Layered journeys: Experiences of fragmented journeys among young Afghans in Greece and Norway

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This article focuses on the fragmented journeys towards and within Europe among a group of young people originating from a country marked by war and conflict. It explores how the journey towards Europe may be part of a complex migration history that leads to layered journeys. I use the term 'layered journeys' to refer to multidimensional and multi-experiential journeys in which past, present and future experiences of mobility are intertwined. They may include multiple stages and various statuses. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork, creative methods and life-history interviews. It focuses on a case study of a group of young Afghan males who arrived in Greece and Norway between 2008 and 2015, looking at their journeys in the context of mobility, undocumentedness and return. Young Afghans have represented the largest group of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers arriving in Europe between 2008 and 2018. While the last decade saw a considerable increase in the number of young Afghans arriving in Europe, migration itself is not a new phenomenon in the Afghan context. Afghanistan has a long history of migratory movements as part of livelihood and survival strategies, of which the past four decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan and its resulting millions of refugees are part.

Introduction

I will tell you about my life . . . I was born in Afghanistan, but my siblings were not . . . Afghanistan is a war-torn and very poor country. For many years, it was ravaged by other countries, and until now, there is still war in Afghanistan . . . Because of this situation, people flee to other countries. Pakistan and Iran are Afghanistan's neighbours, and those countries host most of the refugees. One of those who fled, was my family . . . We were undocumented (Ata).

The opening quote is excerpted from a hand-written diary given to me by Ata, a 16-year-old unaccompanied Afghan I met in Greece. After several conversations, I gave him a notebook and pens. Some weeks later, he returned it to me having written 44 pages in his own language. The above quote is how he starts his narrative of his journey towards Europe: rooted in the history of his country, his own past migration and his family history. These experiences were part of his journey towards Europe—a journey he was still trying to undertake given his efforts to leave Greece from the port city of Patra, by trying to hide inside and underneath lorries heading to Italy onboard ferries. He was undocumented; he had been undocumented since he left Afghanistan as a child with his parents for a neighbouring country. While his past and present experiences of undocumentedness concerned different contexts, they retained some central elements in common, among them a pervasive marginality, insecurity and a risk of apprehension. Ata had no guarantee that he would ever manage to reach a destination within Europe that he perceived as preferable or, if reaching it, that he would be allowed to stay. As such, his journey extended simultaneously backwards and forward, as did his undocumentedness.

This article looks at the complex experiences of fragmented journeys and arrival in Europe in terms of the broader life story for young people on the move originating from a country marked by war and conflict. It explores how past experiences of mobility, undocumentedness and return may influence present experiences of such and may, furthermore, lead to layered journeys. A layered journey may be understood as a multidimensional and multi-experiential journey in which past, present and future experiences of mobility are intertwined, and may include multiple stages and various statuses. Past experiences of migration help to structure and inform present and future migration through aspects such as migration skills. The article focuses on a case study of a group of young Afghan males in Greece and Norway. I start by providing a brief overview of migration from Afghanistan. This is followed by a presentation of a conceptual framework on fragmented journeys, irregularity and migrating minors, and the study's methodology and context. I then move on to a presentation of what experiences the journey towards Europe entailed among my interlocutors. I unpack the journey by looking at its potential different layers, illustrated through the life story of Sadeq, one young Afghan in Norway. I then discuss some broader insights of how prior experiences may structure current experiences of undocumentedness and prospective return.

Migration from Afghanistan

Afghans have long sought asylum in Europe. In 2015, when the number of asylum applications peaked, Afghans were the second largest group after Syrians, with 178200 asylum seekers in the EU (Eurostat 2016b), of whom 45300 were unaccompanied minors (Eurostat 2016a). In fact, Afghans have represented the largest group of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers arriving in Europe since 2008 (Eurostat 2017, 2018, 2019). Particularly many Afghan minors claimed

asylum in 2009 and 2015 but, even in 2016, when arrivals decreased, more than 40 per cent of total asylum applications by unaccompanied minors were by minors of Afghan origin (Eurostat 2017). Unaccompanied Afghan minors are a group almost exclusively consisting of males and they are known for often undertaking long and arduous journeys (Boland 2010; UNHCR 2010a, 2010b, 2016; Echavez *et al.* 2014). Given the lack of regular migration channels, these journeys are undertaken irregularly. They may include experiences of detention, violence and deportation, and often pose real threats to survival.

While the large number of unaccompanied Afghan minors arriving in Europe during the last decade is new, migration itself is not a new phenomenon in the Afghan context. Afghanistan has a long history of migratory movements as part of livelihood and survival strategies. This means that, for many Afghans, migration has been part of their surroundings (Monsutti 2005). Furthermore, for more than three decades, Afghans represented the world's largest refugee group under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2014). Most Afghans have sought refuge in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, which have represented the top host countries for refugees combined for 33 years since 1979. However, the situations in Iran and Pakistan have changed and more Afghans see themselves being forced to return to Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch 2013c, 2014, 2015, 2017; IOM 2018; Majidi 2018), where the security situation has deteriorated (UNAMA 2019), or seek refuge and opportunities further afield. Such aspects often result in complex migration histories. As Scalettaris *et al.* (2019: 8) remind us:

> For the new generation facing insecurity in Afghanistan and the absence of prospects in Iran and Pakistan, seeking protection in Europe becomes a quest for meaning, social recognition and a re-appropriation of their lives.

Afghans are also experiencing deportation from Europe. Despite this, little is known about what happens post deportation (Gladwell and Elwyn 2012; Schuster and Majidi 2013, 2015) and about the specific experiences of child returnees (Majidi 2018; Guillaume and Majidi 2018). When considering the factors affecting unaccompanied Afghan minors, in addition to war, conflict, poverty, insecurity, inequality, exclusion, lack of prospects in Afghanistan, decreasing opportunities in neighbouring countries, the international refugee regime and people's own life projects, it is important to also deeply consider child-protection regimes and ideas about minors in the migratory process.

Fragmented Journeys, Irregularity and Minors at the Margins

Restrictive migration regimes are producing increasingly fragmented journeys (Collyer 2007). This term encompasses the long and dangerous journeys undertaken by people on the move, often overland or by sea. Fragmented journeys may be conceptualized as a stepwise migration, given that they are often undertaken in stages (Collyer and de Haas 2012). This challenges understandings of migration as a linear process with a definite start and endpoint, expanding it to consider the

numerous reorientations and reconfigurations that journeys generally entail. Intended destinations, even when clear, may never be reached 'undermin[ing] any clear identification of points of origin and destination' (Collyer 2010: 279). As shown by others, such journeys also challenge an understanding of journeys as made up primarily of mobility (Kaytaz 2016).

While increases in border controls make a clear distinction between those sanctioned to move and those not, technology has also created possibilities for movement (Collyer 2007). Mobile phones, money transfers and the Internet enable people to both organize journeys and stay in touch with social networks more cheaply. This reduces the costs of the journey and extends the possibility of migration (Collyer 2010; Collyer *et al*. 2012), even if the costs are still great and outside the reach of most. In fact, a lack of resources is one aspect that often leads to even more fragmented journeys, in which people, for instance, work in one place to save money in order to move on to the next stage of the journey (Collyer 2007). Structures and services, both formal and informal, appear to respond to the needs and consequences of such journeys (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). Structures of control, such as detention centres, fences, border patrols and vigilante groups, also appear to restrict, impede and manage movement (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016).

People undertaking fragmented journeys may occupy several different legal statuses (Collyer 2010) but, given restrictive migration regimes, such journeys are often accompanied by irregularity. Individuals with an irregular status are denoted by a wide range of names such as *illegal aliens*, *sans papiers*, *undocumented*, *clandestine*, *unlawful*, *illegal* and *irregular migrant*, among others. While 'irregular migration is not an independent social phenomenon but exists in relation to state policies and is a social, political and legal construction', the status conferred by it has real consequences (Düvell 2011: 276). It represents a constructed and criminalized identity (Bloch *et al*. 2014). Irregularity as a juridical status places individuals in a specific relationship with the state (De Genova 2002) and positions them as opposites to citizens. While often constructed as a binary opposition, it has been argued that, like many constructs in migration, ir/regularity is better conceptualized as part of a continuum (Bloch and Chimienti 2011; Düvell 2011) and as a process (Bloch *et al*. 2014) in which individuals may repeatedly move between statuses (Collyer and de Haas 2012).

Irregularity has been conceptualized as a kind of absenting practice on behalf of the state conferred upon those without permission to stay (Coutin 2005). Such absenting takes place both physically, through practices of deportation and detention, and socially, through the denying of social rights. Willen (2007: 11) approaches 'illegality' as three-dimensional: as juridical and political status, as sociopolitical condition and as producing 'particular modes of being-in-the-world'. Irregular migration is often explained as a mismatch between an aspiration to migrate and a lack of entry channels (Ghosh 1998). However, children may be born into irregularity and rejected asylum seekers may opt for irregularity over return (Bloch and Chimienti 2011). Bureaucracy, long procedures and changes in legislation may also cause irregularity (Düvell 2011).

There has been a tendency within much research on experiences of irregularity to focus on the numerous hardships that result from such a status. For instance, Beneduce (2008: 512, emphasis in original) describes undocumented persons as '*liminal individuals*' 'ruined by modernity' who urge for invisibility (Beneduce 2008: 509). Often it is described as a liminal state. Liminality is frequently used to describe the vulnerability and marginality resulting from undocumented status, denoted as a time when persons may not be classified and may be, or strive to be, 'structurally, if not physically, "invisible"' (Turner 1967: 95). Moreover, the metaphors of *living underground* or *in the shadows* are commonly employed to denote experiences of irregularity.

Some scholars advocate for the importance of investigating ways of coping with undocumentedness. This opens for exploring the more complex nature of ir/regularity and how undocumented status can be perceived as advantageous in some contexts (Bloch and Chimienti 2011). The undocumented may potentially leave and re-enter clandestinely, in contrast to those who are in immigration procedures. The latter may in fact be rendered more immobile through their attempts to exit the space of legal nonexistence (Coutin 2003). Irregularized persons simultaneously exist within and outside the state and its boundaries. However, legal nonexistence is still intimately connected to precariousness and deportability—that is, 'the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state' (De Genova 2002: 439).

An insecure legal status has profound consequences and may permeate all aspects of life (Willen 2007; Sigona 2012). Its effects may persist after such status desists (Menjívar 2006). Willen (2007: 27) found that irregularity 'produced new forms of "abjectivity"'. It results in a rightlessness and a defencelessness (Krause 2008). However, being undocumented is not a homogeneous experience. It makes itself more pertinent in certain contexts (Coutin 2003) and is mediated through factors such as social networks (Krause 2008). Furthermore, it is important to approach the study of irregularized persons not as separate and sealed communities, as people articulate their lives beyond and across such dichotomies (Coutin 2000; De Genova 2002; Gonzales 2016).

Given the lack of regular migration channels, people fleeing conflict, violence and persecution often undertake undocumented and fragmented journeys. There has been a lack of analytical studies on refugee journeys (BenEzer and Zetter 2015). Journeys are fundamental to the migration process and represent an experience that may be of both a significant temporal and experiential nature; it may extend in time but may, regardless of this, include profound experiences. The lack of studies on journeys is also largely the case with research on unaccompanied minors (for some studies, see BenEzer 2002 and Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016). Minors are often pushed by the same factors as adults (Engebrigtsen 2002; Chavez and Menjívar 2010). Unaccompanied minors, like adults, may simultaneously belong to several different categories and may equally move between these (O'Connell Davidson and Farrow 2007). While minors may share the migration experiences of adults, it is important to investigate their specific experiences.

In the migration and asylum context, the difference between being defined as an adult or as a minor makes itself very pertinent as it regulates access to protection, care and rights. Unaccompanied minors represent a particularly vulnerable group in the migration process. As migrating children, they are caught between immigration and child-protection regimes. Given undocumented travel, due to the lack of regular migration channels, and other survival strategies, they may find themselves in repeated encounters with the criminal justice system. They may at varying times be classified as children, as irregularized and as homeless or 'street youth'. Research on unaccompanied minors during the journey raises the complexities of being young, at the margins of society within new sociocultural contexts, often without much-needed language skills (Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016), in addition to dealing with the difficulties of (non)status and, oftentimes, mistrusting and refraining from entering formal protection mechanisms, as these may challenge the young people's own priorities (Vollebæk 2015; Donini *et al*. 2016; Majidi 2018). As such, unaccompanied minors may also represent a contradiction to the idealized Western depiction of children and childhood. They may accordingly be met with ambiguous feelings—as unaccompanied, vulnerable and innocent (ungendered) children to be protected, but also as young irregular migrant (males) to be stopped. Furthermore, as in the case of Afghan unaccompanied minors, where the overwhelming majority are males, they may be confronted with public and media discourses on risky youth, migrating young men and an othering of Muslims, as dangerous and as potential threats (Pruitt *et al*. 2018; Lems *et al*. 2020).

Methodology and Context

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork, creative methods and life-history interviews with Afghan males aged 15–24 who had arrived in Greece and Norway between 2008 and 2015. The study's multi-method approach was in line with the aim of an integrated approach that employs participant-centred methods and that is exploratory, flexible and sensitive—that is, an approach that combines various methods that engage and, accordingly, tunes into the different ways that the participants mediate and express their experiences (Lønning 2019). My key interlocutors consisted of 27 young Afghans: 4 in Greece and 23 in Norway. They had all arrived in Europe as unaccompanied minors. In addition, I spent time with many other young Afghans, particularly in the Greek port city of Patra, but also in other locations in Greece. I also undertook shorter research trips to Turkey and Italy. Participants' legal statuses varied. Those in Greece were undocumented and, among those in Norway, some had been granted and some had been refused asylum. While the young Afghans in Greece were trying to find ways to leave the country, those in Norway whose asylum applications had been rejected were seeking to remain there. Fieldwork was carried out during a 7-month period between 2012 and 2015, during which time interviews in Norway were also conducted. The interviews were undertaken in Norwegian, English and, with the help of an interpreter, Persian.

Patra was my main field site and represents an important exit point for people trying to leave Greece undocumented. The city has attracted people on the move since the late 1990s and, since the early 2000s, there has been a visible Afghan presence. People on the move usually find shelter in makeshift tents, abandoned buildings or out in the open. Days and nights are spent at the port, where they try to hide inside and underneath lorries heading for Italy onboard ferries. Given the situation and the general insecure status of the young Afghans in Patra—a continuous shifting landscape based on constant arrivals and departures—I continuously had to renegotiate my access (Lønning 2018). Time was a crucial aspect of this and I spent 5 months in the city across three field trips. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork consisting of participant observation and interviews, creative methods were used, such as photo diaries, written accounts and diaries, drawings, maps and photographs (Lønning 2019).

The main purpose of this research was to explore the young people's experiences and coping strategies during their journeys towards and within Europe. In line with this, the main interview question was: *I would like to hear about your journey to Europe. Could you please tell me about it?* As such, the journey provided an entry point to their personal stories. Some responded that their journey was the same as everybody else's and others sought to keep their accounts to practical matters. I would thus emphasize my interest in *their* specific experiences of *that* journey and most eventually provided rich descriptions. These narratives represent retrospective accounts in which the past, the present and the anticipated future acted as structural factors. Given the study's interest in experience and meaning, and its interplay with action and context, life-history interviews seemed preferable (Eastmond 2007). All the young people who were interviewed were provided with a map and were told that they could use this to trace their journeys. In most cases, they did not draw their whole route, but rather used the maps for specific stretches. Some also used them to scribble on while narrating.

Just like time was important in negotiating access during fieldwork in Greece, it was also important when recruiting participants in Norway. First contact was initiated through gatekeepers (schools and education centres, Refugee Services, Child Welfare Services and reception centres). Recruiting participants with refused asylum claims represented a slow and difficult process. Six of the 23 interlocutors in Norway had rejected asylum claims. Once recruited, these young people often spoke at great length. All except one of the young people who were refused asylum had arrived in Norway as minors. They had thus additionally experienced the transition from being looked-after children to becoming deportable adults. This entailed going from reception centres for unaccompanied minors to reception centres for adults, with less access to care and activities, and fewer rights. They had lived at reception centres for between 18 and 36 months. All the participants have been given pseudonyms to safeguard anonymity.

The Journey Towards and Within Europe

The journeys undertaken by people in search of protection are often dramatic in nature. They may become a significant source of trauma (Zetter 2004) and may have long-lasting effects psychologically, emotionally and physically (BenEzer 2002; BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). 'These days will pass but I will not forget them' was one statement I came across in a partially demolished building in Greece. Another, written right next to it, read 'The cage is tight, I cannot fly. Sweden is far, I cannot arrive'. They were both written in Persian. Often, such statements were signed with detail and represented a *yādegāri* (a memento)—a testimonial, memory or trace left behind along the migration trail. They attest to some experiences from the journey towards and within Europe. As suggested by others, such traces may be particularly valuable in accessing immediate expressions of feelings and experiences of people on the move (Derluyn *et al.* 2014).

Journeys are integral to the migration process. The lack of focus on journeys (BenEzer and Zetter 2015) may result from the fact that they have tended to be conceptualized as a linear process between two points (Schapendonk *et al.* 2015) or as an in-between phase, between the before and after, in which the here and now are suspended. However, as the narrative of Roohullah attests to, the journey may represent an exceptional part of life; nonetheless, it is still that—a part of life. He explained:

> It's not just to be on the move, you also live, you know, during that journey. You're not just constantly moving. You're moving but you're also experiencing other things. You're also living during that period.

Temporal and space-defined journeys may be increasingly problematic to delimit for people whose lives are marked by migration, even across generations (Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016), and where migration is part of everyday practices, as compared to those for whom it represents a clear break from the norm (Kaytaz 2016). For many Afghans, migratory movement has been part of their lives and their surroundings (Monsutti 2005). While some may inhabit mobility, an arrival may still be sought, and the meaning of this arrival may be multidimensional. The young people in this study sought to arrive physically, legally and socially in places that they envisioned right for their futures. Such an arrival consisted of reaching their destinations alive, attaining security and feeling accepted (see also BenEzer 2002 on physical and social arrival).

The young Afghans' journeys towards and within Europe were non-linear and had taken them through up to 12 countries—13 if you include Afghanistan. These were journeys filled with various setbacks; a continuous search for onward movement, in which the young people generally expressed being very active; and of longer and shorter periods of waiting and of immobility. Most of the interlocutors in Norway had spent around a year on the move, but durations ranged between a few months to more than 4 years. While some had been on the move for around a month upon their arrival in Greece, others had already spent over a year trying to

leave Greece to continue their journeys onwards. It was as such not movement per se that determined the duration of the journeys, but rather the time periods during which the young people did not move. Immobility during such journeys is therefore of great significance. Furthermore, two interlocutors in Norway had engaged in migration that distinguishes them considerably from the rest, as both had migrated twice to Europe. One had returned to Iran from Greece by himself, while the other had been returned from Norway. Return and deportation from Europe were also experienced by other Afghans I met in Greece, including from the UK, Denmark and Norway. I also met those who had been returned from another European country under the Dublin Regulation before the temporary suspension on returns to Greece after the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case of *M.S.S. v Belgium and Greece* (ECtHR 2011) and many who were returned from Italy, as summary return following apprehension at Italian ports was common (Human Rights Watch 2013a).

The young people's journeys unfolded spatially, physically, experientially and temporally differently. Depending on how these were arranged, they had different degrees of freedom of movement at the various stops. A few undertook journeys carefully arranged by smugglers and travelled from site to site with minimal interaction with the places passed. Most, however, spent extended periods living in the countries they sought to transit or experienced, sometimes repeatedly, detention, incarceration, summary return and deportation. As such, the journeys were fragmented—a stepwise migration, including long periods of immobility.

As a result of state policies and the lack of regular migration channels, conditions during the journeys were physically harsh. Some borders were marked by signs of the physical exhaustion of crossing, while others were marked by their almost impermeable nature and by conditions endured while waiting. The journey between Afghanistan and Italy was throughout described as the most challenging and time-consuming. Crossing the border to Greece and Italy often represented the longest stage, sometimes taking years. While a couple expressed an initial willingness to stay in Greece, they had been pushed on and, in one instance backwards, by the situation encountered. This relates to unsustainable conditions and a lack of durable solutions at destinations (Düvell 2012), such as absent or inadequate reception and asylum systems, low recognition rates and divergent practices (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008; Düvell 2011).

While Iran represented the country in which most of my interlocutors had spent the longest time periods upon leaving Afghanistan, Greece emerged as the country accounting for the longest durations of immobility with aspirations and continued efforts to migrate. The young people often made repeated attempts to leave the country through various exit points. Conversely, those in Norway related few challenges during their journey between Italy and Norway, although the risk of being fingerprinted and caught by the Dublin Regulation was very real. The journey from Italy to Norway could therefore represent significant stress and could have considerable consequences, even if of a less immediate physical nature.

All the young people experienced being held in police cells or detention facilities. This related to eight countries in total, five of which were in Europe. As

unaccompanied minors, several also experienced falling under the child-protection and reception systems of various countries. This had a great impact upon their journey trajectories and often showed the states' 'incapacity to adapt to the needs of children' on the move (Majidi 2018: 133). Such experiences could both represent a strain, by interfering with their migration plans, separating them from their peer groups and not responding to their own priorities, as well as offering a much-needed chance to rest, gather strength and recuperate from injuries and illness, contemplate their options and extend their networks.

Layered Journeys, Layered Experiences

When asked about their journeys, the young Afghans generally started their narration from the physical migration towards Europe, though some embarked on accounts of their childhood and subsequent life in a linear process, and others from their present situation or, alternatively, back and forth between the past, different parts of their lives and their thoughts about the future. Some narratives would also start from the migration experiences of family members and the older generation. Several of the young people had experienced a great deal of mobility during their lifetime as they had migrated to Iran and Pakistan. In fact, out of the 27 key interlocutors, 6 were born or had grown up in Iran from a young age. Four others had spent between 2 and 8 years in Iran or Pakistan, and another three had spent between 1 and 2 years in these countries. In total, beyond 2 of the 3 who were born in Iran and who had solely stayed in Iran prior to their migration to Europe, 11 of the young people had prior experience of cross-border migration in the region of origin, including experience of return to Afghanistan. Those who had undertaken prior migration positioned their journeys within these broader migration histories. They related of their journeys towards Europe with reference to prior (sometimes multiple) experiences of migration and displacement. Beyond prior experiences, some also continued to inhabit mobility or, alternatively, were stuck in mobility, following their arrival in Europe through redirected trajectories, return and remigration.

Looking at their lives in a broader perspective, their journeys towards Europe were thus part of a larger history that extended backwards and included the present and, potentially, future mobility. These layered journeys encompass complex migration histories and, as this is the case, require us to attend to the multidimensional and multi-experiential aspects of the journey and see how past, present and anticipated future experiences of migration are intertwined. Sadeq's trajectory exemplifies this. His trajectory points to how the experiences of the journey are also layered, encompassing numerous (re)directions, stages and statuses, and how this informs his present and anticipated future.

Sadeq first left for Pakistan at a young age along with his relatives (age, durations, towns/cities and years are not given in order to safeguard anonymity). They stayed together in Pakistan for some years before Sadeq left for Iran on his own. During the years he spent in Pakistan, Sadeq attended school and contributed to the household by working after school and on days off. The years during which

Sadeq subsequently stayed in Iran represented a very different situation. He was no longer with his relatives and worked as a casual labourer, mostly in construction work. He was, furthermore, deported. Upon return to Afghanistan, he left anew and arrived in Iran for a second time. This time, he embarked on the journey towards Europe along with some peers. Sadeq managed to arrive in Greece, where he spent the next few years trying to leave the country. During this time, he entered the asylum process. Sadeq remained unsupported while in Greece. He worked as a casual labourer to support himself but faced an increasingly difficult situation with the onset of the economic crisis and an increase in racist-motivated attacks (Human Rights Watch 2012, 2013b). He detailed how the situation changed, of growing hostilities towards immigrants, despite the solidarity among locals that also existed for people on the move, and how his appearance marked him out. He also endured periods of homelessness. Unable to continue his journey onwards, lacking a decision on his claim for asylum and facing an increasingly difficult situation, Sadeq decided to return to Iran. However, given his status and nationality, he could return only how he had come. Sadeq managed to undertake the undocumented journey back to Iran, but only spent a short period in the country before being deported again. In the meantime, his relatives had returned to Afghanistan and Sadeq stayed with them following his return. They decided to leave Afghanistan together and again made the journey to Pakistan, as they had done before. However, this time, they only stayed in Pakistan for some months before continuing together to Iran. During the crossing, Sadeq became separated from his relatives. He waited upon his arrival in Iran but received no news and, subsequently, embarked on the journey towards Europe for a second time. The journey took him through another seven countries before he arrived in Norway, where he applied for asylum. His application for international protection was rejected, as was his appeal. After the rejection of his appeal, he left the system and remained 'underground' for some time. However, he found this situation impossible and revealed himself to the authorities. Still, he refused to leave Norway voluntarily. Sadeq did not envision a life in Afghanistan and was also indebted by his journey to Norway, which, along with his unwillingness to return, increased his stress about finding a solution to what he needed to do to repay his debt. He spent his days in an idleness he described as suffocating and his nights in fear of the police coming to forcibly remove him.

Sadeq's journey reveals a layered journey that connects past mobility, the journey towards Europe and future mobility, both through prospective forced removal and potential future migration. His journey to Norway took 4 years, but it was preceded by several years in both Pakistan and Iran, without an intention of coming to Europe. It included a long and difficult journey towards, within and from Europe, where movement was redirected numerous times. Upon physical arrival in a country that he envisioned right for his future, in this case Norway, he was denied legal and social arrival. His physical arrival was accordingly followed by several years as an asylum seeker, a refused asylum seeker, an undocumented person and as a person facing removal. Seen together, these various stages extend across 14 years of his life. During these various stages, various statuses were

inhabited and various social relations became important in directing mobility. The consequences of migration regimes, security officials and unsustainable conditions at destinations were clearly visible in his trajectory. Beyond these, most important for him was the presence and then loss of his relatives, as well as various peers with whom he left for Europe and other peers to whom he owed money upon being refused asylum in Norway, and who figured, in terms of finding a way to repay them, in what he needed to accomplish in the future.

In detailing his journey towards Europe, Sadeq spoke about a sense of wasting away in terms of his legal and social non-arrival—that is, the absence of legal status and his lack of security, and a place and acceptance within society. He related this sense to his broader life story—the multiple hardships he had tried to overcome but been unable to, or not allowed, given his (non)legal status:

> Sometimes when I'm at home, when I'm alone I just think a lot about my life. I hate my life, the life that I have because when I was born, my whole life has been like this, bad you see. I lost my family, there was war, I couldn't go to school. I grew up abroad, with different people, between offices ... Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece ... I was on the move and now I'm sitting for years at a reception centre here in Norway. I always hoped not to lose my hope. I always tried, carried on. But sometimes no, I become like this, I think no, I've nothing, I'm at the bottom .... Unfortunately, I can't attend school either. I couldn't go to school and I haven't been able to work. If I don't get permission to stay, my hope is shattered. It's completely shattered. I'm young but sitting at the reception centre in this situation and just thinking and thinking, I became old. Just thinking so much. From when I was born until now, I haven't been happy. I thought that I would be allowed to stay in Norway, that I could study and continue my life, but I couldn't that either .... After this, I don't know what will happen to me ... don't know. This is my luck. I can't manage anything.

Sadeq speaks of immense perseverance and the multiple and prolonged stresses that he is unable to overcome given structural factors, given that he was not recognized by the Norwegian authorities as a person in need of international protection. Lingering in his narrative is a sense that, if *he* had done something differently, maybe things would have turned out different but, as things are now, he 'can't manage anything'. There is thus a sense of utter personal failure inherent in the structural constraints that have trumped his trajectory. He also speaks of the fact that this is not a new situation, but a repeated one across countries and regions, which, in his case, exacerbates his current state. For Sadeq, deportation had been 'absorbed into the cycle of migration, and of return, that is part of the history of Afghanistan and its people' (Schuster and Majidi 2013: 235).

Multiple Experiences of Undocumentedness and Deportation

Sadeq's journey was unique among my interlocutors in terms of its complexity. However, it is not necessarily unique among Afghans whose lives are marked by mobility, who inhabit mobility or who are stuck in mobility (Khosravi 2016;

Abbasi and Monsutti 2017). While two interlocutors had migrated to Europe twice, the young people spoke about others in their networks who were on their third journey to Europe following deportation. Furthermore, what was not unique was Sadeq's multiple experiences of migration and displacement, undocumentedness and return. It included prolonged stays as undocumented in the region of origin, irregularity during the journey as a result of the lack of regular migration channels in order to seek asylum and experiences of living as undocumented in Norway upon rejection of their asylum claim. Similarly, some had experienced deportation and return in the region of origin from Iran and Pakistan, but also pushbacks, summary return, return and deportation during their journeys towards and within Europe. Prior experiences structure current experiences of undocumentedness (Bloch *et al.* 2014). Past experiences of undocumentedness and deportation may affect and increase the ability to cope with future experiences of such. While they do not mediate the adverse effects that follow from such situations and status, they may provide a reference point in terms of what migration may entail and, as such, may offer a resource. It has been argued that, among young Afghan returnees from Iran, the experiences of exile and the 'patience and resilience they developed as refugees' may be drawn upon in negotiating the challenges faced upon return (Saito 2009: 48).

There were often similarities between how the young Afghans described their experiences of undocumentedness pre and post migration to Europe. This included worrying about being detained and fearing detention and deportation, living in a marginal and insecure situation, not approaching the authorities for protection and being at risk of exploitation and violence. There was as such a similarity in their descriptions of experienced undocumentedness in the region of origin and in Europe, as captured in the quotes below that detail experiences in Iran and Greece, although it is worth noting that, while the young people expressed prolonged detention as a real risk in Greece, what they emphasized from Iran was a fear of deportation. However, despite most emphasizing that the situation is very difficult for many Afghans in Iran, it was primarily there that those deported sought to remigrate. It thus appears preferable to conditions faced in Afghanistan. Some also had great attachment to the country and felt a belonging to Iran, rather than to Afghanistan.

> I was afraid every day. When you go to work, maybe they'll pick you up on the way, maybe they enter your workplace. It was very difficult. You're constantly scared that maybe the police will come, maybe... (Hamed talking about life in Iran).

> When we had been in Greece for one month and our paper expired [the deportation order given to all those apprehended upon irregular entry or stay], it became a bit difficult for us. Since we didn't have the paper, we were scared. We were scared to leave the house [referring to an informal hotel] and would only go out to buy food and such (Benyamin talking about life in Greece).

They also spoke about experiences of discrimination based on their origin as Afghans, sometimes differently marked out by their appearance, or as refugees

across both regions. Explicit comparisons between different contexts were also made. Some emphasized that, in addition to the situation in Afghanistan, the situation in neighbouring countries had further pushed them to leave for Europe, and similarly that the situation in Southern Europe had pushed them to leave farther north and westward.

The similarity with which some young people spoke about liminality experienced along the journey and in the region of origin could provide some resources for their negotiating what such liminality entailed. It could also influence how they perceived undocumented status itself. During fragmented journeys, migration skills may facilitate protection. When financial means are limited, the acquisition of these skills enables onward movement. Migration skills represent migratory or mobility capital, the knowledge of migration *how's*, *where's* and *who's* (Van Hear 1998). Acquiring migration skills or attaching oneself to individuals who possessed such skills was vital to negotiate the journey. While the young Afghans learned by speaking with others, they also learned by observing, and usually drew on whatever references at their disposal. One consequence of repeated experiences of migration is increased migration skills. With deportations and summary returns, these skills were not only sought, but were forced upon them. The increased migration skills acquired through this changed the experience of the journey in subsequent attempts. Although one can never know how the journey will evolve and what will occur, repeated experiences of migration resulted in these young people being better informed about what to expect and enabled them to better prepare materially and mentally accordingly. This is suggested by Moheb's experience: 'The border crossing to Turkey was so difficult. We had no experience. The second time I could prepare better.'

While increased migration skills represented a resource and could also affect their social relations and position within a group, and as such had a structuring effect, experiences of not being able to secure arrival physically, legally and socially represented an enormous strain—that is, reaching the destinations they envisioned as right for their futures, being granted permission to stay there and finding a place within the given society. Repeatedly living in a prolonged and insecure state takes its toll. This extended within Norway for the young Afghans who were refused asylum. Past and present experiences of irregularity and return can convey a feeling of being unable to escape the exclusion and marginality that they repeatedly faced. This strain appeared to be coupled by numerous experiences of deportation and undocumentedness, especially when relating to a country in which the young people sought to remain. It related to recurrently not being able to find a solution to their predicament by repeatedly seeking to remain in a place but not being allowed to stay. This was reinforced by the fact that, for many, their search for protection and a sustainable future in Europe had been preceded but not found in the region of origin, encompassing both Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Although undocumentedness had been endured by several interlocutors for prolonged periods in the region of origin, it may appear as unfeasible to them in an environment such as Norway, as was the case for Sadeq, who left but re-

entered the system. 'Exiting' the system exposes the young people to additional vulnerabilities as well as exacerbating existing ones. It may result in homelessness and destitution, which again can lead to survival strategies and coping mechanisms resulting in criminality, exploitation, health problems and abuse, including transactional and commercial sex work (Gladwell and Elwyn 2012). Their immigration status makes them more vulnerable than other similarly positioned young people, as approaching authorities for help alerts these bodies to the fact that they are facing removal. Nonetheless, experiences endured while 'underground' may not affect an initial unwillingness to return (Gladwell and Elwyn 2012). In fact, being undocumented and dealing with the challenges resulting from undocumented status may be preferable to return (Abbasi and Monsutti 2017). Furthermore, when the unwillingness to return persists and the present context appears too uncertain, the journey may lead onwards. This has been the case for many young Afghans in Norway and other Nordic countries in recent years, with rejected asylum claims or time-limited status until the age of 18, and who, after several years, have left, particularly to France, Italy and Spain, to avoid forced removal and find alternatives to the exclusion that they have so far experienced. Their onward mobility may thus also be understood as a refusal to be excluded (Monsutti 2018). While such onward migration can lead to a legal and social arrival, it can also, in both the short run and the long run, result in new and repeated forms of experienced vulnerability, marginality and insecurity.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the journeys of a group of young Afghan males in Greece and Norway by drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, creative methods and life-history interviews. Their journeys to and within Europe were physically and emotionally harsh. The journeys were not linear, but fragmented and multi-(re)directional, and encompassed both first- and second-time migrations to Europe. Although most journeys to Norway lasted for about a year, their temporal dimension varied from a few months to more than 4 years. Those who had undertaken prior migration, as many had to Iran and Pakistan, positioned their journeys within these broader migration histories. Their narratives would include such experiences or, alternatively, the migration of family members. They thus related their journeys towards Europe with reference to multiple experiences of migration and displacement.

Several of the young Afghans had prior experiences of living as undocumented in Iran and Pakistan. Their journeys towards and within Europe also included several aspects that can be described as liminal phases based on prolonged periods of unwanted immobility and insecure legal status, including vulnerability, marginality and insecurity. Such experiences had thus been endured in the region of origin, in transience and, for some, in a European country in which they had sought to remain. The past acts as a structural factor that informs both the present and the future. Past experiences can act both as a resource and as a strain. On the one hand, it may affect the ability and skills to negotiate or cope with such

situations. On the other hand, it can feel like an inability to escape these aspects and being stuck in a prolonged liminal phase that extends across countries, regions and generations. This may be experienced as a wasting-away that reinforces previous difficulties and gives a sense of habitual inability to find a solution to their predicaments by repeatedly seeking to remain in a place but not being allowed to stay there. As such, it becomes entangled with an envisioned future or a lack thereof. Such complex migration histories are well described as layered journeys; they consist of layered experiences in which past, present and potential future mobility is intertwined, and may include multiple stages and various statuses.

Given the unprecedented level of displacement generated by war and conflict in Afghanistan during the last four decades, and the profound experiential and temporal nature of the journeys towards Europe, it is likely that an understanding of present experiences of migration, undocumentedness and return would benefit from being seen in light of the broader life story. The benefit of this may be clear within one life story, as was the case for Sadeq's narrative here, and may relate to one journey. It may also intertwine with migration across generations, as evident in the question posed to me by another young Afghan: 'My grandfather had to flee, then my father and then, I. When will it stop?' Such a question also brings our attention back to the multiple dimensions of arrival that a journey entails: the physical, the legal and the social.

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