

**Radboud University**



# **Tracing the Aspirations of Syrian Refugees**

Exploring the Correlations Between  
Migration Aspirations and Integration Dynamics  
in Conflict-Led Involuntary Mobility

Marco Borselli



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Student: Marco Borselli  
Supervisor: Toon Van Meijl  
18 August 2018  
Radboud University, Nijmegen



## **Abstract**

The future of Syrian refugees in general is hotly debated in and outside of Europe. The unsteady situation in Syria, risks of persecution and the lack of economic perspectives for potential returnees suggest that the presence of Syrian refugees in receiving countries must be framed within a long-term perspective.

This research project intends to contribute to the debate on refugee integration by exploring its interrelation to migration. I contend that precious insights can be gained on the subject by studying the evolution of refugee aspirations during migration and their actualizability in destination countries. To explore the topic, in the first months of 2018 I conducted field research in Sweden, where I interviewed 18 newly settled Syrian refugees. By investigating their experience as asylum migrants and their aspirations, I tried to find an answer to the following question: what are the correlations between the original migration aspirations of Syrian refugees settling in Sweden and the dynamics of their integration?

Findings suggest that even in the case of conflict-led involuntary mobility, migration aspirations function as projects for life-making, of which safety is an essential element but not the only one. Achieving self-realisation, guaranteeing stability and a better future for one's family, and reuniting with one's spouse are other elements that emerged from informants' narratives. These primary aspirations are what informants hope to achieve in their destination country, the emotional drivers of their migration and integration. Whether or not informants developed aspirations to settle and integrate in Sweden largely depended on the perceived possibility to realise primary aspirations, regardless of the changes these may have undergone in the migration process.

## Preface

I owe my deepest gratitude to my informants, who generously decided to relive for me the difficult experiences they have been through. Listening to their stories was the real learning experience in the field. I would like to thank them for their kindness, their friendship and their hospitality. I cannot do anything but wish that their dreams come true, and I extend the wish to the other former camp Katsikas residents who are now scattered across Europe.

I would like to thank Toon van Meijl, my supervisor, for his patience and precious suggestions. I am also grateful to the Radboud Anthropology department staff and to my fellow students, who made this experience worthwhile.

I am also obliged to thank Lucia Claudia Fiorella, because what she taught me over ten years ago still guides me today.

As always, my final thanks go to my loving parents and friends, who support me in all kinds of ways when I choose unusual and unpredictable paths.

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## Introduction

In 2016, as migrants from the Middle-East kept landing on the Aegean islands to seek sanctuary in Europe, the Greek government set up multiple sites to accommodate the growing population of asylum seekers. In March, a group of over a thousand asylum seekers was moved to a newly opened camp in Katsikas, Northern Greece, where they spent the coming nine months. The camp closed in December for the harsh winter weather and its residents were moved to temporary accommodations, waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. Most of them were included in the European Union relocation programme and were eventually moved to other European countries. In the summer of 2016 I volunteered in camp Katsikas and at the beginning of 2017 I moved to Greece, where I joined a newly born NGO and started teaching English to a small group of former camp Katsikas residents. In the summer of 2017, about sixty of them were relocated to Sweden. All were extremely pleased with their destination country since Sweden's steady economy and welfare provision made it one of the most sought-after countries within the EU relocation programme.

Historically, Sweden has always been considered a stronghold of multiculturalism and was one of the European countries that most markedly adopted multicultural policies since the post-war period (Wickström 2013; Borevi 2013). In the 2000s, despite an economic slowdown that followed the 2008 recession, Sweden continued investing in immigrant reception and integration programmes. In the 2010 elections, however, the far-right Sweden Democrat party won parliamentary seats for the first time, reflecting the growing anxiety about immigration that insinuated into political and public discourses (Collett 2011, 17–18; Schierup and Ålund 2011; Bech, Borevi, and Mouritsen 2017). Restrictive asylum policies were also implemented in the following years in response to the high numbers of asylum seekers reaching Sweden, most notably temporal restrictions to refugees' residence permits. Under such circumstances, the future of former camp Katsikas residents in Sweden remains uncertain. In fact, the future of Syrian refugees in general is hotly debated in and outside of Europe. The unsteady situation in Syria, risks of persecution and the lack of economic perspectives for potential returnees suggest that the presence of Syrian refugees in receiving countries must be framed within a long-term perspective.

This research project intends to contribute to the debate on refugee integration by exploring its interrelation to migration and its root causes. The project was developed in light of three limits in current academic literature that I encountered while researching the topic or that other researchers have pointed out. The first is that while much of the debate focuses on the expected outcomes of integration policies, further research is needed on the processes underlying integration and on how refugees influence them (Boccagni 2017; van Heelsum 2017). The second limit is that literature on integration is often based on receiving countries' perspective and that a more comprehensive understanding of integration is needed, one that also encompasses refugees' perspectives. Recent literature on migration already adopted a migrant-centred perspective. Works on migrants' aspirations, especially those based on the aspirations/capability framework developed by Carling (2002) and later by de Haas (2014), have provided valuable insights into the dynamics of migration. This leads me to the third limit, namely that integration and migration are too often studied separately, and research that tried to bridge the two fields of study has done so from a policy-led approach (Entzinger, Saharso, and Scholten 2011).

Given these limits in the current literature, I contend that studying the evolution of refugee aspirations during migration and their actualizability in destination countries can shed light on the interrelation between migration and integration. In order to gain insights into this topic, in the first months of 2018 I conducted field research in Sweden, where I interviewed 18 former camp Katsikas residents. By investigating their experience as asylum migrants and their aspirations, I tried to find an answer to the following question: what are the correlations between the original migration aspirations of Syrian refugees settling in Sweden and the dynamics of their integration?

# **1. Linking Refugees' Migration Aspirations to Integration Dynamics**

In this chapter I will review the main theoretical concepts that underpinned my field research and the subsequent data analysis. In the first section I will review some key literature on integration, addressing various positions in the debate that surrounds it and identifying the analytical dimensions that have been used to study it. I will then link the concept of integration to those of aspirations and capabilities, review the evolution of these two concepts in academic research and explain their relevance to this project. I will then demonstrate the value of studying refugees' aspirations as a tool to understand refugees' agency as well as emotional and subjective drivers. Finally, I will review possible conceptualisations of aspirations and explain how they have been operationalized to serve the purposes of this research.

This theoretical framework does not exclusively draw from refugee-specific scholarship, for two reasons. First, some of the concepts at hand, particularly aspirations and capabilities, evolved within wider migration and development theories. Second, while there is extensive research on refugee integration, general models and theorizations of integration often consider migrants as a general category. Researching refugees' aspirations therefore required a wide-spanning look at broader migration and integration theories.

## **1.1. Looking for the Migrant's Perspective in the Debate on Integration**

In their recent work, Garcés-Mascreñas and Penninx (2016) provide a useful analysis of the existing scholarship on integration. Three points of their analysis are salient. First, they underscore how current scholarship is divided on the approaches used to study integration. Second, they point out how academic research has often employed policy-derived concepts and categories to measure immigrant integration. The third point concerns the concept of integration itself and the fact that it continues to assume that migrants should conform to a dominant set of norms, values and practices (Ibid., 11–14).

In an attempt to overcome the constraints of the existing scholarship, Garcés-Mascreñas and Penninx propose to define integration as “the process of becoming an accepted part of society” (Ibid., 14). They leave such definition intentionally open to emphasise the process

character of integration and to avoid setting predetermined requirements or goals to measure acceptance from the receiving society.

The two scholars have the merit of recognising the process character of integration, of highlighting the necessity to involve both immigrants and natives in its analysis, and of acknowledging the problematic entanglement of academic research and policy. However, their definition still remains fundamentally biased towards a receiving-country perspective. Defining integration as “the process of becoming an accepted part of society” legitimises an imbalanced power relation in which immigrants need to be accepted by a majority to be considered integrated. Moreover, this definition still assumes the receiving society as the end point of integration processes. As Anthias (2014) pointed out, the very idea of incorporation in a given social fabric is problematic in that it presumes an intrinsic deficiency of the immigrant: as the ethnic other, the immigrant is unwilling to integrate and/or lacks the culturally specific attributes needed for his full participation in the receiving society.

Garcés-Mascreñas and Penninx also review the key analytical dimensions, or domains, traditionally used to study integration: legal-political, socio-economic and cultural-religious. Categorizations of the integration domains differ between scholars, although they essentially address the same aspects of immigrants’ lives. Freeman (2004) identifies the domains of state, market, welfare and culture, and highlights how integration is the product of migrants’ aspirations and strategies with regulatory frameworks in these domains.

Spencer and Charsley (2016) provide a refined set of integration domains including structural (participation in the labour and housing market, education and training); social (social interaction, relationships, marriage); cultural (values, attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle); civic and political participation (in community life and the democratic process) and in relation to identity (sense of belonging). Spencer’s and Charlsey’s model is particularly useful because it also identifies sets of ‘effectors’ that impact on integration processes across domains, namely: individuals; family and social networks; opportunity structures in society; policy interventions; transnational effectors. The combination of domains and effectors allows to encompass the effects of institutional arrangements with the agency of immigrants and the many elements that facilitate or hinder integration at the individual level (see also Ager and Strang 2008; Crul and Schneider 2010). Analysing the role of effectors is important because they often affect integration processes by influencing refugees’ aspirations.

Moreover, including effectors such as individual characteristics and transnational relations in the analysis of integration processes allows to take up a migrant-centred perspective.

Van Heelsum (2017) recently highlighted how immigrants' perspectives and life aspirations often remain underexplored in the literature on integration. I agree that greater attention must be paid to immigrants' perspectives in order to overcome receiving-country biases and to redefine integration in more comprehensive terms. Recent research (Heger Boyle and Ali 2010; Svenberg, Skott, and Lepp 2011; Morawska 2013; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Vollebergh 2016; Boccagni 2017; Hebbani, Colic-Peisker, and Mackinnon 2018) shows how exploring immigrants' perspectives can shed light on the dynamics underlying integration and intercultural interaction. Van Heelsum (2016, 2017) resorted to the aspirations and capabilities framework to investigate the perspectives of newly resettled refugees in the Netherlands, raising the hypothesis that aspirations and capabilities may be useful tools to study life after migration.

## **1.2. Aspirations and Capabilities in Migration**

Earlier research on migrants' aspirations focused on predicting their educational and occupational level (Portes, McLeod, and Parker 1978). More recently, migration scholarship has used aspirations and capabilities primarily to explore the outset and outcomes of migration. Carling (2002) first introduced his aspiration/ability model to analyse the effects of restrictive immigration policies, arguing for the necessity to study the aspiration and the ability to migrate separately. He developed an aspiration-centred framework that breaks up migration into two separate steps: the evaluation of migration as a potential course of action and its outcomes in terms of actual migration or immobility.

Both aspirations and ability to migrate can be analysed at macro and micro levels in Carling's model. At the macro level, migration aspirations can be understood in relation to a specific emigration environment — the social, political and economic context that explains why people wish to emigrate. Ability can be analysed at the macro level in relation to a specific immigration interface, which is composed of all the (legal and illegal) modes of migration available to migrants given the immigration policies of their destination countries. The micro level of Carling's model focuses on individuals, bringing into the equation migrants' motives and the personal characteristics that enable them to overcome the barriers to migration.

Aspirations to migrate form in the interplay between people's individual characteristics and their common emigration environment. The fulfilment of migration aspirations depends both on people's individual capacity to convert the wish to move into reality and on context-specific obstacles and opportunities.

Carling (2002, 2014) also elaborated on the concept of migration aspirations by connecting it to life aspirations. Migration aspirations can be framed as projects for life-making in that they are functional to realising broader aspirations, such as seeking sanctuary or pursuing a better income or education.

De Haas (2011, 2014) later combined Carling's aspiration/ability model with Sen's theory of human development into an 'expanded' aspirations and capabilities framework to study migration. Sen (1999) conceptualised human development as the process of expanding people's substantive freedoms and introduced the concept of 'capability', that is people's real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value in life. 'Capabilities' (in the plural) refers to people's positive and negative freedoms as well as to their opportunities in relation to personal and social circumstances. Conceptualising migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities, rather than ability, frames migration within broader processes of social transformation by connecting it to diverse aspects of migrants' well-being.

Drawing from van Heelsum's work (2017) on newly resettled refugees, I suggest that aspirations and capabilities may be used to study refugees' lives (and immigrants' lives in general) before, during and after migration transversally. Exploring how refugees' aspirations and capabilities change across time and space can provide a better understanding of their life trajectories.

In order to study aspirations and capabilities transversally to migration, it is also necessary to introduce the concept of transit migration, which refers to a period of waiting that migrants can experience in-between their country of origin and their destination. The concept has gained significant importance in migration studies because of the increasingly fragmented nature of migrants' journeys (Collyer 2010), but it also poses analytical challenges in determining who is actually in transit, since migrants may become immobile in a transit country voluntarily or involuntarily. Drawing from Carling's model, Schapendonk (2012, 579) suggested to define transit migration on the basis of migrants' mobility aspirations. Recent research on refugees in Europe (Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic, and Vidovic 2015) has also used aspirations as a lens to understand situations of transit. The

concept of transit migration is necessary here to analyse the immobility of Syrian refugees who became stranded in Greece as a result of Europe's response to the 'refugee crisis'.

Finally, while this study is especially concerned with refugee aspirations, it is also necessary to explain how capabilities were addressed. As stated above, capabilities have been framed as positive and negative freedoms and as opportunities in relation to personal and social circumstances. Conceiving capabilities as freedoms pertains to the analysis of institutional infrastructures; for Syrian refugees, those primarily entail Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria and the asylum frameworks in effect in the countries they migrated through. Capabilities related to personal and social circumstances refer to individual abilities and to the resources one can mobilise. The latter can be framed in terms of capital. Drawing from Bourdieu's (2007) theorization, I relied on notions of economic, cultural and social capital. Social capital was further distinguished into social support and social leverage (van Meeteren, Engbersen, and van San 2009), respectively defined as the resources obtained by mobilising one's strong ties — mainly family and close friends — and those obtained through so-called 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973). The distinction was important to capture differences in the types of social networks in which refugees become embedded. Specific forms of capital are needed to fulfil specific aspirations. Defining capabilities in terms of freedoms and capital was necessary to understand how individuals exert agency and what constraint and opportunity structures they move through.

### **1.3. Aspirations and Agency**

One of the advantages of the aspirations and capabilities framework is that it allows to better incorporate the notion of agency into migration theories (de Haas 2011, 2014). Most macro-level theories of migration ignore agency and often fail to explore the behavioural aspects of migratory movements, prioritising macro-level causes — such as conflicts, climate change or population growth — over individual motives to migrate. At the same time, neo-classical and conflict theories, while paying attention to the micro-level of migration, depict migrants either as passive victims of macro-forces or as purely rational and income-maximising actors. In fact, migration usually depends on a multiplicity of intertwined contextual factors and individual motivations, which cannot be solely ascribed to macro-forces and economic reasons. Applying the concepts of aspirations and capabilities to migration makes it possible

to gain insight into its behavioural aspects. More specifically, the aspirations and capabilities framework allows to conceptualise how migrants, as individual and as groups, exert agency within broader constraint and opportunities structures.

Bringing agency into focus means to acknowledge that migrants make independent choices. This in turn underscores the importance of aspirations as subjective and emotional drivers that prompt them to make those choices and to favour certain options over others. Indeed, some scholars incorporate the capacity for desiring and for forming intentions into the notion of agency. Sewell (1992) and Ortnor (2006) conceive agency not only as the exercise of (or resistance against) power, but also as the intention of pursuing one's goals. Ghorashi, de Boer and ten Holder (2017, 377) elaborate on this perspective and identify five agency types: a) actively getting things done; b) actively resisting against visible forms of power; c) resisting normalised structures through reflective consciousness; d) maintaining a delayed form, inspired by dreams and desires without immediate actions; e) choosing marginality in relation to power to produce counternarratives to dominant societal discourses. The third form, delayed agency inspired by aspirations, is particularly useful within the scope of this research to analyse situations — such as their forced standstill in Greece — where refugees might find themselves restrained by particularly coercive structures but preserve the intentionality to actualize their aspirations.

If exploring people's aspirations before they migrate sheds light on the behavioural aspects of migration and its micro-level dynamics, exploring aspirations during and post migration can give insights into how the subjective and emotional drivers evolve and shape their life trajectories in destination countries. More specifically, a thorough analysis of post-migration aspirations can improve our understanding of how migrants' life trajectories change in relation to external social structures (Boccagni 2017) and how they develop transnationally (for a theorisation of transnationalism in migration and integration studies, see Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Mügge 2016).

#### **1.4. Conceptualizing Aspirations**

Researching aspirations presents various epistemological issues for both theorisation and practical methodology. A conceptualization of aspirations is therefore necessary here to clearly delimit the object of this study and to frame it as empirically researchable data.

Carling (2014) suggested to conceive migration aspirations as a specific type of attitudes, which enabled him to draw from both positivist and constructivist approaches. An attitude can be defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (Eagly and Chaiken in Carling 2014, 6). If we accept to conceive migration aspirations as attitudes, several conceptualisations become possible. Migration aspirations can be seen: as a comparison of places; as related to a culturally defined project (the case of ‘migration as a rite of passage’); as a matter of personhood and identity. Transversal to all three types are the intrinsic and instrumental value of migration. With regard to situations of conflict and involuntary mobility, Carling suggests classifying migration aspirations as a culturally defined alternative to staying (Carling and Schewel 2017, 9–10).

The aspirations/capabilities framework, however, was conceived to investigate how people form and actualize aspirations to migrate, and while it can indeed be applied to various phases of migration, it is not meant to capture variations in the individual motives and goals of broader life aspirations throughout the migration project.

A more encompassing approach to conceptualizing aspirations can be found in Boccagni (2017). Boccagni compares the life stories of over 200 immigrant domestic workers, all long-time residents in Italy, in order to investigate their aspirations’ evolution and its implications for their life trajectories. He pays particular attention to the subjective character of aspirations, yet the most innovative aspect of his work is to frame them within a temporal dimension, in a dual sense: in relation to their evolution over time and as a way of cultivating open representations of the future at individual and group levels. Aspirations are approached as an expression of the self, to which certain views of the future are attached and which result in distinctive social practices (Ibid., 4). The retrospective analysis of immigrant workers’ aspirations allows Boccagni to trace changes of their aspirational trajectories in a variety of arrangements: aspirations can be displaced, deferred, intergenerationally invested or curtailed over time.

Boccagni’s work constituted the perfect basis for a theoretical and empirical approach to study refugees’ aspirations. Specifically, his conceptualisation of aspirations as open representations of the future was helpful to understand how refugees envision possible life trajectories, and how they pursue or discard them depending on their capabilities. Framing aspirations within a temporal dimension was also essential to capture how agency is exerted

in its delayed form and how refugees devise strategies to fulfil aspirations that are not immediately actualizable.

### **1.5. Operationalizing Aspirations**

The aim of this research was to study refugees' aspirations in order to better understand of how their life trajectories are shaped during and after migration and what their subjective and emotional drivers to integration may be. To achieve such aim, the research investigated the correlations between the original migration aspirations of former camp Katsikas residents settling in Sweden and the dynamics of their integration. The following sub-questions were developed in order to investigate the topic:

- How did these refugees' aspirations evolve throughout the migration process?
- What are their aspirations concerning their future in Sweden (or elsewhere)?
- What obstacles to the realisation of their aspirations did they encounter at the various stages of the migration process, including resettlement?

The first question was crucial to understand how past aspirations affect current ones and especially how original life aspirations have been transformed by the migration experience. This question also constituted a logical precondition to answer the second one. It would in fact be a fallacy to assume that current aspirations can be studied in isolation from past ones, since the former stem from the interrelation of the latter with life experiences. Moreover, a comparison of current aspirations in isolation from past ones would assume that all refugees' life trajectories in Sweden shared the same ideal starting point, which again is a logical fallacy. In order to understand these refugees' current aspirations, a chronological reconstruction of their evolution was needed.

The second question related to the impact the current context has on aspirations, but also to the significance of the destination country in broader life aspirations — the role Sweden plays in the general life aspirations of these refugees and if they plan to settle permanently. Finally, the last question is transversal to the first two. By exploring the tension between aspirations and capabilities (or the lack of them) it is possible to understand how capabilities shape aspirations and how refugees exert agency.

Boccagni (ibid., 14–15) proposed an analytical framework to dissect the aspirations of the migrant workers he interviewed. He developed such framework along three key dimensions:

- *Contents* (aspiring what?): this points to the necessity of studying aspirations in regard to specific, subjectively meaningful objectives, which are in turn embedded in specific sets of values, interests and rights.
- *Relational references* (to the benefit of whom?): one can cultivate aspirations involving oneself as much as significant others, as it is the case in family-based migration.
- *Space-time horizons* (where, and when?): aspirations are embedded in complex spatial and temporal frames — they can develop in relation to more or less idealised places, as short-term or long-term projects or even as temporally undetermined ones.

Boccagni's heuristic model transforms aspirations in empirically researchable data and is suitable for a comprehensive analysis of their significance. In fact, it also allows for their conceptualisation in the spatial, cultural and identity-related terms proposed by Carling for migration aspirations, while still leaving room for further conceptualisation along different dimensions. The analysis of aspirations along the three dimensions above was crucial to understand the type of influence that various factors and 'effectors' have on aspirations. It was also essential to understand if and when different aspects of aspirations are susceptible to change, and how they influence one another. Ultimately, Boccagni's model proved to be important to gain a deeper understanding of how refugees unmake and remake their migratory and life trajectories in light of their priorities and environment.

## **2. Capturing Aspirations in the Field**

Aspirations are a fluid concept. They are inherently subjective and yet also culturally and contextually defined. In order to gain a thorough understanding of one's aspirations, attention must be given to their content and to the context in which they were formed. An interview-based qualitative approach is more appropriate for this purpose, because it allows to investigate aspirations' variations in content and functionality.

In this chapter I discuss the design, methods and challenges of this research project. The first section explains why former Katsikas residents constitute a valid research population. The second section addresses the rationale behind the design of this study and explains why a case-study approach was preferred to other sampling logics. The third section describes the methods used to collect data in the field and the implications of using autobiographical narratives to research aspirations. The fourth section briefly explains the logic underpinning data management and analysis. Finally, in the last section I reflect on ethical concerns, on the pre-existing relationship with my informants and on my positionality as a researcher, as well as on their methodological implications.

### **2.1. Are Former Katsikas Residents a Valid Research Population?**

The first question I was confronted with when I decided to build a research project around former Katsikas residents in Sweden was whether studying the aspirations of this specific refugee group could produce information that is relevant for comparison and theorisation. It was a legitimate doubt since the research population was predetermined by my personal relation to it, not by the research topic and the data needed to investigate it.

As far as I knew before I set off for fieldwork, circa 60 former camp Katsikas residents had been relocated to Sweden since June 2017. The group included families with children, married couples without children, single mothers with their children and about twenty single men in their twenties and thirties. All were from Syria, but they were of diverse ages and ethnic backgrounds — mainly of Syrian and Palestinian origins.

So far, the group seems very heterogeneous. By looking at it in terms of national background and migration history, however, it is possible to identify five key elements that make the group not only coherent but also interesting for research on aspirations and asylum

migration. First, there is people's common country of residence prior to migrating. Syria links them all to a very specific socio-political context — the ongoing Syrian conflict — that is the root cause of their migration and the determinant of their legal status(es) in Europe. The second element is the similarity of their migration trajectory and the shared experience of specific sites along this trajectory. The third element is that they underwent the same procedures to obtain asylum; as Syrian residents who arrived in Greece before 20<sup>th</sup> March 2016, these refugees were all included in the 2015-17 EU emergency relocation mechanism before they entered the Swedish asylum system. The fourth element is the common destination country, Sweden. The fifth element is that former camp Katsikas residents were transferred to Sweden approximately at the same time and therefore they are at the same stage of the settlement process. These common elements made the group relatively coherent as a research population while ensuring variety in terms of age, familial status, level of education and employment.

The focus on national background and migration history also enabled me to shift from a receiving country perspective to a migrant-centred one. Part of the literature on migration and integration tends to aggregate migrants into legal or policy-derived categories, such as refugee, asylum seeker, economic migrant; migrants within these categories are treated as interchangeable research subjects whose ethnic, national, cultural and socio-economic background is irrelevant. This approach largely reflects the perspective of receiving countries and while it may still be valid for certain types of research, it fails to acknowledge that migrants' background is a key component in determining constraint and opportunity structures, in defining integration dynamics and, most importantly, in shaping aspirations and expectations in the receiving country (Portes, McLeod, and Parker 1978; Carling 2002; Svenberg, Skott, and Lepp 2011; Vollebergh 2016). Investigating a research population with common national background and migration history is therefore more likely to shed light on the peculiar dynamics of specific migratory events — the Syrian diaspora in this case — and to link such events to the consequent processes of settlement and integration.

In this regard, a criticisable aspect of this research is that it merges Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria in the same research population. This was due to the impossibility to access larger and better-defined groups of informants. The specific conditions of Palestinian refugees in Syria — namely that of stateless second- and third-generation immigrants — impacted on the form of protection they received in Europe, which in turn can affect their

opportunities and aspirations. It is therefore possible that a more thorough comparison between Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria may bring specific discrepancies to the surface. Nonetheless, findings suggest that the similarities between the two groups outweigh ethnic and socio-political differences within the scope of this study, and that comparisons and generalisations are still possible.

Going back to the question posed at the beginning of this section, the commonalities shown above explain why former camp Katsikas residents represented a valid research population for purpose of this study, regardless of my personal connection to them. Such commonalities made them valuable research subjects to investigate how individual and context-specific elements concur to shape the aspirations and life trajectories of involuntary migrants. The next task was therefore to identify individual research participants within the group.

## **2.2. Applying Case Study Logic to Multi-sited Research**

In terms of participant selection, case study logic was better suited than sampling logic to adopt a migrant-centred perspective. Case study logic proceeds sequentially by building a set of cases, each of which gradually adds to the understanding of the research topic. The aim is theoretical saturation, not statistical representativeness. For this reason, case study logic is particularly suited for in-depth interview-based studies that focus on the dynamics of unknown processes (Small 2009, 25), such as capturing the evolution of Syrian refugees' aspirations.

The choice of a case study-based approach also depended on the geographical distribution of research subjects. Former camp Katsikas residents are located in different parts of Sweden, from the southernmost tip of the country to villages in the northern regions. While a number of them have found accommodation in larger cities, others are currently living in out-of-reach villages that are not connected by major transportation arteries. The research project therefore presented the logistical challenges typical of multi-sited ethnographic research. Following the research population's movements is a basic mode of constructing multi-sited ethnography that has already been used in migration and diaspora studies (Marcus 1995, 105–6). This project can be considered a variation of this particular mode, in which multi-sitedness is determined not by the movements of research subjects but by the multiple

destinations of their movement. Using a case study approach minimised the problems posed by conducting multi-sited research within the short time span of three months, since it implied collecting fewer but detailed interviews rather than large numbers of standardised interviews.

In order to collect as many case studies as possible, I chose research participants on the basis of the following criteria: a) the level of English of potential informants and the possibility to rely on other former Katsikas residents to act as translators, b) the time needed to reach one's location as well as its proximity to other informants' locations, c) my relationship with each potential informant. The latter was a crucial precondition to access the research population quickly; in fact, not only did my relationship with former Katsikas residents influence their willingness to participate in the project in practically all cases, but it also proved essential to find support for translation and to reconnect with informants who were out of my immediate reach.

Eventually, I collected 15 case studies and interviewed a total of 18 respondents. These included four families with children, two adult sons with their mother, a married man who left Syria in the hope reunite legally with his wife in Europe, a married man whose wife had reached Sweden before him, and eight single men. With few exceptions, respondents lived in three major Swedish cities — Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö — and in their immediate proximities. Limiting fieldwork to these areas offered more chances for interviews because of the higher concentration of former Katsikas residents and made the research process time-effective by enabling me to adjust to the schedules of multiple informants simultaneously.

The final set of collected cases presents two main limitations. The first relates to the geographical limits of the research. After the first month of fieldwork I ruled out the possibility to visit potential informants living in the northern half of the country, both because their command of English was not sufficient to carry out interviews and because meeting them would have required very long journeys. Given differences in urban settlements, population density and climatic conditions, the experience of former camp Katsikas residents settling in Northern Sweden might differ from that of my informants.

The second limitation is that women are significantly underrepresented in the case-study set. This was due partly to the composition of the research population, which featured more males, and partly to my own gender identity. Out of 15 cases, only two interviews with families include direct feedback from female respondents. In other interviews concerning

families, it was the male head of the household that automatically offered to participate in the research — although the interview investigated the aspirations and the history of the whole family. In addition, as a man I had already built stronger rapport with male members of the Katsikas community in Greece, which also determined access to the population in Sweden. Despite these limitations, the collected cases offered in-depth data for cross-case analysis, from which broader theoretical insights into refugee aspirations may be inferred.

### **2.3. Qualitative Methods to Capture Refugees' Experiences**

Drawing wide conclusions from interview-based case studies can be challenging, but the qualitative information gained by looking at patterns in the narratives of migrants provides a far greater understanding of how they form aspirations and exert agency in the constraint and opportunity structures they encounter.

There is a growing corpus of literature on migration that makes ample use of in-depth interviews to capture migrants' aspirations and decision-making processes (Robinson and Segrott 2002; Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic, and Vidovic 2015; Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Mandić and Simpson 2017; Boccagni 2017; Ghorashi, de Boer, and ten Holder 2017; Dekker et al. 2018). Within this trend, a preference for life histories and more generally for a biographical approach to studying migration has taken hold. Such preference stems from the need to integrate migrants' perspectives into policy-driven research, to better understand the dynamics of their mobility and to examine the wider societal and political structures into which they move (Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Pascual-de-Sans 2004; Ghorashi 2008; Horst 2018). As stated above, I, too, opted for in-depth biographical interviews as they are an effective method to explore both the content of aspirations and their relation to context and culture.

Interviews were my primary (and for some cases the sole) data collection method. On most occasions, interviews took place in informants' homes, although a few were held in cafés. The time at disposal with each informant varied greatly. In some cases, I only spent a few hours with them, whereas in others I was hosted by my informants for days or even weeks, which gave me the opportunity to split interviews into more detailed sub-sessions. I interviewed most of my informants individually, with the exception of two couples, where both spouses were interviewed simultaneously. All interviews were in English, since that was the only

common language I could use with informants. In four cases, I asked some of my informants to act as translator for others whose level of English was not sufficient to hold the interview autonomously. While I appreciate that external translators would have been a more neutral choice, my own informants were the fastest and only option available to collect a considerable number of interviews within the project timeframe.

For the first couple of case studies, I used unstructured and loosely structured interviews to gain a general idea of the stages and dynamics of the journey that took my informants from Syria to Sweden. These first, less structured interviews brought to the fore topics that I had not anticipated in my initial interview guide; new topics were thus integrated with the interview guide in the development of a case study protocol, which was meant to ensure theoretical and literal replication in the assembling of the case-study set (Yin 2003; Small 2009). In reality, immediate replication was hard to guarantee. First, the plurality of informants' experiences made it difficult to identify certain patterns until the whole case-study set was completed. Second, sometimes interviews rapidly followed one another and the collection of different case studies overlapped. This is not to say that the interview structure did not develop logically throughout the course of the research. Rather than testing theoretical hypotheses for replication in each case study sequentially, I consistently investigated the elements of informants' journeys that seemed crucial to understand their aspirations and incorporated new relevant topics as they arose. This enabled me to draw patterns from later cross-case comparison.

Asking informants to describe their journey to Sweden chronologically enabled both them and me to reconstruct events more clearly. In almost all cases, I started out by asking about informants' lives in Syria before the conflict began; the interview then flowed naturally to follow their life courses until the present. The chronological structure allowed me to pause the narrative and delve into specific themes, but informants were free to highlight elements of their journey that they deemed relevant. Open-ended questions ensured non-directionality (Merton and Kendall 1946) when I transitioned to new topics and moments of the journey, while closed questions were useful to double check information and fill narrative gaps.

Investigating aspirations also required specific linguistic strategies, since the term 'aspirations' can be elusive. I therefore opted for terms like 'dreams, hopes, goals, plans' — English words that my informants could easily understand and that are part of their everyday

language. This linguistic variation allowed me to explore a wide spectrum that ranged from more abstract and idealistic aspirations (e.g. giving one's children a future) to more practical ones (e.g. what job one wants in the immediate future).

The use of autobiographical narratives in qualitative research also has downsides, in that it presents a number of risks concerning the reliability of accounts. Both the long-lasting effects of traumas and the natural difficulty of recalling distant and complex events can lead to narrative inconsistencies. In addition, determining the truthfulness of accounts is often impossible given the circumstances of involuntary migration — i.e. I have little chances to discover whether any of my informants deliberately gave me incorrect details.

As to inconsistencies, most informants demonstrated to have solid memories and could recall their journey rather clearly. Research also argues that minor narrative inconsistencies do not necessarily undermine the reliability of refugees' accounts (cf. Millbank 2009). Furthermore, the similarity of informants' migratory histories allowed a number of strategies for external validation, namely: cross-case comparison; validation through my first-hand knowledge of their experience in Greece and the information I gathered when I was there; validation through official sources such as UNHCR and Frontex reports and available research on the Syrian diaspora. As far as truthfulness is concerned, positive rapport with my informants and my extraneity to any organisation involved with their asylum applications lead me to think that the information reported in this study is trustworthy and representative of their experiences.

The main issue regarding the reliability of the information acquired concerns the retrospective rationalisation of aspirations, which eludes strategies for external validation. Yet, given the impossibility of a longitudinal study, informants' own recollection remains the most reliable source to investigate their aspirations. This is an unavoidable impasse and, as said above, in-depth interviews are widely accepted in the literature as a suitable method to research refugees' aspirations and experiences.

In addition to interviews, I also relied on conversations and small talk (Driessen and Jansen 2013) to collect information. Especially when I had the chance to spend a prolonged period of time with informants, small talks provided relevant details that I then raised again during interviews for further exploration. In some cases, small talk corroborated and complemented the data collected through interviews. Being hosted by informants also gave the opportunity to observe their daily routine and their immediate environment, and sometimes to be

introduced to their current social networks. Therefore, I took notes of relevant details as they emerged from small talks and observation, asking for permission to use them in my research when necessary.

#### **2.4. Exploring the Patterns of Aspirations: Data Analysis**

Since interviews were the main data collection tool, transcripts and interview-based notes constituted the main bulk of my data set. All respondents but one agreed to be recorded and in almost all cases I took extensive notes during interviews. Given informants' varying proficiency in English, I decided to transcribe verbatim only interviews where the speaker was able to express her or himself articulately. When informants' English skills were lower, I preferred to rework my notes and check them against the interview recording to produce detailed summaries. It is important to underscore that in all cases I was able to understand informants and to grasp the meaning of their sentences, and I double checked what they were saying when I doubted whether I had understood them. If informants could not speak English well enough, their translators did. When I decided to summarize an interview instead of transcribing it, I did so because the informant's speech, albeit clear in its meaning, presented the redundancies and syntactical errors typical of people who are not yet confident in their second language. In these cases, producing detailed summaries was more time-effective than transcribing.

All transcripts, interview notes and notes based on small talks and observations were coded through TAMSA Analyzer, a QDA software. The initial set of coding categories was derived deductively from theories on aspirations, migration and integration. More specifically, the three dimensions proposed by Boccagni (2017) to explore aspirations — content, relational reference and space-time horizon — constituted my prime analytical tools together with notions of capital. These were paired with more practical codes, such as education and employment background, to record informants' characteristics. As interviews were collected and analysed, I inductively expanded theoretical categories into sub-codes, so as to capture the emic dimension of informants' narratives. Additional codes and categories were derived inductively from the data set or were borrowed from existing theory during post-fieldwork literature review.

The final set of codes and concepts enabled me to perform comparative analyses that brought to the surface significant similarities in informants' migratory trajectories, in their use of capital for emigration and *en route*, in the lived experiences of asylum systems and of settlement processes. Most importantly, cross-case comparisons along the three dimensions mentioned above allowed me to identify patterns in informants' aspirations and showed how these played a constant role in determining their movements and life trajectories.

## **2.5. Friends, Informants, Refugees: On Rapport, Positionality and the Politics of Representation**

When anthropologists and social scientists ventured to study forced migration in the 1970s, they rightfully questioned the legitimacy of their own research. What right did they have to intrude into the traumatic experiences of forced migrants and study their suffering? Knowledge in the sake of knowledge was not a reasonable justification. As Chatty (2014, 78) puts it, "The study of refugees and forced migrants had an ethical and individual moral imperative to give something back to the community studied, as a step to ameliorating suffering". For many researchers, then and now, studying involuntary migrants is intimately connected with an ethical and political tension to advocate for their rights (see Colson 2003).

Researchers' latest attention to life histories and autobiographical narratives is an integral part of this tension. It is an attempt to let 'refugee voices' be heard and express refugees' political subjectivity (Ghorashi 2008; Horst 2018). It is also an attempt to do justice to the plurality of refugees' experiences and move past the one-dimensional, infantilized and feminized image of refugees that dominates humanitarian, academic and mediatic discourses (Sigona 2014).

The motives underlying this research project are not different from those described above. Yet, the decision to undertake research on former camp Katsikas residents came with additional ethical dilemmas. The only reason why I could envisage such a project and be confident that I would succeed was that I had a personal relationship with the people I intended to study. This relationship pivoted on mutual trust and sympathy and it had been built gradually through my work as a volunteer. Back then I had no plans to do social research and my role within the community was that of a supporter. The fact that I belonged to a grassroots organisation also released me from the constraints of the codes of conduct that

normally regulate interaction between refugees and staff in larger NGOs; I could relate with camp Katsikas residents on friendlier terms, and by the end of my period in Greece I considered most of them friends or close acquaintances. I kept in touch with them through social media, and the signs of affection I received showed me that sympathy was reciprocal. What right did I have then, not only as a researcher but first and foremost as a friend, to ask these people to unearth their traumas, especially now that they had finally completed their journey and could leave them behind?

I decided to carry out the research project nonetheless, motivated partially by the ethical and political tension mentioned above and partially by a genuine desire to see how the people I knew were faring in Sweden. Ethical doubts on rapport and positionality dominated the first period of fieldwork — and in all honesty they never completely faded. In Sweden I was received warmly and practically all former camp Katsikas residents showed willingness to help me with my research. Many explicitly ascribed their willingness to participate to the gratitude they felt for what I had done for them in Greece. This flattered me but also made me brood over power relations. Was I exploiting their gratitude? Was I recreating the imbalance of the volunteer-refugee relationship, and was I objectifying my friends for the sake of my project? I also worried about their ability to deal with the emotional burden of the traumas I was asking them to relive. The first month I even hesitated to propose potential informants to participate in the project.

Eventually, I realised that letting former camp Katsikas residents decide freely whether or not to partake in the research was a necessary step to acknowledge them as equal and self-determined individuals. If they wished to participate out of gratitude, it was their choice. What was due from my side was transparency about my role as a researcher and the scope of my research, as well as the commitment to ‘handle carefully’ the stories they entrusted to me. This had ethical and methodological implications both in the field and in representing their experiences.

My main responsibility in the field was to distinguish my role as a researcher from that of friend and acquaintance. I had already notified former camp Katsikas residents that I was in Sweden to conduct research about them before my arrival. When I reached out to potential informants, I made sure to explain that I would visit them regardless of their participation to the project, to remark that our relationship would not be affected if they declined to be interviewed. When I met them, I ensured to clarify the nature of the project and briefly

explained that I would ask about their life in Syria, their trip to Europe and their life in Sweden. I stated explicitly that they were free to refuse to participate, and that they could choose not to answer specific questions or ask me not to use certain information for research purposes. Taking notes during interviews also served as a reminder of my position as a researcher and drew a line between research and social interaction.

Issues of anonymity and representation came at the time of writing. My primary concern in terms of anonymity was to ensure that informants' identity could not be associated with details of their experiences that they shared with me but might not necessarily have told others. To do so, besides changing all names, I gave informants more than one pseudonym when I reported different parts of their stories. Moreover, when I wrote about events of a particularly sensitive nature I detached them from larger narratives that could have led to identification and referred generically to 'informants'.

As to representation, it goes without saying that I intended to place my work within the strand of studies that rejected passive and one-dimensional representations of refugees. The fact that I researched aspirations and agency made it easier to depict my informants as active subjects, yet I wanted *their* voice to filter through my writing. I therefore tried to report their stories as I have been told them, despite the necessary abridgements and linguistic revision, and I avoided unnecessary dramatization. The structure of this work, which retraces informants' journey from Syria to Sweden chronologically, is also a narrative strategy to represent their lived experience of migration in a collective form and give readers a credible account of it, albeit mixed with theoretical reflections. Such collective account remains subjective, in that it aggregates multiple but still personal perspectives. Yet, the goal of this research project was precisely to take up refugees' perspectives and incorporate them in dominant discourses on migration and integration.

Finally, a remark must be made on the outcome of this research project. It is self-evident that the research process was greatly influenced by the pre-existing relationship with my informants and the ideological basis on which it rested. This is not to say that my analysis was tainted by ideology — conversely, looking at informants' narratives from a scientific perspective informed my ideological stand on the 'refugee issue'. What I mean is that the type and quality of the information informants decided to share with me depended on the type and quality of our relationship, and on the image they had of me as a person. My informants knew that they were talking with somebody who is 'on their side', and such tacit

complicity influenced their decision to participate in the study and possibly the way they told their stories. This affected the research process as much as my gender and nationality. I have already mentioned that being a man restricted access to female informants. On the other hand, the fact that I am not from Syria, Sweden or any of the countries informants crossed likely affected the openness with which they talked about their experiences in each of them. It is the unique combination of these components that contributed to shaping the corpus of data from which I draw my conclusions.

### **3. Syrian Refugees on Their Way to Europe: Migration Aspirations in Conflict-Led Involuntary Mobility**

In March 2011, Syrian citizens gathered in the streets of Daraa and Damascus to protest against Bashar Al Assad's regime, demanding government reforms and greater freedoms. By May, mass demonstrations had spread to other major cities such as Hama, Homs and Aleppo. The Syrian government violently suppressed the protests adducing foreign terrorism as the cause of the agitations. Armed fights between the regime and the opposition spread quickly. In 2012, government forces were fighting the Free Syrian Army and other opposition groups across Syria, causing mass internal displacements. Outward migration, which until then had been relatively contained, intensified (Chatty 2017a, 228–29). In the same year, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — or Daesh, as my respondents often referred to it — conquered Raqqa and started expanding its control over the northern and eastern regions. In 2015 Russia launched air strikes to support Assad's forces. In order to escape bombings, fights and oppression, an increasingly higher number of Syrians crossed the national borders between 2012 and 2016 to find safety in neighbouring countries and in Europe. Today more than half of Syria's 23 million population has been displaced and over 5.6 million have sought refuge abroad (UNHCR 2018).

The 18 Syrians I interviewed for this research project are among those 5.6 million. They all reached Greece in early 2016 but they left Syria at different times between 2011 and 2016. In this chapter, I will focus on the years that preceded their arrival in Greece. In the first section I will sketch my respondents' emigration environment to understand how the Syrian conflict suppressed their aspirations to stay and kindled aspirations to migrate. The intention here is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the conflict's effects on the Syrian population but to convey my informants' emigration environment as it emerges from their subjective accounts, so as to better understand the subjective causes of their migration. The second section will shift the focus to respondents' individual capabilities and seeks to understand how they mobilised the resources at their disposal to fulfil the aspiration to migrate. The third section explores how respondents negotiated and sometimes renegotiated their ideal destinations in view of broader life aspirations. In the final section, I will try to analyse the patterns and meanings of informants' migration aspirations to gain insights into

the values that these involuntary migrants attached to migration beyond the immediate need for safety.

The aim of the chapter is to understand how my informants' aspirations to migrate to Europe were formed and fulfilled, and to explore the link between migration aspirations and broader life aspirations in the context of conflict-led involuntary mobility.

### **3.1. Migrating from War-Torn Syria: Decision-Making in the Context of Involuntary Mobility**

To study migration aspirations in the case of conflict-led involuntary mobility, it is first necessary to acknowledge that this specific type of mobility happens when one's life and safety at home are under severe threat: involuntary migrants leave because they have no reasonable option to stay. The implication is that migration aspirations are not a positive response to opportunities elsewhere, but they develop when aspirations to stay cannot be fulfilled (de Haas 2014). Mapping the factors that curtailed my informants' aspirations to stay in Syria is therefore an important step in understanding how their aspirations to migrate were shaped and what their instrumental value was.

None of my respondents had planned to migrate to Europe before the conflict started. Although some had worked and lived in other Middle-Eastern countries, others did not even hold a passport when they fled because they had never thought of requesting an international travel document. Only three respondents said that they had dreamed of moving to Europe before the war. Their aspirations were essentially connected to their perception of Europe as a place where people enjoyed great political and intellectual freedoms. Saad, a young man in his mid-twenties who wishes to become an academic, remembered his aspiration to study at a European university:

Saad: My dream was... I [wanted to] study history and after that... I dreamed to take my master and [doctorate] from any European university. But that was like wish, because in Syria you can't travel to complete your studies. You need a lot of money, you have to know [officials] in the government. You understand me? [...]  
Corruption.

Me: Ok, so you have to give money to them in order to... [*He nods*] So, you give money to the government, you know, to get the visa.

Saad: To high officials in the government.

Me: To get a visa?

Saad: To give you [a visa and money]. [...] Sometimes Syrian government sends some students to European universities. The money [is] from the government, you understand me?

Me: Ah ok, like, with a scholarship?

Saad: yeah, yeah...

Me: Ok, I understand. Because otherwise it is very expensive [for Syrians] to study in Europe, right?

Saad: Exactly.

Saad's words suggest that he considered his aspirations to move to Europe unrealisable or at least unrealistic — a distant dream rather than an actual plan to migrate. The other two respondents who had fantasized about Europe gave a rather abstract and idealised depiction of it as a 'free place' but did not actually mention any intention to migrate before the conflict started. Indeed, travelling to Europe was difficult for the majority of Syrians: the government's strict emigration controls limited their capability to cross borders (see Chatty 2017a, 217) and the difference between Syrian and European currencies made travel costs prohibitive.

The war between Assad's forces and the opposition changed perspectives about migration. As the fights sparked in various areas of the country, Syrians were essentially presented with three possible solutions to find safety: to stay in their current locations provided that these were safe, to move to safer areas within Syria and to seek sanctuary abroad. For my respondents, the possibility to implement one or more of these strategies depended on their individual aspirations as well as on their capabilities within the context of the war. In fact, many resorted to more than one strategy at different times to adjust to the conflict's changing landscape, as the examples below will show.

Adar and Basma, a Syrian couple with children, were able to remain safely in their city for about three years until the fights reached their region. Initially, they did not intend to leave their home and hoped that the fights would end soon. They expected the conflict to last a

few weeks, perhaps a month. When bombs started exploding in their city, however, they became afraid for the children and for themselves. Staying thus became too dangerous. During the interview they explained to me that the government held no regard for the lives of civilians and many innocent people died under the fire of Assad's forces. They worried that the house could be bombarded. In 2014, they reached the Lebanese border and bribed an officer to cross, having had no idea how long they would stay in Lebanon. They just wanted to ensure the safety of their family and wait for the conflict to end.

Thirty-year-old Noor was instead forced out of his city and moved to a safer area in Syria before he migrated. He was studying law when the conflict started. In June 2011, Assad's forces started bombing his city and he moved to his parents' village, which was safe and under the control of the Free Syrian Army. The fights also prevented Noor from commuting freely to his university, forcing him to drop out. In a country where military service was compulsory and the government was calling men to serve in the war, being formally enrolled in higher education was one of the few opportunities young men had to be exempted from service. Not sitting exams meant losing such right to exemption. Noor tried three times to enrol in a different university, without success. Eventually, his parents told him to stop trying for fear that government forces would seize him. The fights also brought about a strict curfew that cost Noor's brother 15 days of imprisonment. Noor spent the next three years in his village, until Daesh reached the area in 2015. For eight months, Daesh fought the Free Syrian Army and raided houses in the villages it attacked. Noor's family moved from village to village to avoid the fights. When Daesh took over, the situation became difficult to bear. Studying law was forbidden, as Daesh believed the Quran to be only real law, and law students were forced to take religion classes. Smoking, shaving, wearing jeans and listening to certain types of music were outlawed. Being out or working during *salat*, the obligatory daily prayers that must be recited facing Mecca, was a problem. "I was worried to walk in the streets because I was smoking, and I was worried about my clothes," Noor told me. Months after Daesh came to his area, he contacted a smuggler and escaped to Turkey.

The two cases described above provide insights into the numerous mobility restrictions and threats to personal safety that characterised my informants' emigration environment. Some elements are worth discussing, namely: the situation of radical uncertainty caused by the conflict, the violation of people's basic freedoms, the impossibility to leave the country legally and the circumstances in which the actual decision to migrate was taken.

First, the fights between the various actors partaking in the conflict caused a situation of uncertainty where people's safety could be easily and suddenly threatened. As factions gained and lost ground, the geography of war zones changed, pushing people away or trapping them in certain areas. Proximity to fights was inherently dangerous, but many respondents pointed out that moving between areas controlled by different factions also entailed risking one's life.

Second, informants' fundamental freedoms were severely infringed. Other informants beside Noor told me that they or their close relatives were stopped and imprisoned by radical religious groups or by government forces. According to informants, radical religious groups randomly tested people on their knowledge of Islam, and unsatisfactory answers could lead to imprisonment or death. As to Assad's forces, the government tried to control people's movements in order to seize supporters of the opposition (several newspapers and human rights agencies denounced mass detention and torture in Syria; see Shadid 2011; Human Rights Watch 2016; Amnesty International 2017).

Informants consistently mentioned the threats posed by government control and security measures. Three of my informants reported being imprisoned by government forces and being subjected to some form of torture. Two were caught while trying to leave the country and were released after one or two months. The third was working as an undercover voluntary journalist for an online newspaper that criticised Assad's government; he was stopped during a random search and was detained for 'political security' reasons for about a year. Another respondent also told me about the horrific stories surrounding Saydnaya, a military prison built by former president Hafez Al Assad, and how the regime used them to deter any opposition. Stories of searches and imprisonment, as well as Basma's and Adar's remark about Assad's indifference to the lives of civilians, exemplify the political climate during the conflict and explain the sentiments of distrust, fear and resentment towards the government that emerged in most of my interviews.

A third element that emerges from the cases above is that respondents did not leave Syria legally but resorted to bribing and being smuggled. While few could move into Lebanon or Turkey autonomously, the majority needed smugglers to be able to navigate through areas controlled by different factions and to cross national borders. One respondent told me that he crossed illegally into Turkey after being rejected at the Lebanese border as early as 2012. Others narrated how they attempted to cross the Turkish border several times before

succeeding and gave accounts of Turkish soldiers using violence against border crossers (similar stories were reported by other Syrian refugees; see Human Rights Watch 2018). With both internal and external borders heavily patrolled, illegal migration became the only mode of migration available to my informants, regardless of their financial and legal statuses.

The last aspect to be noticed in the narratives above is that respondents took the actual decision to migrate when they perceived a more or less imminent threat to their physical safety. For Basma and Adar, that was the beginning of bombings in their city. For Noor, and for other informants who had initially sought safety in the northern and eastern areas of Syria, it was the brutal rule of Daesh. Others fled when the threat of imprisonment became tangible, or because they feared further persecution after they had been imprisoned. In eight out of 15 cases, male respondents told me that they decided to migrate to avoid serving in the war; five out of these eight left when they received the official call to arms. As more than one informant put it, serving in the war meant that “you either kill or get killed”.

However, not everyone left due to an immediate threat to their own safety. Omar, a young Palestinian in his early twenties, had originally planned to migrate after his parents, who were waiting to be legally reunited with their younger son in Germany. Omar’s plan changed when his sister decided to leave with her three children in order to reach her husband in Germany:

I wanted to go Europe, but I didn't choose the time. Because I wanted my parents to go [through my brother’s request for family reunification] to Germany, then when they arrive, I will follow them. But when I saw that my sister would go alone, I didn't let her. I went with her.

It should be clear by now why respondents saw no reasonable option to stay. In the context of a war that sees no end, when one’s life is constantly at risk and basic freedoms are not respected, the aspiration to stay was replaced by the need to seek safety, which translated into the aspiration to move elsewhere.

Regardless of whether they were hoping to stay or had already formed migration aspirations, in many cases my respondents’ decision to migrate was triggered by events out of their control that either threatened their safety or that of close family members. This is not to downplay the role of the conflict as the primary cause of involuntary mobility. Rather, I want to highlight how the specific events that triggered my informants’ decision to migrate

resulted from the interplay between the conflict and their individual circumstances. This perspective is important to understand why individual capabilities and particularly access to certain forms of capital — and the lack thereof — determined when and how one was able to migrate.

### **3.2. Making the Way out of Syria: Structural Constraints and the Mobilisation of Capitals**

Given the emigration environment described so far, it is evident that for my informants moving inside and out of Syria entailed a number of significant risks and obstacles. The following cases exemplify how possessing a combination of social and economic capital was a necessary precondition to overcome such obstacles and fulfil the aspiration to migrate.

When Majid turned 18 in 2010, he was not enrolled in formal education and was therefore called by the government to fulfil his military service obligations. He was assigned a post as a policeman in a city in Northern Syria, where he was supposed to serve for one and a half years, but when the war started his discharge was postponed indefinitely. In 2014, Daesh conquered the areas around the city. Majid decided to leave but at the time he did not have the means or the possibility to carry out his plan. Daesh had blocked the roads to the border and the salary he received for serving in the police was not enough to pay the high prices imposed by smugglers. “I decided [to leave] when the problem [with Daesh] started but I couldn't, because I needed money. You know, the 200,000<sup>1</sup> that I paid for the smuggler, it was a lot in Syria.” Since he could not move, Majid ensured his safety by bribing one of his superiors to maintain his post in the police and avoid serving in the army.

For almost two years Majid was able to avoid the war by paying part of his salary to his superior. When Kurdish forces took the area back from Daesh and opened the road to the Turkish border, he took his chance to escape. He used one of his contacts, an important officer in Damascus, to obtain a leave of absence with the justification that he intended to visit his mother. Majid's permit, however, only allowed him to move to the city where he had said his mother was; when the Syrian army caught him going in the opposite direction, he was

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<sup>1</sup> Informants often switched between different currencies when they referred to sums paid to smugglers or other actors, so as to give an idea of prices in Western currencies (Dollars or Euros). Since verifying exact amounts and currency equivalencies is impossible, I report the same numbers I have been told during interviews.

imprisoned for 40 days. Once released, he decided to try again with the help of some Kurdish friends:

Majid: After one month, I decide to try again but this time with help. First time it was without help. This time, my friends brought me with a car [in the direction of] the border.

Me: Your Kurdish friends?

Majid: Yeah.

Me: Did you have to pay them for this?

Majid: No.

Me: So, they took you to the border...

Majid: They had a house in that area. So I stayed, I waited there for three nights. Eating, sleeping there.

Me: And then they introduced you to the smuggler?

Majid: They choose the smuggler for me.

Majid's case exemplifies a situation in which aspirations to migrate have been formed but they cannot be fulfilled for a combination of individual and structural constraints. On the one hand, Majid initially lacked the economic capital necessary to leave Syria. On the other hand, the fact that Daesh had blocked the roads limited his capability to move towards Turkey.

Although Majid was eventually able to cross the border thanks to his friends, social leverage — or the mobilisation of so-called 'weak ties', like Majid's superior and the officer in Damascus — was essential to expand his opportunity structure. First, by bribing his superior, Majid was able to deploy an alternative strategy to migration that allowed him to ensure his own safety with the limited economic capital at his disposal. Second, by exploiting his contact in Damascus, he obtained a permit that expanded his capability to move within Syria.

Social support — the support given by family members and close friends — also proved essential to most informants. Majid was eventually able to cross the border because of his Kurdish friends' intervention. Others said that their friends provided information and hospitality on the way out of Syria. Social support was crucial for some to gather the economic capital necessary to pay smugglers. Tariq, a father of eight who left in a hurry with his wife

and children to flee Deash, borrowed money from his friends to pay the extremely high costs of smuggling such a numerous family. Most often, however, it was informants' families that facilitated the journey. The case below is emblematic.

Mustafa, a young Palestinian, had just enrolled at a local university when the war started. Because of the fights around the city, commuting to and from the university became increasingly difficult and Mustafa fell behind in his studies. Since he had stopped sitting exams, in 2015 the government called him for an appointment and demanded that both him and his younger brother joined the army within five months. At that point, his mother told him to leave for Europe and take his brother with him.

Mustafa's mother and his aunt provided the funds necessary to travel. His aunt had already sent her son to Europe and told Mustafa that in Europe he could continue studying and have a future. When Mustafa set off to Turkey with his brother, his city was divided between Kurdish, Palestinian and Syrian forces. The Syrian army stopped him for a random search and asked him to provide his exemption from military service. Because the soldiers thought his documents were fake, even though they were authentic, Mustafa was separated from his brother and imprisoned. On the same day, his brother was also captured by Al-Nousra, an extremist group who detained him to teach him the laws of Islam.

Because he was still underage, Mustafa's brother was released after 20 days and managed to reach Germany. Mustafa remained in prison for about two months. His mother bribed a judge and paid 10,000,000 Syrian liras to know where his son was. When she found out, she paid the bail and had him released within one week. Mustafa returned home, and his mother told him once again to flee. His brother called him from Germany and told Mustafa that he was going to move back to Syria unless Mustafa joined him in Germany. It was his brother's statement that convinced Mustafa to try again. His mother sold a house to pay for his journey. Mustafa paid a smuggler 1,000 Euros to go from his village to a city between Idlib and the Turkish border, then he found another smuggler and crossed into Turkey.

The cases above provide examples of how respondents mobilised the capital at their disposal to overcome the obstacles they encountered on their journey out of Syria. In Mustafa's and Tariq's cases, social capital was crucial to gather the economic capital required to pay for smugglers. Majid's case, on the other hand, shows how not having the necessary combination of social and economic capital at the right time could hinder one's capability to migrate.

Given the specific emigration environment described so far, where moving across the country was unsafe and illegal migration was the only available option to cross national borders, smugglers played a crucial role in my informants' opportunity structure. They possessed the knowledge required to move out of Syria: how to avoid military posts, proceed safely across areas controlled by different factions and plan border crossing. As other informants explained, smugglers also often acted as a network and connected their customers to the next smuggler *en route*. In this sense, smugglers possessed both the cultural capital (knowledge of the pathway) and social capital (connections) that respondents lacked to exit Syria.

### **3.3. Towards Europe: The Unmaking and Remaking of Migratory Trajectories**

In its first year, the conflict caused various flows of circular migration between Syria and its neighbouring countries (Chatty 2017a, 219–46). Many Syrians turned to relatives and personal connections in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to find support, but they often returned to their hometowns when the area became safe again. In 2012, when the number of exiles increased sharply, Syrians who did not embark on the journey to Europe self-settled in neighbouring countries where they had personal connections and joined the local formal and informal economies.

Of the 15 cases I examined, eight left Syria between 2011 and 2015 whereas the remaining seven left in early 2016. The former tried to settle in Lebanon or Turkey before reaching Europe at the beginning of 2016. Conversely, those who left Syria in 2016 directly moved towards Europe. Informants who left between 2011 and 2015 found accommodation and employment, sometimes relying on the assistance of UNHCR or their host country's government. They therefore seem to match the pattern of self-settling migrants described above. However, in 2016 they all decided to cross the Aegean and risk their lives to reach Europe. Why did these informants decide to move? Or rather, why did they develop new migration aspirations? The direct answer to this question is that their ideal destinations changed over time. The narrative below, which fuses the accounts of two families whose migratory trajectories intertwined, provides a good example of how the geographical horizon of migration aspirations can be revised repeatedly and unexpectedly.

Salah was the first among my respondents to leave Syria. When the conflict started in 2011, he had just earned his degree in engineering and he decided to move to Lebanon to find work. Within six months he had found a job at a state-owned company. Meanwhile Fatimah, his future wife, still resided in Syria. In July 2012, thanks to the mediation of their families, they became engaged. Salah found a house and arranged everything so that Fatimah could join him to start a life together in Lebanon. However, when the Lebanese government passed a law that forbade Syrians from working in public companies, Salah lost both his job and the house. Fatimah could not reach him. Salah decided to move to Beirut and found a new job, but the salary was not enough to start a family. He therefore planned to continue working in Lebanon until the end of the war and then move back to Syria but Fatimah, who was coping with the effects of the conflict at home, explained to him that the war was not going to stop soon. Meanwhile, the situation for Syrians in Lebanon worsened. Many municipalities set up curfews and Syrians could not move freely or work overtime (Chatty 2017a, 235). Seeing no future in Syria or in Lebanon, Salah tried to find work in Qatar and in Dubai.

Meanwhile Ali, who was Salah's friend and neighbour in Syria, had moved to Turkey in 2012 to avoid being called to serve in the army. His plan was to earn enough money to allow his family to join him in Turkey. Initially, he lived with some relatives in Istanbul, then he secured a job in a factory and an accommodation. Between the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, his mother and two younger siblings reached him in Istanbul. Like Salah, Ali had initially planned to wait in Turkey until the conflict's end.

In 2014, Ali convinced Salah to join him in Turkey. Together they set up a business as builders and interior decorators. With the collaboration of a Syrian businessman, they developed a commission-based network of people to procure new customers and worked for several hotels and restaurants. Now that Salah had stabilised his economic situation, Fatimah finally joined him in Turkey and they married in June 2014. Ali's sister also married her fiancé; he had already received asylum in Germany and flew to Turkey to marry her, hoping to bring her to Europe legally by applying for family reunification.

At the beginning of 2016 Fatimah became pregnant. She was scared of giving birth in Turkey because she had heard of the poor assistance Syrian women received in hospitals. Salah was also concerned about obtaining some form of permanent residency for them and for the coming baby. His brother had tried to obtain citizenship in Turkey for two years without success. "You work for now, nothing for the future", he said, highlighting how the

family's future would be precarious without legal residence. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of asylum seekers crossed into Turkey, making it the country hosting the highest number of refugees in the world; this brought about a negative change in the local population's attitude towards refugees (Zoetewij-Turhan 2018). Flows towards Europe increased. Salah said that workers in his company would only stay long enough to save money to pay a smuggler and then disappear. He also said that the media portrayed a promising image of Europe, showing NGOs and volunteers that worked to support the asylum seekers landing on Greek shores. At the same time, Ali's sister decided to cross to Greece in order to join her husband in Germany, the procedures for reunification from Turkey being too slow. The whole family decided to go with her. In March 2016, despite the relative economic security they had achieved, the two families crossed the Aegean together on a smuggler's boat.

Salah's story shows how both structural constraints and changing aspirations can redefine one's ideal destinations. First, the aspiration to start a family with Fatimah led Salah across four countries until the conditions to realise it were met. Then, when Fatimah became pregnant, the couple formed new aspirations concerning the future of the coming baby; since safeguarding the baby's rights through citizenship was impossible in Turkey, their geographical horizons expanded towards more promising European countries.

Ali's story also exemplifies the strong interaction between personal aspirations, migratory trajectories and family dynamics. In his case, migration was a strategy to ensure both his own safety and that of his family. Moreover, his case shows how someone can suppress personal aspirations to favour those of loved ones. During our interview, Ali told me that he did not wish to leave Turkey but did so to follow his family. "I knew that Europe is difficult, to change your life from Syrian to European. You can make money, you can have freedom but it's not like Syria. Our social relationships are different," he told me.

The impossibility to build a future for oneself and for one's family is a theme that arose in the interviews of practically all respondents who tried to settle in neighbouring countries. While Salah and Ali managed to secure a good income, others stressed that being employed in Lebanon or Turkey meant working long hours and at bad conditions. Respondents reported working up to 12 hours a day for as little as \$300 dollars a month, working without insurance, facing racism on the workplace and not being paid at all for their work.

Lack of access to formal education for children and young men was also a driver for further migration. Abbud, a young man who left Syria with his family in 2014, explained that the little

money he earned in Turkey was not enough to access higher education; eventually, he decided to separate from his family and move to Europe to make a life for himself. Basma and Adar too stated that the impossibility to pay for their children's education in Lebanon was one of the main reasons that pushed them to look for better opportunities in Europe. The impossibility to lead a 'good life' in Turkey and Lebanon, therefore, pushed informants to move onwards (cf. Chatty 2017b).

All the examples above show that migratory trajectories are not always the results of predetermined plans but can be processes in the making that entail some degree of unpredictability. Within these processes, life aspirations work as a compass with no fixed North. Schapendonk (2011, 112) rightly notices that "aspirations 'move' along with migrants' trajectories", pointing out that aspirations evolve *en route* and adjust to new needs and contexts. Such was the case for Salah and Fatimah, whose ideal destination changed as they formed aspirations about their future child. In other cases, however, new destinations entered the geographical horizon of my respondents because their aspirations could not be fulfilled in their first country of arrival. It was the impossibility to fulfil life aspirations in their given context and the perceived possibility to realise them elsewhere that rekindled informants' desire to move and redefined their trajectories.

### **3.4. Beyond Safety: Unpacking Migration Aspirations in Conflict-Led Involuntary Mobility**

In the previous sections I have stated that migration aspirations are better understood in relation to broader life aspirations, even in the case of involuntary mobility. This is not saying that the need for safety is not the real cause behind my respondents' migration aspirations. In fact, five of them explicitly remarked that they migrated to seek safety. Some even said that they had no clear destination in mind when they left but simply wanted to reach a safe place as soon as possible. More generally, depictions of the threats fled by respondents and the dynamics of their journey out of Syria always implied the aspiration to be safe — when people say they want to escape death, imprisonment or torture, it is self-evident that they aspire to safety.

The Syrian conflict was the backdrop against which respondents' aspirations to stay were suppressed, and both the aspiration and the decision to migrate were formed. The array of

threats and constraints described so far clarify why staying was not a reasonable option, and why safety was the primary concern that dictated informants' decisions. At the same time, the context of the war contributed to giving shape and direction to the aspiration to migrate. More specifically, the conflict changed the hypothetical futures my informants envisaged for themselves and their families in and out of Syria.

It is important to consider that, besides the threats to safety and liberties, informants had to cope with the other effects of the war. Some lamented not being able to find a job during the conflict. For students like Saad, Abbud and Noor, the war made it impossible to continue their education. For parents, the war jeopardised the future of their children. Many informants had been planning to enhance their economic position, to further their education or to obtain a job of their interest. The war thwarted these aspirations and caused a major disruption in informants' imagined life trajectories.

Under these circumstances, migration aspirations took up additional meanings and values, which intertwined with respondents' individual life aspirations as well as with collective aspirations that formed in Syria during the war. In fact, scholarship on (migration and other) aspirations emphasises how individual aspirations have a collective origin, in that they are the product of one's particular milieu (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2017; Frye 2012).

Carling (2002, 2014) suggests that one way to conceptualise migration aspirations is to look at them as projects for life-making, or culturally defined projects that are socially constructed. With regard to situations of conflict, Carling and Schewel advance the hypothesis of reading migration as one of three alternative projects based on Hirschman's (1970) trio of options exit, voice and loyalty, the first of which implies migration (Carling and Schewel 2017, 9–10). It is certainly true that migration aspirations can be opposed to other culturally defined projects that imply staying, for example to support a government or protest against it (options that other Syrians have chosen). However, even within culturally defined projects to migrate, diverse variations are possible.

From the cases described in this chapter it emerged that some informants initially intended to wait the end of the conflict or hoped that it would end soon. Out of six respondents who explicitly expressed the wish to wait for the conflict's end, five moved to a neighbouring country before 2016, hoping to return to Syria when the situation would allow it. For them, migration aspirations therefore corresponded to a temporary project, a period of time in

which their life aspirations and trajectories were to be postponed or diverted until a safe return was possible.

Instead, the group of informants that left Syria in 2016 moved immediately towards Europe. Whether they initially remained in Syria because they intended to stay or because they could not leave, these informants coped with the effects of the war longer than those who migrated earlier and experienced first-hand the progressive collapse of Syrian socio-economic infrastructures. As the country's future took up a grimmer look and the chances of making one's future died down, migrating became a project of self-realisation. In this case, migration was a strategy to realise one's life aspirations rather than their temporary interruption. To use Saad's words: "I decided to migrate from Syria because everything was killed. I couldn't live as a [human being]. I cannot be anything, I was nothing at that time."

Why did the latter group decide to move directly towards Europe instead of settling in a neighbouring country like those who migrated earlier? I believe the answer to this question lies in the duration of the conflict and in the collective nature of these projects for life-making.

By 2016 not only had these 'late migrants' acknowledged the lack of a future in Syria, but also the difficulties encountered by previous migrants in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. At the same time, Syrians who had reached Europe and the media returned an idealised image of Europe. Virtually all of my respondents stated that at one point or another of their decision-making process they had been in contact with relatives or friends who had already migrated to Europe, most of which portrayed it as a safe place filled with opportunities for self-realisation. To give one example: when Abbud asked his nephew, who had migrated a year and a half before him, what the situation in Germany was like, his nephew replied that "If you have a dream, you can do it in Europe".

The same processes influenced the aspirations of those who migrated before 2016. The aspiration to wait for the conflict's end was most often connected with the first years of war, when the possibility of a dignified life in Lebanon or Turkey and of a relative quick resolution to the conflict were still conceivable. However, as both possibilities became less likely and flows towards Europe intensified in 2014 and 2015, this group's collectively shaped project changed and eventually conflated with that of the previous one. Salah's story is telling in this regard.

The ones described above are only two of the culturally defined projects that possibly underlay Syrian migration. Other Syrians may have migrated to a neighbouring country with

the intention to settle permanently (cf. Seefar 2018), whereas others may have seen Europe as a temporary solution until return is possible. As shown in the third section of this chapter, aspirations are subject to change across time and space, and this statement holds true even when they are conceptualised as collective products.

Framing migration aspirations as future-oriented, culturally defined projects was important to highlight their instrumental value. What should be clear now is that even the case of conflict-led involuntary mobility, where they primarily avail aspirations to safety, migration aspirations serve multiple goals are always embedded in broader life aspirations. It is in light of these broader life aspirations that migration and settlement can be understood as part of the same ongoing process.

## **4. Stranded in Greece: Renegotiating Aspirations Within the European Union's Asylum System**

In 2015, the number of non-European migrants transiting the Balkans reached an unprecedented level, with over 2 million illegal border crossings reported in the region — roughly 30 times more than in 2014 (Frontex 2016). The majority of these migrants were asylum seekers from Syria and the Middle East. Since European border authorities proved unable to tackle a migratory movement of such scale, Balkan countries and the EU implemented a number of sometimes contradictory measures to manage the flow of people, shifting from initially relaxed entry provisions to increasingly stricter measures to curb illegal migration. In November 2015, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia started granting access to a progressively narrower number of nationalities, until at the beginning of March 2016 it eventually announced that its borders were shut. As a result, thousands of migrants were stranded in Greece.

In this context of increased border securitization, the European Union called for concrete actions of solidarity towards the Union's frontline countries, Greece and Italy, which found themselves alone in managing the pressure of migration. An emergency relocation mechanism for asylum seekers was eventually agreed and entered into force on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2015. The two-year plan entailed the exceptional relocation, from Greece and Italy to other Member States, of 120,000 persons in clear need of international protection. Access to the mechanism essentially depended on asylum applications' probability of success, based on applicants' country of origin or residence (Council of the EU 2015, 83).

Given the circumstances and numbers of Syrian migration, Syrian nationals as well as non-national residents like Kurds and Palestinians could access the relocation mechanism. In practice, this meant that they could lodge their asylum application in Greece but would eventually be relocated to another Union Member State, and their application would be processed within the jurisdiction of that State. Relocation countries were to be decided according to a quota system, although applicants' characteristics like vulnerability status, language skills and existing linkages with European countries (e.g. the presence of family members) were to be taken in account. Greek institutions were tasked with duly informing applicants about the relocation procedure (Ibid., 90).

To stem migration from the East, the European Union also stipulated a pact with the Turkish government and agreed that all new irregular migrants landing on the Greek islands should be returned to Turkey (European Commission 2016). The pact de facto entitled only asylum seekers on mainland Greece to access the relocation mechanism.

The EU-Turkey deal entered into force on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2016. While some of my informants had reached Greece in February or early March 2016, many ventured to cross the Aegean Sea on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> March, often sharing the journey on the same boats. All of them crossed illegally from Izmir, one of Turkey's main hubs for migrant smuggling. Most informants landed in Chios, two in Lesbos, and from there they were sent off to mainland Greece before the EU-Turkey deal could trap them on the islands. Then, their journey came to a halt. Since the border with Macedonia was shut, informants were accommodated in Katsikas's newly set refugee camp and were later enrolled for relocation. Their long wait in Greece commenced.

Eventually, informants spent one and a half years in Greece before being relocated to Sweden in the summer of 2017. It is on this period of transition that this chapter will focus. In the first section, I will analyse the networks informants mobilised on their way to Europe and the agency they exerted in the smuggling process to cross the Aegean Sea. The second section will explore the important moment when respondents were formally introduced into the Greek asylum system, and by extension into the wider European framework, and describe their arrival at camp Katsikas. The third section will focus on their enrolment in the EU relocation programme and the standstill that followed. The next two sections will provide insights into the evolution of informants' aspirations by analysing them along the three dimensions discussed in the theoretical framework — content, relational reference and time-space horizon. More specifically, the fourth section will focus on the interconnection between information and the geographical horizon of aspirations, whereas the fifth section will explore how the three dimensions changed and influenced each other throughout migration.

This chapter ultimately intends to picture respondents' immigration interface in the European Union and their responses to it. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the European Union's asylum system but to render its lived experience as it emerges from informants' subjective accounts. Exploring the interplay between the structural constraints posed by the asylum system and informants' life trajectories is a key step in understanding the continuities and discontinuities of aspirations in migration.

#### **4.1. Crossing the Aegean: Agency in the Smuggling Process**

When my informants set out to cross the Aegean in early 2016, the migrant route that connected Turkey to Northern Europe through the Balkans was already well established. The many migrants who had used the same route in the previous years had reinforced the existing migration infrastructure, including complex and organised smuggling networks. My informants could therefore rely on a variety of channels to reach out to smugglers. One of them reported using a Whatsapp group created expressly for migrants who wanted to cross to Greece. Another one said that every smuggler in Izmir had middle-men in refugee camps who recruited potential crossers. Others reported being approached by middle-men in the streets or going to bars where smugglers were known to gather. As more than one informant put it, “You can find them everywhere, you just have to ask”.

In the relationship between migrants and smugglers, the latter always represent the more powerful actor. Yet, migrants retain varying degrees of agency even in their disadvantaged position. Some researchers evaluated migrants’ agency in the smuggling process primarily on the basis of their ability to determine destination countries (cf. Robinson and Segrott 2002; van Liempt and Doomernik 2006). However, for my informants and for Aegean crossers in general, the destination country was a given; the question was not what country they would reach but which Greek island they would land on. Nuances in agency must therefore be researched in their capability to influence the dynamics of the crossing. This could entail identifying more reliable smugglers, negotiating prices, demanding safer conditions for the trip and accessing relevant information to verify what smugglers told them. Mohammed’s account below exemplifies how migrants can influence the dynamics of the crossing despite the highly coercive structure of smuggling networks.

During the interview, Mohammed explained to me that smugglers act in organised networks and share clients in order to form larger groups of crossers and capitalize on numbers. Nurturing the relationship with smugglers was essential to him to guarantee his own safety. The first night he tried to cross the Aegean on a smugglers’ boat, the engine was so old that it malfunctioned 500 metres from the shore. Mohammed arranged to cross two days later with a different smuggler. He said he left Izmir with the smugglers’ other clients. They were crammed in a big truck “like animals”. When they got out, they found themselves

in front of a small river, not near the sea as they expected. Three or four men were holding rifles. The smugglers forbade everyone from talking loudly or using their phones — a common strategy among smugglers to reduce the risk of arrests (Dekker et al. 2018, 7). Mohammed contacted his former smuggler asking what was happening. The man asked Mohammed to share his location through his smartphone, then warned Mohammed that the trip was risky: they were far from Greek shores and would probably spend five or six hours in the water before reaching Greece. Mohammed protested with the smugglers, but they insisted they the group cross.

Before that night, Mohammed had dined with a man who held a high position within the smuggling network, a Turkish Kurd who spoke Arabic and had studied in Eastern Europe. Mohammed called him and asked him to intervene. The man agreed to let the group stay but demanded that people help pull the boats onto the shore and go back to Izmir on their own. The group took cover under a bridge and lit a fire to warm up. In the morning, they walked two or three kilometres and reached a gas station, where they asked somebody to call for a bus that would take them back to Izmir. However, before the bus could arrive the police came into the station. They confiscated life jackets, separated men from women and took names and photographs of the men. When the police had finished, they fetched another bus to take people back to Izmir. Each person was charged 20 liras, a ridiculously high price compared to that of average bus tickets.

Mohammed was discouraged. While staying in one of the houses where smugglers keep their clients waiting, he met Fares, another future resident of camp Katsikas. They tried to cross together a few times, without success. Meanwhile, Mohammed had kept in touch with the smugglers' boss, who had told him that the Macedonian border was shut and that he was free to give up if he wanted. Mohammed and Fares decided to try one last time. If it did not work, they would stay and find work somewhere in Turkey. One afternoon, a smuggler told Mohammed that a friend of his had a group ready to leave and was looking for one more person to join them. Mohammed agreed to join at the condition that Fares could come too. They met the middle-man in a café and after several hours of waiting, they were sent off to a beach. This time the smuggler was Syrian, and the boat was in good conditions. They sailed at 9 o'clock. Mohammed kept sending their location to his smuggler via GPS. The smuggler informed him when they entered Greek waters but also warned him not to say anything to avoid commotion on the boat. At some point, the boat was approached by a larger ship.

Mohammed could not tell if they were the Greek coast guard because they spoke English. The crew rescued them and took them to Chios. It was 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

Mohammed's example is unique among my informants in that he displayed greater agency and self-efficacy. A single man in his late twenties and with a high level of education, he was likely more experienced than younger migrants and enjoyed greater mobility than families, whose movements were restrained by children. Other informants did not necessarily exert agency to the same extent. Yet, Mohammed's story illustrates that migrants employ a number of strategies to reduce risks and influence the dynamics of the crossing, primarily through the mobilisation of social capital.

In the previous chapter I have shown how informants' social networks were crucial to exit Syria. These networks could also extend beyond Syrian borders, for example when one had relatives or close friends in Turkey or Lebanon. However, leaving Syria often meant exiting one's primary network and source of support; accessing new networks was therefore necessary to create social capital. Mohammed's friendship with Fares demonstrates how forging new relationships can be crucial to expand one's opportunity structure: it was because of Mohammed's negotiation with the smuggler that Fares could be included in the upcoming trip. Alliances *en route* are a common strategy among migrants to reduce individual risks and stimulate mutual solidarity (Schapendonk and van Moppes 2007). As Mohammed's story shows, part of this solidarity consists of sharing information and granting access to networks.

Nurturing the relationship with smugglers was also a key strategy for Mohammed to create leverage in a system where he could only exert limited agency. The smugglers known to him facilitated the crossing and provided strategic information, acting as nodes in his social network rather than mere service providers. Other informants seemed less engaged with smugglers, although all resorted to smuggling to reach Greece — which confirms asylum seekers' increasing dependency on smuggling networks to reach European countries (cf. Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Mandić and Simpson 2017).

In the absence of safe legal routes, being smuggled via sea represented the only available strategy to reach Europe for my informants. Some described the bureaucratic and economic obstacles to obtaining asylum that they and their relatives encountered at the embassies of both European and Middle-Eastern countries. Therefore, when they felt that it would be impossible to build the lives they imagined in the Middle-East, sea crossing became an unavoidable risk to secure a brighter future in Europe.

## 4.2. Arrival to Camp Katsikas: Aspirations to Mobility and the Constraints of the European Immigration Framework

Once they landed in Chios or Lesbos, informants were taken to reception centres and given the official documents issued by the Greek government to irregular migrants who came from countries recognised as at risk by the EU. These documents marked informants' entry into the EU asylum system. While their documents officially granted them legal stay and freedom of movement within Greece, informants' initial movements were in fact limited by a number of state-imposed constrictions.

Those who arrived on the islands in February or earlier in March were taken to local camps and spent there a period of time varying from a few days to a few weeks. Some of them reported that they could not leave the island because the ferry service was interrupted for days. It was only on the day before the EU-Turkey deal entered into effect that asylum seekers in Chios were moved *en masse* to Athens. Some informants told me that the government was "emptying the islands" before the deal became effective, and that they were the last ones to leave for mainland Greece.

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2016, together with many other asylum seekers, the majority of my informants arrived at Athens' Piraeus port. They unanimously reported that once they got out of the ferries, they found that the Greek police had encircled the area and that empty buses were waiting for them. People were told to wait in the port and were progressively moved onto the buses. Abdullah, a young man in his twenties, recalled the moment:

Abdullah: When we left the boat, [there] were a lot of policemen at the port and they made a circle around us, and we got a short rest, maybe for half an hour, and the police put us in the buses. But we had no idea where we would go. We just thought we would go to the border of Macedonia, we will pass the border to go to Germany... we didn't know anything.

Me: So, you were thinking that they would take you from Athens to the border?

Abdullah: Yeah.

Me: And this... you were talking about this with the people? It was your idea...

Abdullah: No, nobody from the government, from the police spoke with us.

Me: But... between the people that came off the boat, between the refugees, you were thinking that they would take you to the border, and you were speaking about this...

Abdullah: Yeah... we were so happy, so happy.

Me: So, you thought 'they're taking us to Macedonia, or maybe Germany' ...

Abdullah: Exactly. We thought we would go to the border of Macedonia, and after that, we can complete our trip by ourselves.

In fact, Abdullah told me he had already heard about the Macedonian border closure in Idlib, on his way out of Syria. His friends in Europe had warned him that passage was now restricted. Other informants too reported that they had heard about Macedonia's border securitization before crossing the Aegean, either from friends or through the media, but they did not expect the border to be completely shut. They had all planned to transit quickly through Greece and continue their journey along the Western Balkan route, so as to reach more promising locations in Northern Europe (a common pattern among migrants coming from Africa and the East; cf. Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic, and Vidovic 2015; Brekke and Brochmann 2015). Rumours about the border being shut were initially rejected. Some informants stated that on the bus to Katsikas somebody spread news of the border closure, but the claim was dismissed. Other studies have shown how migrants might rely on outdated information to plan their movements and may tend to filter out negative information (Schapendonk and van Moppes 2007), as my informants' narratives confirm.

Another detail deserving attention in Abdullah's quote is that neither the police nor government representatives provided any kind of information. Informants reported being moved onto the buses without knowing their destination. Some asked the bus driver for information and were told that he was only following the police car ahead of them. By monitoring their location through their phones' GPS, informants realised that the buses were heading North and this strengthened their expectation to be taken to the Macedonian border.

Instead of reaching the border, the buses took the asylum seekers to Katsikas. The refugee camp had been built in an unused military airport a few kilometres away from the village centre, along a country road that ran through sparse houses and factories. Rusty hangars still stood next to the road, while behind the camp a plain stretched out towards distant mountains. The runways had been covered with a layer of jagged white rocks of the type used

for landscaping. Lines of UNHCR tents had been set up, a metallic net fenced the camp and a container placed next to the entrance served as an office for the Greek army, which was tasked with supervising the area.

Informants said they were shocked at the sight of camp Katsikas. Some asylum seekers refused to leave the buses, but the majority accepted to enter because they were tired for the recent crossing or because their children needed to rest. Groups of six to eight people were accommodated in each tent. Everyone was given a sleeping bag to be put directly on the rocky ground. Tents lacked flooring as well as heating and electricity, and toilets were far too few for the over 1,500 people who would be eventually hosted in the camp.

Informants also reported being told by representatives of the Greek government that the camp was a temporary solution, and that they would soon be able to continue their journey to Macedonia. Four respondents mentioned that government representatives were accompanied by a Syrian interpreter, an earlier immigrant who had been living in Greece for years. Wardan, a young man in his twenties, recalled the words of the interpreter in our interview: “This is only a station, tomorrow you will move to Macedonia, just sleep [here] tonight. Tomorrow we will take you [to Macedonia]”. The hope to be taken to Macedonia persisted for a few days, sustained partly by the promises of government representatives and partly by rumours, until the awareness of being stranded sank in.

The first months in Katsikas represent a critical moment in my informants’ journey. UNHCR officially notified them about the possibility to enrol for relocation only two to three months after their arrival at the camp; until then, their chances to continue the journey became almost null. The closure of the Macedonian border was a major obstacle to the realisation of their journey and, by extension, to the realisation of the future they envisaged in Northern Europe. At the same time, informants perceived no opportunity to fulfil their aspirations in Greece, a country that they had only ever seen as a transit area and that was now letting them sleep on the bare ground. The extreme conditions of life in the camp, combined with the lack of reliable information on their future in Europe, exacerbated feelings of uncertainty.

Qasim, a man in his forties, recalled the hopelessness experienced during the first weeks in Katsikas: “Here is when the bad situation started: camp Katsikas. Stones, tents, bad food, no blankets or anything. Sometimes we lit fires in the tents because it was cold. The toilets were very bad [...] I left Turkey because I was living in a bad tent, after that I found myself in a worse one”. Qasim had left Syria in 2013 with his wife, his children and other relatives to

seek refuge in Turkey. For the following three years they lived in a Turkish refugee camp, where Qasim tried to make a living as a greengrocer and a builder. Pushed by lack of perspectives, the family decided to cross to Europe in 2016, only to find themselves stuck in another camp. A few days after their arrival in Katsikas, they tried to cross the border with Macedonia illegally. They took a bus to Thessaloniki, from which they intended to reach Macedonia by train, but the adults soon realised that the children were in no condition to travel. The prospect of undertaking a long, unsafe journey across the Balkans with a group of exhausted children was unrealistic. The family therefore returned to camp Katsikas with no other option but to wait. When I asked Qasim what he expected to happen then, he replied: “We didn't think about what would happen. It was like having a [blindfold] in front of our eyes. We just prayed that our country become safe again. Which future is with us now? We lost the children's future because we put them in a tent. We didn't know what their future would be”.

As Qasim's story illustrates, children hindered families' mobility because of their limited ability to sustain demanding journeys. Their presence also multiplied smugglers' fees. An informant told me that being smuggled to another European country by plane could cost \$3,000 per person, whereas continuing via land implied a costly journey across several national borders. Most informants had exhausted their monetary resources in order to reach Greece and could not afford smugglers' services anymore. Crossing without smugglers was also hardly feasible. An informant reported that he initially tried to cross the Macedonian border on a weekly basis, and on one occasion he even went as far as Skopje, but he was always caught by Macedonian police and returned to Greece. Europe's clampdown on migration had heightened risks for migrants at the external borders of the EU (Mandić and Simpson 2017), but it had also made it extremely onerous to move across internal borders.

As their imagined futures continued to be geographically bound to Northern Europe, informants retained their aspirations to migrate but lacked the capability to do so. From their initial situation of involuntary mobility, they had shifted into one of immobility. It was the EU relocation programme that offered a way out of this condition of immobility by creating a legal pathway to exit Greece.

### **4.3. The Long Wait for Relocation: Delayed Agency and In/voluntary Immobility**

From the moment they left Syria until their arrival in Greece, informants retained relative freedom in deciding the direction of their movements, although those movements entailed considerable efforts and risks. In Greece, European regulations forced informants to halt until the relocation programme offered them a chance to continue moving. At the same time, however, the programme deprived informants of the capability to determine both the direction and timing of their movements.

Asylum seekers enrolled in the programme were formally asked to express their preferences and select eight possible destinations out of the 22 participating countries, but there was no actual guarantee that they would be sent to a country of their choice. Being denied asylum in a second European country was also a possible outcome, which would leave no other option but applying for asylum in Greece or returning to the Middle-East. The relocation programme therefore rekindled informants' hopes to reach their ideal destinations in Northern Europe, but it also created the risk of receiving asylum in Southern or Eastern European countries, where informants felt they had less chances to build the future they hoped for.

The relocation programme also forced informants into a period of transit that lasted over a year. The programme entailed a number of interviews to assess individuals' right to asylum and relocation, after which destination countries were to be established and communicated; then, flights from Greece and reception in destination countries needed to be arranged. The same procedure applied to all eligible asylum seekers in Greece. My informants' enrolment into the programme started in the summer of 2016 and interviews to apply for relocation took place in January and February 2017. Between April and July informants received official notifications of their relocation to Sweden, after which they were accommodated in Athens until their flights were arranged.

Given the complex workings of the process, informants did not know in advance how long they would have to wait in Greece. Additionally, during this long standstill informants were repeatedly moved. After nine months in the camp, they were accommodated in various hotels in Epirus as a temporary provision for the winter. In spring, informants whose application had already been processed were moved to Athens, whereas those still waiting were moved to camps or to other temporary accommodations across the country, until they were all transferred to Sweden.

It should be evident now that the asylum system kept my informants in a prolonged state of suspension characterised by instability and uncertainty. It is therefore legitimate to wonder why, under such circumstances, no one applied for asylum in Greece or left the country illegally before being relocated.

Applying for asylum in Greece meant staying in a country with scarce employment opportunities and limited provisions for refugees. On the other hand, depleted economic resources, individual restraints to mobility and the constrictive immigration interface continued to hamper informants' capability to migrate illegally. Relocation was the only possible route out of Greece for most informants, but not for all. While all informants initially found themselves blocked by the Macedonia border closure, the standstill gave some of them the opportunity to mobilise their social capital — family in the Middle-East and in Europe — and gather the money needed to pay a smuggler. Yet, they decided to endure this period of suspension in hopes of being relocated to Northern Europe. From informants' perspective, waiting represented a sensible investment if the potential outcome was to be granted legal entry and full government support in a Northern country, especially when the alternatives were accepting a less promising future in Greece or burdening one's family and undertaking the risks of illegal crossing. Adam, a single man in his thirties, gave a clear assessment of these options:

The first option was to wait for someone to send me money. Second, to stay in Greece. The third one to wait for relocation programme, to wait for anything to happen without doing anything. But I chose the third option, to wait. Because I didn't like so much to stay in Greece, because I saw that there was crisis, the economy was not so good. [My brother in Germany] told me that if I could not leave Greece with the relocation programme, he would try to help me, to send me money to be smuggled. I told him yes, but I will wait. I waited for relocation.

Smuggling oneself in the eventuality of being relocated to an undesirable country is a fall-back plan that other informants mentioned. This capability to imagine desirable futures and devise plans to enact them within (and despite) the constrictive asylum framework can be considered a 'delayed' type of agency, one that is characteristic of states of suspension and in-betweenness (Ghorashi, de Boer, and ten Holder 2017). This specific form of agency pivots

on the temporal dimension of aspirations: because of their potential nature, aspirations do not necessarily require an immediate realisation and can be moved in time. During their standstill in Greece, informants postponed the realisation of their aspirations, serving multiple purposes. First, projecting oneself into a positive future became a coping mechanism to endure uncertainty, instability and the grief of informants' particular situation. Second, postponing the realisation of aspirations enabled informants to reformulate them — more on this in the following sections. Finally, by postponing the realisation of their aspirations, informants could try to game the asylum system: they took advantage of the possibility offered by the relocation programme to reach their desired destinations and devised fall-back plans to counter negative outcomes. Of course, this was not the enactment of a fully conscious strategy; agency can also be exerted unconsciously and by envisioning and striving towards projects for life-making (Ortner 2006, 134–53).

It could also be questioned whether informants' wait for relocation should be categorised as voluntary or involuntary immobility. The plurality of cases described above suggest that both answers are correct. On the one hand, most informants did not have the capability to migrate where and when they intended to, and therefore they subjected to the immobility dictated by the European asylum framework. On the other hand, those informants who could potentially migrate illegally chose to be immobile after they evaluated the options at their disposal. As Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic and Vidovic (2015, 109) illustrated, both migration capabilities and the assessment of the cost and benefits associated with migrating can influence the im/mobility of asylum seekers stranded in transit countries.

The above analysis of informants' transit migration through Greece also brought to the fore two more relevant aspects of their imagined trajectories, which are interlinked. First, the polarisation of potential destinations in desirable and undesirable European countries; second, the motives behind individuals' choice of countries. These aspects will be addressed in the following sections.

#### **4.4. 'Good' and 'Bad' Countries: Information and the Collective Shaping of Geographical Horizons**

During the time I taught English to former Katsikas residents in 2017, I observed first-hand how they waited with trepidation to know their destination countries. As I heard people

voicing their hopes and fears about the future, the polarisation between Northern countries and the rest of Europe became evident: Northern European countries were 'good', whereas Eastern and Southern countries were 'bad'. I still remember the excitement in Abdullah's voice when he called me on a May afternoon to let me know that he would be relocated to Sweden. When I interviewed him in Stockholm six months later, he recalled his anxiety about the possibility to be sent to a bad country:

I was worried about that, because this country will be your whole future. Maybe you will go to the heaven, maybe you will go to [hell]. If you get Bulgaria, Romania, you will go to the hell. If you get a respectable country, like Sweden, Germany, Ireland, Holland... you can build your future.

Informants assessed European countries on the basis of the image they held of them and of the chances they thought they had to realise their aspirations there. Such perceptions depended on the information they had about each European country. Two factors must be considered in order to understand how information shaped informants' geographical horizon: the sources from which information came, and the type of information used to assess countries.

Various sources contributed to influencing informants' perceptions of European countries. Friends and relatives as well as the media were informants' primary sources of information before they migrated. Several informants mentioned that they already possessed a general knowledge of European countries when they lived in Syria; this was mainly based on the mediatic representation of those countries. Friends and relatives who were living in Europe provided up-to-date information on their countries, such as employment opportunities, provisions for refugees and the quality of life for newcomers. To use Abdullah's words again:

I knew a lot of information about Europe because of my studies, from the TV, from the internet, from YouTube, from Facebook... I knew all things about Europe. From Wikipedia... but my friends here in Europe told me about social life in Europe, about the [people].

When informants arrived in Greece, they became enmeshed in the local migration infrastructure, which included both institutional and non-institutional actors, namely volunteers, NGOs, government representatives and the UNHCR. Besides providing asylum seekers with a number of services, these actors also functioned as important sources of information.

Throughout the nine months that my informants spent in Katsikas, the camp remained an open site. Hundreds of volunteers came to offer their help and they became camp Katsikas residents' first acquaintance with Europeans. Some informants felt that meeting people of different nationalities gave them an impression of different European cultures. The international volunteer network that formed in camp Katsikas also served as a vehicle to disseminate information about European countries. Amir, a young man in his early twenties, remembered how some volunteers told him which countries would be best for refugees:

They said to go to North Europe or... [countries] like Sweden, like Scandinavia or Germany, Holland, Belgium, France. It will be good for you as refugee, but there are European countries that are bad for refugees. Like the Eastern ones... so, Greece and Italy, Spain. They're not so good for refugees.

As the quotes above hint, informants were inclined to rely on hearsay. Conversely, they hardly trusted official information sources, such as the government, UNHCR and, to a lesser extent, NGOs. The tendency of considering personal networks as more trustworthy has already been noted among asylum migrants, and it is often paired with sentiments of distrust towards official institutions, especially when asylum seekers fled their countries because they experienced persecution (Koser and Pinkerton 2002, 15–16). My informants were no exception in this sense, and it is possible that the tendency not to trust institutions is rooted in informants' experience of the Syrian regime. However, as far as institutions managing asylum seekers in Greece are concerned, sentiments of distrust also depended on their unreliability.

Lack of accurate and relevant information from official sources (primarily government representatives and UNHCR staff) was a recurring element of informants' experience as asylum seekers in Greece — an aspect that consistently emerged from their accounts and that I partly witnessed when I worked with the Katsikas community in 2017. Asylum seekers

lacked key information about the length of their stay in Greece; news about their movements to different sites were sometimes unreliable and abrupt; information about the relocation programme were not disseminated accurately and equally to all Katsikas residents. Most importantly, informants were not given official information about their relocation countries at any stage of the programme.

When I asked Hamza, a man in his thirties, how he obtained information about European countries, he replied: “Nobody gives you this kind of information. You talk to people and you understand what they've been through”. As Hamza’s words elucidate, the lack of official information about the relocation programme and its potential destinations prompted informants to rely on alternative sources of information, primarily rumours from other asylum seekers and the internet.

Informants also mentioned consistently online media as a tool for gathering information. One informant told me that he researched potential destination countries on Wikipedia as well as through online communities; he specifically mentioned a Facebook group with over 50,000 members where prospect and former migrants exchanged information. Social media complicate the analysis of information sources because all actors partake in the online sharing of relevant information by disseminating various types of content. As seen above, asylum seekers create online communities to share relevant information with peers, whereas institutional actors use their online profiles to share information about asylum procedures. Volunteers also make extensive use of social media to share helpful information. Asylum seekers expand their social networks exponentially through social media, but the variety of content they find requires a great ability to triangulate information and verify different sources (cf. Dekker et al. 2018).

Other studies highlighted smugglers’ increasingly important role in providing information about destination countries (Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Robinson and Segrott 2002). However, my informants did not mention smugglers as sources of information; this might be explained by the fact in both Syria and Turkey their trajectory was already predetermined.

In light of the different sources at their disposal, informants assessed potential destination countries on a range of criteria including considerations about their economy, politics, asylum policies and society (information that matches findings in Koser and Pinkerton 2002). Qasim explained in detail the reasoning behind his choices for relocation and enumerated the criteria he considered: first, the possibility to find a job; second, the possibility for the children

to receive an education; third, higher respect for refugees. He associated these conditions with the economic prosperity of a country and its technological advancement. “We had this information before the war started in Syria,” he told me, and explained that people could tell which countries’ economy was stronger from the products they exported to Syria.

Knowledge of a country’s thriving industries can indeed make that country more appealing as a potential destination. Rashid, a young man with a passion for mechanics, stated that he initially intended to go to Germany because of its established automotive industry. His assessment was therefore related to the perceived employment opportunities in his industry of preference. Conversely, lack of employment opportunities qualified a country as less appealing. “People from Eastern Europe go to Western countries like Germany,” Rashid told me, “if they leave, what about refugees? What chances do we have?”.

Opportunities for education are another important factor in choosing a destination. Like Qasim, all other parents I interviewed said that the possibility to offer their children an education was one of the main criteria they considered. Opportunities to enrol in higher education were also important to young men who wanted to continue their studies.

Finally, it must be noticed that the reuniting with family members was always a prime concern. Hamza, who aspired to bring his wife to Europe, chose the Netherlands as his first option for relocation because the process for family reunification was faster compared to other countries.

As the examples above show, informants’ ideal destinations were chosen on the basis of more or less defined criteria. These depended partly on individual needs and aspirations and partly on the perceived image of European countries, primarily their economic performance. Informants’ geographical horizons in Greece — here intended as the spatial horizon within which they perceived that they could realise their aspirations — can therefore be considered a collective product created through the acquisition and exchange of information.

#### **4.5. Aspirations in Transit: Fixed Priorities and Changing Trajectories**

While the previous sections elaborated on the sources and types of information that influenced the geographical horizon of informants’ aspirations, here I will explain how other dimensions of aspirations (content and relational reference) may be affected by new information.

In Chapter 3 I showed how some informants initially intended to stay in Syria's neighbouring countries and decided to move to Europe when they realised that they could not fulfil their aspirations or because their needs changed. To reformulate the same concept, when informants' aspirations changed, so did their geographical horizon. As they moved along their migratory trajectories, new information sources enabled them to build up their knowledge of European countries and expand those horizons. Other research shows that the information acquired in transit countries may help asylum seekers to form impressions about unknown countries, reinforce pre-existing ideas or result in new desired destinations (Koser and Pinkerton 2002, 26–29). As the narratives presented here have partially shown, some informants reached Europe with very specific destinations in mind, some left with the generic intention to reach (Northern) Europe and sharpened their focus in transit, whereas others changed their minds about potential destinations.

Caleb, a tailor, did not have a specific destination in mind. His hopes about Europe related to safety, to making a family and to continuing the job he is passionate about.

I wanted to continue my work, my job. My life. For example, to get married and have children, to make a family. I'm thirty now, almost. You know, I'm the only one in all my family [that] didn't marry. My brother got married last year, now he has [a boy]. My sister, my cousins... all of them are younger than me. So, I'd like to make family. That's my hope.

The content of Caleb's aspirations remained unchanged throughout the journey, but it was not associated with any specific location. The spatial dimension of his aspirations therefore stayed open: he essentially sought the conditions necessary to fulfil his aspirations. In other cases, the content of informants' aspirations led them to reconsider their destinations. Saad reached Europe with the intention of completing his education. He had initially set his mind on Germany, where some of his friends lived, but he then chose Ireland as his first option for relocation:

Saad: [During the relocation interview] they asked me about my life. What you studied, what you did in Syria, how you came to Turkey, to Europe. [...] Where do you prefer to go and why?'

Me: And what did you say?

Saad: I said... I would like to go to Ireland.

Me: So you had changed your mind from Germany to Ireland?

Saad: Yeah. Because I knew European countries better.

Me: What do you mean?

Saad: I mean... my knowledge about Germany and about Europe grew. I knew exactly which country was better for me. Because in Ireland they speak English, it's easier than German. And I learnt some English when I was in the camp.

One of the main criteria Saad used to assess optional destinations was the opportunity to access quality higher education; opting for an English-speaking country with renowned universities increased the chances to realise his aspirations. The acquisition of new information in transit did not affect the content of Saad's aspirations, which remained unchanged, but affected their spatial dimension.

In other cases, both the content and the time-space horizon of aspirations adjusted to the circumstances of migration. Rashid, the young man with a passion for mechanics, had an entirely different dream when he was in Syria: he wanted to become a history teacher. The conflict forced him out of school and he later moved to Turkey, where he worked for a couple of years to support his family, until he decided to make a future for himself in Europe. By then, he had already decided to become a mechanic. He explained that he abandoned the idea of studying history because of the school years he had lost and because he felt that studying history in Europe required a different education from the one he received in Syria.

The dimension of aspirations that seemed not to be affected in any case by varying circumstances was their relational reference. Qasim's primary aspiration was to secure a future for his children. The possibility to guarantee them safety, education and economic security was his primary driver to leave Syria and then Turkey. When he selected his options in the relocation programme, he chose countries where he felt he could better ensure his children's well-being. Both the geographical horizon and the content of his aspirations — e.g. the type of employment he could access — were instrumental to the fulfilment of their relational dimension. The same applies to other families.

The relational reference of aspirations was also the primary driver for informants who hoped to reunite with family members. This requires a further distinction: in some cases,

informants had left Syria to reunite with family members who were already in Europe; conversely, Hamza reached Europe to apply for family reunification and secure legal entry for his wife. Both the presence of family members and the possibility of family reunification are found to be primary drivers for asylum migrants (Robinson and Segrott 2002; Brekke and Brochmann 2015). In the first instance, informants chose their family's country of residence as their preferred destination. In Hamza's case, the aspiration to reunite with his wife overruled all other necessities; location and employment opportunities were instrumental to fulfilling the conditions to apply for family reunification.

Relational reference was the most compelling dimension of informants' aspirations, the one that acted as the primary determinant of their trajectories and that influenced the other dimensions. Knowledge about new countries did not affect the relational reference of aspirations but was instrumental to its realisation. Relational reference therefore seems to be the dimension of aspirations that is less prone to change during migration. Conversely, the spatial horizon of aspirations seems to be most likely influenced by other dimensions. If one's destination is determined by the presence of family members in a given country, it is not likely to change. If one's destination is functional to fulfilling the content of their aspirations, then that destination can be easily subject to reconsiderations. However, in some cases the content of aspirations can change in relation to their time-space horizon, as in Rashid's case. More generally, the analysis of aspirations in terms of their constitutive dimensions highlights how informants determined and sometimes reconsidered their trajectories in view of their subjective priorities. It must not be forgotten, however, that informants' effective relocation countries were not decided by them: it was EU asylum system that allocated them to Sweden.

## **5. Settling in Sweden: Rebuilding Futures in Light of New Constraints and Opportunities**

Sweden's state-sponsored settlement and integration programmes for refugees have always been regarded as a unique case for their extensiveness and their liberal, rights-based approach. Based on a strong welfare state and on ideals of universalistic egalitarianism, these programmes focus on enhancing refugees' human capitals and pivot on housing and employment assistance as primary tools for integration (Valenta and Bunar 2010). While the central government is responsible for financing the reception system, integration programmes also involve governmental institutions like the Swedish Tax Agency and the Public Employment Service. Once refugees are given a stable accommodation, their municipality becomes responsible for them and is tasked with developing an individual integration plan with them.

These programmes were implemented in response to political concerns about high unemployment rates among immigrants and refugees. Refugees in Sweden still have lower standards of living than the rest of the population, show limited upward housing mobility (Magnusson Turner and Hedman 2014) and are overrepresented in low-income jobs (Rydgren 2004; Valenta and Bunar 2010, 470).

The Swedish asylum system also underwent significant legal changes in the past decade, both because of a change in the attitude towards migration in political discourses and as a response to the recent peaks in immigration. The change of attitudes towards immigration and a progressive backtracking from Sweden's multiculturalist tradition were marked in 2010 when the far-right Sweden Democrats party entered the parliament for the first time, voicing concerns related to the protection of national identity and to immigration-related expenses (Schierup and Ålund 2011; Bech, Borevi, and Mouritsen 2017). Later in 2015, as a reaction to the surge of refugees reaching Sweden, the government adopted a number of restrictions to asylum rights, most notably the decision to issue only time-limited permits to asylum seekers; in practice, this meant that most asylum seekers would only be given temporary residence — three years for Geneva Convention refugees and a 13-month permit for persons with subsidiary protection status.

My informants fell in either one of the two categories above. Those with Palestinian origins, who are stateless and already held refugee status in Syria, were granted political asylum and a three-year residence permit, whereas Syrian citizens were granted subsidiary protection and a 13-month residence permit. Only a few Syrians were granted political asylum and a three-year residence, primarily because of the risks of persecution in Syria.

When they arrived in Sweden in the summer of 2017, informants landed at different airports and were taken to reception facilities across the country. The Swedish Migration Agency assessed their cases and provided them with temporary accommodations until longer-term housing solutions became available. By the beginning of 2018, when I carried out field research, informants had been relocated to their new cities of residence and had started state-sponsored introduction programmes.

In this chapter, I will analyse informants' experience of the Swedish reception and integration framework and their hopes for the future. The first section will retrace their arrival and the movements that took them to their current locations. The second section will explore the subjective experiences of integration plans and the dynamics at play in their development. The three following sections will widen the focus to encompass other dimensions of informants' lives where the interrelation between aspirations and integration becomes evident. More specifically, these sections will explore informants' aspirations concerning their future in Sweden, the linkage between aspirations and socialization, and the ways in which transnational family dynamics can affect integration outcomes. Finally, the last section will focus on the individual level to see how informants adjusted personal aspirations to the Swedish context.

Ultimately, this chapter will provide an assessment of the role of aspirations across what are considered the key domains of integration — structural, social, cultural, civic and political participation, identity (Spencer and Charsley 2016). Exploring the interrelation between individual and contextual elements will cast light on how possible life trajectories are created and curtailed.

### **5.1. The Arrival in Sweden and the Contradictions of the Asylum Reception System**

When Wardan and his family landed at the airport, they found Swedish Migration Agency staff handing out food and water to the newcomers. Free transportation to reception facilities

had been arranged by the Migration Agency. On the bus, the staff explained the workings of the reception system and distributed flyers containing essential information. The day after their arrival, Wardan and his family had the first interview with the Migration Agency, in which they were asked once again to tell their stories and the reasons why they left Syria. They soon received confirmation that their asylum request had been approved and within a few weeks they were moved to another camp, where they spent three months waiting to be assigned a longer-term accommodation. "It's another world," Wardan told me, "It's completely different from Greece. You can feel you are alive, you wait for something. They are not liars. They told us: you have to wait. After one month I asked what will happen, [and they said] they are building [new houses for refugees in another city], you have to wait." The Migration Agency funded the family's trip to their new accommodation. There they were welcomed by staff from the municipality, who asked if they needed money and went through the house-related bureaucracy with them. The family then registered with the Tax Agency, a prerequisite to attend Swedish for Immigrants classes and be entitled to the benefits of the Swedish social security system.

Wardan's account exemplifies well the asylum reception procedures that all informants underwent. Two elements of the reception system are worth analysing here, namely its high level of organization and its housing policy. As Wardan himself pointed out, entering the Swedish asylum system represented a major shift from the conditions of disorganization and uncertainty that informants experienced in Greece. The quality of the information and services provided by the Swedish Migration Agency and by municipalities was significantly higher. Informants were also satisfied with the possibility to express preferences about where they would like to settle and to personalise their introduction plans. The Swedish asylum systems put informants into a framework with definite legal, temporal and geographical boundaries, a framework that formally offered temporary stability and the opportunity to resume and develop one's life trajectory.

Yet, the temporariness of initial accommodations limited stability and the possibility to resume one's life. Informants were moved across two or sometimes more temporary accommodations before being finally given a long-term solution. With only a few exceptions, all spent months in camps that were often isolated from urban areas. Camp confinement policies are at odds with principles of fast-track incorporation. While difficulties in finding accommodations for large numbers of refugees might partially account for it, this

contradiction reflects the recent tendency in European countries to disincentivize asylum migration by territorialising refugees (see Kreichauf 2018). Contradictions in Swedish asylum reception policies have also been discussed elsewhere (see Valenta and Bunar 2010, 478). What needs to be highlighted here is that, despite being introduced into a system that formally aims at their integration, informants found themselves again in a state of suspension. This delayed the start of their introduction programmes and, consequently, the opportunity to resume working towards their goals.

## **5.2. Choosing Routes: The Experience of Personalised Integration Plans**

Shortly after being moved to their new city of residence, informants were interviewed at the local Public Employment Service to discuss their personalised introduction plans. Introduction plans last two years and include civic integration and language courses, short internships and other competence-specific activities depending on individual needs. Civic integration and language courses are compulsory, and the allowance refugees receive from the Public Employment Service is proportional to attendance. The tie-up of these specific courses to welfare benefits rests on the conviction that refugees must acquire country-specific skills in order to integrate functionally in Swedish society, especially on the workplace (Rydgren 2004, 702). Indeed, the ultimate purpose of introduction plans is to ensure the financial independence of refugees by raising their chances of employment, although education-oriented plans are also possible. Each refugee is assigned a case worker that helps them formulate their goals for the programme.

My informants were generally appreciative of civic integration courses. Information on the Swedish economy and its thriving sectors, on laws, taxation and salary average were useful to navigate their new environment. Language learning was also one of informants' most immediate goals, as it happens for immigrants during settlement (cf. Pratsinakis 2005, 200). Besides being functional to socialization and everyday life, knowledge of Swedish is a prerequisite to find work and to access education and training.

With regard to additional courses and activities, these are agreed upon by the refugee and the case worker on the basis of the refugee's goals. Broadly speaking, refugees can choose between two tracks, the first focusing on academic education and the second on professional

training. Activities are then decided depending on individual preferences. Saad gave a practical example of how he personalised his own plan:

Every refugee here in Sweden [has a] special plan [...]. Because somebody wants to be a builder, somebody wants to be a barber, somebody wants to be a professor. They help you achieve your goal. [...] For example, my computer classes: they didn't put me in this class. I asked them when I had my interview [at the Public Employment] office. I told them, I don't know anything about computers, I'd like to learn [...] how I can [use] computers and the internet. And they said ok.

Municipalities also arrange internships for those oriented towards a fast-track integration in the job market. Internships are meant to familiarize refugees with the Swedish work environment. Two informants reported being employed for random tasks that were below their level or education and professional experience, such as cleaning, building bird houses, filling and labelling soap bottles and tending animals; however, another informant told me that he was doing an internship as an office assistant in a bank (a position not in line with his previous occupation). It is likely that the type of internship depends on local availability as much as on individual skills; a higher knowledge of English may also give access to more qualified positions.

But integration in the job market presents a number of obstacles beyond language proficiency and the positions available locally. An important setback encountered by informants was that Syrian qualifications are not (fully) recognised by Swedish authorities. Students who were forced out of university might not see the exams they passed in Syria recognised in the Swedish academic framework. Salah, who already has a degree in engineering and a few years of experience, must either obtain a full Swedish degree or complete professional training before he can practise his profession. Informants who enquired about employment were often directed towards low-status occupations that are in demand but not necessarily in line with their education or previous profession — jobs like cleaner, bus driver and kindergarten teacher.

Introduction plans also differ on the basis of participants' age. Youths in their early twenties are given the chance to obtain a Swedish high school diploma and tailor their plan

to the professional or academic path they wish to undertake. 20-year-old Amir, for instance, discussed with his case worker the intention to study medicine:

Me: And you choose what courses you do, or they tell you?

Amir: No, they tell me. It depends on what I want to study.

Me: At the university, you mean?

Amir: Yeah.

Me: So you told them what you want to study at university and they gave you some courses that...

Amir: Yeah. They will tell me 'You need to study this and this and this... then you can go to university'.

Amir's educational plan was customized to include scientific subjects such as chemistry and biology, so that he can obtain the qualification needed to access medical higher education.

Some informants also reported that case workers tended to prioritize language learning over immediate integration into the labour market, probably because promoting language acquisition is considered a key condition for a fast integration. Not all informants, however, were satisfied with dedicating five days a week to classroom learning. Some felt that they would learn Swedish faster through interaction in the workplace. Yet, their wish to work seemed to be also connected with aspirations to independence and self-determination. As 24-year-old Ibrahim said:

If you work you will feel better inside, [it's not just] to get money. Because in Greece you feel like you are nothing. They give you food, they ask [nothing of you] and you don't do nothing. If you work, you will change inside. It's better than staying in the house and [receiving] money.

Ibrahim agreed with his case worker a mixed solution involving two days of school and three days of work. Other former camp Katsikas residents besides my informants also expressed the urgency to work or start higher education, particularly young men. This sentiment of impatience must be understood in relation to the prolonged state of suspension they have experienced. While their relocation to Sweden and other European countries is relatively

recent, the Syrian conflict caused a diversion from their expected life trajectories that lasted years. From this perspective, a programme that ties refugees to welfare benefits and preparatory activities also restrains them from regaining full independence and further delays the achievement of their long-term goals.

The above should not convey an all-negative impression of introduction plans: informants were generally appreciative of them. However, the paradox is interesting: while refugees' self-sufficiency is the purpose of introduction plans and is in both parties' interest, some refugees experience them as a limitation to the control they can exert over their lives. In Swedish asylum law, introduction programmes are framed as an extension of refugees' rights, in the sense that refugees are both entitled to and empowered by them (see Fernandes 2015, 254–55). Adopting Lutz's (2017) aspirations/capabilities model for integration policy analysis, it is possible to say that Swedish introduction programmes focus on expanding refugees' integration capabilities, specifically by enhancing their cultural capital. The possibility to personalise plans also enables them to expand the capabilities they need to realise their own aspirations, at least formally. In practice, however, my informants' accounts show how introduction programmes may sometimes route refugees into life trajectories that do not coincide with their aspirations. Fernandes (2015, 257) already underscored how these programmes can at once empower and disempower refugees: while considering their needs and wants implies empowerment, failing to provide actual opportunities to fulfil them is disempowering.

Introduction programmes can be seen as laboratories in which refugees' aspirations and capabilities are reconfigured into life trajectories that may be more or less satisfactory to them. But empowerment and disempowerment also depend on other factors: residence permits, housing, interactions with the local population and family reunification laws all affect refugees' capabilities and aspirations. To grasp the role aspirations play in the making of refugees' life trajectories, introduction plans must be understood in relation to other processes of asylum management and refugee settlement.

### **5.3. “I Want to Be a Swedish Man.” Aspirations to Settle, Temporary Protection and the Significance of Citizenship**

When I asked informants whether they intended to stay in Sweden, the large majority expressed a clear orientation towards permanent settlement. A few said that they would like to buy a house instead of renting or being dependent on welfare housing. Many talked about achieving a degree, a goal that is necessarily long term. Single men also expressed the wish to form a family and spontaneously put forward the possibility that their future wife may be Swedish. When I enquired if informants would consider returning to Syria, however, their answers showed how the common intention to settle is underlain by complex reasons, which are connected to the Syrian situation as much as to Sweden’s role in their life projects.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the decision to come to Europe was not exclusively dependent on the need for safety but corresponded to specific projects for life-making, which were framed in a long-term perspective since their conception. Like Wardan told me, “If you move to Europe, it’s not just for a year”. A report by Seefar (2018, 9) also shows how Syrian refugees in Turkey believe that moving farther from Syria reduces chances of returning. If moving to Syria’s neighbouring countries was a temporary solution to avoid the conflict, undertaking the journey to Northern Europe was not a short-term project.

The perception of better opportunities for life-making in Europe works in combination with a lack of perspectives in Syria. Many informants emphasised the impossibility of returning. They expressed scepticism about a near end to the conflict and highlighted how they saw no opportunities to make a life in a country devastated by years of war. Adhem, a young Palestinian man, effectively voiced the sense of being deprived of his future in Syria:

In Syria I lost everything. I lost my future, I lost my [years at the] university. It's not a country to live in. It's not my country, because I am a refugee like here in Sweden. And people kill and fight. [...] If I go back and fight, I will become a criminal. Europe is better. I go to sleep and I sleep to relax.

In some cases, lack of opportunities in Syria was aggravated by the prospect of political persecution. Five of the men I interviewed expressed concerns about being deported to Syria;

they feared that Assad's government might seize them for deserting the army (or the call to arms). For these informants, the end of the conflict was not sufficient in itself to guarantee a safe return. Removal of Bashar Al Assad from power and a radical political shift towards democracy in the country represented necessary conditions for returning. As Seefar (Ibid. 7–8) reported, other Syrian refugees in Turkey hold similar views and link Assad to the ongoing violence. Recent developments in the conflict, however, suggest that the regime is not likely to fall nor to stop his repressive measures; moreover, other military forces including Islamist extremists are still fighting in the country (*The Economist* 2018). Under these circumstances, informants who ideally wished to return saw their aspirations stifled and anchored their future on Sweden. Those who wanted to stay in Sweden only hypothesized going back to visit their families should Syria become safe again.

The impossibility of returning and consequent aspirations to settle are in stark contrast to the temporary forms of protection informants were granted. When I interviewed them at the beginning of 2018, their feelings about temporary protection varied. Some of them had expected to receive longer-term residence permits or a different form of protection. A few were optimistic that their permits would be renewed, whereas others felt the precariousness of their status looming large over their future. At the time of writing, informants with subsidiary protection have had their residence permits extended for an additional two years. While this certainly is a positive outcome for them, the temporary nature of informants' protection statuses inevitably impinges on their aspirations to stable and long-lasting safety, let alone the possibility to achieve their long-term goals. The result is that informants are kept from putting down roots in their host country when their homeland is unwelcoming, in a prolongment of the state of suspension that characterized their journey.

But if temporary residence permits cast a shadow on the possibility to settle, citizenship laws leave more room to aspire for stability. Despite the restrictive turn on asylum laws, Sweden's citizenship policies are still the most liberal in Europe. Such approach is embedded in Sweden's tendency to frame citizenship within broader integration processes and in the conviction that easy access to formal citizenship facilitates the social and political integration of immigrants (Midtbøen 2015). Only five years of residence are necessary to apply while language proficiency, knowledge of Swedish society and financial self-sufficiency are not prerequisites.

The large majority of my informants said they hoped to obtain Swedish citizenship in the future, and in most cases they developed this aspiration after being relocated to Sweden. Only three people stated that they started thinking about citizenship before reaching Sweden, and for different reasons. Ali first thought of acquiring European citizenship in Greece to be able to travel and visit his sister in Saudi Arabia. Saad said that he considered citizenship requirements as a criterion to choose destination countries in the relocation programme. Finally, Salah started thinking about citizenship in Turkey, when Fatimah became pregnant and the impossibility to obtain some form of citizenship for their future child pushed them to move to Europe (see Section 3.3). As in the latter case, parents often saw citizenship as a safeguard for their children's future. More generally, informants looked at citizenship as an instrument to secure safety and full rights in Sweden.

This utilitarian perspective, however, was not the only one to emerge from interviews. Some informants attached to citizenship other meanings related to needs of belonging and equality. Adhem, the Palestinian who stressed that he was a refugee in Syria as much as in Sweden, saw citizenship as an opportunity to become a full-fledged member of a national community, one that enjoys the same status as those around him:

If I go to another country, I go for a visit. I waited a long time to come here and do something with my life. For sure I will stay. The first thing, Marco, I don't have a country. Now I will have one, like normal people.

Equality of status was also the core argument of another Palestinian, Nadir, who felt that gaining citizenship would enable him to cast off the refugee label:

I don't know why [but] the best country to get a nationality is Sweden, and it will be good for me to get nationality, because I will feel that I am like everyone around me. I am Swedish. I will not be a refugee anymore. I will feel that I am a refugee, but I will have the same rights and the same [duties as others].

Despite being granted working rights, Palestinian refugees in Syria were never given the opportunity to acquire full citizenship. Therefore, for Adhem and Nadir obtaining citizenship also represented the possibility to exit a life-long condition and fulfil aspirations to social

equality. I must point out that not all Palestinian informants expressed the same feelings, and one of them even made a comment about belonging to both Palestine and Syria. Nonetheless, citizenship is the only aspect of the research that brought to the fore patterns potentially related to ethnic differences.

Not all informants perceived citizenship as a necessity. Some said that they would be content with some form of permanent or long-term residence. Rashid, a 24-year-old Syrian, stated that obtaining citizenship would not affect his identity: “I will not be Swedish. Even if I get [citizenship], I will still be myself. It's not my goal”. However, Rashid also expressed the desire to mix with people of different nationalities and to discover more about other cultures. Two more informants said that coming to Europe was for them an opportunity to cross the boundaries of their own culture; they appreciated the possibility to learn new languages and meet people from diverse countries, explicitly framing these as opportunities for cultural growth.

Indeed, some of my informants’ answers suggest that integration itself can be an aspiration with intrinsic value, a goal detached from the aspiration to acquire citizenship. When I asked Noor how he sees himself in five years’ time, he replied: “I want to be a Swedish man. With citizenship and a good job”. Integration into Swedish society was a clear goal to him. Yet, when I asked him if he wanted to settle in Sweden, he did not associate his desire to stay with citizenship: “They give us a good future. I think we should do something for the country. I will not stay here just for the passport. If I don't get it, no problem”. Noor’s aspiration to integrate did not stem simply from a need for stability, but also from the feeling of gratitude he felt for being given the opportunity to rebuild his life.

The cases explored in this section show how informants’ aspiration to build a life in Sweden are grounded in a plurality of motives. The need of stability and long-lasting safety underlies and conflates with other aspirations connected to inclusion, self-realisation and moral obligations. As a result, informants envision different strategies to negotiate a place in their new society. Citizenship, as the marker that defines one’s rights, is important to satisfy the need for stability and safety and it can also be instrumental to fulfil aspirations to social inclusion, but it is not an essential goal for everyone. Informants also frame their integration aspirations in terms of being culturally open and ‘embedded with the people’, paying attention to their relationship with the Swedes rather than with the Swedish State.

#### **5.4. Building Social Networks: Integration Aspirations and Socialization Dynamics**

More than one informant explicitly stated that they hope to integrate with the Swedes. When I asked how they see themselves in five years' time, Salah and Fatimah replied that they want to have "good Swedish friends" and so did Noor, who added that he does not want to have friends only within the refugee community. Informants framed this willingness to befriend Swedish people as a genuine aspiration to social inclusion, a desire to become a part of their receiving society, but establishing social connections is also essential to create social capital. When I visited them, my informants had achieved different degrees of integration in their local environment and encountered diverse setbacks to socialization, of which some were common and others depended on individual circumstances.

Generally speaking, informants had a positive impression of the Swedes. A few informants reported enthusiastically how on some occasions perfect strangers had spontaneously offered to help them, for example when they had become lost trying to find a specific place. At the same time, many said that Swedes are "closed", meaning that they are private people who do not easily include newcomers in their habitual social circles. Nadir, for instance, explained to me how Swedish cultural routines leave little space for socialization:

In Sweden it's hard to find Swedish people to talk. They are busy, they have a system in their life, they wake up early to go to work and after, when they go to their house, they sit with their families or to go to exercise, they sleep early. In the weekend they go out with their families [...] or with their close friends. They don't really like change, Swedish people. They have stable relationships and it is hard to [enter] their community.

Indeed, cultural differences in socializing and establishing relationships seemed to be acknowledged by both sides. During one of the last weeks of fieldwork, I was invited by some informants to have lunch with them and with an elderly Swedish couple they had recently met. The conversation was in English and friendly chatter about cultural differences abounded. My informants discussed the difficulties they encountered in befriending Swedes and one of them pointed out that it takes a very long time to get to know a Swede. His Swedish

guest replied that this is actually the way Swedes interact with each other and added “it is not because you are Syrians”.

Language barriers also affected one’s chances of interaction but did not seem to play an essential role. One would expect that a higher command of English increases informants’ chances to integrate, given Swedes’ generally high proficiency with the language — and from a merely functional perspective, that may be the case. Yet, some of the most able English speakers had less social contact with Swedes than other informants with lower levels of both Swedish and English. Besides inevitable differences in individual dispositions, it was housing, local environment and daily routine that seemed to be more prominent in determining interactions with the native population.

Distribution across different municipalities resulted in very different housing solutions. Most informants were located in and around major urban areas, whereas a few had been settled in more isolated villages. Living in densely populated urban areas, however, did not necessarily result in more frequent interactions with Swedes. Single men in Stockholm were accommodated in prefabricated complexes expressly built to host refugees; much like camps, these complexes only offered container-like apartments and de facto separated refugees from the rest of the population. These men also spent most of their day attending language courses, which bound them to interacting with other immigrants. Single men living in other cities and villages enjoyed better housing conditions, but otherwise found themselves enmeshed in similar routines. These informants said that they had not yet befriended any Swedes because their daily routine did not provide occasions to meet with the native population.

Other informants were more successful in establishing relationships with locals. Caleb, who lives in a major city, was able to befriend locals through a Swedish girl who volunteered in camp Katsikas, who introduced him into her social circles. The most notable case, however, are Salah and Fatimah. The couple was given a house in a village that only counts about 700 residents. Despite its small size, the municipality organizes a number of activities to foster social cohesion among residents (natives and non-natives). Salah and Fatimah both signed up for a language café, and Fatimah attends women’s meetups and a knitting club. Salah put great efforts into building social relationships. He befriended most of his neighbours and when I met him he had already developed several positive relationships with other Arabs

beyond his neighbourhood. The couple also befriended a Swedish woman who engaged them in local events and who was able to find Salah a small paid job as a newspaper delivery man.

I believe the combination of three specific factors accounts for the faster integration of these informants. First, in both cases informants possess an outgoing character and have a proactive approach to socialization. Second, they can speak English at a conversational level. Third, they could rely on key connections that provided opportunities to enter native social circles and most importantly to create social leverage.

Research on refugee settlers (Ager and Strang 2008, 179–80; Hebbani, Colic-Peisker, and Mackinnon 2018) shows how positive interactions with neighbours considerably affect refugees' sense of wellbeing as well as language learning, acculturation and employment trajectories — which is evident in Salah's case. Conversely, when refugees' needs are not met by the community in their initial locality, this can hinder their settlement and have durable consequences on health, education and employment (Jones and Teytelboym 2017, 5–6).

Ethnic-like communities may partially counter the negative effects of the lack of social contacts with Swedes, in that they help refugees feel more settled (Ager and Strang 2008, 178). Several informants, including some who do have connections with Swedes, said that the presence of Arab communities or the possibility to shop in Arab stores gave them a sense of familiarity. One of the young men who is living in Stockholm's camp-like complexes even expressed the concern that he might suffer from isolation if he does not establish relationships within his own ethnic network: "If you can't find friends from your community, your Arab community, maybe you'll have a bad life, because Swedish people [don't like to have too many social contacts]".

Ethnic-like networks may also compensate for the absence of social capital in the native community to find employment. Ismael, a young man in his twenties, used his contacts to procure himself small electrical jobs within his own ethnic network, which he performs illegally because he has no valid licence to work as an electrician.

As the cases above show, the majority of informants do aspire to integrate with natives and perceive social inclusion as an important goal. Nevertheless, when their housing and educational arrangements do not provide many chances for spontaneous encounters, they feel that they are not in the conditions to fulfil the aspiration to integrate. The right combination of cultural and social capital was important to expand informants' chances of integrating with Swedes, whereas ethnic-like communities helped them feel settled despite

their limited social connections. There is, however, another type of social network that considerably affected informants' integration trajectories, namely transnational family networks.

### **5.5. Home Is Where the Heart Is: How Transnational Family Networks Affect Settlement Aspirations**

The disruption of family networks is one of the most notable effects of involuntary migration, and one that has durable consequences. The experience of war tears families apart, alters relationships between family members and puts a severe strain on the mental health of refugees, who are concerned for the safety of those who are left behind (cf. Heger Boyle and Ali 2010). The Syrian conflict is no exception. As my informants left their country to seek safety in Europe, the geography of their family networks was reshaped to encompass Syria, Sweden and in some cases even a third country.

This new transnational dimension of their family networks affects informants' integration in Sweden in different ways. Three factors emerged that particularly affected their aspirations to settle and integrate: the presence of close family members in Syria; the presence of close family members in other European countries; and (the lack of) opportunities for family reunification.

The effects of the first factor have been anticipated above: knowing that close family members — parents, siblings, aunts and uncles — were still subject to the risks posed by the war in Syria was a great source of distress for informants. Two of the former camp Katsikas residents I engaged with in Sweden (one is an informant, the other preferred not to participate in the research project) came from the cities of Afrin and Der'aa, which have been heavily bombarded in 2018. Both men were extremely worried for their families during the attacks and lamented the inability to focus on studying and on their life in Sweden. While this is not the place to discuss refugees' psychological well-being, it is worth noticing that transnational ties with family in war-torn Syria affected integration processes but did not seem to influence aspirations to settle in Sweden — the impossibility of returning may explain why.

Conversely, the presence of close family members in other European countries could affect settlement aspirations. Two of my informants came to Europe with the intention of joining

their younger brothers in Germany —and in one case my informant was also waiting for his parents to reach Germany. They had both chosen Germany as their first option for relocation, but they were sent to Sweden instead. Both gave positive feedback on Sweden and generally felt that they had been given the opportunity to build their own futures. Yet, when I asked them if they intended to settle permanently, they gave different answers. One said that he wanted to stay but expressed great concern about his brother, who was having difficulties in adjusting to life in Germany, and he hoped that they could reunite in Sweden. The other informant hypothesized moving to Germany in the future to be closer to his family. Interestingly, this young man was keen on continuing his education and finding a job in Sweden, which means that his short-term settlement and the intention to integrate, at least functionally, were not disputed. However, because of the presence of his family in Germany, he left the possibility of migrating again open.

Opportunities for family reunification seemed to weigh the most on aspirations to settle and integrate. This factor applies to only one of my informants: Hamza, the Syrian man who came to Europe with the intention to request reunification with his wife (see Section 4.5). Hamza's case stands out among my informants in that he was the one whose aspirations were most significantly curtailed, and the only person to express radically negative views on Swedish society.

In order to understand Hamza's perspective, it is important to acknowledge that family reunification is a critical point of the migration project (cf. Pratsinakis 2005, 210). When asylum seekers leave their homeland with the intention to open the way for their families, ensuring families' safety and reuniting with them are as fundamental to the migration project as asylum seekers' own safety — Ali's and Salah's stories in Section 3.3 are also exemplificative in this regard. Such dynamics invest asylum seekers with a specific role that ties them to the expectations of their families, and the success of the migration project therefore may depend on whether or not family reunification is accomplished.

When Hamza was relocated to Sweden, he was expecting to receive political asylum and be able to apply for family reunification, but he was granted subsidiary protection instead. The restrictions to asylum laws imposed by the Swedish government in 2015 deprived refugees with subsidiary protection of the right to family reunification, in an explicit attempt to control immigration numbers (Government Offices of Sweden 2015; see also Bech, Borevi, and Mouritsen 2017).

Hamza explained to me in detail the workings of family reunification laws. Having received subsidiary protection, he would not be able to apply for reunification during his first year of residence. Only when his residence permit will be renewed for an additional two years he will be granted the right to family reunification. However, refugees can only lodge an application when they meet certain criteria related to economic self-sufficiency and housing conditions (cf. Bech, Borevi, and Mouritsen 2017, 24–25). According to Hamza, refugee integration programmes work in such a way that refugees are prevented from meeting those criteria. Refugees are included in welfare programmes that pay their employers about 80% of refugees' salaries for an initial period of two years; while this is supposed to promote their integration in the labour market, it also makes them financially dependent on welfare. Hamza said that in order to be able to apply for reunification sooner, he would need to find an employer willing to hire him while giving up state subsidies. On the other hand, the current state of European regulations makes it nearly impossible for Hamza's wife to obtain asylum in Europe from a non-European country.

With no options to apply for reunification, Hamza considered migrating again. Hoping that financial independence might grant him the right to reunification sooner, he mobilised his contacts in Greece to find a job, with no success. He also thought of other extreme options, like smuggling himself to Canada or going back to Syria and undertake the journey again with his wife, but both are hardly feasible.

In Hamza's case, the primary aspiration underling his migration project encountered no immediate possibility of fulfilment in Sweden. As a result, Hamza developed no aspirations to settle and has instead rekindled his aspirations to migrate — although these cannot be actualized either. The experience also stymied his aspirations to integrate, as he himself made clear:

[How can they accept people] without giving them a little hope that they will see [their families] again. Where are the human rights now? [Having a family] should be a basic human right. How do you expect people to integrate and get a job and get a life with their heads looking backwards [to the families left behind]? Your head is somewhere else.

The impossibility to reunite with his wife seemed to affect Hamza's perception of Swedish society as a whole. He was the sole informant to denounce widespread racist attitudes and to express resentments towards the Swedes. However, he still put considerable efforts into completing his introduction plan and into learning the language, which he already spoke at a basic level. "Sweden is a back-up plan," he said, "I am not planning to stay. I am learning Swedish just in case. My plan is to find a job outside of Sweden and get a working permit".

As other research shows (Spencer and Charsley 2016), family reunification is crucial in creating sociocultural stability and facilitating integration for refugees. However, Hamza's words highlight an interesting discrepancy that can exist between the need to integrate functionally and the aspiration to integrate in a broader sense. Put differently, should Hamza have no option but to stay in Sweden, he would still integrate functionally out of need — learn Swedish, find a job — but having his primary aspiration curtailed would inevitably continue to affect his disposition towards Sweden, let alone the possibility to develop a sense of belonging.

## **5.6. New Context, New Structures: Reconfiguring Aspirations During Settlement**

The sections above have shown how informants found themselves enmeshed in a new context, the Swedish asylum system and its practical enforcement, that is at once expanding and limiting their capabilities, thus creating a new set of opportunities and constraints. In light of this broader context, it is possible to examine if and how individual informants reconfigured their aspirations.

Introduction plans formally enable refugees to formulate their own goals. For some, this translated into the opportunity to pursue the goals they had before they left Syria. Saad, who still dreams of being an academic, personalised his introduction plan so as to access higher education, aiming to eventually enrol for a master's degree in history. Others wanted to resume their previous job. Caleb, who is a tailor, plans to seek professional training and dreams of creating his own fashion brand. For these informants, settling in Sweden represents an opportunity take up again the life trajectories that the war interrupted.

But settling in Sweden also creates opportunities to realise aspirations that were once unrealistic or unrealisable. Saad considered his dream to study at a European university unrealisable before he migrated; coming to Europe and steering his introduction plan towards

academic education gives him a possibility to realise what was once a fantasy. Tariq and his wife appreciated their language course because it gives them the opportunity to study, which they lacked in Syria. But aspirations are not limited to work and education. For Adhem and Nadir, the Palestinians mentioned above, settling in Sweden is an opportunity to obtain citizenship and redefine their status and identity.

Other informants developed entirely new aspirations in response to the experience of war and involuntary migration. Amir, the 20-year-old Palestinian who wants to become a doctor, originally intended to study communication engineering. Witnessing people's suffering during the war led him to more altruistic dreams:

Me: You've told me also that you were doing communication engineering and now you changed, you want to study medicine.

Amir: Yeah.

Me: When did you change your mind?

Amir: It was in Aleppo.

Me: In Aleppo already?

Amir: Yeah. You know, there was the war in Aleppo and I saw many people injured in front of me... they died and I couldn't help them. So I decided to change my studies to medicine.

Altruistic behaviour can indeed be a response to the traumas of involuntary migration, because it helps refugees make sense of their experiences (Puvimanasinghe et al. 2014). This contributes to redefining their life trajectories, for example by driving them to undertake new career paths, as in Amir's case.

Goals like achieving a degree, however, imply a long-term investment. A sound knowledge of Swedish is required, and informants also need to ensure their financial stability after the introduction programme. Some informants devised alternative strategies to tackle these obstacles, like seeking temporary careers that will ensure their financial stability. In doing so, they apply the same delayed kind of agency they applied in Greece. Noor, for example, is thinking of training as a welder, a profession in high demand, so that he can be financially independent and study law in the future.

Conversely, other informants have renounced long-term goals and adjusted to more immediately realisable ones. This was especially the case of parents, for whom financial stability and the well-being of their children are primary concerns. Basma expressed the wish to study as a nurse but was discouraged by the long time it would take her to obtain the qualification. With five children to support, she will probably settle for a different kind of job. Other parents also said that they were willing to take up any readily available jobs. As Boccagni (2017) highlighted, when parents cannot achieve the future they wished for themselves, they may project their hopes for a better life onto their children.

Some informants also adjusted their career aspirations in light of their competitiveness on the job market. Twenty-nine-year-old Farid was gifted a professional photo camera by a volunteer in camp Katsikas. He developed an interest in photojournalism and thought about undertaking a similar career in Sweden. However, a quick online research into available photographer jobs made him realise what competition he would have to face. He therefore abandoned the idea thereafter and has now turned photography into a hobby.

The cases elaborated on in this chapter show how possible life trajectories are created as informants devise strategies to navigate through the opportunities and constraints of their new environment. In some cases, like Saad's, the content of one's aspirations remained constant throughout the migration project, and the perceived opportunity to realise those aspirations in Sweden resulted in the recovery of one's life trajectory. In other cases, the content of aspirations changed throughout migration and in response to the opportunities and constraints with which informants were presented in Sweden, resulting in new life trajectories.

The relational reference of aspirations still plays a crucial role in the settlement phase. Parents who see an opportunity to actualize their aspirations to stability and to guarantee the future of their children also aspire to settle and to integrate, even if that may imply sacrificing their own personal goals. On the contrary, when aspirations to reunite with one's family were curtailed, informants showed an inclination towards secondary migration.

The temporal horizon of aspirations had a major influence on what life trajectories informants decided to undertake. Pursuing certain goals means projecting them into the distant future, because obstacles like financial insecurity and language barriers need to be addressed first. But the temporal horizon of one's aspirations relates to the future as much as to the past. In some cases, the long interruption of their expected life trajectory affected

negatively informants' willingness to pursue certain aspirations. Age and parenthood are likely to be discriminating factors in this process.

At the individual level, aspirations are therefore variably susceptible to space-time conditions — the opportunity structure in which refugees are embedded, the effects of their past experiences and the perceived opportunities to actualize aspirations in the future. This may influence the content of aspirations and/or the strategies devised to pursue them. At the same time, wider patterns emerge from informants' narratives. When informants perceive opportunities to realise their primary aspirations — safety and stability, self-realisation, securing their children's future — they likely develop aspirations to settle and to integrate. Conversely, when they perceive that their primary aspirations cannot be fulfilled, for example if they cannot reunite with their families, aspirations to settle and integrate are negatively affected — to which extent depends on individual circumstances.

As shown in Chapter 3, these primary aspirations are intertwined with the root causes that led informants out of Syria. Even in the case of conflict-led involuntary mobility, migration aspirations correspond to specific projects for life-making. Whether or not refugees develop aspirations to settle and integrate with the receiving society is largely dependent on whether they perceive the possibility to bring those projects for life-making to completion, regardless of the changes in content and space-time horizon that may have occurred during the migration process.

## Conclusions

In the previous chapters I have retraced the journey of former camp Katsikas residents from the moment they decided to leave Syria until their first months in Sweden. By examining their narratives, I have reconstructed the evolution of their aspirations to investigate how these have shaped their trajectories during and after migration, but also to understand how the constraints and opportunities they encountered affected their aspirations. The aim was to explore refugee migration and integration through a refugee-centred perspective, so as to shed light on the interrelation between the two processes. In this final chapter, I will summarize my findings to answer the sub-questions that directed this research project. I will then return to my main research question, discuss the theoretical implications and the limitations of my work and make suggestions for further research.

In order to understand how the aspirations of refugees evolve throughout migration, it is first necessary to assess the value they attach to migration aspirations. Even in the case of conflict-led involuntary mobility, migration aspirations do not solely stem from aspirations to safety but serve multiple goals. Unquestionably, the need for safety is the force that drove my informants and other millions of Syrians to seek sanctuary abroad. As I have shown in Chapter 3, the actual decision to migrate was often caused by specific circumstances that threatened the physical safety of my informants or of their loved ones. However, when migration aspirations are formed and actualized, they take up additional meanings. My informants migrated to find sanctuary but also to seek opportunities for self-realisation, to secure decent living standards for their families, to bring their loved ones out of the conflict and, more generally, to 'build a better future'. Migration aspirations are therefore better framed as future-oriented projects or, as Carling (2002) suggests, culturally defined projects for life-making, whose goals may be more or less defined.

These projects for life-making are amenable to change throughout migration. Aspirations are not firm but respond to individual needs and to specific time-space conditions. In the case of my informants, who crossed two or more countries and experienced various phases of transit migration, examining how aspirations changed during mobility and especially during phases of immobility was crucial to understand their patterns.

Boccagni's (2017) analytical framework to study aspirations through their constitutive dimensions — content, relational reference and time-space horizon — proved particularly useful to understand how different factors (opportunities and constraints) affect different aspects of aspirations at various stages of migration. These three dimensions are not equally important and are variably susceptible to change. The spatial horizon of aspirations is more likely to change because it is instrumental to the fulfilment of the other dimensions. Informants chose their destinations in order to reach their families (relational reference) or on the basis of the perceived chances to realise their goals, for example accessing the type of career they aspire to (content) or applying for family reunification (relational reference). Conversely, the relational reference of informants' aspirations acted as the primary determinant of their trajectories in many cases. Content can be influenced by the other dimensions of an aspiration, not least its temporal horizon, and can change after an evaluation of costs and benefits. (How long does it take to realise an aspiration? Is it worth pursuing?) The analysis of aspirations through their constitutive dimensions showed how informants determined and reconsidered their trajectories in view of subjective priorities.

The analysis also brought to the fore the role of aspirations in transit migration. The capacity to postpone the fulfilment of aspirations and to strive towards positive futures acted as a delayed form of agency; this enabled my informants to devise strategies for realising their projects for life-making later in time. Indeed, most of my informants had no opportunity to continue their journey in Greece and experienced a situation of involuntary immobility, in which aspirations served primarily as a coping mechanism. However, other informants *chose* to suffer the standstill after evaluating the costs and benefits of illegal migration *vis-à-vis* the possibility to be relocated to a 'good' country. Schapendonk (2012, 579) defines transit migration as "a phase of experienced immobility in a process of movement in a specific migratory direction. It is about migrants' aspirations of moving in a context of involuntary immobility". My findings suggest that transit migration is not (only) about the aspiration of moving in a context of involuntary immobility, but rather about the aspiration of moving in a context where mobility is not immediately possible or desirable.

Informants reviewed their aspirations once again when they became enmeshed in the Swedish asylum system. At the individual level, state-sponsored programmes often gave informants an opportunity to pursue their aspirations, especially in terms of education and employment. Some informants resumed working towards the goals they had before they left

Syria, whereas others decided to follow new aspirations that they developed while migrating. In some cases, informants abandoned long-term goals in view of the barriers they faced and adjusted to more easily realisable aspirations. As other researchers have already noticed (van Meeteren 2014; Pratsinakis 2005), the aspirations of immigrants — refugees in my case — and the strategies they enact to fulfil them change along with the perception of their opportunity structure. But this is not necessarily true for all kinds of aspirations. As stated above, relational reference is hardly negotiable. Those informants who saw their aspirations to reunite with family curtailed by their relocation to Sweden showed an inclination to migrate again.

Besides the evolution of individual aspirations, broader considerations can be made about informants' perspectives on their future in Sweden. In general, generous provisions for refugees and the perceived opportunity to realise one's goals increase both aspirations to settle and to integrate. However, Sweden's recent restrictions to asylum law, and especially the decision to only grant refugees temporary forms of protection, work in opposition to the desire for stability and long-lasting safety that still underlies my informants' aspirations. The contingency of being repatriated to a country that is unstable and where they fear persecution undermines their hopes.

Acknowledging the role of aspirations is important to understand refugees' migration and integration trajectories. Focusing on aspirations allows to capture agency in extremely coercive contexts and to move beyond the depiction of refugees as passive subjects. But analysing the obstacles to the realisation of their aspirations that they encounter is equally relevant to understand how their *actual* trajectories are formed.

Obstacles to aspirations can be framed as individual and structural constraints. Informants' individual constraints primarily related to the availability of capital. As shown in Chapter 3, possessing the right combination of social and economic capital was vital to exit Syria and undertake the journey to Europe. In Sweden, constraints to realising one's aspirations depended on the lack of relevant cultural capital — recognised qualifications and country-specific skills such as language proficiency. Individual constraints to mobility, like the presence of children for families, were also relevant during migration.

The structural constraints faced by my informants essentially related to the socio-political and legal frameworks of the countries in which they moved. While this work focuses on aspirations and agency, the role of structure in determining refugees' trajectories cannot be

forgotten. As I have shown in the previous chapters, my informants' trajectories were often decided or heavily influenced by structural elements. What is worth highlighting here is that structural constraints do not only determined their movements but also affected their aspirations. For instance, the impossibility to actualize their life aspirations in Syria led informants to reformulate their hypothetical futures and to develop migration aspirations.

At this point, I have retraced the evolution of my informants' aspirations throughout migration and settlement, briefly discussed their future perspectives and touched upon the interrelation between the obstacles to their aspirations and their trajectories. It is therefore time to answer the main research question: what are the correlations between the original migration aspirations of Syrian refugees settling in Sweden and the dynamics of their integration?

As I demonstrated, the original migration aspirations of my informants availed a plurality of purposes. Even in conflict-led involuntary mobility, migration aspirations function as projects for life-making, of which safety is an essential element but not the only one. Achieving self-realisation, guaranteeing stability and a better future for one's family, and reuniting with one's spouse are other elements that emerged from informants' narratives — more may be possible. I also referred to these elements as primary aspirations, because they are substantial to informants' projects. They are what informants hope to achieve in their destination country, the emotional drivers of their migration. Whether or not informants developed aspirations to settle and integrate in Sweden largely depended on the perceived possibility to realise primary aspirations, regardless of the changes these underwent in the migration process. Primary aspirations therefore represent the link between the migration aspirations of these Syrian refugees and the dynamics of their integration in Sweden. Perceiving the opportunity to bring projects for life-making to completion is the foundation to develop aspirations to settle and integrate.

The relevance of projects for life-making becomes clear in the cases of informants who initially migrated to Syria's neighbouring countries. Even though they had already escaped the conflict, the impossibility to realise their main goals in Lebanon and Turkey pushed them to migrate again. Brekke and Brochmann (2015) registered similar behaviours in Somali asylum seekers in Italy. Asylum seekers do not simply move from unsafe locations to technically safe ones, they also move onwards to other locations where they can aim for

better conditions and living standards. The role of aspirations in determining this kind of processes is evident.

Other researchers (Pratsinakis 2005; van Meeteren 2014; Boccagni 2017) also highlighted how aspirations are important determinants of integration outcomes. The goals of newly settled refugees, and of migrants in general, shape their social interaction, their educational and career paths, and broader life trajectories. How projects for life-making specifically translate into patterns of integration depends on individual characteristics as much as on structural elements. Refugees strive for diverse aspirations and perceive different sets of opportunities and constraints.

At the same time, integration is a process that involves other actors besides the refugee: their sending country, their receiving society and the people they are related to transnationally. Understanding the relevance of refugees' projects for life-making and the effects that other actors have on them may help reduce the barrier to integration they encounter. This is particularly important for Syrians and for other categories of refugees who may have little chances of returning to their homelands.

As I explained earlier, I undertook this research project to better understand of how Syrian refugees shaped their life trajectories and what their subjective and emotional drivers to integration may be. In doing so, I hoped to contribute to the reconceptualization of integration towards a less receiving country-biased perspective. Research on aspirations indeed proved valuable to understand integration patterns by incorporating the refugee perspective within discourses on structure. Returning to van Heelsum's (2017) question — whether the aspirations/capability framework can be used to study life after migration — this work suggest that the framework offers valid tools to contribute to the debate on integration.

My analysis also gave insights into the dynamics of refugees' migration. If the significance of the journey has to be taken in account to better understand migration patterns, that implies adopting a migrant-centred approach; hence, aspirations become an important lens to interpret various stages of the journey, because from the migrant's perspective each stage is evaluated on the basis of (mutating) goals and dreams.

It is also important to remember that aspirations are influenced by one's milieu and by opportunities and constraints, and therefore they are always contextual. So are my findings. My informants' aspirations and their trajectories are intertwined with the Syrian conflict, the EU relocation mechanism, the particular experience of their journey and their destination

country. For instance, it cannot be forgotten that, despite its recent restrictions, the Swedish asylum system is still the most liberal in Europe, and this contributed to my informants' generally positive attitude. Studying the aspirations of former Katsikas residents in other countries may unearth very different integration patterns. The same would be true for other groups of refugees. It must also be remarked that I have interviewed my informants at a very early stage of their settlement. It is difficult to predict whether all their aspirations will be realised, what obstacles they will have to overcome and how these will change their aspirations. My informants' future in Sweden is still in the making.

There is a need for further research on aspirations to bring diverse perspectives in migration and integration studies. As I noted in the methodological chapter, female voices are little heard in this work. A gendered perspective on aspirations is crucial to explore the specific projects for life-making that underlie female and LGBTQ asylum migration. Religion is the other notable absentee in my analysis. This is both because it was not included in the research design and because informants themselves did not give the subject remarkable attention. However, the debate around Islam's compatibility with European values might benefit from the exploration of Muslims' aspirations in terms of religious freedom. As refugees' presence in Europe increases, more efforts are needed to voice the plurality of their experiences.

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