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# Temporal Intersections of Mobility and Informality: Simsars as (Im)moral Agents in the Trajectories of Syrian Refugees in Turkey and Germany

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**Abstract**

*During the Syrian conflict that sparked after the insurgency in 2011, 5,6 million Syrians sought refuge in other countries. This article looks into the informal practices that have significance in the trajectories of refuges who fled first to Turkey and then to Germany. These informal practices are directed at the facilitation of spatial and social mobilities between and within these two countries: a) cross-border migrant smuggling and, b) employment and real estate brokerage. The accounts of the research participants point to a differential moral worth attached to these two modalities of informal facilitation: they value the work of smuggling and detest the idea of other types of brokerage. These views are in direct contrast to the views by the respective states, and the article discusses the reasons behind the asymmetry of moral assessments between the refugees' accounts and the perspective of the two states. It is argued that refugees' differential assessment is related to how their experiences of time changed between their flight and settlement in their new homes, as well as their perception of borders.*

**Keywords:** *Syrian migration; human smuggling; brokerage; temporality*

## Introduction

This article uses ethnographic material to discuss how refugees assign differential worth to informal practices in the course of two different modalities of mobility—spatial and social—within the context of post-revolution Syrian migration to Germany. Here mobility is not taken as an exceptional human condition. Instead, it is approached as an integral part of social life (Kalir et al., 2012; Urry, 2007) that contains equally important spatial and social dimensions. Hence, the mobilities this article sheds light on involve moving between both places and social statuses. They involve transgressing borders between states, within cities, and between social groups, while the refugees, who aspire to better their lives, face internal and external border regimes (Hamann and El-Kayed, 2018). Informal practices are an important part of this endeavor so long as the migrants come in contact with an abundance (or absence) of state imposed regulations that aim to control, manage, enhance, or to diminish their mobility, and with the social barriers that similarly constrain them.

My interlocutors in this research have settled and lived in Turkey before they decided to move to Germany. Their migration stories reveal that many sorts of informal practices not only marked their lives in Turkey and their flight journeys, but also (contrary to their own expectations and popular beliefs) their struggle to establish new lives in Germany. Besides benefiting from family and community networks, these practices involved paying for illegal

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services to achieve licit ends such as fleeing violence, finding employment, opening a bank account, or renting a flat. My research participants considered them steps to improving their life conditions to a decent human level, which involved living in safety and with dignity. However, this also put them in ambiguous positions against state regulations, rules, laws, and institutions. The ways they assign moral value to different informal practices is rather distinct from those employed by state agencies, transnational migration management organizations, and mainstream media. Their stories rate the human smugglers who facilitated their undocumented border crossings highly. However, the brokers who charged them for facilitating their social mobility by finding flats or employment are instead, despised. They are both, notwithstanding, addressed by the same name: *Simsar.*

*Simsar* is the Arabic word for middleperson or broker (Camerani, 2019). It is used in all sorts of contexts that would require intermediaries. *Simsars* get commissions for the transactions and deals they broker between those who do not know or trust each other (Marsden, 1982). My Syrian interlocutors use the word for real estate agents, employment brokers, forged, fake, or real document providers, those who make international money transfers in their name and, also, for the human smugglers who facilitated their undocumented border crossings. However, this last usage is not the norm. A more conventional word would be *muhareb,* the literal equivalent of smuggler. Still, there are those who use *simsar*, thus suggesting, as explained by a Syrian lawyer to me, that there is nothing essentially wrong with the activities of a smuggler—just like other *simsars*, they facilitate mobility by selling connections. My focus in this article will be on two kinds of *simsars*: the smugglers, who facilitate refugees' spatial mobility, and the real estate and employment brokers, who facilitate social mobility.

## Methodology

Between April 2017 and May 2019, I conducted 21 in-depth life story interviews with Syrian migrants in Berlin and Leipzig. These migrants share a particular migration trajectory. They had all lived in Turkey for at least six months (but often longer) before fleeing to Germany and applying for asylum in the period of 2015-2016. Reflecting the demographic distribution of Syrian refugees in Germany, 18 of my interlocutors was below the age 30 at the time and 17 were men while only 4 were women. I contacted them via acquaintances, language courses, and reception centres. They were chosen due to their privileged position of being able to compare their settlement experiences in Turkey and Germany. The interviews were designed to complement my research project on informal initiatives supporting Syrian migrants in their settlement in both countries. The participants were asked to tell the story of their migration in any way they wanted to relate it, as with the biographical interview method. There was no pre-determined set of questions; I intervened only when asking for clarifications and when they expressed their need for guidance. Each interview took two to four hours and often required a second meeting for its completion. Interview locations varied, depending on the wishes of the participant. I visited some in their homes or in their rooms in mass accommodation facilities. Others I met in cafes or at language courses. Interview languages were English, German, Turkish, and Arabic—sometimes it was a mix of two or three. Even when my interlocutors felt comfortable with English or Turkish, an interpreter from Arabic to English was always present in case they felt more at ease in their mother tongue. However, due to a lack of resources, I could not offer this to my three Kurdish interlocutors. Their interviews took place in Turkish and Arabic. Except for two, all interviews are recorded and

transcribed. I took detailed notes in the two interviews during which the participants did not consent to voice recording.

## Theoretical Framework

The idea of 'informality', in this article, is understood as anything that goes 'behind and beyond' (Polese et al., 2019: 5) state regulations and written rules. It is seen not only in conflict with the realm of the former but also complimentary to it at times, and always in dialectical conversation with it (Scott, 1998). In order to understand the complexity of this large field, Polese et al. (2017) propose a differentiation between two types of informality: one is 'beyond the state', which refers to practices and actions that fall outside of state regulation, and the other exists 'in spite of the state', i.e., those which are in direct opposition to, or that neglect, official regulations. Both of the services provided by *simsars* that are subject to investigation in this article fall into the 'in spite of the state' category. Migrants engage in these transactions by going against state rules and regulations in order to overcome the obstacles between them and their perfectly licit (but in some cases illegal) aims. Unlike 'beyond the state' informalities, they act within and against a strictly regulated and legislated realm. However, despite the illegality within which they function, both in Germany and Turkey, *simsars* (and their clients) navigate through the relative permissiveness of respective states (Kalir et al., 2012), which selectively sanction acts that fall out of the legal sphere—prohibiting them at the level of law and giving state officials discretionary power to ignore them at the level of practice. Within this ambiguous realm of 'sanctioning states' (Gandhi, 2017), refugees refer to their own multilayered moralities, which do not correspond to the states' view of informality/illegality, but do not escape from this view either.

By examining the rift existing between stately and social understandings of informality, Itty Abraham and Martin van Schendel (2005) propose a differentiation between legality and licitness. According to their framework, legality is defined by the state. Licitness, on the other hand, is determined by society. Hence, they suggest an alternative to the state centric framework of il/legality by making room for social contestations, tangential engagements, and the negotiation of state imposed categories. At the same time, this view allows the analysis of the processes of the creation of licitness through conflict and negotiation within a given society. In Rebecca Galemba's (2012a, 2012b) insightful research with Guatemalan-Mexican border dwellers, we see the differentiations made between the unregulated trade of essential items and the smuggling of arms and drugs, although they are both considered as contraband by each state. Janet Roitman's (2006) work on cross border trade and banditry in the Chad Basin, and Hatice Pınar Şenoğuz's (2018) conceptualization of petty-smugglers on the pre-war Syrian-Turkish border as border laborers are also built on this paradigm of licitness, and illustrate the intricate social processes that are involved in the construction of these particular meanings. These works exemplify how social agents involved in illegal work create licitness when they tap into kinship networks and social solidarity schemes, all the while sharing stately aspirations for politico-economic governance. They may be part of larger 'shadow networks' (Nordstrom, 2000) but this does not mean that they are positioned in complete opposition, or provide an alternative, to dominant, state propagated norms and ideals (Campbell and Heyman, 2007).

Roitman (2006), who places particular emphasis on the notion of discord, argues that the licitness of illegal actions do not necessarily stem from a given and shared (alternative) moral

framework. Instead, even though they do not resort to prescribed differentiations between right and wrong, those who take part in these networks in the Chad Basin engage in a practice of ethics, which Roitman (2006), following Foucault (1976), understands as a practice of self-reflection and questioning. In that sense, the meanings surrounding these illegal practices are significantly dynamic. My interlocutors who are involved neither in smuggling nor in brokering but speak as customers, are less enthusiastic about finding an ethical reasoning behind their own role in these practices. While shared networks, backgrounds and beliefs impact their views of *simsars*, they feel freer to resort to moral assessments, especially when it comes to attributing worth to the *simsars* themselves. Yet, these assessments go equally 'slantwise' (Campbell and Heyman, 2007) towards the state-centric axis of legality-illegality. Syrian refugees converse with official legislature, globalized secular notions of human rights, and culturally ascribed understandings of dignity and a worthwhile life, while they try to come up with definitions of entitlements, rights, and obligations anew at every stage of their flight and settlement. Their moral compass and ethical decisions are informed by their perceptions of borders and boundaries, and by their experience of time while overcoming these boundaries.

Temporalities have been receiving growing interest in the literature on migration throughout the last few decades, despite the fact that governing agencies often approach migration only as a phenomenon of spatial mobility. Duration, frequency, rhythm, speed and tempo are all elements of migration and mobilities, either as characteristics, determinants and/or outcomes (for a review of literature, see Griffiths et al., 2013). The importance of all these time-related issues notwithstanding, temporality in this article is used only in a very specific and limited sense: to refer to *the experience* of time by migrants and refugees. This experience involves the changing flows, textures, and densities of time as remembered and related by refugees at particular moments in their trajectories. The analysis builds upon the works of Catherine Brun (2015, 2016) and Ghassan Hage (2005, 2009), who identified temporality as a key aspect of migration and of flight experiences. Brun (2015), in her ethnographic research with internally displaced persons in Georgia, introduces the perspective of time to her examination of protracted displacement. She argues that displaced people's orientation to the future and the quality of their waiting changes during the prolonged duration of displacement. They dwell in time differently, as their hopes shrink and expand, and as their futures become more or less attainable. Coming from a different geographical focus and perspective, Hage (2005: 470) emphasizes the importance of how time is experienced by people who decide to migrate. He develops the concept of 'existential mobility' to denote a universally shared but culturally shaped human sense of life being mobile and with a direction. When the present does not seem to be leading towards the anticipated and hoped-for future—when life feels stuck—a sense of existential immobility starts to prevail and pushes people to look for ways to make the wheel turn again, often by becoming spatially mobile. However, the sense of stuck-ness does not only predate and condition the migration of individuals, but it may also follow it as a consequence of the conditions of their forced migration or protracted displacement (Griffiths 2014; Ramsay 2017a, 2017b).

Temporality as such is key to understanding the assessment of the work done by *simsars* at different moments in the trajectories of migration undertaken by Syrian refugees. While the smugglers who make border crossings possible provide refugees with a sense of existential mobility—an experience of time that is fluid and flowing towards a future—the employment and housing brokers remind them that they are stuck in the conditions their new countries

offer. These conditions are shaped by xenophobia, racism, and an economic structure that does not promise a future to the most precarious segments of society, of which refugees are a part. In the following two sections, I illustrate these points with excerpts from my interlocutors' accounts. I start with analyzing the role smugglers play in the precarious lives of refugees and the moral worth refugees assign to them. I look into the informal paid services refugees require in order to achieve social mobility. By the end of this section, the contrast between the refugees' assessments of the providers of these different services—smuggling and brokering—become clear. Finally, in the concluding section, I look at the interplay of the experience of time with the social and economic structures in Turkey and Germany and how they affect the moral worth of *simsars* in the eyes of the migrants.

## *Simsars* of spatial mobility

Abdullah once lived in eastern Syria, in the village of Sur. He studied in Deir ez-Zor and was repeatedly displaced when the city and his village changed hands between rebel and regime forces. Finally, the village fell to the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) and Abdullah began undergoing episodes of intimidation. He was arrested six times within a year, and each time he feared that this would be the end for him. In August 2015, he finally left Sur and went to the nearby town of Mayadin, with the aim of fleeing to Turkey. But the borders within the country made it impossible for him to move further.

In order to pass through the various territories controlled by a handful of opposing forces, Abdullah needed assistance. For this purpose, while in Mayadin, he contacted a *simsar* operating in Raqqa. He went to IS controlled Raqqa by his own means, and paid the *simsar* USD 500 to take him to the Turkish border. Although the nearest border gate was less than 100 kilometres away in the north, it was impossible to reach, let alone to cross. So they traveled westwards towards Idlib. The smuggler's intimate knowledge of the area helped them navigate the conflict zone. This first *simsar* handed Abdullah over to another one in a conflict zone near Idlib. The second *simsar* took him to the border town of Kesab.

Once he reached Kesab, things were not straightforward for Abdullah either. He could not legally enter Turkey without a passport. In order to cross the border secretly on foot he had to find a smuggler again. He paid USD 100 for each of his first two attempts, which ended with them being fired on by Turkish soldiers. In his third attempt, he contacted a smuggler who had a good reputation, and paid him $500. Apparently, this smuggler bribed the soldiers, so that they were able to walk past them as if they were 'going on a picnic', in Abdullah's own words. Once on the safe side of the border, he paid a different smuggler to take him to the nearby city of Antakya for another $20.

Once these ordeals were over, Abdullah reached Istanbul, but there he was met with unbearable work and accommodation conditions. After many months of suffering and saving money, he left again, and paid smugglers to cross the Aegean and the Balkan route on his way to Norway. His money and his luck sufficed only to bring him to Berlin, where we met.

The 'restrictive' economies and migration regimes of Western Europe and its associates, like Turkey or Serbia, make undocumented migrants increasingly dependent on smuggling networks to cross borders (Ahmad, 2016). Certainly, human smuggling has almost always accompanied the creation of borders, since it is a part of a larger border economy that does not only regulate the flow of goods but also of people (Parizot, 2008). However, while state

borders are further enforced through new surveillance technologies, wires, military equipment, and walls (Anderson 2014), the dependence on human smuggling has become the norm for those who are unable to obtain or procure the documents needed for travel. Abdullah's journey is marked with such inabilities and dependencies due both to his personal circumstances (e.g. lack of a passport) and the political shifts over which he has no control. So, even travelling within his country of birth requires facilitation, let alone the crossing of international borders.

In my interlocutors' accounts, the facilitators of these journeys are either mentioned very casually (as if they were selling ordinary bus tickets), or appreciatively. They are not pictured as the evil and greedy criminals depicted by the media, and propagated by states (see for example: Alderman, 2016; İçduygu, 2004; Stamouli, 2016). For my interlocutors, smugglers are the people who fulfill an important function at an extraordinary and critical junction of their lives.

In the last two decades, a scholarship on smuggling that 'challenges the dominant characterization of smuggling as violent and predatory' has flourished (Sanchez, 2017: 12). These studies document the day-to-day functioning of smuggling networks (Achilli, 2015, 2018), their organizational structures (Zhang, 2007), the interplay of gender and care on the clandestine migration routes (Vogt, 2016), and how clients perceive smuggling (Achilli, 2018). In this vein, Bilger et al. (2006) urge approaching the issue of human smuggling as a structurally distinct one from human trafficking and from the illicit trade of goods. In their view, the smuggling of migrants can be seen as a 'transnational service industry' where the most important capital is one's reputation and network. However, recent evidence from the human smuggling networks that operate between Lebanon and Syria suggest that at least some of them are offshoots of pre-existing organizations specialized in contraband trafficking (Lagarde and Doraï, 2017), so 'transnational service industry' is too much of an euphemism.

Luigi Achilli's (2015, 2018) writings on Syrian refugees and their smugglers in the sea border between Turkey and Greece follow Bilger et al.'s differentiation between trafficking and smuggling, but with a significant difference. Achilli argues that human smuggling is never only a business. Smuggling networks are deeply embedded within kinship and community networks, and highly dependent on personal relations. In his research participants' stories, 'human smuggling was perceived as part of a system of protection within the context of asymmetric distributions of power where people in certain countries have overarching incentives to move but few legal avenues to do so' (Achilli, 2018: 83). Such a perception brings migrants and smugglers together as allies in an attempt to overcome the hindrances that arise from injustice and inequality.

In a report prepared for the International Organization of Migration, Ayselin Yıldız (2017) documents a similar attitude among Syrian refugees in Turkey. For them, too, there is nothing essentially and principally wrong with human smuggling; however there were certainly good and bad smugglers. What makes a bad smuggler is straightforward: he does not keep to his promises, and does not prioritize the refugees' well-being. The good smuggler on the other hand is defined by the character of the work he does (those who save people from misery by helping them to move forward) and by his own accomplishments in undertaking this task (delivering promises, caring for refugees, being respectful to them, etc.).

My research participants did not only come across good smugglers. Some of their dealers proved utterly incapable, as in the case of Abdullah's first two attempts to cross the Syrian-Turkish border. Another was left on a very desolate part of a Greek island and had to walk for half a day to find human settlement. While they disparage these *simsars*, they still talk favorably about the enterprise. In any case, it is important to emphasize here that my interlocutors arrived in Germany without experiencing the loss of a loved one or major harm to themselves as the result of a *simsar*'s misconduct. My participants' appreciation and indifference to the enterprise of migrant smuggling does not invalidate the bleak assessment of those who went through such structurally imposed but personally felt tragedies. But it still tells us about the moral worth my interlocutors ascribe to the work done by *simsars* under 'ordinary' circumstances, which is uniformly very positive. Coming back to the discrepancies between the notions of illegal and illicit, there is consensus among my interlocutors that facilitation of irregular border crossings is a perfectly licit enterprise, that is created by the bordering practices of the states themselves.

## *Simsars* of social mobility

Another one of my interlocutors, Ismael, crossed the Syrian border by paying a Syrian *simsar* who then passed him on to a Kurdish *simsar* from Turkey. This second man, whose evil dealings Ismael talked about for a good half hour, owned a restaurant and many flats in Istanbul, where he rented beds to young migrant men and found them jobs. His name, quite tellingly, was Esat (the Turkish spelling of Asad, as in the name of the leader of the regime in Syria, Bashar Asad). Esat sent Ismael to a few employers, including bakers and garment workshops. If he were paid regularly, Ismael would have received €17 per day. Half of this would have gone to Esat, the *simsar*. Esat held Ismael's ID as a guarantee, and charged him an additional €35 per month for his bed. Ismael's working conditions proved to be horrid, and employers refused to pay him his due wage when he wanted to quit. After a month of drifting between jobs, being almost penniless, and left to the mercy of exploitative employers and of Esat, Ismael decided to return to Syria. However, when he wanted to leave, Esat wanted €50 to give him his ID back. So, Ismael had to keep working. He eventually saved enough to pay Esat and buy a bus ticket to the city on the border, and went back home. Yet, life proved to be even harder there. A few months later, he returned to Istanbul. This time, he had his own contacts. He found a job, lived with friends, and saved money to pay smugglers for his crossing to Europe.

Around 1 million of the 3,6 million Syrians who arrived after the insurgency of 2011 and fell under temporary protection in Turkey are estimated to be working, and a great majority of them are employed in the informal sector (ILO, 2020). Although law requires the acquisition of work permits, as of March 2019 only 31 thousand Syrian citizens were ever granted one (Özdemir, 2020). In comparison to Jordan and Lebanon, Syrian migrants have easy access to labor markets in Turkey. But this does not mean that Syrians in Turkey can find employment matching their qualifications, skills, and financial needs. They are predominantly employed and heavily exploited in Turkey's export driven textile and garments industry as unqualified hands (%31,1), in agriculture as seasonal workers (%7,8), and in the construction sector (%13,2) (ILO, 2020). All three of these sectors reflect similar conditions of precarity and insecurity. Syrian migrants are the most dispensable and easily exploitable of those forced to sell their labor under these conditions.

According to research conducted by a trade union in Istanbul, in 2017, wages for Syrian migrants in textile and garment factories and workshops, are on average slightly lower than their Turkish and Kurdish co-workers, but the gap is substantially bigger when it comes to social and health benefits (Erol et al., 2017). The other big difference that exists is between recruitment channels. Unlike their Turkish and Kurdish counterparts who are also dependent on informal networks to find employment but never need to pay for them, %41 of Syrian workers found their jobs in the sweatshops through employment brokers like Esat (Erol et al., 2017: 62). They are not only exploited by their employers, but they also have to pay a percentage of their wages to the brokers who keep them hostage by holding on to their official documents. So, Ismael was certainly not alone in his troubles, and also not alone in his spite and anger.

When Ismael arrived in Germany, he stayed in a succession of overcrowded camps where he had to share his room with 10 others if he were lucky. The food was insufficient and terrible, and sanitation facilities were far from ideal. When he finally got his residence permit and had to leave to live in another city, he immediately moved to Berlin. In Berlin, it took him 45 days to find his way around, and in the end, he had to pay a German-Syrian *simsar* €200 to give him an address to provide as his official residence. Once registered, he was covered by the state of Berlin, and was able to receive an allowance for his rent and for basic expenses. He settled in a hotel-turned-refugee-hosting-facility and started looking for a flat of his own. He used all the official and formal channels. He applied to hundreds of rental web sites, and was rejected by all. Eventually, he heard about a Palestinian real-estate agent, another *simsar*, who found flats for refugees. Ismael paid him €2,300 and the real-estate agent showed him a few flats. But right before they signed the contract, the *simsar* disappeared. When I met him in early 2018, Ismael had been living in the same hotel for more than 1,5 years. Having lost all his savings, he was trying again to raise money with his part-time job (with regular but unofficial overtime) to pay somebody more trustworthy to get him out of his single room.

Of my interlocutors, Ismael was not the only one who contacted brokers in their search for decent housing and the chance to leave refugee-housing facilities in Berlin, yet, he was the only one who was conned. The others, either came across brokers who found their clients flats as promised or they couldn't gather the money brokers asked for and gave up in the meantime. In all cases however, they shared disdain, anger, and even disgust at these go-betweens. Even though some of the migrants benefited from their services in the end, they all felt like they had been cheated.

My interlocutors were sober about the processes and conditions that had pushed them towards accepting the disdained services of *simsars*. When prompted, they detail their encounters with landlords who did not even bother to reply to their applications and the astronomical rents they were advertising. Berlin is infamously and drastically short of low-income housing (Holm, 2016). The discriminatory practices of landlords and real estate companies are well documented (Auspurg et al., 2017; Hinz und Ausprug, 2017; Horr et al., 2018). In order to strengthen the refugees' hand in the housing market, the state of Berlin contributes 20 per cent more to the rents of refugees than to other social welfare recipients. However, the access of refugees to affordable housing is still very limited; this is due to various factors including language barriers, lack of access to information, and outright racism (Hamann and El-Kayed, 2018).

It is in this context that refugees and asylum seekers want to leave mass accommodation facilities or *tempohomes* (container houses built specifically for refugees) and finally find a place that can be called home (for a detailed discussion of what home means for people in protracted displacement see Brun and Fabos, 2015). For that, they have to contact *simsars* who are fluent in Arabic/Kurdish and German, and who have established networks. These *simsars* are often long-term residents of the city, some are already German citizens. They learn about their clients' requirements and preferences, and show them a few flats. They do 'middlemen brokerage' (Janscisc, 2018) between the refugees and the landlords, the latter of which can be private individuals as well as big real-estate companies. They do not have fixed rates for their services. The prices range between €2,000-€10,000, depending on the location and the quality of the apartment, and also the immediacy of the need. Their dealings in this line of work are not taxed. This is a shadow economy rife with rumours that implicates bribery and corruption at higher levels. And yet, so far, media attention has only been towards the hustlers who con refugees, as in the case of Ismael (Berliner Morgenpost, 2016). My interlocutors' disdain does not greatly differentiate between con artists and authentic *simsars*. Even when successful, finding accommodation like this leaves a bad taste in their mouths. They question why would they have to be exploited for something that they should have access to anyway, i.e., the free market of real estate.

Employment brokerage in Turkey and real-estate brokerage in Germany receive similar responses from my interlocutors. Most of them had to pay to these *simsars* but they express a deep disdain for them. They are pushed to use these services nevertheless by the characteristics of the labour and rent markets in these countries, which erect higher barriers for refugees and migrants than for their own nationals. Lacking the established contacts and access to legitimate social networks, which would normally help them jump over these barriers, my interlocutors pay for things that otherwise come free or are substantially cheaper. They also know that this would not be the last time they are pushed into such engagements given the inequality structures and social boundaries in their new homes.

## Conclusion

This article developed as a thought exercise on the observation that my interlocutors rated human smugglers—the *simsars* of spatial mobility—highly, but detested the employment and housing brokers—the *simsars* of social mobility. As illustrated above with the help of the ethnographic vignettes, *simsars* play a significant role in various stages of the trajectories of migrants. These informal practices range from facilitating unauthorized border crossings to procuring documents (see Lewkovicz, 2021, in this issue), to finding employment, and to functioning as shadow real estate agencies. Syrian refugees in Germany attach different moral value to these practices, and their assessments do not reflect the state view of informality. For the states, smugglers are criminals per se, but brokers can be easily overlooked as market actors. The moral rubric of refugees' does not overlap with this view, a common phenomenon with many informal practices worldwide.

For the refugees/migrants whose stories I have collected, informality does not pose a practical problem, let alone a moral problem. Their differential view of different *simsars* does not refer to laws or states (and their lack of adherence to either), nor does it rely on a simply economical cost-benefit analysis of their transactions. There are also no religious or customary references in their accounts. Their moral assessment has two significant dimensions: The first, relates to

the nature of the boundaries to be transgressed and how they are perceived. To a great extend, my interlocutors naturalize state borders. They share the stately view that unregulated border crossings are a fundamental transgression of the boundaries that are the hallmarks of state sovereignties. Social boundaries on the other hand, are seen as arbitrary. They (like all migrants anywhere) are particularly privileged in detecting this arbitrariness, given that the social stratification in their home country does not quite match the stratification in Germany and Turkey. So when they hire smugglers, it is to help themselves overcome an obstacle, they, as well as almost everybody else, consider legitimate. The social obstacles they have to overcome by hiring *simsars,* on the other hand, are from the very start seen as illegitimate.

Secondly, there is a temporal dimension. Crossing a border is a one-off event and in the case of my interlocutors, it is achieved with success. The social boundaries they come to face in their new countries, on the other hand, have to be overcome any day and everyday. They are the barbed wires and barricades one has to jump over regularly, and with the knowledge that another one is waiting just around the corner. Overcoming the obstacles on the way to social mobility is an infinitely dreadful and repetitive task.

Hence, the work different *simsars* do in the context of migration have differential moral value. The service provided by human smugglers is very much appreciated by my interlocutors because they are the facilitators of an achievement; a significant spatial mobility that defies naturalized state boundaries. At the stage of leaving Syria, they are helpers in a flight literally for one's life. They are the companions in journeys under fire, across minefields, and through the rips in barbed wire. At the second stage, from Turkey to Europe, they are the markers of a hopeful future, where life would start to move again. In another article (Alkan, 2019), I looked into the reasons that pushed Syrians out of Turkey, towards Germany, and I came to the conclusion that it is the feeling of being-stuck (Brun, 2016) that is mostly caused by labour conditions, which led Syrians to seek ways to move again. The smugglers, who facilitated their movement first to Turkey and then to Germany, carried them away from this stuck-ness, the claustrophobia of existential immobility (Hage, 2009: 97) to the prospect of social mobility, which would give life a direction and meaning.

Yet, the services provided by employment agents like Esat or the real estate brokers who charge several thousand Euros to make a rental agreement possible, are, on the contrary, the signifiers of social immobility. They illustrate and impersonate the (social) barriers that again create the conditions of being-stuck. They are not the memes of a future, but a present that refuses to move—that is sticky and suffocating, because this present is laden with discrimination, xenophobia, and racism, which will not diminish even if the desired flat is rented or if a decent job is found. In that sense, the *simsars* of social mobility in Germany and in Turkey are despised, not simply because their prices are exploitative but because they are the embodiment of the social ills that make migrant lives unbearably stuck.

In this article, I focused on two informal practices – human smuggling and brokerage – that have a significant impact on the lives of Syrian refugees in Germany and Turkey. Looking into these practices illuminates two levels of contrast within the moral assessment of informality. The first contrast is a well known one, which lies between the state view and the migrant view of informality. While states vilify and criminalize cross-border migrant smuggling, for the refugees this is an appreciated and well-valued enterprise. And while the refugees disdain the services of brokerage they have to pay for, neither the Turkish nor the German state approach this as a matter worthy of intervention. The second contrast lies in the refugee view of these

practices, i.e., their appreciation of smugglers and abhorrence of brokers. This second level of contrast opens up room to introduce notions of stuck-ness and discrimination, both of which are significant elements in the trajectories of refugees. The flight of millions of people from their war-ridden countries creates unexpected intersections of informality, mobility, and temporality, which urge us to question state-centric moralities.

## Acknowledgements

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