, 2007), 37.

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Azeris, Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Armenians. Iranian refugees were often perceived as English-speaking and familiar with Western European lifestyle.[82]

This corresponds with the prosopography in this research: the studied migrants between 1988 and 1989 were mostly young, unmarried, non-practicing Shiite men of Farsi descent and urban middle class. All had completed their secondary education. Five reported having continued their academic training, two of whom were still students at the time of their journey.

The second half of the 1990s showed a slight change in the social profile of Iranian refugees. Although they still enjoyed higher education than the average asylum seeker in the Netherlands, the percentage of urban middle-class citizens decreased slightly. Furthermore, both the average age and the number of women grew.[83]

These trends are again somewhat replicated in sources from 2009 and 2010. The subjects were slightly older—yet still relatively young—unmarried men and women from the urban middle class. With four individuals over forty, they were older at their moment of flight than refugees from 1988 and 1989. Studies on migration in the Netherlands after 2000 confirm this, stating that Iranians typically tended to be of higher age than their Iraqi, Somali, and Afghan peers.[84]

Migration from Iran is primarily described as an elite migration. Iranian asylum seekers who fled after the revolution are therefore thought to originate in the economic, political, and cultural upper classes.[85] This elite nature is often ascribed to political refugee migration in general, where a first wave of highly educated migrants is expected to be followed by less skilled compatriots fleeing violence or poverty, or meeting family members abroad.[86] However, the Iranian case is thought to be a modest exception to this trend, with even recent migration groups showing proportionally high levels of education.[87]

All researched migrants indeed claimed to have obtained secondary education. Moreover, it should be noted that the researched sources adopt Dutch concepts of education, and therefore neglect the different structure of Iranian schooling. It is thus crucial to understand that all asylum seekers from both periods completed not only the legally imposed secondary education, but the non-compulsory final three years as well.[88]

However, university degrees are less common in the files. In each research period, five migrants reported having started higher education, two of whom obtained their diploma. This can partly be explained by the outflow of highly skilled Iranians immediately after the 1979 revolution. In an attempt to de-Westernize Iranian schooling and as part of the "cultural revolution", the government decided to close all universities in 1980.[89] In response to the consistent purge of secular students, professors, and opponents, many decided to either not return from their studies abroad or leave the country.[90]

A large proportion of highly educated migrants in the first wave thus students already abroad, and therefore do not appear in the statistics on irregular entries. Moreover, many professors fled in the first years after the revolution, which might explain the striking

[82] Hakimzadeh, "Iran."

[83] Ibid.; Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen en Racismebestrijding, *Iraanse migratie naar Belgie. Belangrijke trends en vooruitzichten* (Federaal Migratiecentrum Myria, 2005), https://www.myria.be/nl/publicaties/iraanse-migratie-naar-belgie-trends-en-vooruitzichten; "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex – annual aggregated data (rounded)," Eurostat, accessed on December 13, 2021, https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do.

[84] Dagevos and Dourelijn, *Vluchtelingengroepen in Nederland*, 259.

[85] Ibid., 13.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 86.

[88] "Education in Iran: Opportunities and Challenges," Fanack, accessed on December 18, 2021, https://fanack.com/education/education-in-iran/.

[89] Akbar Torbat, "The brain drain from Iran to the United States," *The Middle East Journal* 56, no. 2 (2002): 275; Mohammad Chaichian, "The New Phase of Globalization and Brain Drain," *International Journal of Social Economic* 39, no. 1/2 (2012): 19.

[90] Ibid., 277.

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absence of highly educated applicants between 1988 and 1989: the second wave of Iranian refugee migration centered a different type of migrant.

Indeed, several migrants from both research periods reported having financial difficulties in Iran. While the majority claimed to hold a more comfortable financial position and commented on their parents' prestigious status, these exceptions cannot be ignored. In combination with the previous findings on the level of education, this demonstrates the necessity to nuance the idea of the Iranian exodus as an elite migration.

These findings must then again be interpreted with caution. To fully understand these prosopographic results, we have to consider the historical context of the researched sources. Both case studies are set in politically turbulent years. The Green Movement in 2009 caused an increase in politically-motivated flight narratives, which could explain the divergence from literature arguing that migration profiles should have moved away from political towards more social and economic refugees by then.

2.2.1 Increasing number of women

The number of women is the most striking difference in the chronological comparison, as they hold a comfortable majority in the 2009–2010 files. Only eight of the nineteen migrants in this period were men. Although the female proportion of the Iranian diaspora indeed gained in numbers, this overrepresentation does not correspond with demographic data available on the Iranian refugee population in general or in the Netherlands specifically.

However, several cultural and political factors did indeed impact women's migration decision making and may explain the rising numbers of female refugees from Iran.[91] In the twenty years that passed between this study's first and second research period, many changes occurred in the field of irregular migration. A possible explanation as to why women are increasingly fleeing Iran is twofold.

Firstly, traveling in general became easier and entailed less risk than in the 1980s. This relates to several developments in border regions and transit countries.[92] Even more important, however, was the increasing communication between Iran and its growing diaspora: this growth in social capital facilitated the move of all migrants. Real-time communication eased an exchange of information on the asylum country and the travel circumstances. The growing diaspora and social networks in Europe, as a result of thirty years of migration since 1979, combined with the diminishing travel risks along the way and increasing modes of communication, encouraged women and their male relatives to leave the country.[93]

The changing social and demographic context in Iran itself is the second important element in explaining the increase in female Iranian refugees in Europe. From 1996 onwards, the country experienced a decrease in natality, followed by a drop in population growth. Within the span of barely ten years, women went from having approximately 6.2 children to an average of a mere 2.5 children.[94] This was partly due to the growing number of young, single women living in cities, a result of the general rural flight, higher education level, higher marriage age, and easier access to contraception.[95]

[91] James Barry and Sharon Pickering, "Women Fleeing Iran: why women leave Iran and seek asylum in Australia," *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 19, no. 3 (2013): 80; Anjali Fleury, Marta Foresti and Tam O'Neil, *Women on the Move: migration, gender, equality and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (policy paper, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2016): 4, https://odi.org/en/publications/women-on-the-move-migration-gender-equality-and-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Pooya Azadi, Mohsen Mesgaran and Farzaneh Roudi, "Iran's Population Dynamics and Demographic Window of Opportunity" (working paper, Stanford Iran 2040 Project, Stanford University, 2017), 3, https://iranian-studies.stanford.edu/iran-2040-project/publications/irans-population-dynamics-and-demographic-window-opportunity.

[95] Ibid., 8; Goli Rezai-Rashti, "The Politics of Gender Segregation and Women's Access to Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran: the interplay of repression and resistance," *Gender and Education* 27, no. 5 (2015): 473.

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Meanwhile however, Ayatollah Khomeini abolished the family law established in 1967 for its incompatibility with Islamic rules. This put an end to several women's rights achieved during the Pahlavi era.[96] While the reformist presidency of Khatami (1997–2005) had an eye for women's activism, the fundamentalist Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) and his traditional interpretation of Islamic law enforced new restrictive legislation on women's rights.[97]

Despite abovementioned changes in the fields of education, natality, and marriage, gender inequality thus persisted.[98] Iranian women therefore increasingly participated in protests following several political and social crises.[99] Continued discontent with their social, cultural, and political situation, combined with their growing political involvement and the changing migration context, prompted more women to leave the country.

3. Fleeing with migrant smugglers

Since the 1990s, more irregular migrants use the services of smugglers. As legal entry to Europe has become increasingly difficult, these numbers continued to rise.[100] Iranians, in particular, are thought to often flee with the help of smuggling agencies.

Indeed, all but one of the migrants in this study employed facilitating services in their flight to the Netherlands. Migrant smuggling thus constitutes the second major focus of this paper. In the following sections, we explore the contact and relationship between the migrant and the smuggler.

Public discourses generally describe this relation in dichotomous terms, highlighting the brutality and criminality of smuggling networks against the vulnerability of migrants.[101] Scholarship on the matter has actively contested such discourses, however, instead describing a very diverse playing field: human smuggling can range from acts of altruism to attempts at exploitation, or from occasional one-person smugglers to more elaborate networks. More often than not, trust and cooperation are crucial aspects of the migrant-smuggler relationship.[102]

3.1 Initial contact

Most migrants from both research periods claimed their initial contact with smugglers happened relatively easily, especially inside Iran. They all cited friends, relatives, or acquaintances who referred them to trustworthy smugglers or advised them on who to contact. Choosing a smuggler is therefore to be understood as a referral-based activity built on introductions made within the migrant's own community.[103] The migrant's social capital and community connections thus seem of critical importance in the early stages of flight.[104]

Rather than transnational criminal networks, migrant smuggling should therefore be perceived as a primarily community-based activity: "the choice of a smuggler starts within the

[96] Marziyeh Bakhshizadeh, "Women's Rights in Iran and CEDAW," in *Changing gender norms in Islam between Reason and Revelation,* ed. Marziyeh Bakhshizadeh (Berlin: Burich UniPress Ltd., 2018), 67.

[97] Ibid., 69–72.

[98] Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire," *Middle East Report* 241 (2006): 23.

[99] Barry and Pickering, "Women Fleeing Iran," 92.

[100] Van Liempt, "Mensensmokkel naar Nederland: aannames, perspecties en effecten," *Migrantenstudies* 23, no. 1 (2007): 36; Louise Shelley, *Human smuggling and trafficking into Europe* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2014); Michael Jandl, "Irregular Migration, Human Smuggling and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *International Migration Review* 41, no. 2 (2007): 298.

[101] Sheldon Zhang, Gabriella Sanchez and Luigi Achilli, "Crimes of solidarity in mobility: Alternative views on migration smuggling," *Annals* AAPSS, no. 676 (2018): 7.

[102] Jeroen Doomernik and David Kyle, "Organized migrant smuggling and state control: conceptual and policy challenges," *Special Issue of Journal of International Migration and Integration* 5, no. 3 (2014); Achilli, "The human smuggling industry," 5.

[103] Majidi, "Community Dimensions of Smuggling," 104–106.

[104] Akcapar, "Re-thinking migrant's networks and social capital," 178.

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community."[105] After all, trust and reliability are crucial for migrants and smugglers, who both wish to minimize risk.[106] Since this chain of trust is strongest within one's own community, both parties rely mostly on kinship and community ties.[107]

However, these community ties weaken as the distance from the country of origin—and therefore the community—increases.[108] In the case of those who fled Iran without help, finding facilitators in transit countries indeed proved to be a greater challenge. There, they were generally tipped off by fellow (irregular) migrants.

This community-based character is also noticeable when looking at the smugglers' nationalities, who typically have links to the local community in which they operate.[109] Between 1988 and 1989, the studied migrants mainly recognized Iranians and Turks among their smugglers, corresponding to the main regions through which they traveled. Despite the lack of information available on the second period, Iranian and Turkish are again the most cited nationalities, although now complemented by Afghans.

The binary perspective that places predator-smuggler in opposition to victim-migrant therefore does not apply to these sources: both parties engage in negotiations and trade.[110] Human smuggling should thus be perceived as an (initially) voluntary transaction between migrant and facilitator.[111]

3.2 Choice of destination

One decision central to these negotiations was the destination. Smugglers are known to have a lot of involvement in this choice in the case of Iranian refugees. This involvement became even more significant by 2009.[112]

In 1988 and 1989, seven out of eighteen migrants claimed to have consciously chosen the Netherlands as their country of asylum. Then again, an equal number of migrants reported their smuggler's decisive influence in this matter. Four others were on their way elsewhere when they were stranded in the Netherlands. As it pertains to 2009–2010, the sources clearly show an increase in the number of cases in which smugglers chose the destination country. Only two of thirteen migrants claimed to have had a decisive say in the matter.

Scholarship tends to highlight different factors and disagrees somewhat on the decisiveness of each.[113] In his research on Iranian refugees in the Netherlands, Köser describes this decision as primarily based on information about the host country's migration and asylum policy.[114] Then again, Robinson and Segrott found the presence of a social network to be the most significant influence in this regard.[115]

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[105] Ibid., 106.

[106] Içduygu, "Decentring migrant smuggling," 3302; Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time," 3310.

[107] Van Liempt, *Navigating Borders,* 208.

[108] Majidi, "Community Dimensions of Smuggling," 101.

[109] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global study on smuggling of migrants* (New York: United Nations, 2018), 7.

[110] Zhang, Sanchez and Achilli, "Crimes of solidarity in mobility," 8–9.

[111] Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou, "Smuggling, trafficking and extortion," 213–214; Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration,* 35.

[112] Khalid Koser and Marie McLauliffe, eds., *A Long Way to Go. Irregular migration patterns, processes, drivers and decision making* (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2017), 123.

[113] Darren Middleton, "Why asylum seekers seek refuge in particular destination countries: an exploration of key determinants" (Research paper, Global Migration Perspectives, Global Commission on International Migration, 2005), 9, https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/2018-07/gmp34.pdf.

[114] Khalid Koser, "Social networks and the asylum cycle: the case of Iranians in the Netherlands," *International Migration Review* 31, no. 3 (1997): 595–596.

[115] Vaughan Robinson and Jeremy Segrott, "Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum-Seekers" (Research Study, Home Office, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2002), http://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/57982.

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Sonja Fransen and Hein de Haas furthermore found that refugee migration tends to be more motivated by labor migration than other factors in destination countries. While this does not imply a lack of interest in the living standards and migration policies of potential countries of settlement, Fransen and de Haas are convinced these elements are merely of secondary importance. They argue that refugee migration is more dependent on chain migration and access to resources.[116]

However, this article argues that these are not mutually exclusive. It is known that both the choice of destination and actual decision to leave depend on a complex combination of elements. Refugees typically flee their country with little preparation, which leaves no time to base decisions on an elaborate cost-benefit analysis.[117] The *rational choice theory* therefore seems less applicable to refugee migration.[118]

The researched files systematically include if and which relatives live where in the Netherlands and Europe. We therefore know that if the migrant had close family members living in the country, they indeed consciously chose the destination. Those without these family connections mostly referred to the Netherlands's reputation as an asylum country. Information on the migration policy and risk of deportation generally reached them either through family, friends, or smugglers. The latter generally referenced Dutch asylum legislation to motivate their choice to their clients.

If a refugee's migration is not preceded by that of a family member or other social network, scholars name three factors that typically guide the decision-making process: a connection between the homeland and country of asylum, the characteristics of the destination country, and events that occur before or during the trip.[119] As the lack of historical bond and language barrier excluded the Netherlands from being a desirable destination for Iranians, their choice was likely motivated by other factors.[120]

Smugglers and migrants generally consider similar factors when debating a migration route, albeit to varying degrees. While migrants' reactions are often based on emotion, rationality tends to dominate smugglers' decision-making process.[121] The Dutch road network and asylum procedures are among the significant pull factors that mark the Netherlands as a potential destination, and smugglers seemed well informed on both.

Due to its role as a transport and transit region, the Netherlands's well-developed road network is heavily frequented. This enables irregular migration, as it offers various points of entry. Enhanced by European Union policy changes that necessitate smuggling over legal entry points rather than green zones, this constituted an important element of attraction for irregular migrants.[122] Clandestine border crossings were facilitated by these developed roads and busy cross-country traffic.

Moreover, the Dutch asylum policy showed a certain mildness towards Iranian migrants of the late 1980s. In spite of the restrictive nature of the 1980s legislation, very few Iranians were actually sent back after a negative assessment. Due to the unsafe situation in Iran for returned refugees, the Netherlands adopted a tolerating status (*gedoogdenstatus)* according to which rejected Iranians could not be repatriated.[123] Iranian migrants furthermore enjoyed a positive reputation in Europe, as they fled a regime despised by Western European powers. They were known as highly educated, English-speaking, middle-class citizens who would not burden Dutch society.[124] Van Meeteren, Engbersen, and van San similarly confirm higher success rates

[116] Fransen and de Haas, "Trends and Patterns of Global Refugee Migration," 99–100.
[117] Ibid.; Koser and McLauliffe, *A Long Way to Go*, 164.
[118] Ibid., 8.
[119] Anita Böcker and Tetty Havinga, "Country of Asylum by Choice or by Chance: asylum seekers in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 43.
[120] Mobasher, *The Iranian Diaspora,* 74.
[121] Böcker and Havinga, "Country of Asylum by Choice or by Chance," 57.
[122] Bijleveld and Taselaar, *Motieven van asielzoekers om naar Nederland te komen,* 20–21.
[123] Walaardt, "Patience and Perseverance," 10.
[124] Ibid., 10–28.

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when asylum seekers possess cultural capital, such as knowledge of a local language, customs, and culture.[125]

Furthermore, the length of procedures contributed to the attractiveness of the Dutch asylum system. It is generally thought that the longer such processes take, the more chance the asylum seeker has to stay. When the Netherlands invited refugees from different countries in the 1980s, spontaneous asylum applications quickly followed. This caused a significant increase in pending cases and delays with the IND.[126] By 1990, the Dutch—along with the Swiss and British—asylum procedures were the longest in the European Union.[127]

A country's reputation was indeed an oft-quoted reason for (not) choosing a certain destination. Between 1988 and 1989, six migrants cited the image of the Netherlands as a welcoming host with kind citizens. When not joining family members already in Europe, smugglers and migrants seemed to attach great importance to the name and migration policy of the Netherlands. However, the question remains whether these claims are genuine recollections of the decision-making process or influenced by the context in which they were remembered: for some, referencing the country's reputation might have been a strategic move to proclaim their admiration for the Dutch attitude towards immigration.

Finally, it must be noted that the decision of destination may be impacted, altered, or reinforced by additional factors.[128] Firstly, changes in the policies of neighboring countries greatly influenced Dutch asylum applications, in both directions. Secondly, events that happened along the way often guided or altered routes and destinations: several migrants were indeed on their way elsewhere, but became stranded in the Netherlands and decided to apply for asylum. Others also mentioned that their destination depended on the false or falsified documents or visa available to them. The choice of route and eventual destination thus depends on a complex combination of factors that cannot be reduced to a single influence.

4. The journey from Iran to the Netherlands

4.1 Increasing involvement of smugglers

The researched files show an increase in smugglers' involvement in the journeys of Iranian irregular migrants to the Netherlands. By 2009, they were increasingly assisted by smuggling networks operating across larger regions and taking care of all or multiple stages of the journey. Smugglers went from being involved in just one stage of the journey across a single border in 1988 and 1989, to the whole of the route in 2009 and 2010.

In 1988 and 1989, a significant number of migrants arranged large sections of the trip themselves, ranging from crossing borders on their own to contacting smugglers in each region they passed through. Indeed, the majority reached a transit country without any professional help, and would locate a smuggler to organize the remaining trajectory there. Those whose journey had been arranged for them typically fled Iran by plane, explaining the unusual extent of smugglers' involvement: a plane ride to the Netherlands is more easily arranged in Iran by a single person, contrary to multiple clandestine border crossings through different countries over a longer period of time.

This had changed drastically by 2009. While only half of the migrants from the first research period had their entire journey arranged for them, such was the case for all the 2009 and 2010 files. Smugglers organized every step of the way to the Netherlands, from

[125] Masja van Meeteren, Godfried Engbersen and Marion van San, "Striving for a Better Position: Aspirations and the Role of Cultural, Economic and Social Capital for Irregular Migrants in Belgium," *International Migration Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 883.

[126] Herman Obdeijn and Marlou Schrover, *Komen en Gaan. Immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008), 312–315.

[127] Bijleveld and Taselaar, *Motieven van asielzoekers om naar Nederland te komen,* 20–21.

[128] Böcker and Havinga, "Country of Asylum by Choice or by Chance," 43.

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itinerary and modes of transportation to necessary documents and contacts with other smugglers.

These findings suggest a shift to more elaborate networks, with contact between smugglers across national borders. Contrary to earlier years, irregular migrants from 2009 and 2010 reported extensively on contacts between various smugglers at different stages of the journey and over national frontiers. Particularly those who conducted many clandestine border crossings mentioned a larger number of different individuals. Whereas the 1988 and 1989 migrants counted a maximum of two smugglers working together, the 2009 and 2010 migrants cited up to seven smugglers (truck drivers excluded), all of whom maintained contact throughout the flight. This method became increasingly successful as modern communication technology made it easier to stay in touch over long distances, without leaving any trace.[129] Such technological changes facilitated a growth in communications and therefore social capital: it became easier to build and maintain relations and ties with a larger number of individuals.[130]

Two elements impacted this shift. The first factor relates to the chronological aspect, as the twenty-year time span between the two periods allowed Iranian smuggling organizations to grow. Several of these networks came into existence after the 1979 revolution, when Iranian borders were closed entirely. Around this time, political parties set up all kinds of clandestine networks to help opponents of the new regime leave the country.[131] These networks thus gained expertise in human smuggling and when their connections to the initial political parties attenuated, they took their services to the commercial market. Moreover, a large number of these Iranian smugglers settled in Turkey, where the clandestine Iranian web of the 2010s was considered one of the five largest smuggling networks.[132]

Over time and due to continued irregular migration, these smuggling groups have expanded their knowledge of the asylum, migration, and visa context over an ever-growing region.[133]

The increasing need to call on facilitating services can be further explained by growing restrictions on regular migration and general difficulties in crossing borders. As is fully addressed in the following section, policy changes at all stages of the journey (country of origin, transit, and asylum) make it progressively difficult to enter a country regularly.[134] This prompts migrants to seek out irregular migration strategies that are, in turn, complicated by state efforts to stop these flows. This vicious circle encourages more people to migrate with the help of professional facilitators.[135]

4.2 Irregular migration and the journey to the Netherlands

Migrant smugglers are generally involved in the migration process in three ways: assistance in leaving Iran (exit strategies); in arranging the journey and providing guidance along the way; and finally, in helping enter the country of asylum (entry strategies).[136]

The researched files show two important exit strategies. Firstly, several migrants were provided with false or falsified documents to bypass border controls. These tactics are mostly present when migrants traveled by plane, both directly from Iran and from a transit country.

[129] Icduygu and Toktas, "How do Smuggling and Trafficking Operate via Irregular Border Crossings in the Middle East?," 47.

[130] Akcapar, "Re-thinking migrant's networks and social capital," 178.

[131] Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen en Racismebestrijding, *Iraanse migratie naar België. Belangrijke trends en vooruitzichten,* 22.

[132] Ibid., 22–23.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Triandafyllidou, "Migrant Smuggling," 214.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Koser, "The Smuggling of Asylum Seekers into Western Europe", in *Global Human Smuggling. Comparative Perspectives,* eds. Rey Koslowski and David Kyle (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 63.

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The second strategy involved clandestine crossings of Iranian borders, which mainly occurred either entirely or partly on foot, through the mountainous borders surrounding Iran.[137]

Moreover, smugglers were also heavily involved in the actual journey. This includes the provision of various types of documents, the planning of routes, and the arrangement of accommodation and transport. As explained in the previous section, this involvement had increased significantly by 2009.[138]

Finally, entry strategies into the Netherlands were similar to the exit strategies from Iran: smugglers helped migrants clandestinely cross borders into the territory, provided false or falsified documents to enter the country, or guided migrants to official border controls where they would present themselves and apply for asylum.[139]

In both research periods, clear narratives emerged, indicating a shift in the irregular migration strategies of migrants and smugglers. Between 1988 and 1989 smuggled migrants either traveled clandestinely to a transit country in the Iranian surroundings, where they would continue their journey by plane, or they flew directly to the Netherlands. The plane was clearly the most prominent mode of transportation, with a mere two of eighteen cases not mentioning the vehicle at all.

By 2009, this narrative had changed. The vast majority of migrants in the second period described a clandestine trip to Turkey, after which they would hide in the back of a truck for the remainder of the trip to the Netherlands. This narrative is only interrupted by three cases: one in which the asylum seeker arrived by direct flight and two others who followed a completely different path.

Additionally, Crawley et al. further broadened the potential tasks of smugglers, arguing that migrants can be aided in navigating border controls as well as danger.[140] As described above, smugglers can indeed help migrants circumvent border controls. However, their services are not limited to these crossing of borders. They can also help migrants escape or avoid danger throughout the journey, including by helping migrants evade persecution by clandestinely smuggling them out of the country.[141] Several migrants indeed recalled hiding in Iran while waiting for their flight to be prepared. They were subsequently picked up by smugglers who ensured a clandestine escape from the country and its authorities. A full picture of these services thus necessitates a study of the migration journey in its entirety, instead of merely concentrating on border crossings.[142]

4.2.1 From Iran to Turkey

The most cited exit strategy between 1988 and 1989 was clandestine border crossing to a neighboring country. The exact route was not fixed, but rather a combination of a walk by foot and a ride in a vehicle. Their journey often started in Tehran and led them through the province of West Azerbaijan, and the cities of Urmia or Bazargan, to the Turkish town of Van. From there, they would continue to Istanbul. A significant minority traveled via Pakistan or India. Seven others flew out of Iran, either directly to the Netherlands or to a transit country. In these cases, they were provided with false or falsified travel documents by smugglers.

The popularity of clandestine border crossings to Turkey grew even more between 2009 and 2010. In this period, migrants similarly made clandestine escapes to Van via the Iranian cities of Urmia, Salmas, or Bazargan. This was generally done by car, foot, or public transport. India and Pakistan were no longer mentioned as transit countries. This narrative is

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid., 65.

[139] Ibid., 65.

[140] Heaven Crawley, Franck Düvell, Katharine Jones, Simon McMahon and Nando Sigona, *Unravelling Europe's 'Migration Crisis'. Journeys over Land and Sea* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018): 74.

[141] Ibid., 74–78.

[142] Mainwaring and Brigden, "Beyond the Border"; Bilgili, Caarls and Fransen, "Evolution of migration trajectories and transnational social networks over time."

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interrupted only by a mere three cases in which the asylum seekers arrived to the Netherlands by direct flight.

Although both research periods show similar exit strategies, there is an important difference: the number of cases in which smugglers personally accompanied migrants on their way out of Iran had increased significantly. Between 1988 and 1989, just under half the migrants crossed the Iranian border on their own, without any help from facilitating services. Their first contact with such agencies occurred in the transit country. This had changed completely by 2009, when all border crossings out of Iran were arranged and assisted by smugglers.

As briefly explained above, smugglers' increasing involvement in migrants' journeys can be partly explained by changing migration and asylum policies and border management on the way to their destination. The following sections therefore explore the impact of Iranian and Turkish legislation on these irregular exit strategies.

4.2.1.1 Leaving Iran. In both periods, Iranian nationals required an exit permit and visa for all foreign travel. Access to outbound permits was limited by certain conditions, meant to exclude specific categories of citizens. Young men who had not yet completed military service and women without the permission of their husbands had an especially hard time leaving the country.[143]

The IND's standard questionnaire asks for travel documents. Many migrants explained that, while they may have been in possession of a legitimate Iranian passport, applying for an exit visa and permit was nearly impossible due to their political activities or religious beliefs.

Indeed, political opponents had a difficult time obtaining such visas.[144] All applications went to the Security Office, which systematically verified a traveler's potential involvement in any criminal justice procedures or threats to state security.[145] When we consider the political nature of migrants' motives for flight and reported difficulties getting exit permits in both research periods, the option to leave the country via regular migration seems unlikely.

Moreover, travel restrictions were further tightened during the new conservative era of President Ahmadinejad. Following increased international tensions, both outbound and inbound travel stagnated.[146] Especially during Ahmadinejad's second term, there was a sharp decline in outbound tourism. The government forced political travel restrictions, controlling travel to certain destinations—such as Turkey and Thailand—and cancelling flights to others altogether.[147] Leaving Iran for Turkey via regular travel channels thus became more complicated.

Those irregular migrants who did travel through legal checkpoints generally did so with false or falsified documents. By 2009, however, this had become much more difficult as well.[148] Changed legislation, migration policy, and border controls not only further complicated foreign travel through official border checks, but also posed great challenges to irregular migration via air travel.[149]

[143] "Iran: Information on exit visas," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1994, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab5e78.html; "Iran: Exit and entry procedures at airports and land borders, particularly at the Imam Khomeini International airport," Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2013, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://irb.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=454849.

[144] "Iran: Information on requirements for exit permits," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1989, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6abb53c.html.

[145] "Iran: Information on exit visas," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1994, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab5e78.html.

[146] Ali Mozaffari, Ramin Karimian and Sajad Mousavi, "The Return of the 'Idea of Iran' (2005–2015)," in *Tourism and Political Change,* eds. Richard Butler and Wantanee Suntikul (Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers Ltd, 2017), 191; Seyfi Siamak and Michael Hall, eds., *Tourism in Iran. Challenges, Development and issues* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[147] Mozaffari, Karimian and Mousavi, "The Return of the 'Idea of Iran' (2005–2015)," 191.

[148] Mathias Czaika, Hein De Haas and Maria Villares-Varela, "The Global Evolution of Travel Visa Regimes," *Population and Development Review* 44, no. 3 (2018): 603–606.

[149] Ibid.

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These increasing difficulties were due to the enhanced and computerized security checks of such permits from 1991 onwards, which made such checks harder to circumvent. While these security procedures were initially performed at the Security Office—under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister's Office—a week prior to departure, they now took place at the airport and consisted of two elaborate control points. The first such point was controlled by regular police officers, trained to intercept individuals breaking all kinds of travel restrictions. The second point was located at the entrance to the terminal and operated by Revolutionary Guards specifically instructed to intercept travelers banned from leaving the country for political reasons.[150] This double verification made it increasingly difficult to leave Iran irregularly via official check points and might explain why the vast majority of migrants between 2009 and 2010 opted for clandestine border crossings.

As outbound visa restrictions continued to increase and border controls tightened further, Iranian irregular migrants were thus pushed to clandestine crossings and smuggling agencies.[151] This situation was also further enhanced by similar policy changes on the other side of the Iranian-Turkish border.

4.2.1.2 Entering Turkey. The asylum files of both research periods show Turkey as the main transit region. Of the fourteen recorded transit travels between 1988 and 1989, nine traveled through Turkey. These figures increased spectacularly in the second research period, with all stopovers happening there. As Turkey was the most cited transit country, its migration and asylum legislation and policy impacted these practices significantly.

Previous research attests to Turkey's popularity as both a transit and asylum country for many refugees fleeing the Middle East. While this phenomenon started as early as the 1980s, the numbers increased impressively in the following decade.[152] Iranians constituted a significant proportion of these refugees, especially after the 1979 revolution.

Turkey has various features that contribute to its appeal to (irregular) migrants. The most important is its geographical position, as it lies close to both countries of origin and asylum. Indeed, Turkey's location in a region troubled by political instability makes it both a popular asylum and transit country.[153] This has allowed vast social networks and smuggling organizations to settle in its large cities.[154]

Moreover, part of Turkey's significance as a transit country lies in its proximity to European borders. In the context of Europe's perceived "migration crisis," Turkey is thus often referred to as the gateway to Europe. This stands even more for migrants who attempt to enter the European region through its Eastern borders.[155]

Turkey's popularity as transit country for migrants hoping to move to Europe greatly expanded after European member states adopted restrictive migration policies. As a result of these restrictions, irregular migrants took to Europe's periphery in hopes of bypassing controls and entering this way.[156] This trend increased even further with the expansion of the European Union and Schengen Zone in 2004, which brought European borders closer to the Turkish region.[157]

Moreover, the Turkish government also made agreements to exempt the nationals of several countries from visa requirements. In 1964, just such an arrangement was reached between the governments of Turkey and Iran, installing visa-free travel between the

[150] "Iran: Information on exit visas," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1994, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab5e78.html.

[151] Triandafyllidou, "Migrant Smuggling," 214.

[152] Icduygu and Toktas, "How do Smuggling and Trafficking Operate via Irregular Border Crossings in the Middle East?," 31.

[153] Ibid., 171.

[154] Ibid., 176–177.

[155] Akcapar, "Re-Thinking Migrants' Networks and Social Capital," *International Migration* 48, no. 2 (2010): 173.

[156] Akcapar, "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country," 822.

[157] Baklacıoğlu and Özer, *Turkey,* 33.

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countries.[158] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, large numbers of refugees benefited from this arrangement.[159] However, this did not change the Iranian requirement of an exit permit and visa to regularly travel to Turkey. Despite the arrangement still being in place in 2010, these outbound visa restrictions in Iran prohibited politically active refugees from entering Turkey this way.[160]

Similar to its Iranian and European neighbors, Turkey also witnessed a major evolution in migration policy and border control. This contributed to the aforementioned shift to clandestine crossings and the increased involvement of smugglers.

By the end of the twentieth century, immigration had become a political concern of the Turkish government. The recent and relatively new migration transformed the region into a country of both transit and asylum, in need of a clear policy.[161] This was further enhanced by Turkey's candidacy to the European Union, with the Helsinki decision of 1999 and membership negotiations of 2005 demanding stricter border control, including regulations around irregular migration.[162]

Scholarship therefore distinguishes three periods of change in the country's migration policies and practices.[163] Interestingly, this subdivision fits this study's periodization perfectly.

The pre-1994 era is typically described as a "time of ignorance" due to its lack of systematic immigration and asylum regulations and legislation. It was only in 1991, with the mass influx of the Iraqi asylum seekers, that the topic moved to the forefront of political concern. New legal regulations were quickly initiated, of which the 1994 asylum law marked a turning point, consolidating the role of the state in the matter.[164]

Perhaps more crucial, however, were the post-2001 changes, which were largely related to Turkey's relations with the EU and the latter's request for stricter control of irregular migration passing through the region to Europe.[165] The Turkish immigration and asylum administrative and institutional structures were thus harmonized with those of the EU, taking on European concerns around irregular migration.[166] In its National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis, Turkey described how it would regulate migration and asylum issues, which included elaborate legislative reform and the establishment of a Task Force on Asylum, Migration, Border Protection, and External Borders.[167]

Between 1989 and 2009, Turkey thus took several measures to reinforce its border management: equipment was modernized, new check points set up, and more observation towers installed on its border with Iran.[168] This way, irregular migration from neighboring countries was complicated, forcing more migrants to employ facilitating services to circumvent migration controls.

4.2.2 From Turkey to Europe and the Netherlands

Those migrants who traveled via a transit country between 1988 and 1989 before arriving in Europe generally continued their journey to the Netherlands by plane. This was clearly the

[158] Kemal Kirişci, "A friendlier Schengen visa system as a tool of 'soft power': The experience of Turkey," *European Journal of Migration and Law* 7 (2005): 351; Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey: A country of transition from emigration to immigration," *Mediterranian Politics* 12, no. 1 (2007): 93.

[159] Ibid.

[160] "Iran: Information on exit visas," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1994, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab5e78.html.

[161] Ahmet Içduygu, "Irregular migration in Turkey" (Research Paper, International Organization for Migration, 2012), 39, https://mirekoc.ku.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Irregular-Migration-in-Turkey.pdf.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid., 39–40.

[164] Ibid., 40.

[165] Ibid., 40–41.

[166] Saime Özçürümez and Nazli Şenses, "Europeanisation and Turkey: Studying irregular migration policy," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 233.

[167] Içduygu, "Irregular migration in Turkey," 41–52.

[168] Ibid., 241.

main mode of transportation in the first research period, with Iranians flying either directly from Iran or from a transit region. A mere two case files make no mention at all of the vehicle.

This number decreased remarkably by 2009, when a new narrative took its place: in eight out of thirteen cases, the smuggled migrant made a clandestine escape to Turkey and then continued on to the Netherlands in the back of a truck. The shift from the use of a plane to a ride in the back of a truck can again be explained by changes in border control and migration policy in both European and Dutch politics. Particularly, the implementation of the Schengen Zone, changing European legislation, and the expansion of European Union forced such shifts in irregular migration and smuggling strategies.[169]

New narratives on migration emerged in the 1990s, triggering the idea of migration as a threat to European security.[170] Their rising numbers, combined with several much discussed events related to migration, caused political and social uneasiness about refugees.[171] From then on, EU member states focused on a joint—restrictive—asylum policy centered around control and management of the EU's external borders.[172]

While such measures on irregular migration were initially handled through intergovernmental cooperation, the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam transferred asylum and immigration policy to the European communities pillar, making it an EU competence.[173] Asylum strategy and border management were thus decided at the European level and binding for most member states, including the Netherlands.[174] The council quickly set out to create joint legislation that juridically translated these growing concerns about irregular migration and its prevention.

The Tampere Conclusions of 1999 further emphasized the need for instruments to actively combat irregular migration and punish its facilitators. Its focus on a proactive border management and restrictive visa policy has been continuously confirmed, reinforced, and developed by later European legislation. EU initiatives—such as The Hague program of 2004, the Commission Communication in 2006, and especially the Lisbon Treaty in 2009—continued on this path, fully implementing restrictive measures that greatly impacted aforementioned migration strategies.[175]

The instalment of the Schengen Zone in 1995 further strengthened this cooperation between European nations. As all internal borders were abolished and replaced by a single external border, its member states responded by tightening controls at the region's legal entryways.[176] Common rules and procedures united the region in a harmonized migration policy.[177] The legislative changes and hightened border management of both the European Union and Schengen Zone again targeted irregular migration and migrant smuggling, making it increasingly difficult to enter the regions.

Indeed, authorities did register a decrease in the number of border apprehensions at the EU's eastern border.[178] While this could indicate an actual decline in irregular migrants entering the EU, it is more likely that human smugglers and migrants adapted their practices to the new circumstances.[179]

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[169] Jandl, "Irregular Migration, Human Smuggling and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," 291.

[170] Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu and Yeşim Özer, *Turkey: beyond the fortress paradigm at the south-eastern borders of the EU* (Lewiston: Edwin Edgar Melen Press, 2013), 23.

[171] Ibid., 24.

[172] Ibid., 23.

[173] Özçürümez and Şenses, "Europeanisation and Turkey," 238.

[174] Ibid., 238–239.

[175] Ibid.; Baklacıoğlu and Özer, *Turkey,* 27.

[176] "Schengen Area," European Commission, accessed December 20, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/schengen-area_en.; Baklacıoğlu and Özer, *Turkey,* 24.

[177] Ibid., 25.

[178] Jandl, "Irregular migration, human smuggling and the eastern enlargement of the European union," 304–305.

[179] Ibid.

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The previously mentioned policy modifications influenced a shift from clandestine crossings at green borders to crossings at official border posts.[180] Smugglers responded to the tightened border controls by abandoning previous tactics, such as clandestine migration through green zones. Instead, irregular migrants were to enter the European Union through official entryways. To avoid inspection, they were generally hidden in vehicles that traveled with legal border-crossing traffic—such as trucks.[181]

However, these new practices entailed greater risk and difficulties. Circumventing official border controls required a certain expertise and access to a network. In line with the findings in previous chapters, these policy changes prompted an increasing number of refugees to seek the services of migrant smugglers.[182]

Due to this ride in the back of a truck, few migrants could name transit countries beyond Turkey. While it is therefore unclear precisely which exact countries they passed through, migrants from both periods who did not reach the Netherlands by plane generally traveled over land, supposedly via the Eastern Mediterranean route. This route is considered one of the three main trajectories into Europe, running from Turkey via either the Aegean Sea and the Greek Islands to Southern Europe or the Greek mainland or Balkan region to Central Europe. This way, it connects Turkey to Europe, by land or sea, and is therefore mostly frequented by migrants from Southwest Asia.[183]

Although most asylum seekers from both periods seemed to follow the well-documented Eastern Mediterranean route, the findings of this study contradict previous research that emphasizes the ever-rising popularity of travel via the Aegean Sea.[184] Instead, Iranian refugees seemed to move primarily over land.[185] While the exact transit countries beyond Turkey are not mentioned by name, it is clear they entered Europe through its eastern border and likely traveled along the Balkan route and through Bulgaria.

Discourse of recognition

The previous sections showed how the migration and asylum policies of the asylum country impacted irregular migration and smuggling practices. However, the influence of these policies also reached further. Prevailing metanarratives on asylum, migration, and asylum do not only have the ability to cause shifts in how people migrate, they also navigate the ways in which these migrants retell their journeys.

In the asylum procedure, the stories the applicant tells play a crucial role. Their application is assessed based on the textual statements explaining the reason for their flight and motivation for migrating to the Netherlands. Inconsistencies—such as contradictions between various versions or not remembering certain information or superficial knowledge—are major causes for refusal.[186]

Smugglers are suspected of providing information on such asylum procedures. The association of human smuggling with abuse of the asylum system traces back to the assumption that smugglers sell their clients stories with the highest success rate.[187] Due to increasingly restrictive policies and the importance of credibility, migrants themselves are also thought to keep an eye out for such information and successful precedents.[188]

[180] Ibid., 309.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid., 304.
[183] UNODC, *Global study on smuggling of migrants,* 150–154.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Van Liempt, "Mensensmokkel naar Nederland," 3.
[186] Jan Blommaert, "Analysing African asylum seekers' stories: scratching the surface" (Working paper, Urban Language & Literacies, University of London, 2000), 2–3; Marie Jacobs and Katrijn Maryns, "Managing narratives, managing identities: Language and credibility in legal consultations with asylum seekers," *Language in Society* (2021): 2–3.
[187] Van Liempt, "Mensensmokkel naar Nederland," 45.
[188] Ibid.

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Nevertheless, there is little evidence to support these suspicions, other than an in 1986 intercepted letter by an approved asylum seeker, in which he advises a fellow Iranian on his asylum procedure: to prove the urgency of the request, the man should include individual and familial prosecution by the Iranian authorities and mention at least two arrests in Iran.[189]

The asylum seekers in this study seem to confirm that at least some migrants were indeed somewhat informed on Dutch asylum procedures, by smugglers, family, and other refugees. The most telling case in this regard concerns a young woman who claimed to have been assisted by an elaborate smuggling network in 2009 on her journey to the Netherlands by truck. In reality, she left Iran regularly on a tourist visa in 2008. She explained how her aunt—a settled refugee in Italy—advised her to lie about both her mode of transport and the time period, as this allowed her to embed her flight narrative within Iran's 2009 political unrest.[190]

It is thus to be expected that at least some asylum seekers retell their narrative according to their understanding of the expectations of the asylum procedure. Central in this reconstruction is the conception of what being a refugee entails and what constitutes them as such, implying the need to correspond not only to relevant legislation, but to public meta-narratives as well.[191] The legal criteria, combined with these public narratives, limit the space in which asylum seekers can freely recount their story.[192]

The files studied in this paper should therefore be read in this light. After all, the Dutch asylum procedure also attaches great importance to credibility. Inconsistencies are often cited as a main reason for asylum being refused.[193] Köser, for instance, noticed an explicit distinction in the post-1994 Dutch policy between "sincere" and "bogus" asylum applications based on the credibility of the flight story.[194]

A critical reading of the sources reveals the emergence of similar narratives across the majority of the files. There is a clear shift between both research periods from political to political and/or religious flight motivations. The importance attached to religion in 2009 and 2010 is striking; this was cited only once between 1988 and 1989, while the Iranian political scene was highlighted as the main reason for fleeing. However, religious motives and conversion to Christianity were very common among asylum seekers of the second research period, with ten reporting having been baptized.

The focus on the religious component of flight can be explained in two ways. Firstly, conversion to Christianity was a way to facilitate migration to Europe.[195] In both transit countries and Western Europe, several organizations offered humanitarian aid to Christian migrants.[196] In addition, adopting the main religion of the host country could contribute to their socio-cultural integration.[197]

Secondly, conversion was also an additional reason against deportation. Although several religious minorities did enjoy constitutional protection in Iran, there was little tolerance for Christian converts or Muslim apostates.[198] While the death penalty and imprisonment prescribed by the Islamic law were rarely imposed, converts did face discrimination and threats.[199] Humanitarian reasons therefore prohibited immigration officials from sending

[189] Walaardt, "Patience and Perseverance," 10.

[190] Archive P.B.Ph.M. Bogaers, 907, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

[191] Marie-Florence Burki, "Exploration into an asylum seeker's narrative retelling" (master's thesis, Université de Neuchâtel, 2013), 6.

[192] Ibid., 7.

[193] Walaardt, "Patience and Perseverance," 17–18.

[194] Köser, "Social networks and the asylum cycle," 595–596.

[195] Akcapar, "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country," 218–219.

[196] Ibid., 219.

[197] Ibid., 218.

[198] Ibid.

[199] Landinfo, *Iran: Christian Converts and House Churches. Prevalence and conditions for religious practice* (Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, 2017), 22, https://landinfo.no/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Iran-Christian-converts-and-house-churches-1-prevalence-and-conditions-for-religious-practice.pdf.

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Iranian converts or apostates back. For some, the focus on conversion may have been a strategic move to increase their chances of being granted a refugee status.

As migrants are thought to listen for information on European asylum procedures, chances are they were aware of the evolution of Dutch policy towards a more restrictive regime.[200] As mentioned, the percentage of accepted Iranian asylum seekers was initially relatively high and very few were actually deported back to Iran. However, Dutch statistics indicate a declining trend in the allocation of temporary and permanent residence permits after 2005. The changing means of communication with the diaspora, combined with the aforementioned advice from smugglers and fellow refugees, might have informed asylum seekers on the changing situation in the Netherlands. It is therefore not inconceivable that asylum seekers would substantiate their stories with additional motives. While most files still mention political persecution, the religious component seems to add weight to the need for recognition. This might have been less critical in 1988 and 1989, as—with the revolution of 1979 and subsequent change in political regime still fresh in the mind of Western governments—English-speaking and highly educated Iranians enjoyed a positive reputation in asylum procedures.[201] This changed with time and new waves from varying backgrounds, which caused a decline in acceptances and a need for a stronger flight narrative.[202]

The Dutch asylum policy was moreover known for its third country policy, which rejected several asylum seekers for having passed through a safe country before arriving in the Netherlands.[203] This policy was backed up by the implementation of the Dublin Convention in 1997, according to which refugees are expected to apply for asylum in the first safe country they enter.[204] The narrative of being transported in the back of a truck, and therefore not knowing which countries had been passed through, formed an ideal context to circumvent this rule. While some asylum seekers may have been informed and had knowledge of the route the vehicle would follow, reorienting their story would be beneficial to their application to a Western European country.

Smugglers' requests not to reveal their routes or tactics might further reinforce this method. Several migrants pointed to pleas by their smugglers not to convey any information to the authorities on their practices and routes. A twenty-two-year-old woman who fled Iran in 1988 explicitly stated that she remembered the name of the airline she flew to Europe, but promised her smuggler to keep this secret.[205] Furthermore, migrants were also asked to either return or dispose of the documents they received. A twenty-one-year-old man from Tehran, who came to the Netherlands in 2009, recounted how the smugglers took back these papers: "This is their commodity, which gets recycled again and again. They also don't want to leave any traces behind."[206]

A ride in a truck answers both needs perfectly, as refugees would be hidden in cargo departments and therefore have no idea which borders they crossed.

6. Conclusions

This article researched irregular migration practices from Iran to the Netherlands after 1979, comparing the routes, transportation, and human smuggling practices in two case studies (1988–1989 and 2009–2010). This historical approach unveiled some significant shifts and trends.

[200] Öcker and Havinga, "Country of Asylum by Choice or by Chance," 13.
[201] Walaardt, "Patience and Perseverance," 10.
[202] Ibid., 27.
[203] Ibid., 21.
[204] Baklacıoğlu and Özer, *Turkey*, 25.
[205] Archive P.B.Ph.M. Bogaers, 2, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
[206] Archive P.B.Ph.M. Bogaers, 951, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Translation by author: "Zij wilden de documenten terug om een reis te kunnen regelen voor een andere person. Dat is hun handelswaar, dat telkens wordt gerecycled. Zij willen ook geen sporen achterlaten van hun handelen."

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In both research periods, statistics showed lasting migration from Iran to Western Europe and the significance of the Netherlands specifically as a country of asylum. While this study's findings suggest a continuation of political migration, the case studies' socio-historical context must also be considered: both occurred in politically tumultuous times—following a war and transfer of power in the first, and widespread public protest in the second—which might explain the continued presence of political refugees and the lasting emphasis on Iran's political environment, rather than a shift towards more economic and social migration.

Despite this study's accordance with the general description of Iranian refugees, as well educated and young, it still nevertheless shows the need to nuance existing perceptions of the elite nature of migration from Iran: only a minority of researched subjects continued their academic training at university level and several even referred to financial difficulties they experienced in Iran. The automatic association with brain-drain and elite migration should therefore be revisited in further research.

A second set of findings relates to the ever-growing involvement of migrant smugglers in irregular migration from Iran to Europe: the research files show how, by 2009, smugglers were involved in migrants' entire journeys. This can be explained, on the one hand, by the increasing expertise of smuggling networks in Iran, that had grown over the thirty years since their inception around 1979. They became active over larger regions and across more steps of the migration process, while also establishing more elaborate cooperation with colleague-smugglers. By the second research period, migrants were therefore systematically assisted over longer distances, by a larger number of smugglers, who maintained contact throughout the journey.

These smuggling networks have, on the other hand, always been characterized by their adaptability to contextual change. The shift from flying to the Netherlands by plane between 1988 and 1989 to riding in the back of truck by 2009 and 2010 is partly explained through changes in migration legislation and border management along the way. The article thus showed how irregular migration and state policy on the matter are historically linked. The border controls of the traveled regions are crucial to understanding the migration journey.

All three regions indeed experienced an evolution towards more restrictive migration policies and border management. Their governments attempted to gain control over movement across their borders, paying special attention to irregular migration. Such attempts, however, hardly ever had the desired effect. Rather, they set in motion a vicious circle of growing irregular migration and tightening migration legislation.

Although migration restrictions are meant to limit the ways in which migrants can enter countries legally, motivations for global migration exceed these legal possibilities. Migrants therefore increasingly seek out irregular methods of migration. In turn, countries of destination respond to these growing numbers by further restricting migration policies and tightening border management. This interplay increases the risks and costs of migration and encourages migrants to employ facilitating services. Instead of addressing the roots of migrant smuggling, government attempts to control the phenomenon through restrictions thus contribute to the even further growth in irregular migration.

Moreover, the influence of the asylum country's ideas on irregular and refugee migration continues long after arrival. Prevailing metanarratives on the matter further guide migrants' experiences during potential asylum procedures. As there is an emphasis on flight narratives in this process, migrants have little space in which they can freely recount their story. The possibility should therefore be considered that migrants reorient their narratives according to their knowledge of local understandings and expectations of refugees and their experiences. This might explain the emphasis on two narratives that emerged from the sources. Firstly, the increasing presence of religious motives reinforcing flight narratives that had previously been almost entirely political may have be a response to the restrictive asylum policies of the 1990s. Secondly, a ride in the back of a truck is a suitable context to circumvent the Dutch third country policy, as it emphasizes the migrant's inability to know the countries through which they passed.

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Through these findings, this article thus explored the complicated interactions between state policies, migrants, and facilitating services. It engaged with existing scholarship on the impact of politics on the phenomenon by showing how the ever-restricting policies of Iran, Turkey, the European Union, and the Netherlands each limited the legal migration options for Iranian migrants. The combined difficulty of both leaving Iran and entering the territories of these regions indeed compelled migrants to resort to irregular migration, potentially with the help of migrant smugglers.

Influenced by migration trajectory research, this article also acknowledges the significance of all phases and aspects of the journey. In an effort to move away from the prevailingly Eurocentric perspectives present in many migration studies, the article looked at the policy decisions of all relevant countries along the way. The focus here is therefore not limited to immigration legislation in Europe, but also the emigration policies of Iran and the immigration and emigration policies of Turkey. This way, the article recognizes the wide array of influences and broad variety of actors in the migration experience.

Disclosures

None

7. Bibliography

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