

**Taking control, losing control.**  
**The EU's policy of teaching helplessness.**

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no one leaves home unless  
 home is the mouth of a shark  
 you only run for the border  
 when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you  
 breath bloody in their throats  
 the boy you went to school with  
 who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory is holding a gun bigger than his body

you only leave home  
 when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you fire under feet  
 hot blood in your belly  
 it's not something you ever thought of doing until the blade burnt threats into

your neck  
 and even then you carried the anthem under your breath  
 only tearing up your passport in an airport toilets sobbing as each mouthful of paper  
 made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,  
 that no one puts their children in a boat  
 unless the sea is safer than the land  
 no one burns their palms  
 under trains  
 beneath carriages  
 no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck feeding on newspaper unless the  
 miles travelled  
 means something more than journey.  
 no one crawls under fences

no one wants to be beaten pitied

no one chooses refugee camps or strip searches where your body is left aching  
 or prison,

because prison is safer than a city of fire  
 and one prison guard in the night

is better than a truckload  
 of men who look like your father no one could take it  
 no one could stomach it  
 no one skin would be tough enough

the  
 go home blacks  
 refugees  
 dirty immigrants

asylum seekers  
sucking our country dry  
niggers with their hands out  
they smell strange  
savage  
messed up their country and now they want to mess ours up  
how do the words  
the dirty looks  
roll off your backs  
maybe because the blow is softer  
than a limb torn off

or the words are more tender than fourteen men between your legs  
or the insults are easier

to swallow than rubble

than bone  
than your child's body  
in pieces.  
i want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore unless home told you  
to quicken your legs  
leave your clothes behind  
crawl through the desert  
wade through the oceans  
drown  
save  
be hungry  
beg  
forget pride  
your survival is more important

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear saying-  
leave,  
run away from me now

i don't know what i've become but i know that anywhere  
is safer than here

- *Home*, by Warsan Shire

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## Introduction

In 2015, the world started its their day in shock, with the image of the toddler lying face down on a beach in Bodrum all over the news (see e.g. Al Jazeera, 2015b; The Guardian, 2015; The Huffington Post UK, 2015; The Independent, 2015; The New York Times, 2015; Trouw, 2015). Photos like these don't make headlines anymore. This does not mean, however, that people are no longer drowning. According to the International Organisation for Migration, almost 24.000 migrants have gone missing in the Mediterranean since 2014 (Missing Migrants Project, 2021), making EUrope's Mediterranean border the most deadly in the world (Panebianco, 2020).

For those lucky enough to survive the Mediterranean sea and make it to EUrope, for example through Greece, safety is not a guarantee. Since the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, the camps, once meant for short-term reception, have become places of semi-permanent residence (Hermans et al., 2017). These camps, or 'hotspots' are often extremely overcrowded (Paul, 2020). Moreover, up to ten per cent of migrants experience physical violence while staying in Greece (Ben Farhat et al., 2018) and access to healthcare (especially in times of COVID-19) is lacking (Giannopoulou & Tsobanoglou, 2020).

As one might expect, surviving conflict, violence and long-term stay in overcrowded camps will have an effect on one's mental health. Mental health in the camps is deteriorating up to a point that even children are attempting to commit suicide (BBC News, 2019). Events like these are testimonies of hopelessness, imposed upon people by the EUropean policies and hosting (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). The increased control exhibited by the European Union's policies has a two-fold effect. First of all, by closing of all legal routes of entry into the EU, refugees are forced to use smugglers to get to safer lands, therefore going beyond the Union's control. The Union seems to be at her wit's end and keep on going down the same

road. Europe's response of increasing measures of control, with the consequence of losing control, is a literally deadly case of auto-immunity (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). This control is also very noticeable in for example the camps and daily life after these. Paradoxically, however, by increasing control over migrants lives, they learn to feel helpless. This learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) means that people lose their sense of agency and is at the core of many (mental) health problems such as depression and anxiety. This thesis will focus on the learned helplessness, taught by the European Union as a core subject. Why is the EU constantly trying to **expand** her realm of control? How **is** the EU increasing control over asylum seekers arriving to her gates? And how **does** this affect the mental health of these people looking for asylum?

Studies focussing on the migrants' explanations of their distress seem to be lacking, even though there are signs that these might include concepts that are not easily translated into Western-based diagnostic categories, such as belief in spirit and the 'evil eye' or other externalising concepts (Hassan et al., 2015). In addition to little attention being paid to migrants' own attributions, there seem to be no studies asking the migrants how they feel that their situation could be improved. This is most remarkable, since sense of control has been shown to be a protective factor against mental health problems in several contexts (e.g. De Brier et al., 2020; Vukojevic et al., 2016; Keeton et al., 2008) and is an important source when dealing with stressful life events (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Therefore, migrants' own ideas on how to improve their situations deserve more attention, to help them regain a perceived sense of control. Understanding the factors that migrants attribute their mental health problems to and how to improve their situation, taking into consideration the political and social context that the migrants find themselves in, is likely to lead to better, more adapted strategies for relief. This leads to the following research question: How has the 'refugee crisis' since 2015 affected the mental health for refugees in Europe, especially in The Netherlands? Answering this question

is important, first and foremost for the obvious reason that it will gain insight into how to help migrants retake control over their lives and make them feel better. Consequently, the societal costs of immigration are likely to decrease, as people are more capable to participate in society when mentally fit to do so. In order to answer the research question, the following sub-question will be answered in this thesis:

1. What are reasons for seeking asylum?
2. What is the European external policy with regards to irregular migration?
3. What is the European policy regarding reception of asylum seekers?
4. How do asylum seekers perceive their mental health?
5. How do these asylum seekers feel their situation might be improved?
6. What can be done to improve asylum seekers' mental health?

To answer the central research question, a qualitative research approach was used, which will be elaborated upon below.

#### Positionality

I have written this thesis from a background in psychology. After finishing my master's degree in clinical psychology, I noticed an increased interest in understanding the world around me. Because: how can one understand an individual without fully understanding the world he is living in? I started this master's degree, and quickly found myself interested the crossroads of both clinical psychology and conflict: the mental health of those fleeing their homes, in hope of finding a better, safer live.

During my master's, in addition to working as a psychologist, I started at Dokters van de Wereld. At first I was at Gezellig, which can be best described as a multicultural 'living room', open to anyone. Here, Dokters van de Wereld every week hosts the 'zorgcafé', where migrants (most often without documentation) can ask questions about (mental) healthcare. Often, they would be referred to a general practitioner, dentist, or mental health institution. Despite the mental health institutions in the Netherlands being overcrowded, Zorgcafé managed to

cooperate with Pro Persona for a transcultural team. However, people could only be referred in the case of serious psychopathy. Therefore, volunteers with a background in psychology (like myself) often speak to these people for several weeks. Sometimes in order to judge the seriousness of their symptoms and conduct an intake for Pro Persona, but most of the time to provide relief, a sympathetic ear, and/or practical tips. In addition to individual help, group sessions to improve empowerment are also given to whoever wants to join.

Later, the Zorgcafé expanded to the crisis location at d'Almarasweg in Nijmegen, the crisis location for many asylum seekers. Here, me and another woman offer psychological help to the inhabitants. The COA does not offer any type of individual psychological counselling, so there is a great demand and very few resources. We (Dokters van de Wereld) try our very best, but it is a challenging task. During my work at Dokters van de Wereld I received several trainings. I have (had) many conversations with people from very different backgrounds that somehow ended up in the same place with very similar problems. Although their stories differ, their problems are very similar. Listening to and interacting with them left me feeling astonished: What is happening here? How did they end up here? In this situation? What are the EU policies? These questions led me to the topic of this thesis and inspired me to deep dive into the subject. As mentioned before, this led me to believe that there is a massive destructive policy at place, in which the European Union does not want to lose control, therefore keeps increasing controlling policies, essentially leading to the loss of control and teaching of helplessness: a case of münchhausen-by-proxy.

### **Methodology**

In the research proposal, I proposed the use of semi-structured interviews and recording the conversations. However, the reality has shown this to be unfeasible. The empirical evidence for this thesis was scattered over several different conversations, with many different people. Within the timespan of seven months, I spoke to 26 people. All of them came to Dokters van



de Wereld to ask for help. Country of origin was most frequently Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. Other countries of origin were Iran, Nigeria, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, Ukraine, and Algeria. Many people I spoke to were very sceptical towards several forms of administration, therefore declining the recording of our conversations. Often, this would lead to some distrust in the first conversations, despite our conversations taking place under professional confidentiality. During our conversations, I took notes, which allowed me to use their stories as a starting off point for literature research, thus using an inductive approach. By using this approach, the stories of migrants that I spoke to, were analysed and compared in order to find common themes (Thomas, 2006). The main themes that were present in almost every conversation were traumatic experiences and (political) situations, both in the home-country and in EUrope, the feeling of having no control over one's life, not being able or allowed to do anything, the way people felt mistreated by the authorities and the situation in the camps. These common themes were the guiding principle in deciding the subjects for this thesis, a quest for better understanding. I could not help but wonder: what is going on here? In an attempt to better understand the asylum seekers I spoke to, I decided to use an inductive approach, where their stories and themes served as guidance on what to research. So, rather than testing an already existing theory, I decided to use a bottom-up approach to better explain my observations and themes I was noticing (Streefkerk, 2023). First, these themes were further explained using literature research, and later developed into a more theoretical framework and theory in order to interpret the personal stories and give meaning to their experiences (Thomas, 2006).

This thesis is written to shine light on these themes, starting with a broad point of view and narrowing this down to eventually create a theory. The first chapter focusses on reasons for migrating: the background to conflict in the countries that used to be home to the majority of asylum seekers coming to EUrope (and the majority of the people I spoke to) as well as some testimonies in order to gain insight into the background and significant events in the migrants'

lives. The second chapter outlines the European Union's migration policy regarding irregular, showing the first steps of the way that the EU tries to expand her control. The third chapter is directed at the reception policy of the European Union, and the flaws that are omnipresent, as a way of better understanding the difficulties migrants are facing and how the policy is preventing them from functioning better. In chapter four, mental health consequences of these policies are outlined as a theoretical explanation to the complaints many had. In the fifth and final chapter, suggestions for improvement are given.

## Chapter 1: Motivations for migrating

In order to answer the question of how the refugee crisis has impacted mental health for refugees in Europe, it seems necessary to understand the background that these people are coming from. In the European Union, 8.4 per cent of residents are born in a foreign country (non-EU country) (Eurostat, 2020). When comparing this number to other high-income countries, it stands out that in other high-income countries, the percentage is much higher. For example, in Singapore, almost half (43.1 per cent) of the population was born elsewhere (Eurostat, 2020). In Australia, New Zealand, and Switzerland the amount of foreign-born consists of almost thirty per cent (Eurostat, 2020).

In 2021, around 630.000 people applied for asylum in the European Union, of which 535.000 applied for the first time (Eurostat, 2021). In the same year, around 200.000 irregular border crossings have been noted (Eurostat, 2021). Of the people applying for asylum, most come from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Although these are large numbers, the majority of people looking for asylum, are hosted by neighbouring countries. Within the European Union, only a little over a half per cent (0.6 per cent) of the population consists of refugees (UNHCR, 2022a). When comparing this to other countries in the region, e.g. Lebanon (12.7 per cent), Jordan (6.3 per cent), and Turkey (4.4 per cent), this number is extremely low (UNHCR, 2022a).

As mentioned before, the majority of people applying for asylum within the European Union come from Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq. This chapter shows a few examples of stories why people decided to migrate. Although individual reasons and stories differ, the theoretical research in this chapter aims to better understand the (political) background of many people currently seeking refuge in the European Union.

## **Individual reasons**

Even though the conflicts in the countries mentioned above comprise the largest part of migrants coming to Europe, many people do not come from these countries or do not have conflict as a reason for migrating. Poverty, loss of parents and having no one to take care of you, having to make money to take care of family, and institutional problems are also very important reasons why one might decide to migrate (personal communications, October, November, December, 2022, January, February, March, 2023). Others might be forced to migrate to Europe because of safety reasons. A man from Nigeria explained a story of having lost his parents, moving to Lagos and trusting someone on the promise to take him to Libya for work, because he wanted to help him (personal communications, October, 2022). The man turned out to become the victim of human trafficking and became subject to severe torture in Libya (personal communications, October, 2022).

A woman from Syria explained her initial refusal to migrate during the war (personal communications, October and November, 2022). She worked at a nurse and even though she went through horrible things, such as her hospital being bombed, someone sitting next to her being shot by a sniper, remaining at work was her way of fighting back (personal communications, October and November, 2022). Only when she felt her children's lives were no longer safe, she made the decision to flee (personal communications, October and November, 2022).

A young man from Iran told me how he belonged to a religious minority (Baha'is) and was kidnapped and tortured upon visiting his family, as well as militia men raiding his home where his wife and children live (personal communications, February and March, 2023). Only after fearing for his life, and there the income and education of his family, he made the decision to flee (personal communications, February and March, 2023). Now, he feels like he

will be kidnapped anytime and does not dare to leave his bed (personal communications, February and March, 2023).

A man from Aleppo, around my age told me about how his fourteen brothers and sisters left for Lebanon, but his dad could not leave Syria because he used to be a professor (personal communications, February and March, 2023). After moving to Idlib, bringing his father to safety, he went to Turkey to work (personal communications, February and March, 2023). However, as his brother got in a car-accident in Lebanon, followed by a grave medical mistake, the family had to take a loan they could never afford to pay off, due to inflation (personal communications, February and March, 2023). He came to the Netherlands, hoping for work, but has to spend his days waiting for his first IMD interview (personal communications, February and March, 2023).

These stories are just a few examples of how migration cannot be understood by simply looking at the numbers, at the historical events. However, in the next pages, the political background of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ will be outlined.

### **Background to the conflicts: Arab spring**

In 2010, a series of protests broke out in Tunisia, spreading to other parts of the Arab world (Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria), known to most people as the ‘Arab spring’ (Abushouk, 2016). On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, 2010, the cart of vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi was confiscated by a police officer, an action he appealed to in provincial court (Abushouk, 2016). However, this appeal was rejected and as a response, Bouazizi set himself on fire (Abushouk, 2016). This incident sparked protests and riots all over the country, with police and army responding with strong actions (Henry & Jang, 2013), eventually resulting in the fleeing of president Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia and therefore the ending of his authoritarian rule (El-Khawas, 2012).

Having started in December 2010, by the spring of 2011, most of the protests had spread to other countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East, overturning the government in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen (Blakemore, 2019). In addition to this, the uprisings led to violent conflict and civil war in several countries, including Syria and Iraq (Blakemore, 2019).

## **Syria**

In February 2011, tensions in Syria came to a boil and ever since, over 6.6 million Syrians have been forced to leave the country, while almost the same amount of people are internally displaced (UNHCR, 2021b). Of these 6.6 million, around 5.5 million are currently living in neighbouring countries (UHHCR, 2021), and around 1 million are living in Europe.

### ***Historical background to the conflict***

At the end of the first World War, the Ottoman Empire threatened to fall apart (Ottaway, 2015). In April/May of 1916, delegates of France (François Georges-Picot) and Britain (Mark Sykes) secretly negotiated the Sykes-Picot agreement, dividing the Fertile Crescent under French and British rule (Tell, 2017). In 1920, during the San Remo conference, the division of the empire Ottoman Empire (and thus geographical Syria) was arranged, with France getting control over the area by the Mediterranean, from Haifa to parts of Anatolia (Ottaway, 2015). Britain, on the other hand, gained control over the Mesopotamian area, from Arabia through Basra, to an area north of Bagdad (Ottaway, 2015). This division drew a line straight across the geographical region formerly known as 'Syria', dividing it into two: Palestine now belonged to Britain and Syria and modern-day Lebanon to France (Fildis, 2011).

After the French acquired the mandate (in 1922-1923), the social structures in the country began to take form (Abboud, 2018). The French kept the country from industrialising,

resulting in a class structure where land ownership and other activities related to agriculture were related to higher social status: land owners (less than one per cent of the total population owning more than half the land) retained the highest social status (Hinnebusch, 1990). Those who owned land, obtained high professional, bureaucratic, and political positions in the country (Abboud, 2018).

Although the many different identities and within Syria (geography, clan, sect) and the dependence of classes on one another prevented a centralised rebellion against French penetration into state politics, there was a decentralised revolt in 1925 (Abboud, 2018). Despite the French ending the revolt in 1927, the revolt called for the French to respond to nationalist demands, which the French did (Abboud, 2018).

In 1946, Syria gained independence as the foreign forces left the Levant (Olmert, 1996). The years that followed were characterised by intense political instability: The Bloc had separated into different parties, which were opposing the elite rule, leading to agitation (Abboud, 2018). In 1948, the Zionist forces gained control over Palestine, leading to radicalisation of Syrian (Arab) nationalist (Abboud, 2018). This rise of Arab nationalism continued in the 50s, benefiting the Ba'ath party (Abboud, 2018). Nevertheless, the disagreements between Syria's political actors kept increasing, eventually leading to a merge with Egypt and the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 (Abboud, 2018). The new country initiated profound land reforms and authoritarian structures (Heydemann, 1999). The UAR turned out to be short-lived, and in 1963, the military elite of the Ba'ath party seized power by means of a coup, despite a lack of coherence within the party (Abboud, 2018). Absence of a unified opposition enabled the Ba'ath party to stay in power the years after the coup, despite the situation being one of political instability until the mid-60s (Abboud, 2018).

With the gain of power, the Ba'ath party called for a state of emergency, giving rise to special courts: Supreme State Security Courts, that won't need to follow regular rules (Human Rights Watch, 2007), as well as the *mukhabarat*: Syria's state police, with (because of the state of emergency) virtually unlimited power to "detain, hold incommunicado, torture, and kill" anybody it believed to be a threat to the regime (Dagher, 2019, p.15).

By means of the corrective revolution, Hafez al-Assad gained power as leader of the Ba'ath party in 1970 (Abboud, 2018). He created a regime which power was divided into four parts (Hinnebusch, 2001). Under Hafez al-Assad's regime, more and more Alawites fulfilled important political and military duties, using the religious minority as a base (NCA, 2016). After Bashar al-Assad took over power in 2000, after Hafez al-Assad's death, state strategy changed, resulting in a "diffusion of economic authority from the public to the private sector through the transfer of responsibility for social welfare from the state to the market" (Abboud, 2018, p. 39). Although this was meant to increase the accumulation, only military officials, urban classes, and elites close to al-Assad seemed to benefit, leading to a decrease of living standards for most Syrians during the 2000s (Abboud, 2018). By the time of the uprisings in 2011, Syria was unrecognisable compared to a decade before: foreign relations, as well as economic and domestic politics had completely changed, not necessarily for the better (Abboud, 2018). However, organised civil society that citizens could use to voice complaints against the regime seemed to be lacking (Abboud, 2018).

### ***The first protests***

It is impossible to identify a singular source of the Syrian uprising, but it was triggered by the detention of fifteen boys in Dara'a who had painted their school's walls with "the people want the downfall of the regime" – a slogan often heard during the Arab spring (Abboud, 2018). Underneath this quote, they wrote "*Jayeek eld or, ya daktor*", which translates to "You're next, doctor", referring to Bashar al-Assad (Dagher, 2019). The boys



were tortured and one of them, an eleven-year-old, was killed (Macleod & Flamant, 2011). The arrest of the boys immediately provoked protests for their (and other political prisoners') release, but soon these turned into protests against the regime, corruption, state violence, emergency laws, and the poor socioeconomic state of the country (Abboud, 2018).

Despite the arrests of the boys being a trigger, the protests can thus be seen as an accumulation of grievances. More specifically, the high birth rates in Syria, in combination with free schooling caused a vast increase in unemployed but educated youth, left to their own devices, as the Syrian economy could not provide enough jobs for them (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). In rural areas, this meant that the younger generation was left without land (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). Coupled with the worst drought in forty years, many were forced to move to urban regions, living together in slums that would turn out to be fertile ground for the uprising (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). In addition to this, the economic liberalisation policies of the regime favoured the well-connected (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). While creating more wealth for the already wealthy, the abandonment of the populist social contract (and thus the previously mentioned shift of social welfare responsibility to the free market) (Hinnebusch, 2020), left many without a proper safety net (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). This economic liberalisation policy created many victims, with poverty rates increasing: over 30 per cent of Syrians' living standards were below the poverty line, and 11.4 per cent under subsistence (El-Laithy & Abu-Ismail, 2005).

This increase in wealth for few, but increase in poverty for many, made it no longer possible to tolerate the widespread corruption (Transparency International, 2010), adding to the many grievances of the protestors (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). In addition to this corruption, the bigotry of the security forces (the *mukhabarat*), as shown by arrests without warrants, arbitrary torture and general repression, without attention to human rights and lack of fair trial proved reason for concern and protest (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016; Human

Rights Watch, 2010). This was possible because of the state of emergency, that had been in place since 1962 (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

While grievances kept adding up, the ‘political opportunity structure’ (Meyer, 2004) was developing in the years prior to the uprisings: despite being repressed by the regime, events such as the Damascus Declaration and Damascus Spring taught valuable lessons for the protestors (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). Moreover, in the late 2000s, the regime began allowing mobile phones and internet (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). With this came the use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, which played a crucial role in the mobilisation (Ahmad & Hamasaeed, 2015). In parallel, the people’s fear of the regime seemed to decline, especially among those who had not experienced suppression under previous uprisings (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016). Lastly, the successes of other uprisings during the Arab Spring proved that not all authoritarian regimes would stay in power forever, motivating the uprisings (Hinnebusch, Imady & Zintl, 2016).

The violence of the state (and armed backup) towards protestors and the failure of the protestors to introduce a process of political transition led to a militarisation of the conflict (Abboud, 2018). Since the summer of 2011, protestors started using violence and began forming rebel groups, united under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (O’Bagy, 2013). Around the same time, many jihadist (who had been released from prison) began forming resistance groups based on an Islamist mindset (Lister, 2015). Late summer, around August 2011, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) started working on establishing a Syrian wing (Jabhat al-Nusra, or JAN), while other insurgent Islamist groups were also forming (Lister, 2015). JAN is at the top of these networks of violence, and carried out their first double suicide bombing in December, amidst rising levels of violence in Syria (Lister, 2015). In the years following, JAN would gain influence in Syria because of its military capacities, the alliances formed

with other rebel (Salafist-jihadist) groups (such as Islamic Front and Ansar al-Din) and the capacity to provide social services (Abboud, 2018).

The fall of Iraq and the following occupation by the United States led to the *Sahwa* (awakening) campaigns, aimed of removing al-Qaeda fighters (Abboud, 2018). Although this was successful at first, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) had survived the Sahwa, and in 2009 many al-Qaeda fighters returned to ISI (Abboud, 2018). Because of the success of the Syrian ISI wing JAN, the leader (abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) of ISI publicly reinsured the relationship between JAN and ISI, and JAN's subordination to ISI, by declaring a new organisation: the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (Abboud, 2018). This subordination led to internal conflict and the division of JAN into two: Syrian fighters stayed with JAN, while foreign fighters would join ISIS (Abboud, 2018). This split, together with the fact that ISIS commanders refused subordination to al-Qaeda, would lead to denunciation of ISIS as part of al-Qaeda and therefore the creation of ISIS as an independent entity (Abboud, 2018). These four biggest networks of violence (JAN, ISIS, FSA, YPG) are often in conflict with each other, but the FSA has lost importance since 2016, despite alliances with both JAN and the YPG (Abboud, 2018). Although JAN was not yet a major actor in the beginning of 2012, the first period following its emergence would turn out to be of crucial impact, as it discouraged the international community to arm the FSA (Lister, 2015). Many different armed rebel groups fought alongside each other against the regime, and against each other (Abboud, 2018). This lack of organisation among rebels is an important factor in explaining the duration of the conflict, the violence towards civilians, and the stalemate (Abboud, 2018). The regime's ability to regain territory, as well as other military gains and survival can largely be accounted for by external armed groups, most importantly the Lebanese Hizbollah (Abboud, 2018). In addition to the abovementioned fighting between rebel groups, the international community plays a major role in explaining the continuation of the conflict.

Within the Western states, there is no consensus regarding policies towards Syria (Abboud, 2018). Most states see the conflict only from the perspective of either the threat of ISIS or the influx of Syrian refugees into Europe, leading to inconsistent EU-policies on the matter (Abboud, 2018). Despite the collective disapproval of the regime, policies are lacking (Abboud, 2018). With Russia vetoing the UNSC efforts, more sanctions are being imposed, impacting civilians but not bringing about change (Moret, 2014).

## **Afghanistan**

Because of the long conflict, poverty, hunger, and natural disasters in the country, Afghans form one of the largest refugee groups (UNHCR, n.d.). The majority of Afghans seeks refuge in neighbouring countries, with ninety per cent hosted in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2021a) in the year 2021, the European Union received 102.000 requests for asylum from Afghan refugees (EUAA, 2022). This was an increase since the year prior, caused by the withdrawal of American forces (present since 2001) and the consequential Taliban takeover of the country (EUAA, 2022).

### ***Historical background to the conflict***

Prior to the 2001 invasion by American and British forces, the country was at war for over twenty years (Witte, 2021). This period is characterised by conflict and chaos and can be split into three phases (Barfield, 2010). In the first phase, members of the communist PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) committed a coup d'état in 1978, killing the president and declaring a socialist state (Barfield, 2010).

The party was greatly divided, all linked in different ways to the Soviet Union (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). After the coup, the Khalqi destroyed the Parcham faction and led the regime (Hughes, 2008). and in the spring of 1979, nation-wide rebellion would break out (Hughes, 2008). These insurgencies were done by Islamist groups, en masse known as

*Mujahideen* (holy warriors) (Barfield, 2010). It was thus the regime's own radical policies that would cause it to be severely weakened within twenty months of ruling (Halliday & Tanin, 1998).

In December of 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in an effort to secure the regime's position (Barfield, 2010). This was initially meant to be a short-term intervention, but it turned out that the Afghan forces were not capable of confronting the Mujahideen (Hughes, 2008), who were located in Pakistan and backed by the United States and Saudi-Arabia (Barfield, 2010). Eventually, a ten-year occupation by the Soviets, pitting the Soviet Army and the PDPA against the Mujahideen was inevitable (Barfield, 2010). After ten years, the Soviet Union withdrew its forces (Barfield, 2010). After Gorbachev came to power and condemned the war as part of his *glasnost* (openness) policy, UN-led settlement talks began and in April 1984, the Geneva Accords were signed by the USA, USSR, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (Hughes, 2008). In February 1989 the withdrawal was completed (Hughes, 2008). The PDPA regime remained in power, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the stability was broken beyond repair (Barfield, 2010). The PDPA dissolved and most of the factions joined mujahideen parties, giving rise to a new phase of the conflict (Barfield, 2010).

This second phase of the conflict is one of civil war (Barfield, 2010). When the PDPA still existed, creating an opposition united the Mujahideen leaders (Barfield, 2010). But with the dissolution of the party and the fall of the regime, a power struggle between Mujahideen leaders was inevitable (Barfield, 2010). Consequently, a civil war emerged, with many of the Mujahideen parties strong enough to rule one region, but none strong enough to defeat all of the others (Barfield, 2010). In 1994, the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, who called for an ending of the civil war and an establishment of Islamic law (Nojumi, 2002). Pakistan covertly supported the Taliban with its intelligence, army, and air force, helping the Taliban to expand rapidly (Johnson & Mason, 2007).

This led to the third phase of the Afghan war: the control of Afghanistan by the Taliban (Barfield, 2010). In September 1996, the Taliban seized Kabul (Johnson & Mason, 2007) and three years later, they controlled all of Afghanistan (Barfield, 2010). Soon, the Taliban allowed other jihadist and radical groups to train in Afghanistan, among which was al-Qaeda, a cooperation which turned out to be quite costly (Johnson & Mason, 2007).

### ***U.S. Invasion – the first phase of war***

On the eleventh of September, 2001, two airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, one airplane hit the Pentagon, and a final plane ended up in Pennsylvania, in a field, unable to make it to its goal of the Capitol (Malkasian, 2021). It was soon made public that al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden was the mastermind behind the attack (Malkasian, 2021). The Bush administration ordered the extradition of bin Laden, but the Taliban refused (Katzman & Thomas, 2017), as described by a Taliban official: “Bin Laden [...] has become synonymous in Afghanistan with Islam. The Taliban can’t hand him over publicly any more than they can publicly reject Islam.” (Grenier, 2015, p. 116).

After almost a month of failed negotiations, Bush ran out of patience on the fifth of October, deciding to attack Afghanistan two days later, backed by Great Britain (Malkasian, 2021). The final strike to the Taliban regime came on the ninth of December, when the regime fled Qandahar and left it to be governed by local tribes (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). On the first of May, the U.S. publicly announced an end to most fighting after operation Anaconda (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). But even after the ending of the first military campaign, two goals remained for the Bush administration: eliminating what was left of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and building a democracy that would stop terrorist from returning (Malkasian, 2021).

### *Rebuilding Afghanistan – the second phase*

With the toppling of the Taliban, focus came to be on reconstruction and nation-building in Afghanistan, as Bush presented a “Marshall Plan” (modelled after the plan that followed the second world war in Europe), consisting of considerable financial aid (Witte, 2021). In the beginning of 2002, eight thousand U.S. and five thousand allied troops were in Afghanistan, temporarily, but without a timeline on their presence (Malkasian, 2021).

The process of creating a new constitution left Afghanistan with a strong central government, but with weaker local structures, against the nation’s culture and wishes of the Northern Alliance (Malkasian, 2021). The first elections in Afghanistan were won by Karzai, who was greatly invested in creating and maintaining a close relationship with the United States, that helped him in critical moments (Malkasian, 2021). After the Taliban left, Bush pushed for creation of a national Afghan army and stronger police force, but resources were only scarcely expended, troubling efforts to build this army (Malkasian, 2021). The Iraq war promoted this process, as this war needed all the attention (Malkasian, 2021).

In the meantime, ever since the defeat of the Taliban, several talks were being held with delegations of the group, all of which the U.S. shut down (Malkasian, 2021). After being turned down, the Taliban started to regroup and to think about attacking Afghanistan (Malkasian, 2021). In the meantime, more delegations came to Karzai to ask for peace and cooperation, but the U.S. government forbid the Afghan government to speaking to Taliban leaders (Malkasian, 2021).

After the 2002 defeat, the Taliban retreated to Pakistan, but they did not go away (Asfar et al., 2008). The war in Iraq consumed the U.S.’s attention, up to 2005 where the U.S. kept believing Afghanistan was under control, while the Taliban were rapidly gaining popularity among the population (Malkasian, 2021). Late 2005, Taliban set foot again in Afghanistan to organise themselves in the rural border areas in the east and south, with new

battle techniques learned from the war in Iraq, such as suicide bombings and Improvised Explosive Devices (Johnson, 2013). In the following years, the Taliban (and Al Qaeda) gained momentum and strength (Johnson & Mason, 2007), accompanied by rising anti-Western positions among Afghans (Witte, 2021).

Throughout 2006, the Taliban kept fighting, resulting in a large territory by the next year, where life was stable for the Afghans (Malkasian, 2021).

### ***Counterinsurgency – the third phase***

In 2009, when Obama came into office, the Taliban were present in close to every province (Indurthy, 2011). Contrary to Bush, Obama prioritised the war in Afghanistan, sending a high number of troops with a detailed strategy against the Taliban's insurgency (Indurthy, 2011). Despite disagreement among U.S. officials over the course to follow, bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in 2011, a major victory for the U.S. army (Witte, 2021).

Although this meant that the ultimate goal of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan was reached (destroying Al Qaeda), Obama decided not to withdraw but rather, aim for a deal with the Taliban (Addicott, 2021). A month later, peace talks with the Taliban started, but were hindered when a key figure in the reconciliation process was assassinated (Witte, 2021).

In 2012, the Obama and Karzai administrations came to agreements on the matters of transfers of Afghan detainees, and the night raids to kill Taliban leaders: these were led by U.S. troops, but the Afghan government deemed this a violation of sovereignty (Witte, 2021). These agreements paved a way for further consensus regarding cooperation after NATO troops would withdraw at the end of 2014: U.S. troops would remain in Afghanistan to support the government as determined in the Bilateral Security Agreement (Witte, 2014). Karzai did not want to sign this agreement, but his successor – Ashraf Ghani – did so right away, allowing the presence of almost ten thousand U.S. and at least two thousand NATO troops in Afghanistan (Walsh & Ahmed, 2014).



Simultaneous with political disorder, the Taliban struggled with the rise of Islamic State, which openly criticised Taliban, caused a renegade of Taliban commanders, and were extremely violent (Malkasian, 2021). In the following year, the Taliban gained more ground and the Obama administration was forced to change strategy by relaxing restrictions on airstrikes and quitting further drawdown (Malkasian, 2019). The election of Donald Trump caused another change in strategy, as he authorised more troops to go to Afghanistan and bring back negotiations with the Taliban (Malkasian, 2020). In February 2020, the Afghan government and Taliban signed a peace agreement, which for the U.S. meant phased withdrawal to be completed by May 2021: within fourteen months (Addicott, 2021). After Trump's defeat in the elections, the U.S. defence department announced the continued deployment of 2.500 troops in Afghanistan (Malkasian, 2021).

With Biden's non-conditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2021, the longest U.S. war would stop (Boot, 2021). At the same time, it was estimated that the Taliban would take over control over Afghanistan within three years of the withdrawal (Boot, 2021). With the U.S. withdrawal came the swift takeover of the Taliban: before all U.S. troops left, they toppled the Afghan government and took over full control, resulting in chaos at the evacuation (Blokker, 2021). Despite Taliban claims that they brought back peace and stability, the opposite appears to be true: the country is ravaged by attacks, most of which are claimed by Islamic State (Verkerk, 2022).

## **Iraq**

### ***Background to the conflict***

Iraq had been under the leadership of Ba'athist Saddam Hussein (Imperial War Museums, 2021). The dictator was known for ruling in fear, and using biological and chemical weapons against his enemies (for example during the Iraq-Iran war), but also against his own population (Imperial War Museums, 2021). In 1993, he became infamous for killing

at least 50.000 Kurdish people with chemical weapons such as mustard gas and Sarin (Human Rights Watch, 1993). On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, leading to an international response led by the United States (Imperial War Museums, n.d.). After a short conflict, Saddam Hussein was pushed back to Iraq and (among other things) UN weapon inspectors were sent to Iraq, tasked with ensuring Iraq would be disarmed of any weapons of mass destruction (Imperial War Museums, 2021). Saddam Hussein was left in power, in order to counter Iran's influence and to avoid a long war, but after the 2001 invasion in Afghanistan the idea grew that something similar (introducing democracy, holding elections etc.) might be done in Iraq, too (Imperial War Museums, 2021).

This is all in the light of the 9/11 attacks, and although Iraq did not have anything to do with these attacks, fears were growing that Iraq might be at the heart of a next big attack, with their weapons of mass destruction (Imperial War Museums, 2021). In 2002, the United Nations imposed Resolution 1441 as "a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations" (United Nations, 2002, p. 3) and thus to give up its weapons of mass destruction. The problem was, that Saddam Hussein did not have any, as the UN weapons inspectors in the 1990s made sure of it (Ofek, 2017). Saddam Hussein only wanted to make it *seem* like he had these weapons, to continue his rule by means of fear (Ofek, 2017). His lies were believed by both the CIA and the UN, offering the final support and official reason for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Ofek, 2017). On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, Bush made speech stating that "Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict" (Borger, 2003). They refused and the United States prepared for war, and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2003, the invasion of Iraq began (Imperial War Museums, 2021). On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, Baghdad falls as the United States' forces take over control (BBC, 2003a) and on the first of May, 2003, Bush declares the Iraq invasion as a done job (BBC, 2003b). On the 13<sup>th</sup> of December, Saddam Hussein was found in a basement and captured (BBC, 2003c).

### *After the invasion*

After the invasion, the country was troubled by looting, political turmoil, and civil war (or as the U.S. called it: sectarian violence), leading to a decrease in (economic) welfare and restrained access to essential services (Rawaf et al., 2014). In order to return to orderly conditions, increase security, and rebuild the country's infrastructure, Bush deployed around thirty thousand extra troops to Iraq in 2007, known as the *surge* (Sheftick, 2017). Together with the surge, Sunni troops (originally including ISI) started working with U.S. forces (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). In 2011, the U.S. troops chose to withdraw, under the condition that Sunni tribes would be included in the Baghdad government (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020).

However, this condition was not met as thousands of Sunnis were detained by the government, leading to anti-government protests and eventually allowing ISI to reform and recruit many Sunnis, also beyond the borders of Iraq (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). In 2013, ISI changed its name to ISIS and took over control of a third of the country (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). Their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced himself caliph and announced the Islamic State in Mosul (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). In 2014, foreign troops intervened again (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). With their (air) backup, the Iraqi army was able to regain control over its territory by 2018 (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). In 2021, Biden ordered the removal of all combat troops from Iraq, now only troops with other goals than fighting remain in the country, as the Iraqi prime minister stated: "Today our relationship is stronger than ever. Our co-operation is for the economy, the environment, health, education, culture and more." (BBC News, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned before, many people come from the same countries, having lived through the political unrest. However, as stories and motivations differ, it comes to show that

migration is a phenomenon that is fluid and very subjective, with many different reasons. Nevertheless, this seems to often be forgotten, with many generalising terms in politics and media. Individuals are being robbed of their identity, treated as if they are all the same, as if they are barely human. Although it is safe to say that many asylum seekers have experienced some kind of loss or trauma, this does not yet explain their struggles with mental health. Is it the migrants' own fault? Or just bad luck? It does not seem that way, so there must be more to the story. The following chapters will shed further light on the responses to migration and the so-called 'crisis', in order to better understand the aggravating consequences that asylum seekers will come across on their journey to the EU.

## Chapter 2: European policy

The situations and reasons outlined in the previous chapter have led to an increase in migrants arriving to Europe since 2015, with over one million people arriving to the continent over the Mediterranean that year (UNHCR, 2015c). In 2015, fifty per cent of the people crossing the sea to Greece were Syrians, twenty per cent were Afghans and seven per cent originated from Iraq (UNHCR, 2015c). Other arriving nationalities include (but are not limited to) Eritrean, Somalian, and Nigerian, mostly arriving in Italy (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015). Although displacement of these populations had started because of different forms of violence in the countries of origin, Europe noticed the biggest increase in migrants in 2015, triggered by decisions of the Turkish government, where many refugees from the Middle East are concentrated (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015). This is what the EU has called the ‘refugee crisis’, which started in 2015. Many people that were spoken to for this thesis reported about living and working conditions in Turkey as a transit country (personal communications, September 2022 to March 2023). To better understand the influx of refugees to Europe, this chapter will focus on these policy changes in Turkey. In addition, migrants often spoke about the several other regimes with no regards for human rights, such as the Libyan Coast Guard, with whom the EU happily cooperates (personal communications, September 2022 to March 2023). This chapter will take a deep dive into the policies that the European Union has employed in response to the increase in migrants arriving to Europe.

In 2014, the United Nations warned of a crisis as funding for the United Nations World Food Programme ended (Jones, 2014). The programme is based on the use of vouchers that refugees could use to buy items in a local store, leaving 1.7 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries with little food for a very cold winter (Jones, 2014). At the same time, countries in the region (such as Lebanon and Jordan), hosting many refugees, adopted stricter policies (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015). For example, in Jordan, a policy adopted in 2014 made it

possible to deport or refuse humanitarian help to refugees leaving the camps without prior authorisation (Ramsey, 2016). In addition to these stricter policies, the EU border regime was reinforced: In 2012, Greece placed a ten-kilometre-long fence on its border with Turkey, meant to stop migration over this land border (Leivada, 2016). Although migration in the area after the completion of the fence dropped by ninety per cent (Leivada, 2016), it merely changed the routes of migrants, not stopping them (Angeli et al., 2014). One other route is the Eastern Mediterranean. But this route was also made more difficult to travel: in 2013, the Bulgarian government started constructing a fence on their Turkish border, too (Reuters, 2015). A year later, a 130-kilometre expansion of this fence was announced (Reuters, 2015). Like the Greek fence, this one was aimed at stopping migration to Bulgaria from Turkey (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015).

### **Frontex: more money, less human dignity**

The main actor in implementing the European external border policy is the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). In the past few years, Frontex has rapidly become the most funded EU agency: it first started with a 6 million euro budget, which grew to 118 million in 2011, decreased to 85 million in 2012, and increased again to 142 million in 2015 (Frontex, 2022). Since 2015, the budget has grown exponentially to 754 million euro in 2022 (Frontex, 2022). But not only budget has grown exponentially: In April 2019, the European Parliament released a statement, stating their aim for ten thousand corps members by 2027, almost 8.5 times the current amount of officers (European Parliament, 2019). Despite the ambitious plans, there is plenty of controversy circling the agency. These controversies are challenging both the European values of 'human dignity' and 'human rights', as well as Frontex's own values, such as 'we care', 'we are respectful', and 'we are accountable' (Frontex, n.d.). The value they do seem to honour is 'we seek cooperation', but to consider this a value is questionable, to say the least.

In addition to the previously mentioned two fences built, the cooperation between the EU and the Libyan military (EUNAFOR MED, later called Operation Sophia) closed off another migration route (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015). The operation, officially brought to life to “disrupt the business model of migrant smugglers and human traffickers” (European Council, 2019), seemed unofficially aimed at reducing the number of migrants reaching Europe from Northern Africa (Bathke, 2019). Operation Sophia consisted mostly of air support for and training and funding of the Libyan coastguard (run by militias) in order to capture migrants’ boats, return and detain the migrants in Libyan detention camps (Bathke, 2019).

Despite both the EU and Frontex denying the creation of a proxy force in the Mediterranean, evidence by Lighthouse Reports (2021) shows otherwise. In their investigation of 94 cases of boats in distress, it was proven that in 56 of these the Libyan coastguard intercepted the boats (Lighthouse Reports, 2021). In twenty cases, a Frontex plane was flying close enough to state that it is very likely that the plane has been aware of the boats in distress (Lighthouse Reports, 2021). In 12 cases, it became clear that Frontex was first to detect the boats (Lighthouse Reports, 2021). Shipping and flight data show a worrying pattern: distressed boats are seen by Frontex, there is communication between the agency and the Libyan Coast Guards, and no notice is given to any commercial or NGO ships nearby, neither by Frontex nor Maritime Coordination Centres (Lighthouse Reports, 2021). Later, Libyan coast guard vessels arrive (though delayed) to pick up the people and return them to Libya (Lighthouse Reports, 2021). Not only are these people placed in the detention centres, the delayed pick-ups are likely to have led to at least 91 deaths (Lighthouse Reports, 2021). Moreover, three high-ranked officers in the Libyan coast guard confirm they received emails and WhatsApp messages from Frontex (Van Dijken et al., 2021). The level of direction and engagement that is shown by the evidence violates both European and International Law (Lighthouse Reports, 2021).

In June, 2021, the NGO Sea Watch responded to an emergency signal from a migrant boat with a plane (Urbina, 2021). Video footage shows a ship from the Libyan coast guard chasing the rubber boat, trying to block the boat, firing twice on the migrants, attempting to slam the boat and to snatch its engine by a rope (Urbina, 2021). It is hard to imagine such an action: a big, sturdy, steel boat attempting to sail into a much smaller, open, rubber boat filled with migrants. Luckily, after one and a half hour, the coast guard returned to Libya, and the migrants were able to reach Italy (Urbina, 2021). Moreover, in April 2015, a boat carrying approximately seven hundred people caught fire and capsized, with only fifty people being able to be rescued by the Italian and Maltese rescue operation (Spindler, 2015).

For those lucky enough to survive, detention centres await after pickup (personal communications, November, 2022; Channel 4 News, 2019). A man told me, piece by piece, about the horrors of these centres (personal communications, November, 2022). Channel 4 News (2019) also revealed the atrocities in these Libyan detention camps in an item. When migrants return to Libya, they are placed in detention camps with no sunlight, diseases, and hardly any food or drink (forcing them to drink toilet water) (Channel 4 News, 2019). Moreover, there have been reports from the Khums detention camps that guards are selling people to human traffickers (Channel 4 News, 2019). These human traffickers torture migrants on video, post the footage on social media, and demand large sums of money from relatives (Channel 4 News, 2019; personal communication November 2022). Those who do not have any family to send the videos to, are often raped by gang-leaders (personal communications, November 2022).

Despite the fact that the EU in 2010 denounced Berlusconi for making a deal with Gaddafi to stop migrants from reaching Italy in exchange for money (Bialasiewicz, 2012), the European member states are very likely aware of this – and even funding this – but choose to ignore it, since it suits their objective (Channel 4 News, 2019), focussing only on the reduced



number of migrants that reach European shores (Bathke, 2019). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in a report regarding the situation that:

[T]his is not a tragic anomaly, but rather a consequence of concrete policy decisions and practices by the Libyan authorities, European Union (EU) Member States and institutions, and other actors that have combined to create an environment where the dignity and human rights of migrants are at risk (OHCHR, 2021, p. v).

In 2021, it was estimated that around six thousand migrants were being held captive (Urbina, 2021). Salah Marghani, Minister of Justice in Libya from 2012 to 2014 explained to Ian Urbina, a journalist for the New Yorker, that “[t]he E.U. did something they carefully considered and planned for many years [...] Create a hellhole in Libya, with the idea of deterring people from heading to Europe” (Urbina, 2021). This is a first sign that the EU seems to have an active policy of deterrence.

But not only the value of cooperation leaves much to be desired, Frontex’s own actions do so too. A joint investigation between several media outlets and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) has shown that Frontex has been complicit in maritime ‘pushback’ operations to drive away refugees and migrants (Waters et al., 2021). Data suggests Frontex’s active involvement in one pushback incident, the presence at another and vicinity to four other incidents (Waters et al., 2021). Although Frontex might not have been at the immediate scene of those latter four pushbacks, the incidents are very distinctive and would have been seen either on radar, with visual tools or the naked eye. Because of the impossibility to track most of Frontex’s assets, it is possible that Frontex has been involved in / proximate to even more pushbacks (Waters et al., 2020).

The increased support for Frontex, closing of land routes and situational push factors leaves smugglers with a very lucrative business model, made possible by the EU (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). Europe saw a vast increase in arrivals by boat, especially on Greek shores,

where a vast spike in arrivals was seen since August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015 (UNHCR, 2015b). Despite the European Commission (2020b) stating that “human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found, with particular attention to the most vulnerable”, budget for Frontex is increasing and it is the Union’s own policies putting refugees at risk (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2016).

This is what Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020) refer to as the EU’s autoimmunity. By requiring a visa to enter the European Union, the EU has created a paper border (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). By doing so, the EU effectively made it impossible to migrate legally for a vast part of the world’s population (Houtum, 2010). People wanting to flee from their country, because of the situation, cannot do so simply because they were born there and thus cannot obtain a visa (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). Therefore, because of the visa requirements, the EU’s asylum system can only be entered illegally (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020), creating perfect conditions for smuggling. The anti-smuggling (essentially anti-refugee) policies by the EU have created an impeccable business opportunity for both smugglers and border authorities (such as Frontex), giving rise to a billion-dollar industry (Spijkerboer, 2018; Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). This billion-dollar industry forces people to take great risk for the simple human need of safety, creating a vicious circle in which it keeps on enhancing its own market value.

The European Union has made several bilateral deals with autocratic regimes and private actors, which have no problems violating human rights or not complying with the principle of non-refoulment (Deutsche Welle, 2017; Cetti, 2014). The outsourcing of responsibility to non-EU countries such as Libya, failure to facilitate safe passage, the lowering of standards in the common European Asylum system failed responsibility and a broken Dublin regulation system (more on this in the next chapter) offer reasons for concern (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Although the European Commission has advocated foreign policy and EU aid

changes, these changes seemed to be merely focused on migration control, rather than human rights – a wolf in sheep’s clothing (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

### **Questionable cooperations for the European Union**

Within the current so-called ‘migration crisis’, Turkey plays a key role. The country has become the preferred option for many people, as Libya as a transit country was no longer an option for many (Adams, 2015). Many people were forced to transit through Turkey in order to get to the EU, implying a need for cooperation between the EU and Turkey (European Council, 2016). In April 2011, the first refugees entered Turkey from Syria (Kirişci, 2014). At this time, the relationship between Turkey’s and Syria’s governments was still very positive, and Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, minister of Foreign Affairs, tried convincing Bashar al-Assad (with whom they had developed a very personal relationship) to prevent the use of hard measures against protestors, rather choose to reform (Bakri, 2011). However, the Syrian government refused to listen to Turkey’s pleas (increasing repression and violence against its citizens) the relationship between the countries degraded at a quick pace (Kirişci, 2014). Less than two years later, the Turkish government fully and overtly supported the Syrian opposition, recognising the Syrian National Council as Syrian’s true representative (Üstün & Cebeci, 2012). Davutoğlu openly stated the expectation that the Assad regime would not remain in charge for a long time (NTV, 2012). Because of this expectation, Ankara opened up the borders for (Syrian) refugees, under the mandate of the Turkish framework of ‘temporary protection’ (Kirişci, 2014).

This temporary protection entails that individuals seeking temporary protection in Turkey cannot be punished for entering or staying in Turkey illegally, as long as the Turkish authorities identify them while they enter Turkey, or they voluntarily go to the Turkish authorities (UNHCR Türkiye, n.d.). Within this framework, refugees are given assistance, protection, services, and rights, including healthcare, psychological support, access to labour

markets, and social assistance (UNHCR Türkiye, n.d.). Most importantly, the temporary protection mandate forbids Turkey from sending refugees back, unless they themselves request this (UNHCR Türkiye, n.d.). In 2013, the Turkish government implemented a new asylum law, aimed at creating a new legal system to protect and aid those seeking asylum in Turkey (Kirişci & Salooja, 2014).

As mentioned before, because of the fortification of Europe and the events in Libya, migrants are cornered in Turkey (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). But while neighbouring countries were adopting stricter border policies for refugees, Turkey did the opposite and welcomed them with open arms: until the beginning of 2015, the country even built new camps for refugees, accepting (and later actively cooperating) with international aid actors, such as UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, IOM, WFP, and UNHCR (UNHCR, 2014). In these camps, living conditions were organised and gave refugees free health care, education (for some), protection and legal status (Kirişci & Salooja, 2014). However, these services were only available for Syrians living in the camps, not for those outside of the camps (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). Although helpful, this solidarity has been considered a strategy of Turkish foreign policy, in which Turkey attempted to obtain a favourable reputation among refugees from the Arab world, and in turn a big influence in the region (Kirişci & Salooja, 2014).

Between the start of 2014 and the end of 2015, the amount of registered Syrian migrants went up by almost 450 per cent, or two million (from 559.994 to 2.503.549) (UNHCR, 2022b). The increase in arrivals can be explained by the advance of Islamic State and the rumours that the Al-Assad regime has lost part of its territory (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). By 2014, it was estimated that 65 per cent of migrants in Turkey are living in urban areas, as camps are filling up (Kirişci & Salooja, 2014). This presence of migrants has a social, political, and economic impact on the host countries (Kirişci, 2014).

In June 2015, the status quo changed as Ankara closed two important border crossings: Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salameh, reducing the available legal routes for Syrians (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). On July 20<sup>th</sup>, Islamic State executed a suicide attack on Turkish soil, in the border town of Suruç (Shaheen & Letsch, 2015a). 32 people were killed and more than a hundred injured (Shaheen & Letsch, 2015a). Later that month, a Turkish soldier was killed, triggering Turkey's approval to let the US use a Turkish airbase, after having long refused this (Shaheen & Letsch, 2015b). Moreover, Ankara decided to reinforce her border, building a 150 kilometre wall, with wire fences and ditches to make crossing difficult (The Guardian, 2015). This led to the conviction among many that the borders are likely to be completely closed soon, and therefore the need to travel to Turkey as soon as possible (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015).

Amidst a period of great political instability – the Interior Ministry announcing restrictions to the right to assemble and demonstrate (Benli, 2015), the AKP losing elections and reigniting conflict with the PKK (Traynor, 2015), and Erdoğan announcing snap elections (Al Jazeera, 2015a) – there were rumours that in exchange for using the Turkish airbases, the US agreed to the creation of a 'safe zone' in northern Syria (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). Both the Turkish Foreign Minister and the Foreign Ministry Undersecretary followed up on these speculations by stating that there was agreement with the US on the location of the safe zone, and that the zone would be used to return Syrians after being cleared from ISIS fighters, Kurdish militia and Syrian regime forces (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). Although understandable, this rhetoric showed great similarities with the safe zone created in Srebrenica, as pointed out by Human Rights Watch (Frelick, 2015). The US did not actively contradict the usage of the term 'safe zone' nor approve of it, with a US official stating: "Safe zone or whatever you want to call it, the idea is to get [ISIS] out of this area" (O'Toole, 2015). This shows very little regard to the health of people living in these regions.

Around the same time, the Turkish Minister of Labour stated that Syrians living in Turkey would not obtain legal work permits (Afanasieva, 2015). This forces Syrians to work illegally, and to accept lower wages (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015), leading to abuse and resentment from the local population (Kirişci & Ferris, 2015). In addition, it prevents them from actually making a proper living, being exploited without a chance for a better life.

The decrease in the Turkish willingness to keep receiving migrants and, as a consequence, the closing of the borders and the deterioration of the (political) situation in Turkey, together with the realisation that the conflict would not soon be over, led to an increased motivation among migrants to leave Turkey and try to reach Europe (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015). Because of the closing of legal routes to enter Europe, migrants were left to their own devices: rubber boats and life-jackets, being sold in the coastal towns (Kingsley, 2015). This once again shows the auto-immunity of the European policies (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020).

The Turkish government also takes advantage of the situation. The government turns a blind eye towards the boats leaving Turkish shores, and using this for its own advantage (Kingsley, 2015). Davutoğlu mentioned the need for EU and US support for a no-fly zone above the 'safe zone', and Erdoğan announced the wish for relaxation of visa requirements for Turkish citizens wanting to travel to Europe, all in exchange for cooperation (Traynor, 2015).

In sum, as conflicts escalated and reception in the region became less and less attractive, many people tried to move to Turkey and use its western borders to reach a safe haven: Europe. Europe's fortification strategy closed off routes for legal entry into the European Union, creating a flourishing smuggling industry that Turkey very willingly used for its own good, with all the consequences discussed in the next chapter. This seems to shine some extra light on the question of mental health: not only have many people experienced traumatic events in their home countries, safety is lacking in the countries in the region as well, causing many to have to move again, in an unsafe way. The hope of safety seems to be useless, as

conditions once arrived to EUrope are dire, once again without any sense of safety, as will be shown in the next chapter. Why this affects mental health seems common sense, but will be elaborated upon in chapter 4.

### **Chapter 3: Receptions**

Since the summer of 2015, Europe has seen an increase in the arrival of migrants, with over one million people arriving to the continent over the Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2015c). As outlined in the previous chapter, the European Union has made an effort to try to stop migrants from coming to Europe, despite claiming to uphold values such as ‘human dignity’ and ‘human rights’ (Frontex, n.d.). However, it is well-known that in addition to not being feasible, the measurements taken and cooperation started did not bear their fruits. People often reported feelings of unsafety, incapability, and unworthiness (personal communications, September 2022 to March 2023). It is very understandable that these feelings, if prolonged, affect the mental state of many people. However, people are often forced to live in these conditions, they do not have any saying and are therefore the victim of the policies. They are forced to take blow after blow, both mentally and physically, without a chance of resting or recovering, leading to mental exhaustion. In order to gain better understanding of the conditions and to understand **how** these conditions came to be, this chapter outlines the way the European Union has received those wanting to come, whatever their reason.

#### **Arriving to European shores**

Since May 2015, over a thousand people were estimated to arrive to Greece every day (Human Rights Watch, 2015b). In 2015, fifty per cent of people crossing the sea to Greece were Syrians, twenty per cent Afghans, and seven per cent originated from Iraq (UNHCR, 2015c). Other arriving nationalities include (but are not limited to) Eritrean, Somalian, and Nigerian, mostly arriving to Italy (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015). Although displacement of these populations had started because of different forms of violence in the countries of origin, Europe noticed the biggest increase of migrants in 2015, triggered by decisions of the Turkish government (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015), as mentioned in the previous chapter. Most refugees



arrive to islands close to the Turkish border, such as Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Kos, and Leros (Human Rights Watch, 2015b).

Rather quickly, the situation on the Greek islands started deteriorating: overcrowding of screening centres leads to scarce access to food and healthcare, as well as unsanitary surroundings (Human Rights Watch, 2015b). On Samos, migrants had access to running water for only thirty minutes per day (Human Rights Watch, 2015b). Despite involvement of UNHCR, social workers, doctors, and other volunteers, a continuous presence cannot be realised and the lack of interpreters poses a big hurdle for communication (Human Rights Watch, 2015b). In addition, there was not nearly enough social support available to support those who had just lived through extremely traumatic events, such as torture (Human Rights Watch, 2015b). Moreover, tensions were rising on the islands and problems in the distribution of food were increasing (UNHCR, 2015a).

The timing could not be worse: while the influx of migrants kept increasing, the European Central Bank threatened to withdraw support for the Greek banks, increasing the chances of Greece leaving the Eurozone (Wearden & Rankin, 2015). The economic situation combined with the influx of migrants put a strain on the local communities, as the islands often do not have adequate infrastructure and services to meet the humanitarian needs, increasing the need for an European plan (UNHCR, 2015a).

In June 2015, the European Union agrees to relocate forty thousand migrants from Italy and Greece (Šelo Šabić, 2017). The European Commission proposed a distribution key based on four elements: population size, GDP, number of applications and migrants already in the country, and unemployment rates (Šelo Šabić, 2017). However, leaders supported mostly measures that ensured removal of those not considered to have a need for protection, showing agreement on proposals focussing on decreasing arrivals to the EU and forcing returns, rather than those focussing on a fair sharing of the burden (Human Rights Watch, 2015a). This focus

on the decreasing of arrivals to EUropean shores became evident a few months later, when the ‘statement of cooperation’ between Turkey and the European Union was signed, also known as the EU-Turkey deal (Šelo Šabić, 2017). In addition to failing to support those who need help and protection, the European Union seems to have made a deal to only make matters worse.

### **Turkey’s key role**

As mentioned before, the role of Turkey as a transit country cannot be overstated, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the European Union. In March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal was made: a statement of cooperation between Turkey and the Union, with the goal to ‘break the business model of the smugglers and to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk, the EU and Turkey today decided to end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU’ (European Council, 2016). Important to remember here is the fact that this irregular migration was the very result of the Union’s own policies, so why delegate the burden? In order to stop irregular migration to EUrope, three essential points were agreed upon with Turkey: Turkey committed to preventing people from travelling to the Greek islands from Turkish shores, those who would manage to reach Greece illegally could be returned to Turkey, and for every Syrian that would be returned to Turkey, EUrope would take in one waiting in Turkey (IRC Deutschland, 2022). Moreover, Turkey would receive six billion euros to improve living conditions for migrants, and Turkish nationals would be allowed visa-free travelling to EUrope (IRC Deutschland, 2022). There is no doubt about the message this deal was meant to send: patience is key, and those waiting in Turkey would replace those who reached the Greek shores by rubber boat (IRC Deutschland, 2022).

The deal has been heavily critiqued. Poon (2016) argues that the first flaw is in the fact that the EU considers Turkey to be a “safe third country”, assuming that international protection can be applied for. Moreover, because Turkey is not part of the EU, the EUropean laws do not

apply to the county, making it prone to violations of the non-refoulement principle (Poon, 2016). The third fault can be found in the absence of domestic mechanisms to guarantee protection for those applying for asylum or refuge, as shown by Turkey's bad record (Poon, 2016). This critique has turned out to be valid. Because of the closing of EUrope's borders, 3.6 million refugees remained stuck in Turkey, more than four times the amount that EUrope took in, causing the Turkish authorities to target undocumented migrants in Istanbul (Ingleby, 2019). Reports are stating that migrants without documentation are transferred into camps to be registered and kept in detention, causing random arrests and forced deportations (Ingleby, 2019).

Although the deal managed to reduce the number of people arriving to Greek shores, the consequences have been disastrous (IRC Deutschland, 2022). Only 2.140 people have been returned to Turkey, and less than 33.000 Syrian migrants were able to leave Turkey for EUrope (IRC Deutschland, 2022). To make things worse, by the June 7<sup>th</sup> 2021 Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD), Greece considered Turkey to be a safe third country for people from Afghanistan, Somalia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Syria (UNHCR Greece, 2021). Whereas the EU-Turkey deal was only applicable to the Greek islands, the JMD impacts migrants in the whole of Greece (IRC Deutschland, 2022). This decision ensured that the Greek court no longer had to admit claims for protection, because they consider Turkey responsible for doing so (Panayotatos, 2022), while at the same time condemning Turkey 'a shame for civilisation' after 92 naked men were rescued from the Evros (ECRE, 2022). To make matters even more paradoxical, Turkey stopped accepting returns since two years (IRC Deutschland, 2022). This leaves those whose cases are considered 'inadmissible' in a legal limbo, stuck in Greece (IRC Deutschland, 2022). While all of this was happening, a rapid and fast solution failed to materialise.

### *A deal with a cost*

In addition to the legal critique on and consequences of the EU-Turkey deal, humanitarian misery was even greater. The EU-Turkey deal caused many migrants on the Greek islands to be placed in detention centres, unable to leave the islands (Amnesty International, 2017b). Although the idea of the deal was rapid processing, the reality turned out to be the opposite, forcing migrants to live in overcrowded camps ('hotspots') with dire living conditions: freezing temperatures, little hot water/heating, bad nutrition, lack of access to medical care and education, and fear for one's safety (Amnesty International, 2017a).

The most infamous hotspot was Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos. The camp was built for 3.100 refugees, but housed around 38.000 people at the top of overcrowding (Júnior et al., 2020). In addition to the previously mentioned living conditions, children were left to their own devices, with no safe place to sleep nor access to education (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019b). Within the camp, violence was everywhere: in May 2018, hundreds of Kurdish people felt forced to leave because of a conflict between the Kurdish and the Arabs, showing the continued presence of sectarianism (Nye, 2018).

Moreover, girls and women were living in fear of gender-based violence as no separate areas were provided to them (Human Rights Watch, 2019a). This led to women and girls avoiding using the bathroom or shower after sunset, in fear of sexual violence (Parish, 2017). But this also holds true during daytime: research in a camp showed that 64 per cent of women did not feel safe to use the toilet or shower whenever they wanted, again stating sexual violence as the main fear (Refugee Rights Europe, 2016). In addition, NGOs are reporting children as young as ten attempting to commit suicide (Nye, 2018): An ultimate testimony to the dire living conditions and the effect on mental health, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

Under Greek and international law, it is obligated for authorities to identify vulnerable persons, such as pregnant women, new mother, survivors of (sexual) violence, people with

disabilities, and unaccompanied children under eighteen (Human Rights Watch, 2019a, Human Rights Watch, 2019b). However, because of the EU-Turkey deal and the following policy of containing migrants on the Greek islands, these vulnerable people are often either not recognised, or it is impossible to provide them better living conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2019a, Human Rights Watch, 2019b). This raises the question: how can this have happened? How is it possible that a Union that praises itself on being characterised by ‘human dignity’, being ‘based on the rule of law’, ‘human rights’, and ‘equality’ (European Commission, n.d.-b) would allow this to happen on its territory?

On September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, camp Moria caught fire, destroying the shelter of over thirteen thousand people living there (Smith, 2020). Many migrants were forced to move to the mountains of the island, or live on the streets, all during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Smith, 2020). However, from the ashes of this ‘living hell’ came hope: the Greek government pledged a new policy, in which there would be no room for overcrowded camps such as Moria (Papadimitriou, 2021). In addition to this, European residents showed solidarity, willing to take those previously living in the camps into their communities (Panayotatos, 2021). It would make sense to argue that this would have been the perfect opportunity to turn things around, to learn from the mistakes made and for the European Union to support Greece and share the burden in line with its values.

However, the opposite appeared to be true. Today, many people are still living in camps, often worse than Moria (Oxfam & Greek Council for Refugees, 2020). Rather quickly after the fire, a ‘Moria 2.0’ was created, which once again leaves much to be desired: people are sleeping in thin tents, if they have this luxury (Artsen zonder Grenzen, 2021a). There are hardly any basic services such as toilets or running water (Artsen zonder Grenzen, 2021a), nor medical, psychological or legal support (Oxfam & Greek Council for Refugees, 2020). One might think that there are other possibilities – and there were – until this was closed too. On the island of

Lesbos, the Kara Tepe camp was known to be somewhat of a safe haven for vulnerable people, where they could live in rather good circumstances and a safe environment (Artsen zonder Grenzen, 2021a). However, this camp was closed, highlighting the European (and Greek) policy of hosting people in inhumane conditions (Artsen zonder Grenzen, 2021a).

In the meantime, new camps are (being) built. On Samos, for example, a new camp was opened in September 2021 (Artsen zonder grenzen, 2021b). The promise of better conditions, such as sea containers rather than tents, as well as increased access to healthcare, goes hand in hand with an end to freedom (Artsen zonder Grenzen, 2021b). Barbed wire, a curfew, and an advanced security system make for the camp to be more like a prison than a place to stay (Artsen zonder Grenzen, 2021b). On the camps, there is continued surveillance, but a lack of medical care (Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam, 2022). According to a report by the Greek Council for Refugees and Oxfam (2022), over a hundred people have not been able to leave the premise because of an exit ban. In the past year, two more of these Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCAC) were created, one on Kos and one on Leros, and two more are being built on Lesbos and Chios (Refugees International, 2022a).

These EU-funded camps are the result of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum: “A fresh start on migration, to build confidence through more effective procedures and strike a new balance between collective responsibility and solidarity” (European Commission, 2020a). However, the pact only increased the securitisation of migration, focussing on returns and outsourcing migration to non-European countries (Vallianatou, 2022). These new camps are completely funded by the European Union (Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam, 2022), amounting to a cost of 260 million euros (Refugees International, 2022b). The average distance of fourteen kilometres to the nearest village, without transportation available testifies to a policy of deliberate isolation and human rights violation (Refugees International, 2022b), making it impossible for “Europeans to trust that migration is managed in an effective and

humane way, fully in line with our values and with international laws” (European Commission, 2020a). But, rather than *actually* helping, the new situation only gave birth to more frustration, human rights violations, and disbelief. Thus, it is safe to say that the conditions offer a fertile breeding ground for feelings of not being in control over one’s life, not being able to do anything or feeling capable at all. In addition to this, people living in the camps are forced to live in a constant state of alertness, not being able to recover and leading to an overactive stress-system, one of the main pillars of PTSD (Van Der Kolk, 2015).

### **Criminalisation of refugees**

The de facto detention of migrants and the restriction of their movements is the essence of the junction between immigration and criminalisation (Papageorgopoulos, 2018). As an Afghan man testified in an Oxfam (2022) report: “I just want to go outside. They don’t let me. They are keeping me here as a prisoner. If I had to choose, I would say that I would prefer the previous camp – at least, there, I was free. I was not living in a cage. At least, I had my freedom to go somewhere.” As the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum said: the camps are meant to “discourage them [migrants] from coming in the first place”. Once again this raises the question: how is it possible that a Union that aims at contributing to “solidarity and mutual respect among peoples” (European Union, n.d.) is so utterly selective in this solidarity and respect and even actively trying to prevent others from coming?

And the prison-like camps are not the only thing that is done to keep migrants from coming to EUrope. As it turns out, Greek police and/or Frontex often arrest one or two people from the boats are arriving, identifying them as ‘smugglers’ (Hänsel et al., 2020). This happens often on discriminatory basis, with no information provided to those arrested, which is against several international laws (Hänsel et al., 2020). Moreover, those who are arrested and accused of smuggling, often report severe beatings (Hänsel et al., 2020).

In November 2020, a 25-year-old Afghan man was charged by the Greek authorities for the death of his own son, who drowned when the dinghy sank (BBC News, 2020). In addition to his arrest, a 23-year-old boy was also arrested, because he steered the dinghy at one point (Borderline Europe, 2022). While the boat sent out a call for help, the Greek Coast Guard only helped several hours later, while witnesses testified that a coast guard boat approached the capsized vessel twice, but did not help (Borderline Europe, 2022). The scapegoating of people looking for safety distract from the EU policy and the negligence of the coast guards (Borderline Europe, 2022). The death of the son and the capsizing of the boat can be considered neither a tragedy nor an accident, rather they are the direct result of the European attempts to stop people from entering the fortress by literally any means. As it says on the son's gravestone: "It wasn't the sea, it wasn't the wind, it was the policies and fear." (Borderline Europe, 2022). Migrants are kept in detention, being left with feelings of despair and helplessness as a result of EU policy. In addition, asylum seekers are the subject of victim-blaming and criminalisation.

But not only the migrants are criminalised, the solidarity is too. In the last years, several organisations and individuals have been influenced by restrictions in their work, intimidation, and criminal persecutions (Amnesty International, 2020). In an extensive report, Amnesty International (2020) reveal several cases where human rights defenders and migrants have been criminalised, simply for standing up for themselves or others. Malta, for example, is prosecuting three teenagers on terrorism charges, for standing up against a captain who would return them and others to Libya, awaiting terrible treatment (as sketched in the previous chapter) (Amnesty International, 2020). Sarah Mardini and Séan Binder helped migrants in Greece to get to shores safely, were kept in detention for over a hundred days, facing many different charges, such as "facilitating irregular entry, espionage, money laundering and forgery" (Amnesty International, 2020). Perhaps most famous is the case of



the German captain of Sea Watch 3, Carola Rackete, who was arrested in Italy after docking her boat with forty migrants aboard, after Italy's interior minister closed the Italian waters to all NGO boats carrying rescued migrants (Tondo, 2019). These are just a few examples of the tendency of the Union to punish its own citizens for holding up values such as solidarity and human rights, when the Union fails to do so. How did it come so far?

This criminalisation of migration, is a term used to describe policies treating undocumented migrants as a threat to security of a state and sees irregular migration as a crime (Gionco, 2022). This is intrinsically linked to the term *illegal*, denying the migrants' humanity (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). In addition to calling migrants illegal, it is often suggested that migrants commit more crimes than 'native' people, leading to the conviction that the arrival of migrants would lead to an increased crime rate (Cacho, 2012). This is especially felt by men, who often report being watched extra carefully in a store, such as a supermarket, assuming people will think they will steal something (personal communications, March, 2023). The feeling of being watched, being seen as less than others or unreliable, causes them to not feel at home or at peace, almost serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy (personal communications, March, 2023).

These two types of criminalisation, also known as *crimmigration*, lead to policy changes, such as exclusion and securitisation (Berti, 2020), but also to a negative representation of migrants and NGOs in the media, as research suggest that media representations follow policies and politics (Brouwer et al., 2017). This means that the right-wing politics and their anti-migration attitudes can play a key role in migrants' representation and treatment in Europe (Berti, 2020). According to the United Nations General Assembly (2019), far right groups, or other extremist groups have been engaging in acts with the goal of harming those who help migrants. This is disturbing in itself, but even more when considering that far-right parties are gaining popularity (Wolf, 2022). In addition, research has shown that

centre-right parties (such as the Dutch VVD) have become more and more anti-migrant to gain votes, moving to the far right end of the spectrum in recent years, possibly mainstreaming far right ideology (Downes et al., 2021). This rise in popularity of far-right can be explained by the increasing salience of the topic of migration, following the so-called 'crisis' (Rooduijn, 2020).

### **Crisis discourse**

The current concerns around migration have often been named a 'refugee crisis', i.e. by the European Commission (n.d.-a): "The Commission is developing a common migration and asylum policy to manage the refugee crisis." The notion of 'crisis' is linked to what Dean (2010) defines as the 'fields of visibility of government' – the way the government is able to make hide certain parts or objects, while highlighting others. In addition to these fields of visibility, the crisis narrative is strongly related to the rise of expert rule (Otto, 2011). Therefore, by creating the discourse of crisis, the government combines the fields of visibility with the rise of expert rule, by directing attention to identifying causes and effects of crises and swiftly responding according to the ideas of experts, often top-down, enabling governments to make claims about the truth, *their* truth (Lawrence, 2014). This often results in the disregard of the democracy and inclusion (Lawrence, 2014). This discourse of crisis has become part of the EU governmental policy (Lawrence, 2014), creating a discourse whereby the crisis can only be turned around by means of exceptional measures (Davitti, 2018).

In addition, the narrative of a crisis often comes with a narrative of causes and effects, and by consequence also the solution to the crisis and/or possible interventions (Lawrence, 2014). As noted in a report by Hänsel et al. (2020, p. 40): "The depiction of the long summer of migration of 2015 as a 'refugee crisis', posing a threat to public order and state control, fostered increased securitization and repressive approaches in migration management". Thus, by framing the current situation as a 'refugee crisis', the solution would be extraordinary

measures - such as the camps and outsourcing of border security – to increase securitisation and militarisation (Stepka, 2018). And to think that this is a new phenomenon, is to think wrong.

### **State of exception**

The narrative of crisis as a governmental technique is what Giorgio Agamben (2005) refers to as the *state of exception*: the ability of modern states to, in times of crisis, exclude entire groups of people from the political system. According to Agamben (1998; 2005), it is especially in these times of ‘crisis’ that the modern nation-state takes off its mask of civilised, liberal democracy, and subjects its citizens to unnuanced, totalitarian power, thereby suspending liberties and increasing police and military power. Hence, Agamben (2005) argues that the increased securitisation and increased intelligence after 9/11, as well as the military expansion that followed were to be expected.

Agamben’s reasoning has been widely accepted and used by others, such as a spokesperson for the UK parliament on the ‘war on terror’ and the increased interference of the state in order to stop ISIS, stating that: “[S]ince 9/11, the government has continuously justified many of its counter terrorism measures on the basis that there is a public emergency threatening the life of the nation [...] we are concerned that the government’s approach means, that in effect, there is a permanent state of emergency and that this inevitably has a deleterious effect on the public debate about the justification for counter terrorism” (Alibhai-Brown, 2014). Dutch politician Geert Wilders offers a striking example of this state of exception: in a recent interview, he mentioned that he wanted to start push-backs, before saying that: “To all asylum seekers who are here now, I say: either you go back, or we will detain you. It is detention or deportation” (WNL, 2021). In this interview, as in many of his interviews, he waives the rights of migrants by framing them as an imminent threat to citizens and public order.

In order to create a state of exception, Agamben (1998) has laid the groundwork in his previous book: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, in which he emphasises the ability of modern states to withdraw the rights of certain marginalised elements of society, such as migrants. This notion of one's political life being taken away and made vulnerable to the violence of the sovereign state, is what allows for the creation of 'bare life' and *homo sacer*, allowing for "the routinisation of exceptionalised practices such as detainment without trial, torture, and even execution" (Vaughan-Williams, 2008, p. 333).

For Agamben (1998), the camp is the spatiality where the production of bare life and the accompanying vulnerability to sovereign violence can be observed in the most basic and fundamental ways. It is the exact geography of the camp that allows for the expression of sovereign power and for regulating the population: who is included and who is excluded (Agamben, 1998). Although Agamben first draws his conclusion on concentration camps, he stretches his logic to other types of camps, such as refugee detention/reception centres, since they share similarities, such as being disconnected from the law and lacking judicial supervision (Agamben, 2005). Along these lines of reasoning, it has become accepted to see migrants as the *homo sacer* of present times and that the state of exception allows for the implementation of reception camps, visa requirements, and border security (see e.g. Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Topak, 2014; Salter, 2008). Following this logic, it can be argued that the reception camps such as those on the Greek islands, or in the Dutch Ter Apel are the spatial representation of the state of exception: the *space* of exception.

### **Bio/necropolitics**

The state of exception and creation of the *homo sacer* relate to Mbembe's (2003) notion of *necropolitics*. In his essay on the subject, he states that he "assumes that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (p.1). Necropolitics implies being held in a state of "permanent

injury”, suggesting a type of political violence imposed upon a certain group by means of constraint: the possibilities to take matters into one’s own hands and improve one’s situation is being constricted, not only by means of political action, but also - and possibly even more so - by means of political *inaction* (Davies et al., 2017). Although the idea of necropolitics was not introduced in relation to the camp per se, rather in the context of the colonial past, it does illustrate how race and racial thinking has been “ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice. Especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign people” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 17). A quote from a man from Iraq illustrates the relevance of Mbembe’s necropolitics in the Moria camp: “If I go back to Iraq, I’ll die.”If I stay here I’ll die... Right now, I won’t die. But little by little, I’ll die.” (Reidy, 2019).

The Greek hotspots, or ‘border camps’ (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2017) illustrate this argument. The camps are peripheral sites, in which political violence is carried out by taking away the possibility for one to improve one’s condition of existence (Diken, 2004). Migrants are often subject to *strategic boredom*: boredom imposed by authorities in order to keep the migrants idle and passive, ergo being robbed from a sense of agency (Wagner & Finkielstein, 2021). As is shown in the next chapter, this sense of agency is very important in mental health.

The policy of segregating migrants in a camp, with the goal of spatially and politically side-lining the migrant, imposing uncertain temporalities in everyday life (Davies, 2018), are described by Stel (2021) as strategic institutional ambiguity and politics of exhaustion. Despite the European Union claiming law and order, migrants are often stuck in ‘legal ambiguity’, fuelled by EUropean authorities (Kubal, 2013). For Mbembe (2003), this is the ‘morbid spectacle’ (p. 35) as well as the ‘death in life’ (p. 21): Rather than directly killing individuals, they are passively, yet permanently, wounded as means of controlling them. Keeping groups alive in a ‘state of injury’ (such as mental injury) can be considered a political tactic (Davies et al., 2017). The lack of action and per consequence the creation of these conditions, create not

only a state of exception, but also a state of *acceptance* (Sandset, 2021), permitting the necropolitical conditions to continue to create spaces where people are vulnerable to conditions of ‘slow death’.

But how did this happen? As argued by Bueno Lacy and Houtum (2021), the criminalisation of those who help migrants is the result of the Union’s own policy, starting with the Schengen agreement and the visa requirements (the paper border and following auto-immunity, as mentioned in previous chapters). The sketched image of the preventable (yet foreseeable) deaths created by the Union’s border system, are the very embodiment of Mbembe’s (2003) necropolitics (Bueno Lacy & Houtum, 2021). The outsourcing of responsibilities to regimes such as those in Turkey or Libya allows the Union to turn a blind eye to the consequential inhumane treatments and deaths (Bueno Lacy & Houtum, 2021). Moreover, the camps create a sense of distance, undermining the sense of solidarity for most citizens and creating an ‘other’, with all dehumanising consequences (Bueno Lacy & Houtum, 2021). Ironically, this creation of the ‘other’ also dangers the solidarity within the European Union, as far-right and anti-EU sentiment grows (Bueno Lacy & Houtum, 2021). The European Union keeps contradicting its very own values and policies, enhancing anti-immigrant momentum and discourses, further deteriorating the situation and inflicting (psychological) harm (Bueno Lacy & Houtum, 2021). This once again shows the auto-immunity in Europe.

To conclude: the arrival of migrants since the summer of 2015 has made the European Union show its true colours. Rather than doing everything within its power to help those in need, as a sign of solidarity and the upholding of human rights, it has done quite the opposite. It has been made very clear that the European Union does everything within its power (and in other regimes’ powers) to keep migrants from reaching Europe and to keep citizens from helping them. This is done by the discriminatory visa regulations, cooperation with other regimes, the creation of and detainment in camps, and the criminalisation of migrants and those

showing solidarity. All this is made possible by creating the narrative of a 'crisis', leading to the allowance of exceptional measures and eventually necropolitics as symptoms of the auto-immune disease.

So far it is showing that asylum seekers often experience traumatic events in their home countries, lack safety in countries in the region and are forced to migrate to places such as the EU in a very unsafe way, often creating a traumatic experience. Once arrived, the living conditions are terrible, they have no freedom and are criminalised. The EU is trying to control their every move, leaving them without a sense of agency. It is logical to conclude that this must have an effect on mental health, but what theoretical concepts can be used to explain this? This will be researched in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Migrants' mental health

As one might expect, the situation that was outlined in the previous chapters, does not go without consequences for those living through it. The policies put in place by the European Union do not only result in physical, but also mental problems. These problems persist long after returning to a somewhat safer situation: a broken leg heals within a few weeks, but a mental disorder does not. What are the mechanisms between the increased mental health problems of asylum seekers in the European Union?

When talking about mental health, there is often a stigma surrounding the topic. I found that many men tend to feel ashamed to share their feelings, feeling like they have to carry the weight of the situation on their own (personal communications, September 2022 to March 2023). When speaking to them, they would want to be in a small room, curtains closed, hypervigilant to any people they know passing by. Often, they only seek help when symptoms become so unbearable that they can no longer sleep, leave their beds, or relax (personal communications, September 2022 to March 2023). The fact that these people have to overcome shame to talk to mental health care workers, shows the severity of the situation, the stigma and taboo, only adding to the problems. This told me that there must be very many people that are silently struggling, that the people seeking help are only the tip of the iceberg. The fact that the Dutch COA did not set up any professionals to help with these types of problems, left me stunned and wondering *why?* Why is there no help available when the problem is so obvious? Why is there no help when mental health is such a 'hot topic' in Dutch society? The idea of foul play started simmering inside, but would this actually be the case? This chapter will argue that the politics put in place by the Union do not only cause physical deaths and harm, but are made to implement mental harm, in order to permanently wound those coming to Europe.



When screening for mental health problems, between seventy-three and hundred per cent of refugees in Greece met the standards for an anxiety disorder (Bjertrup et al., 2018), forty per cent reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (International Rescue Committee, 2018). Moreover, research on Syrian refugees in Greece showed forty-four per cent suffered from major depressive disorder (Poole et al., 2018). When comparing this prevalence to both Syrians before war (Kilzieh et al., 2010) and global depression rates (Ferrari et al., 2013), the scope of the problem becomes clear: prevalence of major depressive disorder in the Greek refugee camps is almost ten times as high.

Although one might think this is a problem that has its foundations in the experience of violent conflict and fleeing from home, this line of reasoning seems to paint only part of the picture, as prevalence rates in the Greek camps are one and a half times higher than the prevalence in Jordan refugee camps (Gammouh et al., 2015), highlighting the importance of post-migration social and material conditions and the impact of reception into high-stress settings (Hynie, 2017). Basic needs to decrease mental health problems, such as predictability and security, are nowhere to be found in many reception camps, further deteriorating already bad mental health (Silove et al., 2007). There are plenty of examples to be found to illustrate the lack of security within the camps. One statement from an Afghan woman: "We are always ready to escape, 24 hours a day we have our children ready" (Nye, 2018), showing hypervigilance and no chance to relax. These daily stressors and mental health influence each other in a negative way (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Whilst severe daily stress can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Schick et al., 2018), mental health problems can lead to problems in daily functioning, such as functioning in relation to others and in self-care (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021).

As mentioned before, there have been reports of very young children attempting to commit suicide in refugee camps (Doctors Without Borders, 2018b; Nye, 2018). Doctors

Without Borders (2018b) noticed that almost twenty-five per cent of children (aged six to eighteen) in group counselling hurt themselves, attempted suicide or thought about suicide. In spite of a lack of exact percentages for the general population, a recent meta-analysis showed that an eight per cent prevalence of suicidal ideation, two to three per cent prevalence of suicide planning and less than two per cent of both self-harm and suicide attempts (Geoffroy et al., 2022). Despite these being estimates, it can be concluded that the rates in the camps offer reason for concern.

But not only the rates in the camps are sky-high. A meta-analysis by Henkelmann and colleagues (2020) showed high prevalence of anxiety (between 13 and 42 per cent), depression (40 per cent), and PTSD (between 29 and 37 per cent) for refugees resettling in high-income countries. According to them, one in three refugees suffers from diagnosable depression/PTSD (Henkelmann et al., 2020). These rates are very interesting, as the numbers are higher compared to those reported in war or conflict settings, suggesting an aggravating role for the flight and additional post-migration factors (Henkelmann et al., 2020). During the Zorgcafé at Dokters van de Wereld and at the crisis location in Nijmegen, many people stated being unable to function properly, having severe panic attacks, suffering from traumatic memories or just overall poor mental health (Personal Communications, November 2022 to February 2023). Many people reported missing a feeling of safety, of being able to ‘let go’ of stressors and therefore living in a prolonged state of distress with no close relatives or friends to rely on (Personal Communications, November 2022 to March 2023). This shows a possible important role for these feelings of safety and connection in explaining the mental health effects of the ‘migration crisis’ on those seeking asylum in the European Union.

But not just prevalence offers reasons for concern: Research by the Dutch government shows that in 2019, 38 per cent of Syrians in the Netherlands could be considered ‘psychologically unhealthy’ (SCP, 2020). To compare: in the native Dutch population, around

thirteen per cent of people are suffering from mental health problems (Bloemen, 2020). However, only eight per cent of Syrians are receiving psychological help (SCP, 2020). Of these eight per cent, only two-thirds were receiving professional help (SCP, 2020): a worrying small proportion. It is important to note that these numbers only include those holding a residence permit, not including those without one. Considering the extra challenges that people without a residence permit are facing, it can be assumed that the full numbers of those with help available are even lower. How was this allowed to happen? And what psychological mechanisms explain the mental health issues resulting from the consequences?

### **Predicting factors**

There are four general factors believed to be predicting of the effect of (forced) migration on mental health (Acarturk et al., 2018), namely sociodemographic factors (such as gender, age, and education), (family) mental health prior to migrating, trauma during war and migration and postmigration factors, such as camp life variables (status in new country, social support, acculturation). Acculturative stress following the resettlement process, following the getting used to entirely new settings and lack of familiar support systems, differentiates migrants' mental health from those with other traumatic experiences, such as veterans (Nygaard et al., 2017).

The Adaptation and Development after Persecution and Trauma model (ADAPT) (Silove, 2013) proposes that there are five main psychosocial needs that help maintain mental health after a great conflict. These are safety/security, bonds/networks, justice, roles/identities, and existential meaning. When all these factors are present, a stable society in which civilians are in a 'mental equilibrium' should be present. However, as noted in the ecological model and in the previous chapters, as well as highlighted by the people spoken to, the experience of the average migrant lacks all five, thus the chances of reaching this psychological balance are slim to none. This is a first step in explaining the mental health issues among refugees.

Miller and Rasmussen (2017) emphasise the impact of daily stressors on the mental health of refugees. In their ecological model, they illustrate the point that distress within displaced populations is just as likely to be related to ongoing stressors in social functioning as it is to prior war exposure. Thus: daily stressors at least partly mediate the effect of prior trauma related to conflict in shaping mental health outcomes. According to Miller and Rasmussen (2017), the reason for this is four-fold. A first aspect is what they call temporal proximity. The daily stressors that refugees might experience are direct and ongoing sources of stress, whereas exposure to conflict might be a more distant experience, especially among refugees who have been displaced for longer periods of time.

A second, and very important factor is the fact that daily stressors ‘represent noxious stimuli that are largely beyond people’s control (just as direct war experiences are beyond control)’ (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010, p. 13). Psychological research on both humans and animals has shown that a lack of power over aversive stimuli has been causally linked to a variety of negative psychological effect, especially when exposure to these stimuli is unpredictable or for a longer period of time (e.g. Sapolsky, 2004, more on this later). Moreover, the degree of *perceived* control plays an important role in several aspects of life, such as social participation, satisfaction with life, self-reported health (Infurna et al., 2011) and more adaptive and effective coping skills (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016). Examples of aversive stimuli that refugees might experience with little to no control over are detention (such as in the camps), discrimination and a lack of access to basic needs and resources.

As a third aspect, daily stressors are omnipresent within conflict-affected populations, whereas the extent of direct exposure to violence of this conflict can vary (Macksoud & Aber, 1996). Likewise, the extent of exposure within migrant communities varies. Nevertheless, almost every migrant has to deal with a large variety of displacement-related stressors (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017).

The fourth and final explanatory factor is the diversity of the daily stressors refugees experience (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). According to Miller and Rasmussen (2017), these stressors exist on a spectrum from lower-intensity, chronic stressors (e.g. lack of proper housing, social isolation, no social roles to fulfil) to acute and possible traumatic experiences (e.g. intimate partner violence, abuse - sometimes as a result of past trauma). This shows at least two ways in which stressors can increase the risk for mental disorders (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). The first pathway is through direct exposure to potentially traumatic stressors, where the stressor itself can lead to mental health problems. The second is indirect, through trying to cope with the prolonged, but less intense stressors, where the duration, rather than the intensity of the stressors is indicative of possible problems (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). This second way is parallel to what is known as type-II trauma (Franken et al., 2019). This type-II trauma is characterised by prolonged and repeated traumatic experiences, such as lengthy war stress or the stress of staying in a refugee camp (Franken et al., 2019). This type of traumatic experience often leads to more complex patterns of symptoms and comorbidities than trauma that is characterised by a single, quick, shocking experience (type-I trauma) (Franken et al., 2019). Examples of comorbidities include depression, alcohol or drug abuse, and other anxiety disorders, often described by the migrants spoken to (Franken et al., 2019; Personal Communications, November 2022 to February 2023).

Thus, as mentioned before, the circumstances in the camps (in addition to the traumatic events experienced prior) are one reason of mental health issues among asylum seekers, as these camps lack the pillars needed for a mental equilibrium, and impose many daily stressors on those living there. Many reports have been filed to warn about the conditions in the camps causing many issues, among which mental health issues (see e.g. Doctors Without Borders, 2018a on camp Moria and Dokters van de Wereld, 2022 on the Dutch Ter Apel). However, the conditions in the camps, as well as other means of ‘controlling’ migration, are active policy of

deterrence: a tool to keep people from coming, as officially approved as EU policy in 2018 (Riegert, 2020).

### **Psychological disorders**

As previously mentioned, many migrants suffer from mental health problems and a percentage of them qualify for a psychological diagnosis or multiple comorbid diagnoses. Most common are anxiety disorder (Bjertrup et al., 2018), major depressive disorder (Poole et al., 2018), and post-traumatic stress disorder (International Rescue Committee, 2019). The fact that not everyone who is traumatised develops PTSD, suggests a genetic component (Franken et al., 2019). Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to go into detail about this, there has been some research supporting this suggestion. Gilbertson and colleagues (2002) found that smaller hippocampal volume is a risk factor for developing PTSD. This is relevant because the hippocampus (together with the medial prefrontal cortex) is responsible for bringing back the fear response, something which is lacking in PTSD (Franken et al., 2019). However, the predispositions that a person might possess (for developing PTSD or depression) only show when combined with situational factors, such as little social support (Kilpatrick et al., 2007), something that is omnipresent among migrants. As mentioned before, many people that I spoke to reported feelings of social isolation and a lack of social support (personal communications, March, 2023).

The nature of the situation of people fleeing their country makes it assumable that almost everyone experiences some sort of traumatic event in this flight or the situation that they are trying to escape. The deterrence measures that are outlined in the previous chapters, such as dehumanisation, inhumane treatment, and detention lead to several mental health complaints, such as feeling hopeless, low self-esteem and self-worth, and desperation (Arsenijević et al., 2018). As discussed previously, the role of perceived control is important for mental health. Studies among refugees have shown that a higher sense of control is associated with positive

affect and can serve as a buffer against the negative consequences of stressful live events (Jibeen, 2018). However, refugees are often robbed of this feeling of agency, through means of victimisation, leaving them in a powerless position (Pandir, 2019). This powerless condition is what many people I spoke to, told me. They felt robbed of their agency, like there was nothing they could do. This is worth further analysing in order to better understand the issues these people are dealing with every day.

### **Sense of control and identity**

A poor locus or sense of control has been associated with different negative outcomes. For example, Sundquist et al. (2000) found that lower locus of control was a strong predictor for psychological distress in displaced people. Another study on trauma (torture) survivors, showed that among many feelings (such as anger, sense of injustice, distress, loss of meaning, etc.) only locus of control and fear were predictive of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Başoğlu et al., 2005). Furthermore, a low sense of control over one's life is associated with feelings of hopelessness, directly affecting mental wellbeing and often making it more difficult to interact with others (and thus creating a social network), find meaningful activities, or to hope that a difficult situation might come to an end (which in turn can lead to depressive symptoms and/or suicidal ideation) (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021).

These social connections and meaningful activities are essential for the creation of identity (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Often, a large part of identity is the social roles that one takes on, such as e.g. being a teacher, doctor, or a psychologist (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Recognition, the feeling of being seen and appreciated by others, is also very important (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). This recognition gives a person the confirmation that they are special, an entity, rather than an anonymous sheep in a herd (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021).

However, for migrants (especially those residing in camps such as those in Greece or Ter Apel), living condition may prevent the execution of social roles (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Moreover, because of the dire living conditions, migrants often become the un-known, non-recognised with no social roles to fulfil, causing a feeling of being without identity, of being lost and insecure (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021; personal communications, November, 2022). In the end, feeling like one has no identity can make a person less open to connect, leading to social isolation and increasing depressive symptoms (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). In addition, the losing of social roles may impact the ability to self-actualise (Kira et al., 2017). It has often been reported that people felt lost when they no longer could take on a social role, like they no longer had a reason to keep trying (Personal communications, October, November, December, 2022, January 2023). Thus, a lacking sense of control has far-reaching consequences for mental health. People I spoke to robbed of their control, feeling like the option they have is to go with the flow, not being able to have any ownership over their lives. It seems that this can be a key factor in explaining why the EU policies are so harmful mentally. When a person is repeatedly exposed to stressful situation over which they have no control, this will lead to learned helplessness (APA, n.d.).

### **Learned helplessness**

The concept of learned helplessness was first observed by Overmier and Seligman (1967) when observing dogs' reactions in an experiment where they were given electric shocks. In the first fraction of the research, a portion of the dogs had the possibility to press a panel in order to escape and avoid the shock, whereas another portion of the dogs had no such possibility and thus had to endure the shocks (Overmier & Seligman, 1967). Subsequently, in the second part of the experiment, all dogs were placed in a different device, with different cues to escape the shock (Overmier & Seligman, 1967). What happened was that the dogs that were previously



unable to escape from the shock, had much more problems trying to learn the second task, namely how to escape in a different situation: many of the dogs froze (Overmier & Seligman, 1967).

Seligman (1972) called this phenomenon *learned helplessness*, referring not to the inability to escape the shock in the first part, but the inability to learn how to escape when placed in a new situation. More research on the subject found that the same concept is also true for humans (Hiroto & Seligman, 1975). The concept of learned helplessness evolved into a learned helplessness theory for depression, which hypothesises that people who are exposed to situations over which they exert no control time and time again, will develop an inability to engage in effective and purposeful behaviours and an inability to make decisions (Miller & Seligman, 1975; Maier & Seligman, 1976). Not only has it offered a robust theory on the development on depression, but also on the development of PTSD and anxious behaviour (Hammack et al., 2012).

Considering the previously explained comorbidities of these disorders, and the prevalence among migrants, it can be concluded that in the migrant population, a sense of control is essential for protecting against aversive symptoms. However, as mentioned before, this sense of control is often taken from them (Pandir, 2019). In addition, identity is often changing, because social roles can no longer be carried out, or people might feel like they are anonymous, just part of the masses, without social connections (personal communications, December 12, 2022). Living in dire circumstances in a refugee camp will cause many migrants to experience a perceived loss of control, a feeling that nothing they do matters (personal communications, December 12, 2022). This can be considered worse than fleeing the country, because when fleeing, one is taking control over their situation, hoping for a better future and feeling like they can work for this (personal communications, December 2022). Many I spoke

to revealed to me that they like there is no chance to better their lives, even if they try: like the dogs in Overmier and Seligman's (1967) experiment.

This offers an explanation for the effect of the 'refugee crisis' on the migrants' mental health: Looking back at the previous chapters and the policies of segregating migrants, attempting to side-line them (Davies, 2018), imposing a politics of exhaustion (Stel, 2021), and the creation of legal ambiguity (Kubal, 2013), it can be said that the current policies concerning migration are not only resulting in a lack of sense of control but also in a *taught helplessness* by the EU. The policies, robbing migrants of control, are creating a mental wound by administering metaphorical shock after shock, leading to mental health problems as a result of this learned helplessness. These policies are active decisions made by the EU, as a way to prevent migrants from coming (Riegert, 2020). Therefore, it can be said that the consequences (such as depression, anxiety and even suicide) are also active policy by the European Union, which will do literally *anything* to prevent migrants from coming: the worse the consequences (and thus the level of deterrence), the better. Looking at the people spoken to, and the way they risked their lives, and left everything (and everyone) they knew, risking a very dangerous journey while hoping, praying for a better life, it is safe to say that it is not working. People are coming, not because Europe is good, but because the other options are worse. Desperation is met with deterrence, hostility, and racism. And humanity is nowhere to be found.

## **Chapter 5: Improvements**

In the previous chapters, a worrying reality was laid down. This reality screams for a solution, a way to do better, to deal better. As argued in the previous chapter, migrants are often subject to learned helplessness. Too little attention is being paid to migrants' attributions, there seem to be hardly any studies asking migrants how they feel that their situation could be improved. This is most remarkable since sense of control has been shown to be a protective factor against mental health problems in several contexts (e.g. De Brier et al., 2020; Vukojevic et al., 2016; Keeton et al., 2008) and is an important source when dealing with stressful life events (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). To battle this, it only makes sense to ask migrants what can be done to improve their situation. In this chapter, the question on how to improve the situation will be answered.

### **Learning optimism**

When asking migrants what could be done, initial responses often include material solutions, such as obtaining a permanent permit, improved housing, getting a job, bringing over their families, moving to another location, better healthcare, or financial aid (Personal communications, November and December, 2022, February, March, 2023). It stands out that these solutions are also out of their control, they are often based on luck. Considering mental health issues, migrants often feel like there are no possible solutions, other than going back in time or 'forgetting the memories' (Personal communications, November and December, 2022). Often, migrants explain their issues by noting that they might have been a bad person in previous lives, having to pay the price now and therefore deserving to suffer (Personal communications, November 2022 to February 2023). Many migrants find it very difficult to trust others, both peers and healthcare workers (Personal communications, November and December, 2022), making it difficult to offer help. As a result, coping is often done by means of avoiding: trying to avoid triggering situations, avoiding sleep, and trying to repress

emotions and memories (Personal communications, October, November and December, 2022). Migrants also seem to find comfort in alcohol or drugs (Personal communications, November and December, 2022). Whilst avoidant coping styles are characteristic of mental health issues, such as trauma, suppression works in the opposite direction: the suppressed memory rears its ugly head more often (Franken et al., 2019). This highlights a need for aid and change.

Although the material solutions are very logical and likely to be helpful, these are often out of the migrant's control and unlikely to change anytime soon, increasing the sense of learned helplessness. To improve mental health and individual situations, it is important to increase coping skills, sense of control, and resilience (Franken et al., 2019). This can be done best with resilience training and guidance focusing on attachment and interpersonal relationships (Franken et al., 2019). Treatments such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or Trauma Focussed Therapy (Exposure, EMDR, and Narrative Exposure Therapy) are the preferred option (Franken et al., 2019). However, these treatments are often unavailable due to a lack of resources or high demand (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Moreover, research shows that certain types of treatments (such as Trauma Focussed Therapy) may not be as efficient in migrants as in other populations (Turrini et al., 2019; Cusack et al., 2016).

As mentioned before, Seligman (1972) is one of the founders of the theory of learned helplessness. During his career, he however found that the focus on pathology neglected a large part of the human experience, namely what comprises happiness (Wallis, 2006). Therefore, Seligman chose to focus on the topic of positive psychology during his term (1996-1998) as president of the American Psychological Association (Nash, 2015). In a special issue of the American Psychologist, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued for a less disease focussed look at human existence, and the field of positive psychology was born. Ever

since, Seligman (and others) have focussed on decreasing learned helplessness and increasing learned optimism, because – as it turns out – optimism proved to be a key protecting factor against disorders such as depression and anxiety, as well as suicidality (Rashid & Seligman, 2018). Unfortunately, no one is born an optimist, but the good news it *can* be learned (Rashid & Seligman, 2018).

As mentioned before, comprehensive and personalised therapy options are often unavailable (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Moreover, treating various disorders requires a safe place and a steady base which is often not available to migrants (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). Teaching migrants how to be more optimistic, to focus on their strengths and skills, and increase their resilience is something that can be done using the *Method for the Empowerment of Trauma Survivors Open Groups* (METS OG) (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). The training is an adaptation of the original METS (7 Roses) training, developed by eight European foundations with funding from the European Commission (Equator Foundation Arq Psychotrauma Expert Group et al., 2018). This training consists of five open groups, each having a separate theme that is related to positive psychology and personal recovery (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). The themes of the groups are connectedness, hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021). In these group sessions, migrants are taught how to reinforce their feelings of agency and control, by focusing on their potential, available social resources, and personal and situational factors that are within their control, aiming to offer some future perspective and grip (Laguna Collective & Cyprus Refugee Council, 2021).

These METS-OG groups are given in refugee camps in Lesbos by the Boat Refugee Foundation (Boat Refugee Foundation, 2022), in Athens and Samos by Médecins sans Frontiers (Laguna Collective, 2022), and in The Netherlands by Doctors of the World

(Doctors of the World, 2021). However, this training is only a relief, a way to bridge the long waiting times that people often face (if they are ever able to get professional help) (Doctors of the World, 2022). As mentioned before, the conditions that people on the move are often facing, offer plenty of reason for concern. In addition, they often do not have access to (mental) health care (Doctors of the World, 2022). As discussed in the previous chapter, these are symptoms of the illness of the European border policy. Although the importance of the work of NGOs cannot be overstated, it feels like putting a band-aid over a bullet wound, created by a gun that keeps firing. This illustrates the need for a more humane border policy.

### **Policy changes**

As mentioned in previous chapters, the framing of migration as a crisis enabled governments to employ extraordinary measures (Hänsel et al., 2020; Stepka, 2018; Lawrence, 2014). The creation of the state of exception (Agamben, 2005) allowed for policymakers to detain migrants in camps fostering fear, segregation, and xenophobia. This sovereign violence that both states and the EU as a collective are exercising results in several (mental) health and societal gaping wounds.

In order to stop these wounds from bleeding, the narrative should first change. Rather than creating a crisis narrative, the focus should be on the reality, the facts. These facts show that migration has been present for a long time: it has been estimated that somewhere around 125.000 years ago the first people started migrating (Bae, Douka & Petraglia, 2017). Since the International Organization for Migration first started collecting data on migration in the 1990s, migration percentages have barely changed: it remains at around three to three and a half per cent of the global population (International Organization for Migration, 2021). Of the current 3.6 per cent of the world's population, most (around 62 per cent) are migrant workers (International Labour Organization, 2021). On top of this, many migrants fleeing conflict or migrating for political reasons are hosted in countries in the region, such as Lebanon, Jordan,

and Turkey, whilst the population in Europe consist of only 0.6 per cent of refugees (UNHCR, 2022a). The fear some people have that Europe would become Muslim is also untrue: for example if every Syrian refugee would start living in Europe, the Muslim population would only increase from four to five per cent (Zunes, 2017).

Thus, the dominant narrative that Europe is ‘flooded’ by (Muslim) migrants – created by political narratives, media, and education, but also by maps (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2019; Esses et al., 2013) is simply not true. Rather, it fosters xenophobia, Islamophobia, hatred, dehumanisation, and racism (see e.g. De Genova, 2017; Esses et al., 2013). In order to change this narrative, the focus should be on the benefits of immigration rather than the downsides, and an active effort should be made to create positive relations between host societies and migrants (more on this later) (Esses et al., 2013). Moreover, the government should play a key role in providing accurate information to both citizens and the media, in order to reduce uncertainty and as a consequence, reduce fear, racism, Islamophobia and dehumanisation (Esses et al., 2013).

Part of changing the narrative is giving the right example: treating migrants with respect and dignity. For this to happen, it is a basic necessity to stop the deaths that are so frequently occurring as a result of unsafe travel. Therefore, the European Union needs to stop facilitating smugglers’ business models and offer safe ways to travel to Europe. As mentioned in chapter two, one needs to obtain a visa prior to entering Europe. However, for a large majority of the world, it is almost impossible to get this visa (Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020), leaving illegal entry with the help of smugglers as the only option (Yıldız, 2020). Despite article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights stating very clearly that: “Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited” (European

Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022), this is exactly what is happening. Access to a visa is being denied or made difficult, based on place of birth. The killer combination of being forced to rely upon up smugglers and the EU's cooperation with third countries such as Libya and Turkey makes for many deaths (Missing Migrants Project, 2021) as well as high costs (Frontex, 2022).

In order to stop this, the focus should be on providing clarity and a fair process. In order to achieve this, it is essential to stop the dangerous route of illegal entry to the EU. Therefore, physical borders (such as walls) should be removed and visas should become more widely available to ensure safe travelling. For those travelling without papers, another safe route should be established so they can reach safety without risking their lives. Human rights (and therefore migrant rights) should be at the core of the European asylum policy. While waiting for asylum, people should be treated with dignity. This means not hosting them in overcrowded camps, but offering safer places to live. People regularly reported not feeling safe in the place they were hosted, for example, because they were forced to live between addicts while they have small children (personal communications, November 2022). Moreover, medical, psychological and legal assistance should be better facilitated. Often, people reported being appointed a lawyer on the opposite side of the country or being appointed a lawyer that barely communicated, leaving them without insight into their legal procedure (personal communications, 2022). As mentioned in the previous chapter, medical and psychological help is often unavailable. In addition to these basic services, people should be able to use their strengths while waiting for a visa. This includes participating in society.

“I feel useless”, “I feel like I am on the outside of society”, “I want to work as a nurse but am not allowed”, “I feel scared”, and “I feel unseen”(personal communications, October, November, December, 2022, January, February, March, 2023). These are just a few statements made by migrants. Many people want to work, participate, and integrate into



society, but are not allowed to. In addition, people often do not feel seen: one man from Syria, around my age, grasps my hand and almost start to cry everytime I pay a little attention to him. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this results in learned helplessness, with many consequences. At the same time, European staff shortages are rising, especially in health care (Rys, 2022), transport (Velthoven, 2022), and hospitality (NOS, 2022). At the same time, many people with these qualities are robbed of the opportunity to do their work. A woman from Syria who used to work as a nurse, even during wartime and bombings, wants to work here. But the hospital did not recognise her training, not even for the low-skilled work: simply washing and bathing the patients (personal communications, November, 2022). A man from Nigeria learned how to be a chef, and loved the job. It gave him a sense of meaning, a social circle, an opportunity to rent a home and start a new life. In addition, it distracted him from the traumatic intrusions. However, when his humanitarian visa expired, he lost it all, no matter how hard his boss tried to keep him in the company (personal communications, October, 2022).

Allowing migrants to work and use their qualities while waiting for asylum is killing two (if not more) birds with one stone. It helps against staff shortages and works against learned helplessness. It can give a sense of meaning, as well as independence from social security, therefore reducing the costs for the state. It has been proven that those who are allowed to integrate, often become productive citizens, with their own businesses and are able to give more money to the system than they take (Zunes, 2017). In addition, fostering (economic) integration is likely to reduce negative attitudes towards migrants (Edo & Giesing, 2020).

### *Double standards*

It has been proven that it is possible. With the current war in Ukraine, Europe has made a U-turn when it comes to its immigration policies: All people fleeing from Ukraine can stay in any country for at least one year, with the right to “a residence permit, access to labour market and housing, medical assistance, and access to education, means of subsistence” (EU solidarity with Ukraine, 2022). This is incredibly important, but it also exposes the double standard: while welcoming Ukrainians with open arms, the same countries are still closing their border to migrants freezing outside of the European borders (Harley, 2022). This double, racist standard becomes painfully clear with the growing number of reports of people being discriminated against at the border, because they are not white (White, 2022). The prime minister of Bulgaria recently explained that “These are not the refugees we are used to; these people are Europeans” and “These people are intelligent. They are educated people.... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists.” (CBC, 2022). An anonymous European official told The Washington Post: “Honestly, the sentiment is different since they are White and Christian” (Faiola et al., 2022). These statements reveal the racism and Islamophobia that is present in the European government.

However, rather than simply disapproving of the double standard, Europe should be praised for helping Ukrainians with all means necessary. At the same time though, the reception of Ukrainians should be used as an example for all migrants. The atrocities that Ukrainians are facing are not unique, these conditions are present all around the world and a harsh reality for many people. The Union should take this opportunity to learn, to become aware of its racial bias, and to fix it in line with its own ideal and human rights.

### Final notes

In this thesis, I wanted to answer the question: ‘How has the ‘refugee crisis’ since 2015 affected the mental health for refugees in Europe, especially in The Netherlands?’ This thesis started with several themes, from many different conversations with different people from very different backgrounds. Despite these differences, they somehow ended up in the same place, with the same experiences and the same problems. Themes that were a part of all of their lives included the feeling of having no control over one’s life, not being able or allowed to do anything, the way people felt mistreated by the authorities and the situation in the camps. While writing, following their storyline, I tried conceptualising these experiences and themes. Starting with exploring the political background of conflict in their home countries, I gained a deeper understanding of the political situation. Hearing their stories about home gave me a feeling of what life was like before this situation changed, and reading the literature made me understand why they left.

The political background in countries of origin, offered some explanation, but not enough. The journey many took, despite the European Union doing everything to prevent them from doing this, showed the auto-immune disorder of the EU: by framing the situation as a ‘crisis’, trying to prevent people from coming, they expand their control and by doing so, they actually *lose* control and increase smuggling. In addition to thus achieving the opposite of the desired effect, the EU also collaborates with questionable regimes and countries, abandoning her core values and degrading to a policy of deterrence.

This leads to many dangerous situations, the criminalisation of refugees (and those helping them), as well as overcrowded camps, or the space of exception, in which the Union’s necropolitics are at a high. In addition, it gives rise to far-left parties, decreasing solidarity within Europe and increasing anti-EU sentiment. The necropolitics of slowly, yet permanently wounding individuals as a way of controlling them, is what leaves many people I spoke to

traumatised, depressed, and/or anxious. Not only are living conditions very poor, people are being robbed of their sense of control, leading to learned helplessness in which migrants are allowed nor capable of making a positive change in their lives. Every aspect needed for good mental health is taken away. This creates an interesting paradox in which the EU wants to increase control, over smuggling and asylum seekers, to keep them controllable. However, by doing this, the European Union teaches them a learned helplessness, in which they are passive, feel like there is nothing they can do other than rely on the government and hope for the best. In this thesis, I theorised that this learned helplessness (as taught by the European Union) is the explaining factor in understanding effect of the so-called refugee crisis on mental health of asylum seekers. The 'refugee crisis' (which is simply a narrative) since 2015 has catalysed the securitisation, reception in camps, uncertainty, and loss of agency. Not only does this lead to mental health problems, it also leads to high healthcare and societal costs and sometimes inappropriate behaviour due to these mental health issues. In addition, the asylum seekers are victim-blamed, their behaviour or lack of initiative used as an 'I told you so' by far-right politicians, even though it is their very own policies that created this situation. This vicious cycle needs to be broken.

Despite there being options based on positive psychology to regain a sense of agency, there is a need for a bigger understanding between the policy of controlling and the actual loss of control. Moreover, the policies need to be changed. The Union has proven with Ukrainian refugees that she can do better. On the one hand, this can be seen as evidence of the racism present in the policies. However, it also offers hope and a good example of how it can be done. It offers a way out of the auto-immunity and out of the paradox of control.

## Personal reflections

When I first started this master's degree, I felt very incapable. I was with many people who, in my eyes, were much more clever, had a better overview and, most importantly, a better academic background. I felt like the odd one out with no background in anthropology, international relations, or political science. Feeling like I was about to give up I decided to - rather than fighting my different background – use it as an asset. I decided to study hard, but also utilise my knowledge to maybe shine a new light on certain topics often overshadowed (such as mental health).

Writing this thesis taught me many things. As mentioned before I am a psychologist, and therefore used to writing scientific articles, but all in quantitative research with a niche topic. The first challenge was in the broadness of the topic: so many interesting events, policies, stories. Next to finding it interesting, it also angered me. The more people I spoke to, the more I read and the more I thought, the more I could feel my disbelief and anger starting to rise: why are not many more people speaking about this? Why is this not all over the news? How is it possible that the far-right parties are only gaining momentum? I felt bitter, but also powerless. The vastness of the problems frightened me and made it hard to think about anything else. It still has a grip on me and I think it always will.

Moreover, the stories moved me. Of course, I knew some things about the atrocities that were happening in other countries. I travel a lot and think of myself as not unworldly. However, no journey could have prepared me for the pain I saw, felt and heard. Many people I spoke to for many weeks, listening to their stories and giving advice. This often created a personal bond, often more personal than in my regular practice, where a professional distance is needed. Due to cultural differences, people sometimes invited me to have dinner with them or to meet their friends. This was heart-warming, but heart-breaking at the same time. I often wished I could do more. I deeply felt the unfairness of the lottery of life, a painful realisation

of privilege and incredible luck. Combined with the notion of being allowed to give *actual* treatment and sometimes difficult cooperation with doctors at the crisis location (an issue mostly concerning insurance policies), left me again feeling powerless and angry.

This thesis process made me not only theoretically aware of the situation, it made me *feel* it. I am deeply moved, stripped of any naivety. However, it also showed me something that I am very passionate about, the intersection between conflict and psychology. Knowing that these two can be combined leaves me hoping for a future where refugees' mental health is no longer a collateral topic, but one of main interests.

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