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Beyond here and there: (re)conceptualising migrant journeys and the ‘in-between’

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ABSTRACT

Journeys of refugees and other migrants are typically represented as linear movements between two places with the academic and policy gaze directed primarily towards the places people leave and what is assumed to be their final destination. This linear representation presupposes that people have a specific country in mind when they depart and that everything ‘in-between’ is simply a ‘stepping stone’. This article explores the journeys of Syrians, Nigerians and Afghans drawing on empirical data gathered in Turkey, Greece and Italy during 2015. Our evidence suggests that, even for those who eventually arrived in Europe, the places to which people initially travelled were often destination rather than ‘transit countries’. It was only when life became untenable and a decision was made to move that these places took on a state of ‘in-betweenness’, most commonly as part of a personal narrative mobilised by respondents to make sense of the broader arc of their life experiences. Failure to understand, or even ask questions about, the multiple meanings which places have for people at different points in both their physical and metaphorical (life) journeys, undermines conceptual and empirical analysis of migrant journeys and plays into anti-immigrant discourses prevalent across much of the Global North.

KEYWORDS

Refugee; migrant; displacement; journeys; transit; in-between

Introduction

The journeys of refugees and other migrants¹ are typically represented as linear movements between two places – here and there – with the academic and policy gaze directed primarily towards the places people leave and those in which they finally arrive (Snel et al, 2020; Kuschminder, 2020). The countries ‘in-between’ are conceptualised primarily as places of ‘transit’ in which people are ‘stuck’ or ‘stranded’ whilst they explore options for their onward travel (Choplin and Lombard 2013; Askerov, Currell, and Ghazi 2018). Whilst some of the existing literature provides valuable empirical material that allows us to better understand the significance of the places ‘in-between’ (see, for example, Collyer 2010), much of it reflects and reinforces a particular conceptualisation of migrants as people that are constantly ‘on the move’ looking for ways to get to the countries of the Global North (Schapendonk 2012).

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Nowhere has this representation been more evident than in the narratives associated with Europe's so-called migration crisis which gave the impression of a linear, uninterrupted flow of people heading towards Europe, most commonly represented by straight arrows on a map linking two distinct areas (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Crawley et al. 2018). Politicians and policy-makers across Europe have largely talked about the arrival of refugees and migrants in 2015 as an unprecedented event, a single coherent flow of people that came 'from nowhere', suddenly and unexpectedly pressing against the continent's southern border. This narrative was echoed by journalists, film-makers and artists who focused on the movement of people, interviewing, photographing and otherwise depicting people on the move. At the same time academics, including the authors of this article, have been funded to document and explain these flows.

But this was (and remains) very much a view from Europe, shaped by the politics of the continent and by a particular, narrow, understanding of migration dynamics which ignores journeys as a social process (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). This linear representation presupposes that people have a specific destination country in mind when they depart from their home countries and that everything 'in-between' is simply a 'stepping stone'. Those living between here and there – 'the in-betweeners' – are most commonly represented as having difficult, uncomfortable, liminal and often meaningless lives. Such representations ignore the complex social and economic realities associated with migration decision-making. As much as migrants exert agency over their journeys, they are thwarted or facilitated by a multitude of shifting place-based structural factors (Bridgden and Mainwaring 2016). They also misrepresent the scale and direction of migration flows and the fact that millions of people move to other countries without ever intending to move onwards to Europe or elsewhere. For example, whilst around 525,000 Syrians arrived in Europe during 2015 (IOM 2016), a higher number live in Istanbul alone (Kirisci, Brandt, and Murat Erdogan 2018), representing just part of the more than 3.5 million Syrians that have moved to Turkey in search of protection. Similarly, whilst around 210,000 Afghans arrived in Europe in 2015 (IOM 2016) more than 3 million live in Iran. To put this into context, in the same year, over 11 million Europeans moved to live in another EU Member State (EC (2016) 2017). Moreover whilst some undoubtedly aspire to move onwards, many others have no clear aspirations or intended direction (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). Others are focused primarily on return – roughly one in four migration events involve a return to an individual's country of birth (Azosea and Rafterya 2019)² – or intend to stay put, at least for the foreseeable future.

Drawing on empirical data gathered in Turkey, Greece and Italy during 2015 as part of the ESRC-funded MEDMIG project³, this article explores the experiences of Syrians, Nigerians and Afghans who spent considerable periods of time living in Turkey, Libya and Iran before we came into contact with them during the course of our research. All three groups – but particularly those living in Turkey and Libya – were, and continue to be, positioned by both policy-makers and researchers as being 'in transit' to Europe. Because of this, Turkey and Libya have been the recipients of European financial assistance aimed at preventing further onward migration. However life in these countries constituted, for most, much more than a temporary 'stop over': some of those we interviewed in Turkey had no intention of moving to Europe; others left their home countries months or even years beforehand, only moving on to Europe because life had become untenable (Crawley et al. 2018). These places only took on the status of being 'in-

between' as part of a personal and/or collective narrative mobilised to make sense of the broader arc of an individual's life experiences to the point at which we met them.

In this context, our article raises new and important questions about our understanding of places for people on the move. In so doing it builds on an emerging literature which unpacks the journeys made by refugees and other migrants (BenEzer and Zetter 2014; Kaytaz 2016; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). We contribute to a growing literature, reflected in 2020, that views refugees and other migrants as active agents in formulating their own plans albeit within often constrained opportunities (Schapendonk 2012, 2020; Kuschminder, 2020). These places provide not just the physical context within which migrants live but also a range of new opportunities, chance encounters and evolving social relationships, including those that are transnational (Caarls, Bilgili, and Franssen 2020) or influenced by technology (Godin and Dona, 2020) within which lives are lived and decisions about the future taken. We argue for the importance of re-situating place as more than a mere back-drop to physical journeys. Failure to understand the significance of places to people – and of people to places – undermines conceptual and empirical understanding of migration and reduces the analysis of migration journeys to the physical movement itself. This, in turn, silences the experiences of those who never aim for, or reach, other countries (Kaiyoorawongs 2016), and plays into dominant anti-migrant policy and media narratives.

We begin our discussion by reflecting on the politics of the 'in-between' for policy-making and for our own research, as well as the relationship between the two. In particular, we draw attention to the ways in which dominant conceptualisations of the 'in-between' often determine the ways in which research is designed including the questions that are asked, the journeys that are told and the stories that are (and are not) heard. Our empirical evidence unfolds in the three sections that follow. Firstly, we outline some of the everyday experiences of our respondents in those places typically regarded as the 'in-between', highlighting their relationships to these places and the ways in which these experiences helped them to feel 'in-place'. Secondly, we analyse the explanatory power of these experiences in helping us to understand the reasons for the decision to move on, exploring the ways in which the notion of being 'in-between' came to be assigned to those places retrospectively. Finally, we situate peoples' experiences of the journey and meanings ascribed to the 'in-between' within their wider historical and geopolitical contexts.

The politics of the 'in-between'

Before engaging with the experiences and perspectives of those who move, it is important to reflect on the politics of the 'in-between' as seen in policies intended primarily to control and contain migration to Europe. An important starting point for this discussion is the concept of 'transit migration', which was invented in the early 1990s when the European Union (EU) introduced stricter border controls and promoted by certain institutions, most notably IOM, ICMPD, the Council of Europe and various UN agencies (Düvell, Molodikova, and Collyer 2014; Zijlstra 2014). Whilst the concept of 'transit migration' is now widely employed by academics and policy-makers alike, its meaning, usefulness and appropriateness remain highly contested (Collyer, Düvell, and de Haas 2011; Düvell 2012; Basok et al. 2015).

Firstly, whilst the idea of ‘transit migration’ highlights the fact that migration is not, at least for a considerable group of people, a simple movement from A to B, the uni-directional configuration from country of departure → transit country → country of destination does not adequately capture the complex realities of physical migration journeys (Bredeloup 2012; Schapendonk 2012). In particular, by reducing the places in which migrants live to places of ‘transit’, and their experiences of ‘the journey’ to the physical process of moving, the social, emotional and economic lives lived and decisions taken in other places become invisible (Bridgden and Mainwairing 2016; Kaiyoorawongs 2016). It is important to remember that most migrants do not move on and are therefore never ‘in transit’ (Kaytaz 2016). Immobility can result from being ‘stranded’ or ‘stuck’ (Schapendonk 2012) but it is more often a choice. Indeed many of those interviewed as part of our research never intended to travel to Europe when they left their countries of origin but were among a minority who, for a variety of reasons, felt compelled to do so (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019).

A second, related, concern is that ‘transit migration’ started life as a policy concept and has been mobilised for political purposes (Düvell 2012; Düvell, Molodikova, and Collyer 2014). The notion of ‘transit migration’ contributes to the idea that millions of people are on the move, currently ‘stuck’ in other countries but ultimately ‘heading to Europe’. Whilst ‘transit migration’ accounts for a relatively small share of arrivals the spectre of *potential migration* haunts Europe and provides a vehicle – and rationale – for policies that aim to manage and control migration flows. This ‘myth of invasion’ (de Haas 2008), to which the concept of ‘transit migration’ is central, allows Europe to justify its policy response which is formulated primarily around two key ideas: the securitisation of migration policies to physically prevent onward migration; and the use of development assistance to encourage and persuade those contemplating onward migration to ‘stay put’. Indeed, the fact that the concept of ‘transit migration’ is used almost exclusively in the context of migration to Europe reinforces concerns that it is primarily a political tool for leveraging policy outcomes rather than a useful analytical or conceptual mechanism for understanding migrant journeys and decision-making (Collyer, Düvell, and de Haas 2011).

Recent EU policy initiatives in both Turkey and Libya illustrate this process. In March 2016, an agreement between the EU and Turkey came into force aimed at stopping the movement of people across the Aegean (Crawley et al. 2018). According to the EU-Turkey Statement, all new arrivals into Greece were to be returned to Turkey with equivalent EU resettlement places provided in exchange. In return for bolstering Europe’s external border, Turkey would see visa liberalisation for its nationals, acceleration of its accession to the EU and a payment of €3 billion. Three years later, the arrangement has failed, even on its own terms.⁴ Whilst the number of people crossing the Aegean has reduced considerably it has not stopped and thousands of people are living in dire conditions on the Greek islands, and in parts of mainland Greece (Jumber and Tank 2019). Turkey meanwhile has seen little to no action on visa liberalisation or accession. At the same time Libya has become a primary recipient of targeted European efforts to detain and deport people attempting to reach Europe across the Mediterranean. These policies are nothing new: since 2004 the EU has placed Libya at the forefront of its policy to export the management of its borders (Hamood 2008). However, with the so-called migration crisis in Europe, considerable additional funding has been allocated by EU Trust Fund for Africa and individual European countries, most notably Italy, to train

and build the capacity of the Libyan coastguard to intercept and return boats off the Libyan coast, increase management at the Southern border, increase detention facilities in Libya and, through IOM, facilitate returns. This is despite the chaotic political situation in Libya and evidence of horrific abuse against refugees and other migrants in Libya to which these policies contribute directly (Human Rights Watch 2019).

In this way ideas around ‘transit migration’ – associated, as they often are, with increased securitisation – serve to underplay the responsibility of governments with respect to the rights of migrants living within their territory, many of whom have no intention of moving on (Cherti and Grant 2013). For those countries positioned as ‘transit countries’ meanwhile, the consequences are double-edged. On the one hand, governments often find themselves subject to growing expectations, and occasional punishments, regarding their role in migration management. At the same time, they are able to leverage the EU’s anxieties around migration for their own economic and political gain (de Haas 2008; Bredeloup 2012; Choplin and Lombard 2013). Indeed these countries may exaggerate or ‘play up’ their assigned role as a springboard or entry point to Europe. In 2010, for example, Gaddafi warned that Europe ran the risk of turning ‘black’ unless the EU paid Libya at least €5 billion (£4.1 billion) a year to block the arrival of migrants from Africa who were representing as transiting through Libya.⁵ More recently Turkey threatened to ‘let loose’ 15,000 Syrians per month and ‘blow the mind’ of Europe unless it was given considerable financial support and visa-free access to the EU.⁶ Hoist by its own petard, the EU has subsequently committed considerable economic and political resources to Libya and Turkey in order to prevent ‘transit migrants’ arriving on the shores of Europe.

‘You see what you look at’: methodological reflections on ‘the in-between’

This article draws on material gathered through 500 interviews with refugees and other migrants undertaken by a team of researchers between September 2015 and January 2016 in Greece (215 interviews), Italy (205 interviews), Malta (20 interviews) and Turkey (60 interviews) (Crawley et al. 2018). Our aim was to gather robust research evidence on the factors driving the so-called migration crisis as these events unfolded in order that this evidence could, potentially, feed into policy-making processes. The choice of countries was in response to a funding call which explicitly sought evidence to explain why and how people were crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. In 2015, Greece and Italy were (and remain) the main sites of first arrival of people into the EU (IOM 2016). Turkey was included as a fieldsite because of its role as neighbour to the EU and primary destination for refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria as well as those arriving at its southern border from Iran. Malta was selected as a comparison site because it had recently seen a decline in new arrivals of people since high points in 2013 and 2008. Interviewees were purposefully sampled by nationality and gender to reflect the composition of those then arriving into these countries. (Crawley et al. 2018).

In reflecting on our methodological approach, it is important to acknowledge that the ways in which the design of research, the questions asked and the location of the fieldwork, can significantly shape understandings of migrant journeys. This, in turn, can inadvertently reinforce and amplify policy narratives about the nature of migration flows to Europe. Although the majority of our fieldwork was undertaken in Europe, we consciously avoided imposing an artificial ‘end point’ on people’s journeys through our own interview

process (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). We constantly reminded ourselves – and others – that *where* we interviewed people could be (or become) an ‘in-between’, either now or at some time in the future. Ontologically, we interpreted ‘migration journey’ as a social and analytical category rather than only physical process (Buscher and Urry 2009; McHugh 2000). This meant not only asking people about their migration decisions and journeys but purposefully asking about their experiences in the places where they had previously lived (in addition to their countries of origin) and exploring the meanings of those place(s) in their everyday lives. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for respondents to share as much detail as they wished or felt comfortable in doing, and for us to explore what places meant to people – in the here and now as well as before they came to be in that place (Kaytaz 2016). We asked people to look forwards, to discuss their hopes and aspirations for the future in addition to looking back. Interviews navigated the ‘in-between’ in respect of people’s daily lives where *immobility*, either chosen or happenstance, rather than mobility is often the norm (Kaytaz 2016).

It is clear that the national and local context in which people make decisions – whether to stay or to leave, where to live, whether to seek legal protection, how to earn money – matters (Ashutosh and Mountz 2012). We therefore designed the research to collect and analyse data at three scales: the macro (institutional, political, economic); the meso (the everyday interactions with people and organisations which helped facilitate people’s journeys and everyday lives) and micro (individuals’ decision-making and life experiences) (Sladkova 2013). We selected more than 40 (anonymised) field-sites in the four countries: in Italy (Sicily, Puglia, Piedmont, Milan and Rome); Greece (Lesvos and Athens); Malta (Valletta); and in Turkey (Izmir and Istanbul). As far as was possible, we set up our framework to capture multiple snapshots through locating ourselves across multiple field-sites (Marcus 1995). This provided opportunities for a variety of interactions with respondents, who had multiple variants of physical and metaphorical journeys. Research sites included places where people were on the move (train stations), where they were living (asylum reception centres, community centres, shared apartments) and where they gathered (city squares, cafes, churches, mosques, providers of legal support and assistance). Interviews were conducted by bilingual field researchers or with the support of interpreters. Careful attention was paid to ethical issues including the need for sensitivity in recognising trauma and the assistance which interviewers could provide (BenEzer and Zetter 2014). Informed consent was cautiously sought from participants (Hugman, Bartolomei, and Pittaway 2011), with researchers mindful of the importance of anonymity in the context of potentially clandestine journeys (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016).

This article presents findings from interviews with Syrian, Nigerian and Afghan nationals, about their experiences in Turkey, Libya and Iran respectively. These three sets of interviews provide an opportunity to delve more deeply into the importance and meaning of places which are conceptualised as a place of transit by policy-makers. Forty Syrian refugees living in Izmir were interviewed about their experiences in Turkey after having fled the conflict in Syria (Crawley et al. 2018). We do not know whether they subsequently decided to move on to Europe or are still living in Turkey; in other words, whether Turkey became an ‘in-between’ or remained a destination. Afghans and Nigerians, by contrast, spoke about their experiences in places where they had lived previously (Iran and Libya, respectively), and which had, in a physical sense,

been an ‘in-between’ on their journeys. Forty-one Nigerians – 28 men and 13 women – were interviewed at field-sites across Italy, having arrived between several days and several years earlier. They had spent between one week and five years in Libya, living in Tripoli, Benghazi and Sabha having left Nigeria as a result of Boko Haram activities, localised conflict and disputes with the police or gangs (confraternities), family conflict and political activism which had put the interviewee and /or their family in danger (Crawley et al. 2018). Fifty-six Afghan respondents, almost all male, were interviewed in Greece and Turkey. Nearly half (43%) had left Afghanistan more than 5 years prior to their interview with us and, of these, a significant proportion (39% of the total) had been living outside Afghanistan, mainly in Iran, for more than 10 years. Most had left their homes in Teheran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Qum because the discrimination they faced in Iran had become intolerable and because they feared being forced to return to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

In this article, we analyse what we recognise to be reconstructed memories of living in places typically considered to be ‘in-between’. Memories are reconstructed by individuals and narrated within the context of current experiences (Burrell and Panayi 2006). It is possible, if not probable, that meanings attached by individuals to their journeys differed at the time we spoke to them from that consciously or unconsciously occurred at the time (BenEzer and Zetter 2014). Our research therefore provides an opportunity to explore the meanings of the ‘in-between’ both to people still living in those places and those who have moved on and are relating their experiences retrospectively. This enables us to compare the multiple meanings which places have for people at different points in both their physical and metaphorical (life) journeys.

Experiences and meanings: everyday life and the ‘in-between’

Afghan, Syrian and Nigerian respondents had multi-layered lives in the ‘in-between’ places, relating tales of family, friends, lovers, schools and work as well as their experiences of daily survival in the face of extreme challenges. These multiple meanings and narratives (BenEzer and Zetter 2014) indicated that they did not spend every day thinking about how to travel onwards to Europe. Indeed for many, and especially the Syrians interviewed in Turkey, this was not even a consideration: ‘My plan for the future is to stay here in Turkey and create a new life for myself’ (Syrian man, 23). Family life was of paramount importance to many and helped them to feel rooted. Their focus was on earning money and providing housing, education and healthcare for themselves and their children. For example, a Syrian woman who was living in Izmir with her husband and two children told us that her primary concern was ensuring that her children had access to education and that her husband earned enough to provide a life for them in Turkey:

I hope to live here in peace with my family. My husband is not registered but he works here as a tailor and earns relatively good [money]. We do not want to return to Syria or go to Europe. (Syrian woman, 30, married with three children)

For others, Izmir provided the security needed for them to focus on getting married and having children. Wider kinship and friendship networks also mattered and contributed to the meanings which respondents attributed to that place (Boyd 1989). Families, friends

and extended kin were sources of friendship as well as of practical support with accommodation and employment (Caarls, Bilgili, and Fransen 2020). They were especially important where refugees lacked financial support or other means.

We found that, for the most part, Syrians were managing to survive and make lives in Izmir even if these lives were sometimes precarious (see also Ilcan, Rygiel, and Baban 2018). There were however variations in their experiences, including by ethnicity. Syrian Kurds and Syrian Turks were especially likely to say that extended kin and friend networks had played an important role in their reason for moving to Izmir as well as in their ability to find work there:

My uncle was living in Izmir and he called me to come to Izmir. He knows Izmir very well. I trust him and decided to move Izmir for a better job. My uncle was working in a shoe shop. In Izmir, I settled to Gultepe district with the recommendation of my uncle and also considering that several Turkmen refugees were generally living around Gultepe district. (Syrian man, 29, married with one child)

As Kurdish is commonly spoken in Izmir, Syrian Kurds found it easier to find work than others. And as Syrian Turkmen already spoke some Turkish, for them too, building a new life in Izmir was less challenging than for other.

Afghan and Nigerian respondents also attached everyday meanings to their day-by-day lives in Iran and Libya. Whilst the decision to move on dominated many of the interviews, their stories of these places were more complex and nuanced than typically represented, reflecting the notion of the journey as a social as well as physical process (Kaytaz 2016). For Nigerians interviewed in Italy, Libya was a place in which they had experienced significant degrees of violence, fear and trauma, all of which had ultimately contributed to their onward movement. But it was also a place where they had worked, made friends and even fallen in love: even in the midst of conflict and societal breakdown, some Nigerians had been able to live ordinary lives in which friendships played a significant role. Friends helped people find work, lent them money, gave them a place to stay or helped find connections. For those who lived in Tripoli, finding friends who were better connected, who spoke Arabic and knew where to get jobs, were lifelines for their survival:

My friend's brother speaks Arabic. He speaks the language and helped me. So I didn't look for a job. I worked for him and stay with him. I'm his boy. Very good man. From same region. Good person. (Nigerian man, 32)

While friends were usually other Nigerian nationals – with whom they felt safe – they also sought and received assistance from other African nationals, especially other English-speaking West Africans. These friendships sometimes evolved into something more: one man told us that he fell in love with the woman who later became his wife whilst working in a shop in Tripoli. At the time we met them in Italy, the couple and their baby, conceived in Libya, were living separately in asylum centres but looking to find a way to get back together. Their love for one another had survived the difficult journey.

Many of the Nigerians we spoke with had travelled to Libya for work and had found meaningful and fulfilling jobs. For instance, a woman who had fled Nigeria because of threats attracted by her public role as a political activist, told us of how she had successfully found work on arrival in Libya in 2012:

My first job was as a cleaner in a hospital, I was there for 8 months. I was always nice to people. ... One day I was holding a door open for a visitor and said 'good day', and the visitor stopped and had a short conversation with me. He said 'your English is very good' and asked if I knew how to teach, I said 'yes!' And he replied 'well go and get your CV!'. He was a very important man in education in Libya and got me a job in a school straight away. (Nigerian widow, 37, with two children still in Nigeria)

Male respondents told us that even after the conflict intensified, they had travelled to wash cars, work in construction, clean and beg in Sabha, Tripoli and other towns in Libya, believing that they could avoid the conflict or that it would not be any worse than the situation they had left behind. Some even thought that the conflict would generate additional employment opportunities:

I learnt to be a muratore (builder) in Libya ... it was stable. Everybody is working in Libya because they destroy a house today [in the conflict] and build it again tomorrow. (Nigerian man, 25)

For many Afghan respondents similarly, Iran had been a place to which they had travelled for work and which came to be regarded as home: it was rarely viewed as a 'transit country'. As one young Afghan man travelling with his wife and child explained: 'I was born in Tehran. I have only been to Afghanistan when I was one or two years old.' Indeed two thirds (66%) of those we spoke to had either never been to Afghanistan or had not lived there for a considerable period of time: seven respondents had not been to Afghanistan for more than 20 years, and some for as long as 35 years. Almost all of those we interviewed spoke at length about the difficulties they experienced during their lives in Iran: difficulties in accessing papers, work, school and University; threats, racism and discrimination; experiences of violence and abuse. However whilst Iran was almost always described as a place in which it was very difficult to make a life, it was almost always represented as somewhere which had been a home rather than a place 'in-between'.

It is clear that the place in which an individual is interviewed has a significant impact on the narrative that is constructed to make sense of the journey and decisions taken along the way. Regardless of where people were interviewed, the meanings attached to places were often similar. For Syrians who had made their home in Izmir, everyday concerns about family, schools, work, predominated. Opportunities to work brought meaning as well as the resources for survival. Even for those interviewed in Europe for whom conversations centred on decisions to move on, these places were more than just a 'stepping stone' regardless of considerations about their physical journeys.

Becoming the physical 'in-between': the importance of place in moving on

Migrants narrate discrete physical journeys as embedded within a larger story arc of events and experiences which determine how they travel, where they go and why (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). In addition to providing a place to live, the places 'in-between' were also described in relation to their contribution to the decision to move on. In other words that were rarely places that were simply 'passed through'.

Nigerian respondents arriving in Libya after mid-2014 described staying alive as a factor which came to dominate their everyday lives and the role this played in their

decision to move. For these respondents Libya represented fear, trauma, violence. They recounted how dangerous Tripoli and its environs was for Black Africans during this time, with multiple accounts of randomised violence and robberies – by police, militias and even children:

It was terrifying in Libya. ... It was not peaceful in any way. You could not walk down the street without risk ... It was between life and death. Between you and God at any point. Anything can happen there at any time. Because of the crisis. Guns are everywhere. You have to sleep with your eyes open. (Nigerian man in his 20s)

People told us that they had witnessed deaths, including loved ones. Women reported sexual violence to be common (see also Esposito et al. 2016). The frequency of kidnapping involving detention in prisons increased, with respondents' release contingent on them or their family making substantial payments (see also Human Rights Watch 2019). Those who lacked money were kept and sometimes put to work, by those who were responsible for holding them:

It's a business, they keep you until you pay to get out ... if you are Nigerian, it's not going to be small [the amount to pay] because they think all Nigerians have money. (Nigerian man, 25)

Several of those we spoke to had been repeatedly detained by those who they understood to be police and militias. For the majority, life in Libya simply became untenable:

After we finished, they gave us an option: life or money. Guns were drawn. If you meet a nice man, you get paid. If not, then not. There is no way of knowing who is a nice man. Libya is a mafia town. Everyone does anything in a free way. Your territory. Your way. You can do anything. (Nigerian man, 25)

Regardless of how long they had been in Libya and their original intentions, travelling to Europe was described as an inevitability and a necessity to stay alive rather than a deliberate choice. Consistently, they told us that going back through the desert was more dangerous – and more traumatising – than boarding a boat across the Mediterranean:

It is too risky to go back across the desert. It is better to cross and risk your life in the sea than go back. ... In Libya, if you stay you know that one day you will die. In the desert you will die. It is better to risk your life in the boat. (Nigerian man in his 20s)

Afghans interviewed in Greece, similarly described the ways in which life in Iran and the socio-economic inequalities with which it was associated had motivated their decision to leave. Their accounts were dominated by a lack of rights accompanied by evidence of severe maltreatment, including summary deportations, physical abuse at the hands of security forces, limited job opportunities outside menial labour, and restricted access to education (Human Rights Watch 2013). As with Syrians living in Izmir, the intersection of place and ethnicity made a difference but this time it was a hindrance rather than a help. For many Afghans living in Iran, particularly those from the ethnic Hazara minority, experiences of severe discrimination, the absence of citizenship rights and a lack of education for children combined with anxieties about what would happen to them if they were to return to Afghanistan influenced the decision to leave. They told us about long and often soul-searching discussions with family members whilst they tried to work out what to do. One young man, let's call him Khalil, was just five years old when he left

Afghanistan with his family. He doesn't remember much about his time there but he recalls all too clearly the difficulties of life in Iran: moving between cities in the search for security and opportunities to rebuild a life, the failed attempts to become an engineer, the harassment and discrimination. Life for the family was hard without papers establishing their right to be in Iran. Khalil met an Iranian and together they opened a garage, but when Khalil's friend left his business was closed down by a rival garage owner who knew he didn't have a work permit. Khalil took up construction work, the only option available to him, to support the family and in particular his mother, who was suffering from poor health and needed to make frequent, expensive trips to the hospital. 'An Afghan can only become a manual worker in Iran' he told us, 'all the dirty jobs are done by Afghans, and their salaries are much lower than the Iranians'. Worse still, he said, there are no rights, no freedoms:

Afghans don't have a right to drive a motorcycle or a car. You cannot buy a SIM card if you are an Afghan in Iran. And you don't have the right to go to the flea market if you are an Afghan in Iran.

And then there was the violence: 'Iranians treat Afghans as if they are animals. I was stabbed twice while working at a construction site in Iran. But it was only when Khalil talked about his fiancé and their desire to get married that his sense of hopelessness became apparent. "Our lives" he said "slipped through our hands in Iran'. For some, this sense of hopelessness was accompanied by fear:

"In Iran I was afraid to go out. They are treating Afghans as if they are dogs" (Afghan man aged 32 travelling with his sister and her husband)

It is clear from these stories that respondents had multi-layered lives, ranging from everyday family and social lives, to experiences of violence and insecurity. Feelings about place may relate directly to the decision to move on (as shown here), or independently of decisions about the physical journey (as shown earlier). It in either case it is clear that to fully analyse migration as a social process, we need to more engage more meaningfully with the experiences in the places typically dismissed as 'in-between'.

More than 'stepping stones': why place matters

Depicting the countries in which refugees and other migrants had lived prior to their arrival in Europe as 'in-between' conceals not just the multi-layered meanings that migrants attach to place. It also obscures the histories, culture, economies and social lives of places that influence patterns of Afghan, Syrian and Nigerian migration and their experiences. In 2009, two years before the overthrow of the dictator Mu'ammarr Gaddafi, Libya hosted on its territory 2.5 million migrants, coming mostly from Africa but also from countries as far as Bangladesh and the Philippines (Toaldo 2015). In 2015, Turkey and Iran were among those countries hosting the largest number of refugees in the world (UNHCR 2016). Yet these factors were largely presented as incidental in Europe's so-called migration crisis.

Turkey, Libya, Iran are historically countries of immigration. For instance, contrary to the way Turkey was perceived by EU policy-makers as a stepping stone to Europe, the

previous two decades of economic growth in Turkey meant that it had become a country of immigration in its own right (Düvell 2014; İçduygu and Yürkseker 2012). And while the city of Izmir was portrayed by the media as a smugglers' transit hub (BBC 2016), it was also a thriving tourist destination with a strong local economy which attracted workers from across Turkey as well as regionally, including from Syria. Moreover, since the 1980s, Izmir had offered a home for internally displaced and refugee Kurdish peoples and by 2015, was home to an estimated 74,000 Syrians (Yildiz and Uzgoren 2016). These points of connection between people and places are reflected in the accounts we heard about how Syrian people came to be in Turkey – and Izmir – in the first place. It is these factors which underpinned the strong social networks and available jobs which helped Syrian refugees move to and settle in Izmir.

For some, journeys from Syria to Turkey had begun years long before the conflict began, illustrating the strength of the historic cross-border ties between the two countries. Many refugees, regardless of their ethnic background, had relatives in Turkey or had previously visited, worked and owned businesses in Turkey. For this group, the journey to Turkey was a continuation of ongoing cross-border mobility both before and after the onset of conflict in Syria:

I know Turkey well because I worked in Turkey and before I was often travelling from Kobane to Turkey in the last three years. I worked in Bursa, Istanbul, Malatya and saved some money. (Syrian man, 26)

A survey conducted in Turkey found that Syrian refugees felt close to Turks and viewed Turkey as a cultural as well as geographical neighbour (Erdogan 2018). Cultural familiarity was reflected upon by respondents in multiple ways, including in relation to a shared religion: 'Turkey is a Muslim country, so we prefer to stay here' (Syrian man, 43). At the same time, the relative security of Izmir and a shared culture was contrasted with the insecurity – physically and culturally – respondents felt about what life would be like in Europe:

I hope to stay in Turkey ... I never thought to go to Europe. They are not close to my culture and life. Moreover, the future there is unclear in Europe. Where will they put us? To house, camp or prison? I feel safe here, I wish to stay in Turkey. (Syrian Kurd, 29)

Similarly, Nigerian respondents followed a well-trodden trail to Libya which, until the fall of Gaddafi, had been a thriving oil autocracy dependent on migrant labour (Bredeloup and Pliez 2011). Nigerian labour migrants had long worked alongside Filipinos, Bangladeshis and Brits in construction, hospitality, teaching and healthcare:

One day a friend said we could go to Libya, that there is a lot of work there. I thought if I make money I can build a house to go back to ... So I moved to Libya. (Nigerian man, 26)

Iran meanwhile is not, and never has been, primarily a 'transit country' for Afghans. In 2015 Iran was the fourth largest refugee-hosting country in the world with nearly one million registered Afghan refugees and an estimated two million more who are undocumented (UNHCR 2016). Many arrived following the US-led invasion of 2001 but there is a long history of migration to the country (PRIO 2004). Whilst some of our respondents had passed quickly through the country, this was not the case for most.

'In-between' or 'in-place'? Everyday life beyond migration

This article has highlighted the multiple ways in which a neglect of the 'in-between', reflected and reinforced by the concept of 'transit migration', serves to silence the experiences of those living elsewhere, including the ways in which immobility is both enforced and chosen. People living outside their countries of origin are not simply 'passing time' waiting for the opportunity to move on, to Europe or elsewhere. They live, love and work in the places where they reside, in turn contributing to – and in some cases transforming – those spaces and their associated social, economic and political processes (Bredeloup 2012; Choplin and Lombard 2013). The decisions they take about whether or not to move on are embedded in the lives that are lived, the relationships that are formed and the opportunities that arise. Places have multiple meanings for people at different points in both their physical and metaphorical (life) journeys. Whilst we have drawn on the accounts of migrants who had lived in Turkey, Libya and Iran, we could equally have included migrants' narratives about life in other places which formed part of their physical journeys.

The evidence in this article contributes to how we think about migrant journeys in two important ways. Firstly, it challenges us to think very carefully about the people with whom we choose to conduct our research, how we define and categorise our respondents, the places where research is undertaken and the questions asked. Migration research always runs the risk of forgetting about significant immobilities, focusing on the people who move rather than those who stay (Kaytaz 2016; Schapendonk 2012). Focusing exclusively, or primarily, on people who move/move on limits our understanding of the lives of migrants and the physical journeys they take. This, in part, is because the labelling of a place as 'in-between', and those who leave it as having been 'in transit', only makes sense post-departure. For those who remain, by choice or otherwise, a life is made 'in-place'. Understanding the lives of migrants 'in-place' draws attention to the structural contexts within which migrant (and other) identities are formed and the ways in which refugees and other migrants – as human beings as well as people who have moved – find ways to exert agency and control over their lives even in conditions of hardship and insecurity. At the same time, asking questions only about the physical journey means that researchers miss all the multi-layered meanings which respondents attach to place beyond the decision to move or not move. Ultimately, they fail to analyse migration as a social process.

Secondly, the focus on what happens 'in-place' moves the gaze away from countries of origin and (assumed) destination and in so doing challenges political and policy assumptions about the linearity of physical migrant journeys. It is clear that the EU policy response to the so-called migration crisis was underpinned by flawed assumptions about the nature of journeys to Europe (Crawley et al. 2018; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). Our argument here is that the representation of countries outside Europe as places of 'stuckness' and 'un-being' not only limits our understanding of migrant journeys but feeds into anti-immigration discourses across the countries of the Global North. These discourses are increasingly harnessed by the countries of the Global South – particularly those labelled as 'transit countries' – to leverage political and financial power, often at the expense of migrants themselves (Cherti and Grant 2013). Reconceptualising the 'in-between' as a place in which people live, and not merely pass through, opens up the possibility of alternative policy approaches

beyond the border control processes on which contemporary policy-making is predominantly focused e.g. addressing structural inequalities that undermine life for migrants and their families in the countries to which they move including access to protection and the right to work. It also enables migrants to construct/narrate their own meanings and experiences about their own journeys (Kaiyoorawongs 2016; BenEzer and Zetter 2014).

Notes

1. We use the term ‘refugees and other migrants’ in this article to reflect the nature of ‘mixed flows’ across the Mediterranean and the movement of people between categories across time and space (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). This phrase avoids the implication that refugees are not also migrants (see also Carling 2015).
2. In 2018, for example, more than 700,000 Afghans left Iran and returned to Afghanistan driven by recent political and economic issues in Iran including massive currency devaluation and a sharp decline in employment opportunities. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-iran-migrants/more-than-700000-afghans-leave-iran-as-economy-slows-idUSKBN1O4145>
3. The ‘Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis (MEDMIG) project (September 2015–November 2016) was led by the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University as part of the ‘Mediterranean Migration Research Programme’ established through the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) £1 million ‘Urgency Grant’ and co-funded by the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID).
4. See, for example, Reuters World News, 11th January 2019 ‘EU-Turkey migrant deal ‘not working properly’: Germany’s Merkel, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-germany-merkel-refugees/eu-turkey-migrant-deal-not-working-properly-germanys-merkel-idUSKCN1P51VX>
5. The Telegraph, 31st August 2010, ‘Gaddafi: Europe will ‘turn black’ unless EU pay Libya £4bn a year’, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/7973649/Gaddafi-Europe-will-turn-black-unless-EU-pays-Libya-4bn-a-year.html>
6. Euractiv, 17th March 2017, ‘Turkey threatens to send Europe ‘15,000 refugees a month’, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/turkey-threatens-to-send-europe-15000-refugees-a-month/>

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