

A RE-POLITICIZED HISTORY OF IRANIAN TRANSIT MIGRANTS
PASSING THROUGH TURKEY IN THE 1980s

by

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“A Re-politicized History of Iranian Transit Migrants Passing Through Turkey in the 1980s,” a thesis prepared by Maral Jefroudi in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree at the Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History.

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Title: A Re-politicized History of Iranian Transit Migrants
Passing Through Turkey in the 1980s

This study scrutinizes the experiences of Iranian transit migrants passing through Turkey in the 1980s, whose history is dehumanized and depoliticized in the reconstruction of the history of Turkey's experience with transit migration. It is argued that extracting their stories for the sake of depicting a homogenized picture of Iranian transit migrants in the background disguises the conflicts, struggles, and strategies embedded in their lives in transit. It is also argued that their experiences of being in transit cannot be told without taking into account their pre-flight experiences and their subjective assessment of being a refugee. The present study focuses on Iranian transit migrants' relations with the Turkish authorities, their perceptions of being in transit in Turkey, and the relations among the community of Iranians in transit. It is argued that the degree of political affiliation was an important factor in the way they experienced being a transit migrant. Through the case of the Iranian transit migrants passing through Turkey in the 1980s, this study aims to contribute to the literature that challenges the victimized portrait of refugee. The main sources of this thesis are oral narratives of Iranian refugees living in Sweden and Germany, as well as written and filmed narratives of or pertaining to Iranians passing through Turkey.

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Başlık: 1980'lerde Türkiye'den Geçen İranlı Transit Göçmenlerin
Yeniden Politize Edilmiş Tarihi

Bu çalışma 1980'lerde Türkiye'den geçen ve Türkiye'nin transit göçle deneyiminin tarihini yeniden kurgulamak adına tarihleri insansızlaştırılıp depolitize edilen İranlı transit göçmenlerin deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Bu tezde, hikâyelerinin başka hikâyelerin arka planını oluşturacak homojen bir resim yaratmak uğruna çalınmasının, göçmenlerin transit hayatlarına gömülü çatışmaları, mücadeleleri ve stratejileri gizlediği ileri sürülmektedir. Ayrıca, kaçış öncesi deneyimlerini ve öznel olarak mülteci olma durumunu nasıl değerlendirdiklerini hesaba katmaksızın, transitte olma deneyimlerinin anlatılamayacağı savunulmaktadır. Bu çalışma, İranlı transit göçmenlerin Türkiyeli otoritelerle ilişkilerine, Türkiye'de transitte olmayı nasıl algıladıklarına ve transitte olan İranlılar arasındaki ilişkilere odaklanmaktadır. Politik bağlantıların derecesinin transit göçmen deneyimini belirleyen önemli bir etken olduğu öne sürülmektedir. Çalışma, 1980'lerde Türkiye'den geçen İranlı transit göçmenler vakası aracılığıyla, mültecinin kurbanlaştırılan çehresini sorgulayan eleştirel literatüre katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. İsveç ve Almanya'da yaşayan İranlı mültecilerin sözlü anlatılarıyla Türkiye'den geçen İranlılar hakkındaki yazılı ve filme çekilen anlatılar bu çalışmanın ana kaynaklarını oluşturmaktadır.

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INTRODUCTION

*[T]hough we know that certainty is bound to escape us,
the search provides focus, shape, and purpose
to everything we do.*

A. Portelli¹

There was a hostel at the Rahmanlar seashore, Sezil Camping. With a huge ping-pong table in the entrance (or the teller was small), beaded curtains dividing the entrance from the lobby, and a TV set at the corner. There are a few things that I remember: a shared kitchen, the heart-shaped burn on my hand caused by the splashed oil of the fried sausages, and turnip soup cooked by a curly haired, stubbled man (he wore a white sweater). And Bereket, the owner's cat. It was 1986. I was living with Iranians waiting to resume their journey. Each story has a beginning and even if it seems bizarre, this story dates back to twenty-two years ago.

This study is an outcome of the search for the footsteps of those people who fled from the very revolution they had struggled for, and arrived in Turkey with the intention of making their way to the West. This is an attempt to record their experiences of being in transit in Turkey. This is also an attempt to record the footsteps of the people that passed through Sezil camping.

A great number of the Iranians that fled from Iran after the consolidation of the Islamic Regime first came to Turkey. Their "passage" to Western countries took a couple of weeks for some, while many had to stay in Turkey for much longer.

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York State: 1991), p. ix.

Despite the frequency of the route's employment, the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s attracted the attention of journalists,² but not that of researchers.³ Furthermore, with the recent interest in the migration issue, their stories have been appropriated for constructing the genealogy of Turkey's experience with migration and have not gone beyond forming a background for other stories.

This study aims at challenging the homogenized picture of Iranian transit migrants in the background, dwelling on the historical quality of which this depiction is devoid of. This necessitates a perspective of concentration on the conflicts, struggles, and strategies; thus on the politics embedded in their relations with the Turkish and international authorities in charge of dealing with transit migrants, their own history of struggle and exile before they come to Turkey, and the relations among the community of Iranians in transit. However, conducting a comprehensive study including all these aspects is beyond the scope of the thesis. Here, this study

² "Federal Almanya/ İltica Hakkı: Mülteciye 'Domuz' Muamelesi," *Nokta*, 05 October 1986; "Söyleşi / Farah Diba'nın Kuaförü: Diba Saçı Lütfen," *Nokta*, 02 November 1986; "İranlı Kaçaklar/ Anamur Burnu Komitesi: Denizden Mazlum Toplayanlar," *Nokta*, 01 February 1987; "Mülteciler/ Türkiye'deki İranlılar: Coğrafyamız İzin Vermiyor," *Nokta*, 31 May 1987.

³ Except for Janet Bauer's illuminating study that focuses on women refugees and compares Germany and Turkey with respect to the conditions of refugee life, it is hard to find the traces of Iranian refugees' temporary stay in Turkey in the literature. Among the studies conducted in Turkey, there is only one study "A fieldwork on the post-1979 Iranian Migrants in İstanbul" conducted by Edman Nematı which can be evaluated as the account of a graciously conducted questionnaire. He presented the answers given to his survey with 104 Iranians, most of whom had left Iran in the years 1987-1989. However, it is no more than a collection of answers given by those 104 Iranians to a number of questions from various realms (from the languages they know, the number of children they have to their evaluation of the Islamic Regime's foreign policy). It gives information on those 104 Iranians (there are important ones as well) but it is hard to say that they are collected into a meaningful whole. It is full of generalizations on various realms without a comprehensive analysis of the percentages it gives. Nevertheless, the study's intention to make a cause out of those Iranians' problems and its declared aim to publicize migrants' problems worldwide in a context that they are completely neglected renders the study notable. See Bauer, "A Long Way Home: Islam in the Adaptation of Iranian Women Refugees in Turkey and West Germany" in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi, (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991) and Nematı, 1979 Sonrası İstanbul'da Bulunan İranlı Göçmenler Üzerine Saha Çalışması (masters thesis, University of İstanbul, 1989).

attempts to make a contribution to refute the dehumanized and depoliticized history of the Iranian transit migrants of Turkey in the 1980s, by focusing on their experiences of being in transit. It is hoped that the case of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s not only will provide insight for the missing chapter of Turkey's experience with transit migrants, but also will contribute to the critical literature on refugee studies.

By focusing on their experiences of being in transit, it is not attempted to create a myth out of the "authentic experiences" of the Iranian transit migrants while trying to refute the myth of "one and a half million Iranians smoothly transiting." Accordingly, the primary question that accompanied the writing process was the validity of taking the narrated experiences of transit migrants as the reflection of "what happened." Taking experience as an unmediated source of knowledge would disguise the social texture of the construction of these experiences. Furthermore, prioritizing the narrative of the interviewed, "authentic" Iranian transit migrants in the attempt of understanding that era might have "burdened [them] the role of a 'representative' who 'speaks for' the entire community from which she or he comes."⁴ It was not wished to juxtapose oral sources with the written ones, but to refute the latter's construction of a homogenized group of people in transit by the tools the former renders possible. Thus, the narrated experiences are taken into account with the histories of the narrators and the conflictual social space in which

⁴ Kobena Mercer, "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 67. Cited in Ulrike Erichsen, "A 'True-True' Voice: The Problem of Authenticity," in *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*, ed. Liselotte Glage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 201.

the experiences took place. Therefore experience is taken as a process in making and a key to understanding the social reality of the studied era.⁵

The selection of the sources employed for the study was not secondary to the formation of its cause. This study is in fact designed as a response to the lack of the stories of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s in a literature that initiates Turkey's experience of transit migration with the arrival of post-revolutionary Iranians to Turkey. As will be seen in the subsequent pages, it was the extraction of their stories in the written [academic] accounts that urged me to search for Iranian transit migrants' footsteps elsewhere. Thus I began to search for the traces of transit life in Turkey through memoirs, novels, movies, and most importantly the oral narratives of Iranians who had been transit migrants in the 1980s. And those narratives revealed that there is more to the written history of being a Non-European transit migrant in Turkey.⁶

Alessandro Portelli's oral history approach assured that elaborating on the former transit migrants' narratives would lead us to know more about the content of being a post-revolutionary Iranian transit migrant in Turkey. Portelli underlines that oral history not only gives us information about illiterate people or social groups but people "whose written history is either missing or distorted."⁷ It tells us more than "what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing,

⁵ See Aksu Bora, *Kadınların Sınıfı: Ücretli Ev Emeği ve Kadın Öznelliğinin İnşası* (İstanbul: İletişim yayımları, 2005), pp. 32-33; For further discussion on experience see CHAPTER VI.

⁶ Portelli states that "oral history has been about the fact that there's more to history than presidents and generals, and there's more to culture than the literary canon." in *The Death Of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, p. viii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

and what they now think they did.”⁸ Thus, resorting to oral history not only gives us “more history,” but also more meaning.

Moreover, two aspects of oral sources should be mentioned. The first pertains to the credibility of the sources and the second to the study of the sources. For the assessment of the credibility of oral sources, stating that oral history is a key to meaning rather than events is not sufficient. However, Portelli underlines that factual credibility cannot be seen as a monopoly of written documents as those written documents have not always been “written” as well. He states that written documents are very often “only the uncontrolled transmission of unidentified oral sources.”⁹ Thus the objectivity that those written sources claim disguises the process of the sources’ formation. In this respect, oral sources are not categorically different from written sources with respect to credibility.

However, the different nature of working with the oral sources must be acknowledged. Oral sources are living sources; therefore it is not possible to conduct a study based on oral sources without the subjects’ participation to the process. Thus, despite the written sources, oral sources respond and react to the way they are being studied. However, this is more an opportunity than a challenge. It provides a more open interaction between the agenda of the interviewee, “the source,” and the agenda of the researcher.¹⁰ However, starting with a set of questions and finishing the interview only with the responses given to those questions would block the possibility of such an interaction. The practice of oral history necessitates and requires dialogue.

⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. xi.

The main material of this research involves interviews conducted with twenty-one refugees (six women and fifteen men) living in Sweden (Stockholm, Malmö, and Lund) and Germany (Cologne), who had firstly stopped at Turkey after their flight from Iran.¹¹ They had mostly fled Iran in the mid-1980s, the earliest being in 1982 and the latest in 1990. Three of the interviewees had stayed in Turkey at most for two weeks, and consistently our interview could not last more than half an hour. The longest stay in Turkey was two years. The average length of our interview session was one and a half hours; for three cases, we met twice. The interviews were conducted at cafes in the neighborhoods selected by the interviewees, in the interviewees' homes, and in their working places. All the interviews were conducted in Persian and tape recorded. During the interviews I assured the interviewees that their identities would not be exposed and as I did not have the chance to present this last format of the study to re-ask their permission for using their names, I respect their concerns about keeping their identity secret and have used pseudonyms.

Apart from the interviews, other forms of narratives were also involved in the study. Mehri Yalfani's novel *Afsaneh's Moon*, Abbas Kazerooni's autobiographic novel *The Little Man* and most importantly Reza Allamezadeh's movie *The Guests of Hotel Astoria* were employed both as narratives of Iranian refugees and as products in circulation that kept the memory of being a transit migrant in Turkey, alive.

¹¹ Sweden and Germany were popular countries of destination for the post revolutionary Iranian refugees. Hassan Hosseini-Kaladjahi points to the years between 1984 and 1988 for Iranian refugee flow to Sweden, the number of Iranian citizens in Sweden had grown from 8342 in 1985 to 38,982 in 1990. See Hassan Hosseini-Kaladjahi, *Iranians in Sweden: Economic, Cultural and Social Integration* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1997), pp. 184-185; Patrick R. Ireland states that Germany, particularly prior to its amendment of asylum law in 1993, received three quarters of Europe's political refugees. See Patrick R. Ireland, "Socialism, Unification Policy and the rise of Racism in Eastern Germany," *The International Migration Review* 31, no. 3 (Fall 1997), p. 555.

Snowball sampling, which is based on forming a network with the references given by the interviewed refugees, was employed for meeting interviewees. In Sweden, I had the opportunity to have the project announced on a Swedish radio channel broadcasting in Persian before my visit there and I had one respondent who had left her telephone number after the radio broadcast. The interviewees in Germany (one-third of the total interviews) knew each other and were from the same organization, the People's Fadaiyan. In Sweden, I had more than one key informant, thus the people interviewed were from more various backgrounds. However, despite the employment of various references for finding interviewees, it is worth mentioning that there were cross references to the people that I interviewed in Sweden.

All in all, the interviewed refugees were mostly political refugees, and the most salient political affiliation was with the People's Fadaiyan. Most of them were still engaged in politics, not in terms of political affiliation with a party or organization but in terms of engaging in discussions via writing articles published in online journals or weblogs. Among the interviewees there were mother-tongue (Persian) teachers, photocopy shop workers and share-holders, maids in nursery schools, journalists and people from various occupational groups such as a restaurant owner, a taxi driver, a publisher, a psychologist, a librarian, and a pharmacologist. Most of the interviewed refugees were in their forties, with the exception of four refugees in their late fifties and early sixties.

I tried to engage in a *thick dialogue* with the interviewees, which allowed for more space to answers than questions and enabled a dialectical relation between

questions and answers.¹² This made it possible to obtain information on the grounds that did not seem to be important for the study before engaging in dialogue with the refugees (i.e., inter group distinctions). Asking open ended questions with more emphasis on “how” rather than “what” rendered it possible to have responses not particularly to the questions that I thought were important, but to the ones that were important for them, which later turned to be important for the study, too. Thus, it should be mentioned that although my agenda was influential in the formation of this study (i.e., asking the primary questions, selecting themes, and organizing the study), its content would be quite different if it weren’t for the narratives of the refugees.

Asking people to tell you the most important and most of the time the most painful days of their lives required a more relevant explanation than mere academic engagement. That’s why I explained my purpose and the reasons of undertaking such an issue for research before starting the interview. At times, I shared my story with them as I didn’t want to be at a position of “extracting” their story for my individual/academic purposes. Most of the time, our dialogue continued off record and we exchanged telephone numbers and emails.

Portelli underlines that “what the interviewer reveals about him or herself is ultimately relevant in orienting the interview toward monologue or self-reflexive thick dialogue.”¹³ This became apparent after the first interviews. In the first interviews I planned not to ask the interviewees about their organizational background, although I had some prior information. However, each time our dialogue brought us to a moment that organizational backgrounds were revealed. And after that moment my personal history was important to build rapport with the

¹² Portelli, *The Battle of Vale Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

interviewees. I was the same ages as their children, if they had any; had family members who were from their organizations; and had lost dearest ones in similar ways that they did. I did not share my story to learn more, but particularly to be able to continue to speak especially in times of rupture, such as an elder brother's account of his brother's being killed under cross fire or a mother's account of shouting at her son attempting to take a piece of bread that was being saved for the next day's food.

Due to visa restrictions, I had only one month (05 August 2007- 05 September 2007) to carry out the interviews and it was the first time that I was at Cologne, Malmö, and Stockholm. Orientation to each city cost me one to two days and when the time for arranging the appointments was taken into account, I was unable to meet more than once with most of the interviewees. So I had only one chance to introduce myself and build rapport with the interviewees which, for most cases, I was fortunately able to do particularly because of my references and personal history. However, a longer period of stay in those cities would have unquestionably provided me with more chances to engage in dialogue with Iranian refugees and help me to convey the period with more depth.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that this study is also stricken with the problem of not being able to assess the composition of the actual population studied. Apart from the discussion on the number of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s, which will be held in the third chapter; it is not possible to give an answer to the question of "who were those people in transit?" There are various attempts at describing that population. It is widely agreed that the migration flow from Iran in the 1980s was more politically oriented than the post-1990 flow.¹⁴ Furthermore, the

¹⁴ Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "Iranians," in *Case Studies in Diversity: Refugees in America in the 1990s*. ed. D.W. Haines (London: Praeger, 1997), p. 88. Cited in Sebnem Koser-

first revolution related migration wave to the United States (starting before the revolution) is argued to include “high status migrants” who had high levels of education and income. For example, it is stated that Iranian non-student migrants had much higher average individual income compared to the *natives* and other foreign born residents of the United States in 1979.¹⁵ These “high status migrants” do not characterize the post-revolutionary Iranian migration wave in the literature; however, there is a general perception that the first post-revolutionary Iranian migrants had a higher economic status than the recent migrants.¹⁶

Both the “political” character of the first post-revolutionary Iranian refugees and their economic status needs further elaboration. The available data for the population studied, namely the Iranian transit migrants that passed through Turkey in the 1980s, is consistent with the above mentioned accounts of the political quality of the first post-revolution Iranian refugees, while it is hardly possible to have access to information on the economic status of the transit migrants of the 1980s apart from oral narratives of the refugees. According to the unofficial UNHCR sources of the 1987, the biggest group of recognized Iranian refugees in Turkey was composed of anti-regime activists (57 percent), to be followed by draft evaders (25 percent). With respect to the refugees’ political affiliations; 36 percent of the refugees claimed to be affiliated with the People’s Mojahedin, 35 percent with leftist organizations (i.e.,

Akcapar, “Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey,” *The International Migration Review* 40, no.4 (Winter 2006), p. 822; also see “The Formation of the 1994 Regulation: Law as an Arena of Conflict” in chapter three of the present study.

¹⁵ Bozorgmehr and Georges Sabagh “High status immigrants: a statistical profile of Iranians in the United States,” *Iranian Studies* 21, no.3 (1988), p. 34.

¹⁶ Sebnem Koser-Akcapar, “Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey,” *The International Migration Review* 40, no.4 (Winter 2006), p. 822.

Fadaiyan, Komala, Tudeh), 12 percent with monarchists, 4.5 percent with Muslim religious opposition groups, and 0.5 percent with nationalist opposition groups.¹⁷

This data should be evaluated cautiously. It is true that UNHCR seeks “well founded” fear of persecution as a prerequisite for granting asylum and has sophisticated methods for assessing the authenticity of the applicants’ claims. However, their authority does not stay unchallenged. Despite the warning of refugee advocacy groups and the UNHCR itself, refugees search for ways of strengthening their applications. For example, the presence of “story selling” people in the satellite cities, in which asylum seekers reside, points to such an effort. There are other ways of “deceiving” the authorities that do not recognize the actual reasons of refugees’ flight, as well. These tactics block the researchers’ means of access to the actual composition of the studied population.

James Scott argues that such tactics should be studied as acts of *everyday resistance*, which is “a stratagem deployed by a weaker party in thwarting the claims of an institutional or class opponent who dominates the public exercise of power.”¹⁸ The widespread employment of political causes for flight among post-revolutionary Iranian refugees should be elaborated with that insight. Being the most “legitimate” reason of flight, it was unlikely for the people who did not want to live in post-revolutionary Iran not to claim political reasons for their flight. Therefore, consistent with Scott’s employment (i.e., claiming membership to the government party for the

¹⁷ Janet Bauer, “A Long Way Home: Islam in the Adaptation of Iranian Women Refugees in Turkey and West Germany,” in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi. (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991), p. 97.

¹⁸ James C. Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colburn (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), p. 23.

benefits that it provide),¹⁹ dissimulation should be taken as an important tactic for the Iranian refugees of the 1980s. It should be mentioned that resorting to such tactics does not necessarily imply the insincerity of the claims of fear of persecution, but at times, to the inability of the decision giving authorities to assess them.

Such acts of everyday resistance are not particular to the Iranian refugees of the 1980s, but have evolved to an important issue of discussion among scholars studying refugees. Gaim Kibreab recounts refugees' attempts at thwarting censuses in the refugee camps and resettlements for increasing their share of benefits and their splitting of their families into different camps for getting more compensation as examples of refugees' tricks against the "faceless" institutions such as UNHCR and the NGOs aiding refugees.²⁰ He points to refugees' lack of participation in the allocation of resources as the reason underlying these tricks and juxtapose these tricks to refugees' inter-community faithfulness. Barbara Harrell-Bond's response to his article puts the name of the question bearing the title "Weapons of the Weak."²¹ Such forms of everyday resistance will be elaborated in the sixth chapter on self-differentiation tactics of Iranian transit migrants in the 1980s. However, it is important to note that such forms of resistance have also blocked our means of having access to the actual quality of the Iranians in transit in the 1980s.

As will be seen in the proceeding pages (i.e., the fourth chapter), the present study includes the narratives of the refugees who claim to be political. However, some of the stories did not include "political reasons" for flight in terms of affiliation

¹⁹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 281.

²⁰ Gaim Kibreab, "Pulling the Wool Over the Eyes of the Strangers: Refugee Deceit and Trickery in Institutionalized Settings," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004).

²¹ Barbara Harrell-Bond, "Response to Kibreab: Weapons of the Weak," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004).

with a certain anti-regime group. Thus, these self-descriptions should be taken into account cautiously and it should not be assumed that all the people who called themselves political constitute a monolithic entity. The question of “what is political” is beyond the scope of the present study. However, it should be mentioned that despite its usage of “political” particularly with reference to leftist political activists, this study does not attempt at rejecting the political quality of non-leftist Iranians’ reasons of flight. That is to say, it is not attempted to state that women’s fleeing because of the discrimination and suppression they face, or the homosexuals’ fear of persecution is less political than the leftist political activists’ reasons for flight. However, the above mentioned dissimulation about political identities render it difficult to bridge the gap between the claimed identities recorded by the institutions and the actual composition of the Iranians in transit in the 1980s’ Turkey.

As mentioned before, our sample is highly dominated by leftist refugees, particularly from the People’s Fadaiyan. The selection of the countries that interviews took place was effective in that result (a similar study focusing on refugees in France or the United States would give different results). However, it was mostly the employment of snowball sampling that brought forth such a composition. Thus this study should be read as an effort of re-politicizing the homogenized picture of Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s by introducing mostly the case of the leftist transit migrants which might not be representative of the Iranians that have passed through Turkey in the 1980s. It is hoped that this study is followed by studies of different experiences of being in transit such as living as an Armenian Iranian or a Kurdish Iranian in Turkey; living as a transsexual Iranian in a central Anatolian satellite city; or living in a constant state of being in transit after a “successful” migration to the countries of destination.

This study is composed of seven chapters. In the second chapter, I tried to provide an introduction to the main discussions on the meaning of being in transit and the depiction of refugee. This chapter aims to question the premises underlying the refugee's problematization. The third chapter provides a setting for the story of Iranian refugees' temporary stay in Turkey. It presents the conditions of being in transit in Turkey accounting for the Turkish state's practices vis-à-vis Non-European asylum seekers with respect to its one and only asylum regulation and introducing the Iranians' case as a key for questioning the categories imposed by the states and decision giving authorities. The fourth chapter portrays the flight of the Iranian transit migrants and elaborates on the influence of their past experiences to the formation of their refugee subjectivity. In this chapter, the degree of political affiliations is introduced as an important variable defining the experience of being in transit. The fifth chapter seeks to answer to question of the perception of Turkey by the Iranian refugees. What does Turkey, as a first stop, represent in the narratives of migration from Iran? How is this representation circulated and how does it effect the Iranian refugees' perceptions of having been in Turkey? The sixth chapter presents tactics employed by Iranian transit migrants in their everyday life struggle over being in transit. This chapter offers alternative axes of self-differentiation through the case of Iranian transit migrants. And finally, in the Conclusion, the main arguments of the study are summarized and remarks for future research are made.

CHAPTER II

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Since 1988 more than four thousand people have been lost at sea while trying to reach Europe.²² And four have been added to these numbers recently. On 23 April 2008, the Turkish police forced eighteen people, among whom were five Iranian refugees recognized by the UNHCR, to swim to Iraq. And four of them, involving one recognized Iranian refugee, were drowned in the Tigris River.²³

There are 191 million migrants in the world, thirty to forty million of whom are “unauthorized.”²⁴ UNHCR figures indicate 9,877,700 refugees; 740,000 asylum seekers, and 733,600 “repatriated” refugees, by 15 June 2007.²⁵ Yet, due to the lack of official figures and the clandestine nature of most of the migration stories, it is hard to estimate the real number of people leaving their country hoping to make a new start somewhere else. Furthermore, these figures can only provide access to the

²² Fortress Europe, 1988-2007 Press Review, Available [online]: <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/2006/01/fortress-europe.html> [05 May 2008].

²³ “UNHCR deplores refugee expulsion by Turkey which resulted in four deaths,” UNHCR Press Releases, 25 April 2008, Available [online]: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/4811e23c4.html> [01 May 2008]; “Dicle’de boğulan mültecilerle ilgili ortak basın açıklaması,” 02 May 2008, Available [online]: <http://www.hyd.org.tr/?pid=620> [05 May 2008].

²⁴ International Organization for Migration, *Global Estimates and Trends*, Available [online]: “<http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/pid/254>” [03 December 2007].

²⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database*, Available [online]: “<http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/populationdatabase>” [04 December 2007].

configuration of the people in movement at the specific point in time when the “count” takes place. However, people do not freeze in time as those numbers do. Both the categories imposed on them by the decision making authorities (i.e., states and international organizations) and their self-identification with those or other categories change as they continue to live.

Refugees have been studied by scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., law, political science/international relations, anthropology, demography, sociology, psychology) and accordingly, the literature pertaining to migrants or refugees is monumental. This chapter provides an introduction to the main discussions on the concepts that will be employed throughout this study according to their relevance to the scope of this study. Critical accounts on transit migration, the depiction of refugee and the assumptions underlying the perception of the “problem” are presented.

Defining Transit Migration

A great number of migration stories have more than one episode. The stricter border controls become, the more episodes are added to the journey. As will be seen in the case of the post-revolutionary Iranian refugees, leaving the country of origin is most of the time the hardest attainable goal for refugees. Thus, to a great extent the phenomenon of “transit migration” has emerged from a necessity. The widely used description refers to transit migrants as “people who come to a country of destination with the intention of going to and staying in another country.”²⁶ It should be noted

²⁶ Ahmet İçduygu, “Transit Migrants and Turkey,” *Boğaziçi Journal: Review of Social, Economics and Administrative Studies* 10, no.1-2 (1996), p. 127.

that the phenomenon of people in transit is strongly related to the restrictive policies against the free movement of people.

Khalid Koser argues that the international asylum regime that emerged in the context of World War II for the protection and the resettlement of the refugees produced by the war has evolved into a restrictive system characterized by reluctance to admit asylum seekers and grant asylum.²⁷ Koser takes the 1973 oil crisis and the end of the Cold War as the cornerstones of that restrictive approach.²⁸ While the former paved the way for the restriction of economic migration with the decline in the demand of foreign workers, the latter ceased the ideological or strategic motivations of the Western World to resettle people that had “escaped from communism.”

However, when legal doors are closed, illegal ones are opened. “The end of West’s sympathy,” in Behzad Yaghmaian’s terms, has resulted in a *wandering* population in search of smugglers.²⁹ As Koser indicates, this restrictive approach resulted not only in increasing the numbers of asylum-seekers, but also in the convergence of economic migrants and political refugees under the name of asylum-seeker, which generated a “crisis” for the system that attempted to sort out the “genuine” refugees in need of protection and block the “bogus.”³⁰

²⁷ Khalid Koser, “New Approaches to Asylum?” *International Migration* 39, no.6 (2001), p.85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁹ Behzad Yaghmaian, *Embracing the Infidel: Stories of Muslim Migrants on the Journey West* (New York: Delta trade, 2006), pp. 216-218.

³⁰ This convergence is conceptualized as “the migration-asylum nexus.” Koser, pp. 87-89.

Thus, transit migration is a product of increasing border controls, reluctance to admit asylum seekers, and granting asylum. Taking transit migration and smuggling as the result of the deficiencies of asylum policies, Aspasia Papadopoulou argues that transit migration or irregular migration should not be taken as different types, but as “different phases” of migration.³¹ According to Papadopoulou, “temporary residence in the first host country is a mechanism of negotiation with the structures of exclusion in Europe.”³²

Elsewhere, Papadopoulou criticizes the previously cited definition of transit migration as it stresses the transit migrants’ intention of going and staying in another country, by stating that such an intention might not exist at the beginning of the journey and that some migrants become transit migrants “by accident.”³³ She underlines that transit migration is not a status, but a process that is negotiated in relation with the structural and individual factors.³⁴

However, it is necessary to state that the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s fit the criticized description ideally. That is, they fled to Turkey with the *intention* of going to some other country. It is true that the destination country and the route that would be employed were not thoroughly thought, but the intention was explicit. Only two out of the twenty-one refugees interviewed thought of settling in Turkey. They were political militants who pursued political activities in Turkey, hoping that regime

³¹ Aspasia Papadopoulou, “Smuggling into Europe: Transit Migrants in Greece,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no.2 (2004), p. 168.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Papadopoulou, “Exploring the Asylum-migration Nexus: A Case Study of Transit Migrants in Europe,” *Global Migration Perspectives*, no. 23 (January 2005), p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*; Papadopoulou, “Smuggling into Europe,” p. 175.

change was close and they would return to Iran. Therefore permanent settlement in Turkey was not seen as an option by the interviewed refugees.³⁵

Transit migrants are mainly composed of people who have not been registered in the first country of asylum to be able to proceed to another country,³⁶ people that do not fit the asylum framework identified in the 1951 Convention, but are still in need of moving to another country, and people whose asylum claims have been rejected. Thus the very category of “transit migrant” points either to the inefficiency of the ideal categories to enable protection for the people who claim it, or to the hardship of having access to that protection.

Furthermore, with respect to the stereotype of “refugee as a victim,” “transit migrant” is a challenging category. There is no question that “being ‘in transit’ is a period of vulnerability, insecurity, and socio-economic marginalization”³⁷ particularly when the period in transit lasts more than the bearable amount of time. However, if we pay attention to the reaction with which the refugees are faced when they do not confine themselves to the fate that is designed by the decision givers, we see that any possibility of such an attempt is encountered with suspicion of his/her asylum claim’s genuineness. Not willing to stay in the first country of asylum (especially when, officially there is no obstacle against the asylum seeker’s application) is easily labeled as an attempt at “asylum shopping” with an approach of denying the refugee’s agency in the choice of his/her destination.

³⁵ We will elaborate on their perception of Turkey in the fifth chapter. Edman Nematı’s study underlines the presence of such an intention as well.

³⁶ According to the 1991 Dublin Convention, the asylum determination process should take place in the first country of asylum in Europe.

³⁷ Papadopoulos, “Transit Migrants in Greece,” p. 175.

This approach is not left without criticism. Koser argues that, refugees' motivations for leaving should not be confused with their attempt to choose their country of destination. He underlines that "it is reasonable to expect that someone fleeing persecution will at the same time try to apply for asylum in a country where he or she has an existing social network, understands the language, and has a chance to work."³⁸ Thus, not staying in the first country of asylum, which is intrinsic to the definition of transit migration, highlights the existence of choice in refugees' flight plans. And that is in contradiction with the conventional definition of the refugee as the person who has no other choice than to flee.

Questioning the denial of refugee's agency is the leitmotiv of this study. However, neglecting refugee's right to choose is part of a greater picture of "Refugee" depicted by a great number of states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The subsequent part will dwell on this picture and the assumptions that underlie its depiction.

Depicting the Refugee

The "unofficial" thoughts of the General Directorate of Security Affairs of Turkey on a recent report on the detention centers for refugees in Turkey illuminates the liveliness of the debate on categories.³⁹ The very first objection of the General

³⁸ Koser, p. 88.

³⁹ An email sent to the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in 13 March 2008 cited in Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Refugee Legal Aid and Advocacy Programme, "Raporla İlgili Ön bilgi," *İstenmeyen Misafirler: Türkiye'de "Yabancı Misafirhanelerinde" Tutulan Mülteciler*, Prepared at December 2007, Released at April 2008. Available [online]: <http://www.hyd.org.tr/?pid=607> [03 April 2008]. For English, see "Addendum to the Report," *Unwelcome Guests: The Detention of Refugees in Turkey's "Foreigners'*

Directorate was that the report was not based on information gathered from refugees, but from illegal migrants. A similar reaction was observed in a symposium where the director of the Asylum, Migration and Citizenship branch of the General Directorate objected to a researcher's employment of the word "integration" for the Iraqi transit migrants in Turkey, stating that "integration" is not a term to be employed for the illegal migrants.⁴⁰

Asylum seekers' flight conditions taken into account, the "legality" of entering to Turkey and having the relevant documents for claiming legal status is harder than that can be anticipated. If we get back to the UNHCR definition of refugee that stresses the individual's "well founded fear of persecution" as the main criteria of the refugee framework, it is comprehensible to state that "refugee" is not a status decided and granted by states and international organizations, but a description of the situation of the person who has a well founded fear of persecution pertaining to her religion, race, ethnicity, political opinions, or a particular social group to which s/he belongs.⁴¹

However, there are various definitions of "refugee" accounted in various realms. For example, Edward Said differentiates between exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés. He argues that the word refugee suggests "large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance," while

Guesthouses." Available [online]:
http://www.hyd.org.tr/staticfiles/files/rasp_detention_report.pdf

⁴⁰ Kadir Ay in response to Didem Danış in "Türkiye'ye olan Uluslararası Göçün Yönleri: Toplumsal Şartlar ve Kişisel Yaşam Dünyaları," Orient Institut, Istanbul and Goethe Institut, Istanbul, 7-10 March 2007.

⁴¹ This approach has been argued to be refugee's legal definition in Helsinki RLAP's response to the previously cited abjection of the General Directorate of Security Affairs. In *İstenmeyen Misafirler: Türkiye'de "Yabancı Misafirhanelerinde" Tutulan Mülteciler / Unwelcome Guests: The Detention of Refugees in Turkey's "Foreigners' Guesthouses.*

exile indicates “solitude and spirituality.”⁴² Hammed Shahidian uses exile, refugee, and expatriate interchangeably⁴³ while Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi differentiate exile and refugee first due to the degree of choice in their flight (exiles are taken to possess a degree of choice); second due to the exiles’ personal motivations and refugees’ externalized, state-influenced pressures; and third by the “desire to go home” that the exile experiences while refugees “seek a permanent home” outside their country of origin.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the most “popular” axis of differentiation is the one that classifies people in move according to two main motivations: economic or political.

Himself an exile in France (d. 1985), the famous Iranian writer Gholamhossein Saedi in his widely cited and harshly criticized⁴⁵ article “*Degardissi va Rahaii-ye Avareh-ha*” differentiates between exiles (*avareh*) and émigrés (*mohajer*).⁴⁶ Dramatically depicted, Saedi presents a number of different attributes:

It is true that an *avareh*, like an *émigré*, suffers from being away from home. But he has no choice of living in a better place. [...] An *émigré* has a choice: north, south, right, left, in the corner of this island, or a lagoon. [...] An *avareh*, however, has no choice. He has been forced to take refuge in the only place offered to him. An *avareh* is a refugee, a prisoner.⁴⁷

⁴² Edward Said, “Reflections on exile” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 181.

⁴³ Hammed Shahidian, “Iranian Exiles and Sexual Politics: Issues of Gender Relations and Identity,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9, no.1 (1996).

⁴⁴ Annabelle Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, “Iranian exiles as Opposition: Some Theses on the Dilemmas of Political Communication Inside and Outside Iran,” in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991). p. 206.

⁴⁵ Daryush Shayegan, *Yaralı Bilinç* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2007), p. 99-100.

⁴⁶ Translated as “Metamorphosis and Emancipation of the *Avareh*,” trans. Hammed Shahidian, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 7, no.4 (1994).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

An *émigré* is hopeful. [...] [He] takes vitamins and visits museums for the sake of maintaining his health and sanity. He is well integrated into the routine of life: he enjoys movies, wearing a tie and relaxing in a park. The *émigré* believes that he is deeply rooted and does not know that a pulled-out root will eventually rot, and cause the fall of even the haughtiest, largest tree.⁴⁸

An *avareh*, however, is a pessimist. He knows that he has been chopped up- not a portion of his body but a portion of his being. The *avareh* sees that his pulled out roots are rotting just as gangrene first blackens its victim's feet, works its way up his body and eventually, if not killing the patient, immobilizes him, uprootedness makes the *avareh* visibly see his own gradual death.⁴⁹

Although Saedi's *avareh* is depicted as a passive and desperate being, it should also be noted that s/he is more conscious than an *émigré* and has the potential of changing the system, as he proposes at the end of his article. *Avareh* may be the one who is suppressed, but s/he is also the one who is aware of that suppression.

All in all, from Said to Saedi who have experienced "exile" themselves, the refugee is depicted as bewildered, helpless, desperate, and uprooted. However, the assumptions underlying this description are effectively questioned by critical scholars among whom we will elaborate on Barbara Harrell-Bond and Liisa Malkki's arguments. Here, two aspects of these assumptions will be questioned: first, the abstraction of refugee and secondly the presumption of his/her "roots."

The Universal Refugee

Malkki criticizes the tendency in refugee studies of assuming a generalized type of people under the label "refugee." She argues that an essentialized, anthropological

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 414.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

tribe is created out of refugees who are not seen as “a mixed category of people sharing a certain legal status.”⁵⁰ Thus it becomes possible to speak of “the refugee identity,” “the refugee experience,” “the refugee mentality,” “the refugee psychology.”⁵¹

Criticizing the formation of a generic type of refugee does not imply the denial of some similarities in the experiences of refugees, but exposes the politics of refugees’ being made into the object of ““therapeutic interventions,” in Foucault’s words.⁵² That is to say, by essentializing the refugee experience, “the problem” (refugeeness) is located not in the “the political oppression or violence that produces massive territorial displacements of people,” but in the “bodies and minds of people classified as refugees.”⁵³ Thus, refugees’ experiences are depoliticized and dehistoricized in order to create an object of knowledge that can be studied and “solved.”

What is involved in this representation? First, s/he is de-individualized and seen as the “embodiment of pure humanity.”⁵⁴ These two might seem to be in contradiction, but they are not. For example, if we revisit Said’s text on exile, we are advised to “set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the uncountable masses

⁵⁰ Liisa Malkki, “Refugees and Exile: From “Refugee Studies” to the National Order of Things,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, (1995), p. 511.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Malkki, *Purity and Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 8.

⁵² Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no.1 (Feb., 1992), p. 34.

⁵³ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

for whom UN agencies have been created.”⁵⁵ In his definition of the refugee as large herds of bewildered and innocent people, he has already made this point. Harrell-Bond criticizes that approach of taking refugees as undifferentiated masses, as if they “no longer comprise groups of individuals with personal histories, skills and aspirations, with varying capacities for strategic planning and decision-making, with different human needs or feelings such as hope, joy, despair and pain.”⁵⁶ This perception of “uncountable,” “excess”, or “mass exodus” of refugees is in fact questionable.

Koser argues that there are not “too many asylum seekers,” but “more people arriving than states are willing to accept.”⁵⁷ Consistently, Cuny and Stein claim that “there are not necessarily more refugees,” but “more without solutions or awaiting solutions.”⁵⁸ Therefore, the emphasis on the abundance of refugees not only distorts the reality, but also blurs the real source of the “problem.” However, the de-individualization of refugees is also supported by the pictures taken of refugees

⁵⁵ Said, p. 175.

⁵⁶ Barbara Harrell-Bond, “Repatriation: Under What Conditions Is It the Most Desirable Solution for Refugees? An Agenda for Research,” *African Studies Review* 32, no.1 (April 1989), p 48.

⁵⁷ Koser, 89.

⁵⁸ Cuny and Stein cited in Harrell-Bond, “Repatriation: Under What Conditions Is It the Most Desirable Solution for Refugees? An Agenda for Research,” p. 48.

caught in the back of trucks,⁵⁹ stuffed into boats,⁶⁰ and left waiting in crowded cellars.⁶¹

De-individualizing refugees and seeing them as the “embodiment of pure humanity” are parallel processes. This discourse is observed particularly in the campaigns of humanitarian interventions. Charity is based on perceiving the refugees as pure human beings, with no “contaminating” histories. Malkki links this humanitarian image of refugees with Roland Barthes’ review of the “Family of Man”:

The universalism of the “Family of Man” depoliticizes fundamental inequalities and injustices in the same manner that the homogenizing, humanitarian images of refugees work to obscure their actual sociopolitical circumstances – erasing the specific, historical, local politics of particular refugees, and retreating instead to the depoliticizing, dehistoricizing register of a more abstract and universal suffering.⁶²

The construction of the universal refugee extracts the history and politics embedded in the sufferings, rendering it a natural outcome of being a refugee.

Another result of this erasure of the refugee’s history is his/her infantilization. The very moment that s/he passes the borders of the country to which s/he is believed to belong, everything that has formed his/her identity is assumed to be lost. Harrell-Bond points to some agencies’ (including UNHCR) publications that claim to give voice to refugees. She argues that without taking into account the

⁵⁹ “Kamyonda 88 kaçak yakalandı,” *Yeni Asya*, 15 December 2007, Available [online]: <http://www.yeniasya.com.tr/2007/12/15/haber/h11.htm> [23 April 2008].

⁶⁰ “Bir gün siz de mülteci olabilirsiniz,” 27 November 2007, *NTVMSNBC*, Available [online]: <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/427645.asp> [23 April 2008].

⁶¹ “Yoğun sigara dumanı kaçakları yakalattı,” 06 October 2006, *Sabah*, Available [online]: <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2004/10/06/gun104.html> [23 April 2008].

⁶² Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, p. 13.

barriers of language and differences between cultures, they present a “childlike image” of refugees who employ “simply worded, semantically flat expressions.”⁶³ This picture of the pure, childlike, and helpless refugee (which at times refugees benefit from) is also sustained by juxtaposing it to the “other” refugee: the *bad* refugee that is thankless, ungrateful, cheating, and aggressive.⁶⁴

Roots and Belonging

Esmail Khoi, the prominent Iranian poet in exile, in his “What a Sense of Being Lost,” underlines that he doesn’t want to be a “bird of a rootless sigh,” but a tree “that holds its umbrella on its head/ and presses/ its knowing roots/ into the unquestioning earth.”⁶⁵ His is not an exceptional reference to the “roots” of the refugee. Saedi had also mentioned that the refugee’s roots are pulled out and left rotting.⁶⁶ These depictions are not confined to the realm of literature, either. Richard Black, in his study on the fifty years of refugee studies, criticizes the policy oriented researchers’ uncritical employment of the term “refugee” in academic writings. He states that “[i]ndicating uprootedness and exile, it often implies a dependence on

⁶³ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work With Refugees be Humane?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, (2002), p. 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶⁵ Esma’il Kho’i, “Time and Displacement: Three Poems by Esma’il Kho’i,” trans. Ahmed Karimi-Hakkak and Michael Beard, *Iranian Studies* 30, no.3 (1997), p. 333-334.

⁶⁶ See page 23.

humanitarian intervention and a rupture of ‘normal’ social, economic and cultural relations.”⁶⁷

Perhaps it is primarily the belief of being rooted in the country in which one is born which needs to be questioned. It is this assumption that creates a problematic self out of the refugee. The refugee is a person who fears to live in his/her “own country,” in the place which is thought to be the most suitable for him/her, the place to which it is assumed that s/he belongs. Therefore, s/he is seen to be “out of place”⁶⁸ and thus each act of solving the “problem” results in appointing the right place for the refugee.

Of three solutions, namely resettlement, integration, and (voluntary) repatriation, the latter is stated to be the most desirable solution by UNHCR.⁶⁹ However, although repatriation is encouraged for the countries that are declared to be safe, examples refute this claim. The countries that are claimed to be safe continue to “produce” refugees, as the case of Afghanistan shows.

According to the figures of the UNHCR, Afghanistan is the top refugee-producing country with 2,108,000 refugees (by 01 January 2007), followed by Iraq with 1,451,000 refugees. However, by 2006, totally 388,000 Afghan refugees had been repatriated (mostly from Pakistan), which constitutes half of the repatriated refugees worldwide.⁷⁰ Moreover, Amnesty International states that five million

⁶⁷Richard Black, “Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy,” *International Migration Review* 35, no. 1, Special Issue: UNHCR at 50: Past, Present and Future of Refugee Assistance (Spring, 2001), p. 63.

⁶⁸ Mary Douglas cited in Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” p. 34.

⁶⁹ Harrell-Bond, “Repatriation,” p. 41.

⁷⁰ UNHCR, *Protecting Refugees and the Role of UNHCR 2007-2008*, <http://www.unhcr.org/basics/BASICS/4034b6a34.pdf> [05 December 2007]

Afghan refugees have returned to their country since 2002.⁷¹ Although this repatriation movement is declared to be voluntary and is encouraged by the UNHCR, the huge presence of Afghans in the illegal migration networks and their testimonies in various accounts reveal that “operation freedom” of 2001 in the name of liberating Afghanistan from religious violence and poverty did not help Afghan asylum seekers, but instead blocked their doors of escape. A more recent case of repatriation involves Iraqi asylum seekers in Sweden, which accepted 18,000 Iraqi refugees in 2007. The Swedish ministry of immigration has declared that repatriation might even be employed forcibly.⁷²

Despite its destructive effects, it is not only repatriation that renders the assumption of “the best place for refugee is her/his country of origin” problematic. The fear of persecution that is intrinsic to the definition of refugee refutes such a perception of peaceful belonging to the country of origin. Malkki criticizes the perception of the bewildered refugee searching for his/her way in a foreign and “thus” frightening country by exposing the already frightening home of the refugee.⁷³ She states that “displacements occur precisely when one's own, accustomed society

⁷¹ Amnesty International, 08 October 2007, “Top UN Envoy Speaks Out Against Death Penalty Following Afghanistan Executions” http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/apro/APROweb.nsf/pages/adpan_UNspeaks [05 December 2007]

⁷² “Sweden, Iraq Sign Deal on Returning Refugees,” Reuters, 18 February 2008, Available [online]: <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSL186017520080218> [23 April 2008]

⁷³ Malkki criticizing Taylor and Nathan in Malkki, “Refugees and Exile: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to the National Order of Things,” p. 508.

has become ‘strange and frightening’ because of war, massacres, political terror, or other forms of violence and uncertainty.”⁷⁴

Those “botanical metaphors”⁷⁵ of roots, being uprooted, rotten, or chopped, tends to naturalize the link of people and place, and renders that relation unquestionable. Malkki starts with questioning this given relationship with reference to the critical literature on the formation of the nation (i.e., Geertz, Gellner, Giddens, and Hobsbawm).⁷⁶ She argues that refugees are seen as a problem as they do not fit in the “national order of things.” The naturalization of the territoriality of nation states render refugee as a being “out of place” and thus ready for intervention. Furthermore, taking the refugee as a being that loses his/her identity when s/he is “uprooted” renders the refugee a being without history; thus the violence at home is left unseen although flight does not erase the traces of refugees’ life at “home.”

Portelli states that when you have people as your sources, interdisciplinarity emerges as a necessity as “human beings do not belong to any one field of scholarly inquiry.”⁷⁷ When the issue of refugees is taken into account, theory and policy cannot be set apart as the results might be harsher than that can be anticipated and endured. By criticizing the uncritical employment of concepts such as nation state, nationality, borders, belonging, and even seeking refuge, the mentioned scholars expose the given terminology’s inability of generating fair solutions. In the next chapter, these

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 509.

⁷⁵ Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1, Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference (Feb., 1992), p. 26.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. xi.

critical accounts will be employed for reading through the layers of the scholarly accounts of Turkey's experience of transit migration.

CHAPTER III

THE SETTING

*The past life of emigrés is, as we know,
annulled. Earlier it was the warrant of arrest,
today it is intellectual experience, that is
declared non-transferable and un-naturalizable.
Anything that is not reified, cannot be counted
and measured, ceases to exist.*

T. Adorno⁷⁸

It is not possible to tell the story of Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s without first constructing the setting. That is, the attempt at challenging the homogeneity of Iranian transit migrants, or any group of refugees, cannot be disassociated from rejecting the identity of each and every stop through which the transit migrant passes. Thus, Turkey's experience in dealing with the newcomers in its territory is influential in the formation of the transit migrant experience in the country.

This chapter examines the relations among refugees, the host society, and the international organizations that have a say in the asylum process in order to depict the strategies employed on each side. It is the assumption of smooth transition in a context of security concerns, "pragmatic and flexible" laws, and fears of deportation that is questioned. So, we will first elaborate on the policies employed for dealing with Non-European refugees before 1994; second, analyze the formation of the 1994 Asylum Regulation and the conditions that necessitated it; and finally, decipher the

⁷⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 46-47.

myth of Iranians in the studies pertaining to Turkey's experience with transit migration by introducing their case which challenges the representations of refugees and immigrants that were described in the second chapter.

Turkey's Experience with Refugees: The Pre-1994 Era

Kemal Kirişçi gives a historical account of the Turkish asylum practice. He discloses two types of refugees that Turkish practice has identified. The first group, "Convention Refugees," refers mainly to people who fled Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. While living in Turkey they had the right to the protection stemming from the 1951 Convention. However, they were granted refugee status on the understanding that eventually they would be resettled in third countries, consistent with the Turkish Law on Settlement (*İskân Kanunu*).⁷⁹

The Turkish Law on Settlement, adopted in 1934, constitutes one of the three pillars of Turkish immigration law (followed by the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1994 Asylum Regulation). According to İçduygu, "It continues to be the main legislative text dealing with immigration, and determines who can enter, settle and/or apply for refugee status in Turkey. It provides for individuals of Turkish descent and culture to be accepted as immigrants and refugees in Turkey."⁸⁰ However, this relatively liberal policy towards immigrants of Turkish descent came to a halt especially with the end of the Cold War. Kirişçi asserts political considerations (i.e.,

⁷⁹ Kemal Kirişçi, "UNHCR and Turkey: Cooperating for Improved Implementation of the 1951 Convention Relating to the State of Refugees," *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 13, no. 1-2, (January 2001), pp. 74-75.

⁸⁰ Ahmet İçduygu, "Irregular Migration in Turkey," Report prepared for the International Organization for Migration, February 2003, p. 57.

refraining from offending the governments of Azerbaijan, Russia and Uzbekistan) and fear of pulling greater numbers of ethnic Turk immigrants for Turkish authorities' desisting from granting refugee status to Azeris, Ahiska Turks, Chechens and Uzbeks.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the presence of laws favoring immigrants of Turkish descent (i.e., 2527/ The Law on Turkish Raced Foreigner's Freely Performing their Professions and Arts, Being Employed in Public, Private Institutions and Workplaces) pave the way for immigrants of Turkish descent's integration to Turkish society even if they are not accepted as refugees.⁸²

The second group defined is the "Non-Convention" refugees. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as someone who:

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Article I/A/2)

Article 2 of the Convention state that "events occurring before 1 January 1951" should be understood to mean either "events occurring in Europe before 1 January

⁸¹ Kirişçi, "UNHCR and Turkey," p. 75.

⁸² Chechen refugees do not share the advantages of being of Turkish descent. On the contrary, they have neither access to the UNHCR asylum procedure, nor to the Turkish asylum procedure regulated by the Ministry of Interior (MOI). There are three camps in the Anatolian part of Istanbul where hundreds of Chechen refugees are waiting for recognition of their statuses. UNHCR is not entitled to take their case as they are in the scope of the 1951 convention that Turkey has ratified with geographical reservation. However, they are kept as "guests" in the isolated camps and not recognized as asylum seekers by the Turkish state refraining from a possible breach in Turkish-Russian relations. According to the Amnesty International, there were one thousand Chechen refugees in Turkey by 2005. For further information, see Amnesty International, 20 June 2005, "Türkiye: 1951 Cenevre Sözleşmesi Uygulanmıyor: Çeçen Mülteciler için 1951 Cenevre Sözleşmesi Uygulansın!" Available [online]: "http://www.amnesty.org.tr/yeni/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=427" [06 April 2008].

1951” or “events occurring in Europe or elsewhere before 1 January 1951” and that any contracting state adopting the former alternative may extend its obligations at any time by adopting the latter alternative.⁸³

Turkey has chosen the former alternative, thus introducing a geographical reservation to the convention; undertaking to grant asylum only to persons fleeing persecution in Europe as a result of events prior to 1951. The 1967 Additional Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees lifted the geographic and time restrictions of the Convention pertaining to the definition of refugees. Yet, Turkey kept the geographical reservation; it was only the time limitation that was dropped.⁸⁴

However, the “geographical reservation” on paper could not hinder hundreds of thousands of non-European asylum seekers from reaching Turkish territory. Although there have been “sporadic movements” of asylum seekers, it is not possible to note salient migration waves before the 1980s.⁸⁵ Therefore, starting with the 1980s, Turkey was transformed into a transit country of *de facto* refugees. By “Non-Convention” refugees, Kirişçi refers to this *de facto* status. It is frequently stated that although no regulations were present before 1994, Turkey had referred to a policy of “pragmatism and flexibility” and some protection to *de facto* refugees of the 1980s were made available.⁸⁶ Yet this “pragmatic and flexible” policy has fed inequalities among *de facto* refugees (both in terms of class and ethnicity), promoted corruption

⁸³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Text of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” in *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Available [online]: “<http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>” [10 December 2007].

⁸⁴ İçduygu, *Irregular Migration in Turkey*, p. 20.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Kirişçi, “UNHCR and Turkey” p.76 and Ahmet İçduygu, *Türkiye’de Kaçak Göç*, (İstanbul: İstanbul Ticaret Odası, 2004), p. 76.

and provoked the already existing uneasiness of the “Non-Convention” refugees adding up to their precarious situation.

The Formation of the 1994 Regulation: Law as an Arena of Conflict

It is necessary to give an account of non-European refugee waves to contextualize the formation of the 1994 Regulation. Iranians fleeing the Islamic Republic founded after the 1979 Revolution constituted the first populous wave of transit migration to Turkey. Ahmet İçduygu frames four distinct periods of irregular migration to Turkey: 1979 to 1987, 1988 to 1993, 1994 to 2000/2001, and 2001 onward.⁸⁷ For the high points of the periods, 1979 points to the Iranian Revolution; 1988 to the massive arrival of asylum seekers from Iraq, Bulgaria and (economically oriented) former Soviet Republics; 1994 to Turkey’s one and only Asylum Regulation, and 2001 to the beginning of a period of degeneration of irregular migration to Turkey.⁸⁸ According to İçduygu a new stage was initiated by 2001 with Turkey’s pursuing more active policies against irregular migration. A declining trend in irregular migration flows and a tendency to employ less common ways was observed in this period.⁸⁹

This periodization needs further elaboration. For the Iranian transit migration which constituted the first wave, the years between 1979 and 1987 involved two distinct migration waves. The first two years were characterized by the migration of

⁸⁷ Ahmet İçduygu, “Demographic Mobility and Turkey: Migration Experiences and Government Responses,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 15, no.4 (Fall 2004), p. 90.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Monarchists and those associated with the Pahlavi regime⁹⁰ while the mass migration of anti-regime militants and people fleeing the repressive atmosphere of the post-Revolution Iran (who dominantly used Turkey as a transit route) starts afterwards. The 1979 is noted to define the beginning of Iranian transit migration flow to Turkey in most of the studies conducted in Turkey-based academic society. However, there are other significant years for the history of Iranian transit migration to Turkey.

Yaghmaian states that Iranian migration in 1980-1991 had a political character while the migration in the early 1990s was more economically oriented. He introduces another cause for Iranians' migration: the 1999 student riots.⁹¹ Fereshteh Ahmadi Lewin's classification is more exhaustive. Starting from the pre-revolution days, she notes that people affiliated with the Pahlavi regime, some of the industrialists, investors, financiers and high ranked officials fled from Iran starting from the summer of 1978 till the winter of 1979. This pre-revolution migration was followed by the flight of ethnic and religious minorities and the remaining Pahlavi related people after the Islamic clergy's victory in February 1979. Lewin notes the removal of the first elected president Bani Sadr in 1981 and the subsequent clashes between the regime forces and the opposition movement as the launch pad of another migration wave composed of people with strong political affiliations. The last significant wave involved draft evaders and people who had lost their means of

⁹⁰ Halleh Ghorashi names this period as "the spring of freedom" which was put to an end with the consolidation of the Islamic Regime. She underlines that for those associated with the Pahlavi regime, "spring of freedom" refers to a period of horror. See Halleh Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), p. 7.

⁹¹ Yaghmaian cited in Esra Kaytaz, *Turkey as a Country of Transit Migration: The Case of Christian Iranian Asylum Seekers* (masters thesis, University of Oxford, 2006), pp. 10-11.

living due to the escalation of the Iran-Iraq war, around 1984.⁹² Lewin's account is exhaustive, yet for our study of Iranian transit migration to Turkey, the relevant categories are mostly the latter ones as the people who had migrated before the consolidation of the regime had more means for flight to the United States and the Western European countries directly from Iran, and did not resort to transit routes.

For the 1988 wave of transit migration, İçduygu gives a comprehensive account. The massive arrival from Iraq started with 50,000 Kurdish *peshmerges* fleeing Iraqi military reprisals following the Iran-Iraq war (most of them repatriated voluntarily after 1991), continuing with 60,000 mostly Asian workers settled in Iraq fleeing Iraq or Kuwait during the 1990 Gulf crisis and finally half a million Kurds fleeing from the Iraqi military.⁹³ This period also involved a mass immigration of Bulgarian Turks fleeing the Bulgarian regime in 1989.⁹⁴ In addition to Bulgarians, Iranians were among the most populous migrant groups in those years as well. Yet, it is important to define the turning point of "1988" and the characteristics of the flow afterwards to contextualize and thus understand the social basis of the 1994 Asylum Regulation.

The formation of the 1994 Asylum Regulation and its amendment in 1999 should be reviewed as products of the power struggle between the Turkish State, The UNHCR, which regulated the non-European refugees' asylum procedures due to the geographic restriction that the Turkish state introduced to the 1951 Geneva Convention, and the Non-Convention refugees themselves. Kirişçi defines the 1994

⁹² Fereshteh Ahmadi Lewin, "Identity Crisis and Integration: The Divergent Attitudes of Iranian Immigrant Men and Women towards Integration into Swedish Society." *International Migration* 39, no.3 (2001), pp. 122.

⁹³ İçduygu, *Irregular Migration in Turkey*, pp. 21-22.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Asylum Law as a reflection of “the ascendance of national security concerns over refugee rights.”⁹⁵ Until the mass arrival of Kurdish asylum seekers, the Turkish authorities managed to do with the afore-mentioned “pragmatic and flexible” lawlessness. However, the influx of half a million Kurdish migrants invoked national security concerns for the Turkish authorities, who at times only became aware of the migrants at the time of their departure (and did not let them leave).⁹⁶ The early 1990s mark a tug of war between the UNHCR, which dealt with the non-Europeans’ asylum procedures (at that time mostly Kurdish Iraqis) and the Turkish authorities, who took the Kurdish migrants’ presence as a security threat given the activities of the PKK in those years. The State’s assumption of PKK militants’ presence among those Kurdish asylum seekers who had entered from the Iraqi border and its disrespecting the principle of *non-refoulement* for Non-Convention refugees stiffened the disputes further.⁹⁷

Thus, the 1994 Regulation on the Procedures and Principles Concerning the Mass Influx of Foreigners in Turkey Requesting Residence Permits with the Intention of Seeking Asylum from a Third Country (*Türkiyeye İltica Eden veya Başka Bir Ülkeye İltica Etmek Üzere Türkiyeden İkamet İzni Talep Eden Münferit Yabancılar ile Topluca Sığınma Amacıyla Sınırlarımıza Gelen Yabancılara ve Olabilecek Nüfus Hareketlerine Uygulanacak Usul ve Esaslar Hakkında Yönetmelik*)

⁹⁵ Kirişçi, “Reconciling refugee protection with combating irregular migration: the experience of Turkey,” Paper presented at the Council of Europe Regional Conference on Migrants in Transit Countries: Sharing Responsibility for Management and Protection, Istanbul, 30 September – 1 October 2004. Proceedings p. 148. Available [online]: http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/migration/Regional_Conferences/MG-RCONF_2004_9e_Istanbul_conference_Proceedings_en.pdf [6 April 2008].

⁹⁶ Kirişçi, “The Question of Asylum and Illegal Migration in European Union-Turkish Relations,” *Turkish Studies* 4, no.1 (2003), p. 86.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

did not stem from the concern of legalizing non-European transit migrants and regulating their already undefined and nebulous situation, but from the state-centric logic of defeating the security threats generated by the recent flow of migrants.⁹⁸

With the 1994 Regulation, the Turkish state took control of determining the status of the Non-Convention migrants and regulating their asylum procedures. Its practices subsequent to the 1994 Regulation aggravated the situation.⁹⁹ It imposed a time limit of five days for asylum applications to be filled, which made it possible for officials to reject late applications without the actual substance of the application's being taken into account.¹⁰⁰ However, the criticisms of international refugee advocacy groups, the UNHCR, and the struggle of the asylum seekers themselves had a collective effect and the Turkish state developed closer relations with the UNHCR during three years after the Regulation.¹⁰¹ Kirişçi points to the role of courts in this process. He states that although there was precedence and a general legal opinion that foreigners could "challenge an administrative decision preventing the entry or requiring expulsion in court," asylum seekers and refugees did not try that option until 1997 due to a lack of confidence in the Turkish police and appeal system as well as the fear of aggravating their situation by challenging the authorities.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ İçduygu and Fuat E. Keyman, "Globalization, Security and Migration: The Case of Turkey," *Global Governance* 6, no.3 (July-September 2000), p. 385.

⁹⁹ Kirişçi, "Reconciling refugee protection with combating irregular migration," pp. 148- 149. Both cases were of Iranians who had entered Turkey illegally in 1996 and whose resettlements were arranged by the UNHCR (the first to USA and the second to Finland). For further information see BMMYK, *Sığınmacı, Mülteci ve Göç Konularına İlişkin Türkiye'deki Yargı Kararları* (İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Vakfı, 2000), pp.192-195.

¹⁰⁰ Kirişçi, "The Question of Asylum and Illegal Migration," p. 87.

¹⁰¹ Kirişçi. "UNHCR and Turkey," p. 72.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

However, two UNHCR-recognized Iranian refugees, whose resettlement had been arranged by the UNHCR in Ankara, took their cases to the court and obtained the support of the administrative courts (one in July and the other in October 1997) “against the MOI [Ministry of Interior] decisions calling for their deportation for violating the time limit clause of the 1994 Asylum Regulation.”¹⁰³ These two trials set forward other refugees’ taking their cases to court, which was encouraged by the UNHCR. These actions rendered the Ministry of Interior’s decisions open to judicial review and appeal, created precedence for future cases, and drew attention to the technical misinterpretation of the time clause that had disregarded the substance of the asylum applications.¹⁰⁴ Thus, fewer deportations and more cooperation between the UNHCR and the Ministry of Interior were seen, which constituted the 1999 revision of the Regulation that increased the time limit from five to ten days. Thereafter, a *de facto* situation was generated for the UNHCR to regulate the asylum procedures.¹⁰⁵ The cooperation among the UNHCR and the Turkish government required the asylum seekers’ application to both authorities. From then on asylum seekers were guided to apply to the UNHCR for refugee status and to the Turkish government for “temporary asylum,” reminded that the UNHCR would not conduct an interview with them or their families and would not decide their case unless they had first registered with the police in their “assigned city.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 72, 86-87.

¹⁰⁶ Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, *Information for People Applying for Refugee Status in Turkey* (Istanbul: Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, August 2007), p. 3.

So far, the formation of the 1994 Asylum Regulation has been discussed to historicize its formation and shed light on the concerns of the actors involved in the process. In its best form, the 1994 Asylum Regulation legalized the Non-Convention refugees' stay in Turkey. This, unarguably, was a positive contribution for the lives of those Non-Convention refugees with respect to the paralyzing incalculability of the conditions in which they lived. However, such a general argumentation based on the change in the transit migrants' legal status should not lead to a perception of a dramatic change in the state's approach to Non-Convention refugees.

The pre-1994 so-called "flexible and pragmatic" policies and the post-1994 policies do not belong to two distinct and opposing life worlds. Criticizing such an assumption of linear evolution of the "state of law," Nadir Özbek notes that such ideal and abstract concepts of two states, one based on pre-modern arbitrariness and coercion and the other based on law are not sufficient to explain concrete historical situations.¹⁰⁷ He argues that there is no such "ideal state of law," or "state based on coercion," but formations based on different strategies suitable for different concrete historical situations. The genealogy of the 1994 Regulation was thus necessary for understanding the changes in the strategies of the government vis-à-vis the issue of transit migration. Moreover, it sheds light on the presence of actors other than the State in the process. The pre-1994 and post-1994 policies were both products of a conflictual social space, and formed new arenas of conflict.

E. P. Thompson's account of the rule of law is illuminating in this perspective. Thompson criticizes the structural reductionist Marxist view that "the revolutionary can have no interest in law," as law is an instrument of the ruling class

¹⁰⁷ Nadir Özbek, "Alternatif Tarih Tahayyülleri: Siyaset, İdeoloji ve Osmanlı-Türkiye Tarihi," *Toplum ve Bilim*, no.98 (Fall 2003), p. 243.

which “defines and defends these rulers’ claims upon resources and labour-power.”¹⁰⁸ He defines the field of law as an arena of conflict. It is true that law does not have an “extra-historical impartiality” and has mediated existent class relations to the advantage of the rulers, but also it has imposed inhibitions upon the actions of the rulers. It is the difference between arbitrary extra-legal power and the rule of law that he emphasizes. He states that,

[T]he law in both its aspects, as formal rules and procedures and as ideology cannot usefully be analyzed in the metaphorical terms of a superstructure distinct from an infrastructure. While this comprises a large and self-evident part of the truth, the rules and categories of law penetrate every level of society, effect vertical as well as horizontal definition of men’s rights and status, and contribute to men’s self-definition or sense of identity. As such law has not only been imposed upon men from above: it has also been a medium within which other social conflicts have been fought out.¹⁰⁹

It is important to define law as a medium of social conflict; that is to say, as a living field which is prone to being molded by struggle. The resistance to the 1994 Asylum Regulation might be seen as a product of the Regulation itself. The pre-1994 “pragmatic and flexible” policies did not define the Non-Convention refugees legally, which rendered them vulnerable to the arbitrary power of the police. Of two interviewees that chose to be registered with the police (as they even did not have fake passports) both stressed the maltreatment of the police in charge of interrogating them and “deciding” to grant them temporary residence permit the first time that they went there. The temporary residence permit was given not on a legal basis, but as an arbitrary favor and thus intermediaries had been formed. For example, there were

¹⁰⁸ E. P. Thompson, “The Rule of Law,” in *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, ed. Dorothy Thompson (New York: The New Press, 2001), p. 433.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

lawyers known for “arranging residence.”¹¹⁰ “Arranging” meant taking money and acting as intermediaries to bribe the police in charge of granting temporary residence permit. Given the fear of immediate deportation, the police that the refugees came face to face represented the omnipotent arbiter.

The 1994 Asylum Regulation was a product of the state’s security concerns; yet by legalizing the arbitrary deportations it laid them bare and rendered a legal status to the legally undefined Non-Convention refugee. It is possible to state that the existence of a “legal right” to stay in the Turkish territory during the asylum procedures enabled refugees to bypass the police to claim their right. Therefore the 1999 Amendment to the 1994 Regulation should be seen not only as products of tug of war between the UNHCR/international refugee advocacy groups and the Turkish state, but as a product of the struggle between multiple actors which involved the refugees themselves, as well.

Iranian Refugees’ Protest in the United Socialist Party

The resistance of the refugees to the arbitrary deportations involved not only individual attempts at taking their cases to the court, but also organizing collective actions such as a major sit-in act that lasted ten months in the Ankara office of the United Socialist Party (USP). The protestors involved refugees whose cases had been rejected by the UNHCR and were under the risk of deportation. They demanded UNHCR’s reopening their cases and taking action against deportations. Starting in

¹¹⁰ I was repeatedly told that by the interviewees that there was an advocate of Iranian origin who had an office with a signboard on which it was written “*ikamet düzenlenir*” (we arrange residence) around Aksaray.

the early days of August 1995, the sit-in came to an end in June 1996 with the intervention of the police in Ankara.

The Iranian Refugees' Alliance, which was formed in New York for supporting the asylum seekers in Turkey in 1993, was their main supporter. The Alliance defines its activities as providing financial support and legal help for Iranian refugees as well as disseminating news about their situation and linking them to human rights organizations.¹¹¹ Its reports state that the sit-in started with the participation of nearly 160 refugees (representing 70 families/files) in the USP's Ankara office and ended with 80 participants in the Freedom and Solidarity Party's (FSP) Ankara office. At the time of the police's intervention, ten refugees were on the 25th day of a protest hunger strike at the Office of the Human Rights Association.¹¹²

In an article written at the time of the protest, Kirişçi stated that they had deferred deportation by means of the publicity surrounding their case.¹¹³ Moreover, a new demand was added to their list: "even if their cases were rightly rejected in the first place, they should now be considered refugees sur place."¹¹⁴ The protesting refugees demonstrated in front of the Iranian Embassy in Ankara and were highly

¹¹¹ "About Iranian Refugees' Alliance," Available [online]: "<http://www.irainc.org/text/whoWeAre.html>" [08 April 2008].

¹¹² Iranian Refugees' Alliance, "Update on the Iranian Sit-in Protest in Turkey," in *Iranian Refugees At Risk Spring 96 / Summer 96*. Available [online]: "<http://www.irainc.org/text/nletter/sp96su96/sp96su96.html>" [19 December 2007]; "Turkey's Refugee Machination" in *Iranian Refugees At Risk Fall 95/Winter 96*, Available [online]: "<http://www.irainc.org/text/nletter/f95w96/f95w96.html#anchor44141>" [19 December 2007]

¹¹³ Kirişçi, "Is Turkey Lifting the 'Geographical Limitation'? – The November 1994 Regulation on Asylum in Turkey," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 8, no.3 (1996). pp. 294-318

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

“exposed” as their pictures were taken and published. This meant that a new condition was created in Turkey (thus sur place) that by itself created a basis for their having “well-founded fear of persecution” in case of return. However, this was seen as abusing the conditions of protection and the UNHCR did not reopen their cases. Nevertheless, as they were highly exposed and their deportation would mean that their lives would be at risk, the UNHCR convinced the Turkish state to extend their residence permits by means of which the fear of deportation was evaded.¹¹⁵

Emptying the Historical Quality: The “Myth” of Iranians in Turkey

The 1990s were years of turmoil stemming from disputes between the Turkish state and international refugee advocacy groups and also the years of an increasing interest in the human rights issues. Most of the NGOs now actively working for refugees were founded in the 1990s. The Organization for Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People was founded in 1991; Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly which gave birth to the Refugee Advocacy and Support program in 2004 was founded in 1993; Amnesty International Turkey Branch in 1995; and the Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants in 1995.¹¹⁶ The only exception is the Human Rights Association of Turkey (IHD), which was founded in 1986. Yet, its activities

¹¹⁵ Ahmet Güder, UNHCR National Resettlement Officer, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Ankara, Turkey, 21 April 2008.

¹¹⁶ These are the most active human rights NGOs which have formed Human Rights Joint Platform (IHOP) in 2005, except the Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants.

pertaining to refugees do not date back to the 1980s. IHD supported the Iranian asylum seekers' protest actively in 1995.¹¹⁷

It is not only NGOs that took up the refugee issue in the 1990s. Recently, the Turkish Academic Society has also become very interested in migration flows of Non-Conventional refugees. Research is conducted on most of the salient refugee groups,¹¹⁸ reports for international organizations are being written, and several symposiums have been organized in recent years.¹¹⁹ Therefore, it is possible to state that immigration and especially transit migration have become visible and turned into an "issue" beginning in the 1990s.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ IHD's president Akın Birdal's visit to the site of the protest was noted in <http://www.byegm.gov.tr/YAYINLARIMIZ/ayintarihi/1995/agustos1995.htm>

¹¹⁸ For research on Iranian Non-Convention refugees see Sebnem Kocer Akcapar, "Iranian Transit Migrants in Turkey: Just a 'Waiting room' before entering the 'paradise'?" (2004), "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey" (2006), and "What's God got to do with it? The role of religion in the internal dynamics of migrants' networks in Turkey" (2007); Esra Kaytaz, "Turkey as a Country of Transit Migration: The Case of Christian Iranian Asylum Seekers" (2006). For research on Iranian, Iraqi, Afghan and Maghrebi transit migrants see Didem Danis and Cherie Tareighi, "Iranians in Istanbul: Changing Migratory Patterns and Modes of Incorporation," Didem Danis, "Iraqis in Istanbul: Segmented Incorporation," Cherie Tareighi, "Afghans in Zeytinburnu: A Cross Between 'Permanency' and 'Transition,'" and Jean-François Pérouse, "Transit Maghrebis in İstanbul: Trajectories, Profiles and Strategies" all in Didem Daniş, *Integration in Limbo: Iraqi, Afghan, Maghrebi and Iranian Migrants in Istanbul*, Mirekoc Research Projects 2005-2006. For research on African Non-Convention refugees see Deniz Yüksek and Kelly T. Brewer, "A survey on African Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Istanbul" (2006), Behzad Yaghmaian "Afrika Diyasporası: Türkiye'deki Afrikalı Göçmenlerin Dramı," (2003), Aslı Falay Çalkıvık, "Yaşam ve Ölüm Alanları arasında Afrikalı Göçmenler" (2003). For Chechens see Halim Yılmaz, "İstanbul'daki Çeçen Mülteciler" (2007).

¹¹⁹ For recent examples: "Türkiye'ye olan Uluslararası Göçün Yönleri: Toplumsal Şartlar ve Kişisel Yaşam Dünyaları," Orient Institut, İstanbul and Goethe Institut, İstanbul, 7-10 March 2007; "E/Im/Migration and Culture", Fourth Cultural Studies Conference co-organized by the Cultural Studies Association (Turkey) and the Department of International Relations of Işık University, 15-17 September 2007; "Uluslararası Göç ve Kadın Sempozyumu", Zeytinburnu Municipality, 01-01 December 2007; "Transit Migration the European Space: Theory, Politics, and Research Methodology," Koç University, Migration Research Programme, 18-19 April, 2008.

¹²⁰ This fact has a direct link with Turkey-EU relations which started with Turkey's membership to the Customs Union in 1996 and developed with the acception of Turkey's

However, Turkey's experience with transit migration can be traced back to the 1980s. Almost all studies point to the 1979 Iranian Revolution as the starting point of transit migration to Turkey. Starting from the 1980s, Iranians have been among the biggest migrant groups in transit that "pass through" Turkey. It is true that they have characterized 1979-1988 period of Turkey's experience with migration (İçduygu defines this period as the *fertilization period*). However, they have continued to be one of the most populous migrant groups in Turkey until today. Even in the period subsequent to the 1994 Asylum Regulation, until May 2004, 21,601 of 35,162 asylum applications in Turkey were filed by Iranians.¹²¹

Despite the increasing number of studies on transit migration and Non-Convention refugee groups living in Turkey, it is hard to pursue the traces that Iranians have left in the 1980s. Their presence in Turkey is generally accounted as "background information" for the assessment of the period studied. Most of the studies refer to the quantity of the Iranians passing through Turkey. However, the estimates of the Iranian population passing through Turkey in the 1980s vary to a great extent. Although it is mostly estimated to be "up to one and a half million," the number varies from a half million¹²² to three million.¹²³

EU candidacy in Helsinki Summit of 1999. Reform in the Turkish policy of migration is at the core of the Accession Partnership Agreement of 2000 and Turkey's National Programme of 2001. It involves Turkey's adoption of *acquis communautaire* vis-à-vis migration and its implementations, which involves the lifting of the geographical limitation within the perspective of EU member states' burden-sharing. See İçduygu, *Irregular Migration in Turkey*, pp. 63-64.

¹²¹ Kirişçi, Kemal. "Reconciling Refugee Protection with Combating Irregular Migration: the Experience of Turkey," p. 149.

¹²² İçduygu brings forward the estimations of "nearly one and a half million Iranians," "half to one million," and "nearly one million" in the IOM reports of *Transit Migration in Turkey* (1995), *Irregular Migration in Turkey* (2003) and "Globalization, security, and migration: The case of Turkey" with E. Fuat Keyman (2000) respectively.

Referring to those fluctuations between estimates, Stéphane De Tapia introduces the case of Iranian nationals in Turkey “as a perfect illustration of the difficulty of determining the statistical reality of irregular transit migration and the fantasies surrounding it.”¹²⁴ Even though not published regularly, various statistics on Iranians provided by a number of Ministries are available. For example, numbers exist for “Foreigners arriving by country of residence/ nationality,” “Foreigners leaving by country of residence,” “Foreigners who live in Turkey by their nationality and reason for presence: (resident/ education/ work/ other).”¹²⁵ Yet, they are far from giving a comprehensive account of the Iranians in transit. According to the border crossing statistics (Foreigners arriving by country of residence/nationality) derived from the Ministry of Tourism there were 3,689,514 Iranian entries in the years 1984-1999.¹²⁶ Nevertheless this by no means conveys their actual “reason for presence” as Turkey evolved into a center of attraction for Iranian tourists after the 1979 Revolution, because of its geographical proximity and lack of visa requirement.

UNHCR figures do not help to solve this ambiguity of numbers. According to the UNHCR figures only eight persons registered with the UNHCR Ankara, and only one person was recognized as refugee up to 1985 (see Table 1). The reliability of the

¹²³ Nilufer Narli, “Transit Migration and Human Smuggling in Turkey : Preliminary Findings From the Field Work,” *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, no. 3 (2002), p.159.

¹²⁴ Stéphane De Tapia, “ Introduction to the debate: Identification of issues and current and future trends of irregular migration in transit countries,” Report presented at the Council of Europe Regional Conference on Migrants in transit countries: Sharing responsibility for management and protection”, Istanbul, 30 September – 1 October 2004. Proceedings p. 114. Available [online]: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/migration/Regional_Conferences/MG-RCONF_2004_9e_Istanbul_conference_Proceedings_en.pdf> [6 April 2008]

¹²⁵ State Institute of Statistics, *Statistical Yearbook of Turkey 1990*, (Ankara: State Institute of Statistics, 1991); State Institute of Statistics, *Statistical Yearbook of Turkey 1994*, (Ankara: State Institute of Statistics, 1995); State Institute of Statistics, *Statistical Yearbook of Turkey 2000*, (Ankara: State Institute of Statistics, 2001).

¹²⁶ Cited in De Tapia, p. 114.

records is questionable as the UNHCR was using cards system in keeping the archive of registrations up until 1985 and it is assumed that there might have been mistakes in data processing.¹²⁷

Table 1. Iranians Under the UNHCR Mandate 1980-1990.

	Iranian registrations		Iranian recognitions	
	Cases	Persons	Cases	Persons
1980	–	–	–	–
1981	1	2	–	–
1982	–	–	–	–
1983	–	–	–	–
1984	6	6	1	1
1985	76	78	17	17
1986	1420	1568	464	487
1987	3382	3867	1169	1269
1988	2968	3584	1745	2042
1989	1049	1198	407	479
1990	907	1192	446	576
Total	9809	11495	4249	4871

Note: The asylum procedure might take more than a year, so numbers do not indicate the recognized cases that were registered in the same year.¹²⁸

UNHCR Ankara, National Resettlement Officer Ahmet Güder states that it was pointless for Iranian refugees to apply to the UNHCR before 1985-86, as no systematical resettlement was employed then. Thus, knowing that the Turkish state did not accept refugees from non-European countries, refugees did not apply to the UNHCR. As arrivals increase by 1984-1985, the UNHCR came to an agreement with the Turkish state not to deport the new comers until they had evaluated their cases and resettled the recognized refugees in a third country. Thus, it is possible to state that the UNHCR's resettlement policies emerged from the necessity produced by the Iranian refugees of the mid-1980s. Furthermore, a special status was created for the

¹²⁷ Ahmet Güder, UNHCR National Resettlement Officer, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Ankara, Turkey, 21 April 2008.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

draft evaders that composed a significant part of the Iranians applying the UNHCR as they did not fit UNHCR's general framework of refugee. They were recognized as refugees on humanitarian bases, as is the case for a great number of Somalis now.¹²⁹

Lack of an official Non-Convention refugee status before the 1994

Regulation in Turkey has worsened the ambiguity of numbers. The pre-1994 *de facto* protection granted to Non-Convention refugees was made up of a temporary residence permit for the asylum seekers that registered to the police. However, registration was not a prerequisite for the UNHCR application and refugees, especially the ones that suffered from fear of persecution in their country of origin, did not choose to register with the police. By rejecting the "pragmatic and flexible" protection of the Turkish authorities, political refugees avoided the threat of being victims of those "pragmatic and flexible" policies which might involve being part of a cartel or deportation without having access to asylum procedures. Celia Mannaert notes the presence of such "security arrangements" between Turkey and countries such as Tunisia and Iran. Such cartels involve the immediate repatriation of opposition activists.¹³⁰ Although most of the time it is hard to have access to the texture of such "security arrangements," what is known in the case of such agreements between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey is enough to understand the aversion of the political refugees to police registration.

In its 31 May 1987 issue, the widely circulated weekly *Nokta* cites a Ministry of Interior officer who states that Turkey finds the opportunity to maintain the

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Celia Mannaert, "Irregular migration and asylum in Turkey," *New Issues In Refugee Research: Working Paper No. 89* (May 2003), p. 9. Available [online]: <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/RESEARCH/3ebf5c054.pdf> [20 December 2007]

“critical stability” by signing bilateral agreements with its neighbors.¹³¹ The Agreement on Repatriating Criminals is reported to be an example of such bilateral security agreements between Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which approved the repatriation of the asylum seekers that had been found guilty in their country of origin. Such agreements actually led to the reciprocal repatriation of opposition activists. While the subjects of these bilateral security agreements were mostly people from leftist guerilla movement in the mid-1980s, it became mainly militants of Kurdish opposition movement in the late-1980s and 1990s. This not only reflects the Turkish state’s evolving perception of threat, but also gives clues for the composition of the Iranian migrants in the subsequent periods. Interviews with former transit migrants in Turkey reveal the awareness of such agreements.

Farhad is one of such refugees living in Cologne. He lived in Turkey for two different periods. As a Kurdish Party professional from Sanandaj, he first fled to Northern Iraq, then to the USSR, went back to Iraq, and entered Turkey in 1988. He applied for asylum through the UNHCR, which he later abandoned. However, he fled to Germany and came back to Ankara as an exchange student with a German passport in 1993 to pursue political activities, which he termed “class activities,” focusing on logistics, which meant organizing safe accommodation for the militants from his organization in transit. He claims that the Turkish police kept a list of Iranian opposition activists according to their degree of importance in order to exchange them with Turkey’s opponents that sought refuge in Iran.¹³²

¹³¹ “Mülteciler/ Türkiye’deki İranlılar: Coğrafyamız İzin Vermiyor,” *Nokta*, 31 May 1987, pp. 20-21.

¹³² Farhad, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 09 August 2007.

The awareness of such agreements can also be traced in representational works of or pertaining to transit migrants. A great number of the Iranian refugees I met in Sweden referred to a film by Reza Allamehzadeh, an exile in Netherlands since 1983. The film, *The Guests of Hotel Astoria*, tells the story of a group of Iranians who stay in the Hotel Astoria in Istanbul while they are trying to find a way to continue their journey to West in the 1980s.¹³³ More than the texture of the film itself, it is the frequency and the stress of reference to it by Iranian refugees in Sweden that makes it a valuable source to understanding the aura of the situation in which the Iranian transit migrants felt themselves to be stuck. The prominent political activist in the film, the engineer Mr. Mohseni, is identified in a regular police raid at the hotel and taken into custody and beaten by the police, who did not even give him time to get dressed. Towards the end of the film we learn that he is deported and handed over to the Iranian government with four other Iranian political activists and subsequently executed. We learn from his interrogator at the Turkish police that he had been working with Armenian and Kurdish political organizations in Turkey. Throughout the film there are few clues about his identity despite some references to the collective memory of Iranian exiles. The only thing mentioned about him is his being an engineer and his final destination, France.

Political refugees' fear of deportation and being used as a part of a "security agreement" is mentioned to shed light on the reluctance of the refugees to register with the police, and therefore adding up to the ambiguity of their numbers. However, by driving attention to the presence of such a strong fear of deportation, it is also attempted to break the "myth" that Iranians transited *smoothly* through Turkey in the

¹³³ Reza Allamehzadeh, *The Guests of Hotel Astoria*, Netherlands, 1989.

1980s.¹³⁴ Roland Barthes argues that “myth is depoliticized speech [...] it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth [...] it establishes blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.”¹³⁵ Used as “background information” for the history of Turkey’s experience with irregular migration, a homogenous “bulk” is created which belongs to the middle or upper middle class, which then “naturally” means that they have transited *smoothly* through Turkey.

Barthes states that “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things”¹³⁶ and it does distort the reality rather than hiding it. The most important distortion is carried out by assuming the homogeneity of the one million or so Iranians in Turkey in the 1980s and the identity of their experiences. The “facts” presented might not be “false” such as the UNHCR’s and the Western European countries’ comparative receptiveness of Iranian refugees in 1980s, or the high percentage of middle or upper middle class Iranians’ presence among the ones in transit. Yet, these “facts” do not speak for themselves and furthermore other facts might be “selected” and juxtaposed to them.

Janet Bauer’s study on Iranian women refugees in Turkey and West Germany, which is based on her research in 1987-1988, is a rare work conducted on those “more than one million Iranians in Turkey.” About choosing Turkey and West Germany as her field, she states that “the class background of the exiles in these

¹³⁴ Didem Daniş and Cherie Taraghi state that “Unlike the middle and upper class Iranians who smoothly transited through Turkey in the 1980s, the migrants of the 1990s are less moneyed and use different travel networks and arrangements” in “Integration in Limbo: Iraqi, Afghan, Maghrebi and Iranian Migrants in Istanbul”, Mirekoc Research Projects 2005-2006, p.119.

¹³⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 143.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p.142.

locations are more varied than those of exiles in the United States.”¹³⁷ In her fieldwork, she was able to contact some of the individuals that she had known from the working class areas in Iran before the revolution. Among her interviewees (she conducted interviews with fifty refugee men and women) there were leftists from Tudeh, Peykar and Fadaiyan; members of the Mojahedin, monarchists and “unaffiliated teens wanting a better chance” all of whom sought political asylum.¹³⁸

Her findings are interesting with regards to the myth of the Iranians in the 1980s’ Turkey. Bauer states that all of her interviewees in Germany had paid someone for their journey to Germany while those remaining in Turkey (from three weeks to four years) had neither the money nor the family connections to continue their journey; they were either waiting for the UNHCR recognition or resettlement in a third country. She adds that the majority of those in transit in Turkey were from working class areas of Tehran or from the provinces.¹³⁹

Two stories that she cites underline the diverseness of transit migrants’ experiences:

Nahid, a member of a Marxist organization, was a teacher in Iran before fleeing. She was injured in street fighting in Tehran and spent time in prison before being married in a proletarian ceremony to a political colleague. After fleeing first to other parts of Iran, she came over the western mountains with a small, sickly infant to Turkey, where she stayed several months before a smuggler arranged her passage to Germany when the border with East Berlin was still open. “It was very difficult, especially in Turkey,” she said. By contrast, Parveen and her sister, with no political affiliations, said “We had a

¹³⁷ Janet Bauer, “A Long Way Home: Islam in the Adaptation of Iranian Women Refugees in Turkey and West Germany” in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991), p. 80.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

great time for two weeks in Istanbul while waiting for a smuggler to take us to Germany.”¹⁴⁰

These are not exceptional stories. The experiences differ with respect to the class, gender, age, and political affiliation of the migrants in transit as well as the duration of their stay and their motivation. Therefore, constructing a narrative of a smooth transition of well-off Iranians in the 1980s excludes, abstracts, generalizes and omits the experiences of those living in Turkey as transit migrants in 1980s which is challenged by such “colliding memories.”¹⁴¹ It is these colliding memories that fill in the historical quality, lack of which Barthes claims constitutes the *myth*.

Questioning the Categories

UNHCR documents stress the difference between migrants and refugees. It is stated that “[m]igrants, especially economic migrants, *choose* to move in order to improve the future prospects of themselves and their families,” while “[r]efugees *have to* move if they are to save their lives or preserve their freedom.”¹⁴² However, as stated before, such categories are far from being explanatory as real people with real motivations of flight hardly constitute such “ideal types.” It is more often the case that they carry a mix of refugee/migrant characteristics as well as other attributes that might engender more substantive axes of differentiation. The case of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s is illuminative in this respect.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p.81.

¹⁴¹ Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, “Introduction,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), p. 5.

¹⁴² UNHCR, *Protecting Refugees and the Role of UNHCR 2007-2008*, p. 7.

Mixed Motivations

It is necessary to recall the indispensable trait of the refugee according to the 1951 convention: the presence of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. There first comes the question of arbiter: who will decide on the validity of the fear of persecution?

In their study on Iranian exiles and immigrants in Los Angeles, Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Georges Sabagh point to the US government's appraisal of refugees. Until the 1980 Refugee Act, which was imposed to bring US policy in line with UN definitions, US refugee policy favored persons coming from communist countries and the Middle East. Thereafter, individual motivations for leaving a country and a well-founded fear of persecution became the decisive criteria for granting refugee status. However, Bozorgmehr and Sabagh argue that it is US government's view of friendly and unfriendly nations that defines who is a refugee. While migrants coming from countries with "friendly governments" such as El Salvador and Haiti are seen as being economic rather than political, migrants from "unfriendly nations" such as Cuba or Vietnam are easily defined as refugees.¹⁴³

The lack of "fair" assessment of the individual motivations of flight renders these legal categories problematic. Moreover, the plurality of the motives of people for leaving their countries of origin and the assumption that these categories are fixed and immune to change over time (with the exception of changes generated by the interventions of the states and international organizations involved) invoke the need

¹⁴³ Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Georges Sabagh, "Iranian Exiles and Immigrants in Los Angeles" in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991). pp. 121-122.

for questioning those categories. The case of the Iranians in the 1980s provides a worthwhile example of the plurality of migrants' motives for leaving their countries as well as of the shift in their categorical status over time.

In their attempt to classify exiles and immigrants in Los Angeles, Bozorgmehr and Sabagh conducted interviews with 671 Iranians (including Muslims, Armenians, Jews and Bahais), each representing a household. Asking an open-ended question on "the most important reason for leaving Iran," they found that "only 35.1 percent of exiles, and as many as 15.8 percent of immigrants, were admitted as legal refugees or, after arrival obtained legal refugee and asylee status," which reveals the unreliability of the legal categories.¹⁴⁴ They stress that the immigrants mostly gave educational reasons for their presence in the US. This needs further elaboration since educational reasons are not particular to the immigrants in Los Angeles, although the high presence there of pre-revolution Iranian students, who did not return to Iran after 1979, should be taken into account.

However, the dominance of "educational reasons" among the responses demonstrates more than the former students' choice to stay. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 proceeded with the 1980 Cultural Revolution that brought forth the closure of universities until 1983, when they were reopened with "purging" examinations and even identifications of the leftist, revolutionary students by their pro-regime former classmates.¹⁴⁵ The militants were "purged," as well as the sympathizers of leftist organizations, the people related to them, and women who had not lived according to the Islamic rules of conduct in the pre-1979 era. Thus, it is not hard to

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁴⁵ For "Cultural Revolution," see Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 250, 257, 290, 305.

appreciate the great number of people who lost their chances of education during the Cultural Revolution. The revolutionary political refugees¹⁴⁶ of the post-Revolution era were mainly young people in their twenties and even in their late teens, which renders the frequent mentioning of educational reasons for flight meaningful. The majority of the interviewed revolutionary political refugees of the 1980s who passed through Turkey responded to the question on the reason for not wanting to stay in Turkey as the existence of better educational opportunities in the Western European countries.

Fleeing conscription for the Iran-Iraq war was also among the leading motives for refugees who were in their late teens or for the “immigrants” that had teenage sons in a context in which the conscription age was reduced to the early teens. Fleeing conscription and pursuing educational opportunities may also be taken as adjoining motivations for leaving Iran for young refugees.

In an end note to her article “Desiring Place: Iranian ‘Refugee’ Women and the Cultural Politics of Self and Community,” Bauer participates in the discussion on the in/validity of assigning people to distinct categories. Referring to the experience of being in both categories at different times, she writes:

Some tried to become students first, applying for asylum later; some applied for asylum but after entering my sample were denied refugee status. Should I throw them out? Layla, for example, was a political refugee (ex-Tudeh) in Europe, who became a citizen of her host country, only to immigrate to North America because of racism. [...] Mehran who was a student in Germany, working with a political organization, returned to Iran after the revolution, lost student status, returned and reapplied for refugee status, was not accepted in

¹⁴⁶ I use the term “revolutionary political refugees” to be able to differentiate them from monarchist political refugees.

Germany but then became a refugee in Norway, from where he then applied for student status in Germany.¹⁴⁷

As Bauer demonstrates, shifting to different categories may stem from the regular, procedural evolution of asylum seeker into refugee and refugee into citizen as well as intended by people as a survival strategy.

Religious conversion points to such an intentional change in categories that can also be taken as a recent migration strategy used by some asylum seekers in Turkey. Sebnem Koser Akcapar argues that “the length of stay in the transit country, often much longer than anticipated, leads migrants to find different ways of maintaining themselves, resulting in specific strategies and skills that are certainly crucial.”¹⁴⁸ And conversion is at times an outcome of such prolonged transit migration. She claims that conversion is used for increasing their chance in asylum procedures by Iranian asylum seekers who have been rejected by the UNHCR in the first place. Conversion not only provides them the chance of readmission to the UNHCR asylum process, but also provides access to social networks both in the country of transit and in the country of resettlement.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Janet L. Bauer, “Desiring Place: Iranian ‘Refugee’ Women and the Cultural Politics of Self and Community,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20, no. 1-2, p. 196.

¹⁴⁸ Sebnem Koser Akcapar, “Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey,” *The International Migration Review* 40, no.4 (Winter 2006), p. 820.

¹⁴⁹ Kathryn Spellman, *Religion and Nation: Iranian local and Transnational Networks in Britain* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), pp. 185-188.

Challenging the “Passive Refugee”

Either intentionally, or according to the regular process of the asylum procedure, the legally defined categories of “refugee” and “immigrant” are prone to change while it is hard to assign people to those distinct categories initially as well. Yet, it is not only the validity of the categories that should be questioned, but also the depiction of the refugee as the passive victim of the migration process who had no other choice than flight.

Mina Agha criticizes the perception of exile as a “process suffered” because of external pressures.¹⁵⁰ The harshness of the circumstances does not sweep away flight’s being a decision. Agha tells the personal history of Robab, an Iranian women whose recognition as an asylee by the German authorities took six years, to illustrate the decision of flight’s being a multidimensional process. She cites Robab’s words explaining her reasons of flight:

I didn’t want to live underground or die a martyr in prison.... I was also very worried about my children. I had to save them, because they had no future and might even die in the war. This is what made me decide to flee.... I also thought that I could be more effective in my political activities abroad than in Iran, because the regime had destroyed all of the opposition groups there.¹⁵¹

Agha states that it was the threat of political persecution that directed Robab’s decision. However, her decision was a result of her rational assessment of the alternatives with which she could not identify. She argues that flight should be seen as a “meaningful course of action taken with the aim of saving oneself and at the

¹⁵⁰ Mina Agha, “The Biographical Significance of Flight and Exile,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20, no.1-2 (2000), p. 165.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

same time creating new social freedom for oneself.” Therefore she states that “flight does not only imply futility but also opportunity and latitude.”¹⁵²

Robab’s exhausting process of recognition as a refugee demonstrates the logic of asylum law on “passive” refugees. Citing Robab’s words on her asylum process, Agha argues that “Robab is supposed to be a passive victim of state violence and not a person having agency, who take her faith into her own hands.” Robab states that:

It was stupid that I wrote in my application for asylum that, besides being persecuted on political grounds, I also wanted to save my children from the Iran-Iraq war. This led to the authorities not believing my political reasons for fleeing, so that I had to fight for my recognition for six years....

Hence, Robab was punished for her recognition of her flight as a “motivated action” and not solely as a forced action.¹⁵³ Moreover, her experience as a political refugee with mixed motivations of flight shed light to the voidance of the assumption of “ideal types” of migrants in a context in which multiple factors determine one’s life conditions.

Political Exile: An Empowering Tool

Although most of the studies use the terms refugee, asylee, and exile interchangeably, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi argue that exile has a marginal degree of choice as opposed to refugee and that it is the consideration of the

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 169.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

life abroad's temporariness that defines the exile.¹⁵⁴ Not their attempt to differentiate between exile and refugee, but their perspective on the definition of *political* exile is distinctive. Defining exile as “the fundamental political strategy of current times,” they argue that the term “political” that foregoes “exile” refers to the political role of the exile as much as his/her political activities preceding the flight.¹⁵⁵ In other words, what renders an exile political is his/her political activities in the country in which s/he resettles and his/her “active desire to affect conditions at home.”¹⁵⁶

Accordingly, in her afore-mentioned words pertaining to her reasons for flight, Robab stressed the lack of opportunity for pursuing political activities in Iran and stated that she could be more effective in her political activities abroad. Therefore, apart from physical survival, exile provides the political self to resume his/her political activities; thus becoming a tool for “deterritorialization of politics.”¹⁵⁷

The revolutionary political refugees' narratives of the mid-1980s exemplify this empowering aspect of exile. Without exception, all the leftist political refugees of the mid-1980s wanted to stay close to Iran (thus, not the United States or Canada, but Western European countries were preferred as destination countries) as they carried the hope of a regime change and struggled for that cause. Although most of them had quitted professional political activity in terms of being a member of the opposition groups in exile at the time we met, they had resumed political activities in

¹⁵⁴ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, “Iranian Exiles as Opposition: Some Theses on the Dilemmas of Political Communication Inside and Outside Iran” in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991), p.206.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

the countries in which they had settled for a number of years. For example the former militants of People's Fedayin that I met in Cologne had taken part in various positions in the Cologne branch of the organization immediately after their arrival.

Moreover, the choice of destination countries did depend on the aspiration of pursuing political activities in a great number of cases. Though settled elsewhere, most of the leftist militants did plan to go to France in the first place (as was the destination of afore-mentioned political refugee of the *Guests of Hotel Astoria*). "Paris is host to almost all of the leaders of the Iranian opposition," states Vida Nassehy-Behnam in her account of "Iranian Immigrants in France."¹⁵⁸ This statement is far from exaggeration. Both the political opponents of the Islamic Republic, and the founder of the regime from which those people fled, sought refuge in Paris. The name of the commune in which Khomeini lived in Paris, Neauphle-le-Chateau is given to the street where the French Embassy is located in Tehran. The most famous and active leaders of Iranian opposition, the last prime minister of the Shah, Shapour Bahkhtiar, who led the National Resistance Movement in France which was in the path of Mossadegh's National Front; Ali Amini, the grandson of Qajar Shah Mozzafar-ed-Din, former prime minister of the Shah and the leader of the monarchist group The Front for the Liberation of Iran (active until 1986); and former president Bani-Sadr and the leader of Mojahedin, Masoud Rajavi, lived as exiles in France.¹⁵⁹

France was also host to the headquarters of the Marxist guerilla organization People's Fedayin and the Kurdistan Democratic Party once led by Qassemlou. Therefore, going to France meant more than physical survival and promised interaction with anti-regime organizations which was important for leftist militants

¹⁵⁸ Vida Nassehy-Behnam, "Iranian Immigrants in France" in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1991), p. 104.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112-113.

who were unable to pursue political activities in Iran, any longer. Moreover, the existence of such networks did ease their process of adaptation in the countries in which they settled.

In addition to the “choice” of the country of destination, the routes taken out of Iran, the years of migration/flight, class and gender of the people in move may be more explanatory than the categories of “refugee” and “immigrant” or the homogenizing assessment of “one and a half million upper middle class transit migrants” with regards to the Iranian refugees of the 1980s as it is not always the same experience that these categorizations attempt to decipher.

Concluding Remarks

Numbers are necessary to capture the big picture of migrating people. Yet, the sole reliance on them brings forth a dehumanized history of people whose life stories are extracted from the totality. Migrants do not move in a void, but pass through doors that are left ajar with respect to the power struggle among the actors involved. The decisions that they make pertaining to the route they chose, their destination country, or even the hotel in which they stay temporarily are not made in a void, either. However, it is not a deterministic relation between the existing structure and their unopened luggage that they drag with themselves everywhere they go but an interaction among them that engenders those decisions.

Criticizing the present legal categories of distinction among migrants does not refer to a lack of distinction among their experiences, but stresses that there are various factors to define such differences and that even “going to disco in Istanbul”

and “waiting for late hours to collect fruits in the bazaar” may construct more valid axes of difference than those at hand.

This chapter constructed the setting of the story of Iranian transit migrants in Turkey. It first discussed the history of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s by focusing on Turkey’s security-based logic of dealing with transit migration and the formation of Turkey’s first and only asylum regulation with the power struggle around it. Second, it introduced the post-revolutionary Iranian transit migrants, whose history has been abstracted, de-politicized, and reduced to the background of other stories.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE ROAD: FLIGHT AND PAST EXPERIENCES

*Our refuge began actually back there [Iran];
it just became clearer here [Netherlands].*
Minoos¹⁵⁹

“They were getting closer,” said Sohrab, narrating his flight from Iran. He had left Iran with a forged passport that had a non-aligned photo of him and a serious stomachache that would accompany him until Germany. Flight was not his first choice, but “they were getting closer,” so he had to leave.

The reason for flight is the main question with which refugees are faced in the interviews pertaining to the recognition of their refugee status. As mentioned before, it is the validity of the fear of persecution that has the leading role in the assessment of the applicant’s eligibility to be a recognized refugee in respect to the international asylum regulations. However, it is not only in official realms that the newcomer or non-citizen is faced with questions enquiring his/her reason of coming. Encountering an Iranian, an Afghan, or a Somalian in their neighborhoods, the “locals” feel that it is their right to know the reasons for her/his being in “their” territory. All in all, the refugee’s presence in a foreign country is seen as a situation that needs to be explained.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Cited in Ghorashi, p. 117.

¹⁶⁰ For example see the accounts of Albert Banza-Bodika and Cemal. “I am one of the first seven Africans who arrived in Konya. In this city the locals asked me several

However, the conditions of flight and the refugee's pre-flight life in her country of origin are influential in the way she perceives transit migration and/or exile. As is widely cited, people carry a suitcase with them everywhere they go. A suitcase of memories, struggles, pains, and hopes. And most of the time this suitcase is never opened. The memories of pre-flight lives and the conditions of flight itself form the basis of the dispositions that are effective in the refugee's interaction with the new environment in which she finds herself. In other words, the history of being a refugee does not begin in the country of reception that one is recognized as a refugee, but the very moment that one starts to hide and escape.

This chapter will elaborate on the Iranian refugees' routes and ways of flight, as well as their pre-flight lives, focusing on the relation between the degree of political affiliation and the start of exile. Two different stories of flight will be presented with flashbacks to their pre-exile lives, followed with a general portrait of flight and two characteristics of the flight of political refugees (internal exile and the dominant sense of incalculability) that render their story different. Therefore, a new axis of differentiation will be introduced: degree of political affiliation.

questions. Where am I from? Where is Congo? Why and how did I come to Turkey, How long will I stay here? So many questions, but because of the language barrier the conversation was short." Albert Banza-Bodika, "A Refugee in Konya," *Refugee Voices* 3, (Fall 2007), p. 6 ; "People are sometimes too curious, they don't refrain from asking questions. They would not ask about your parents' occupations in Ghana..." Cemal, cited in "Türkiye'deki Afrikalı Göçmenler: Bir Yiğit Gurbete Gitse," *Express*, no. 52 (August 2005), p. 42.

Said's Story

*No one sees what the mountain sees
As the mountain sees
No one keeps silent what it sees
as much as the mountain keeps
M. Mungan¹⁶¹*

9 March 1985 Tabriz: Said had an appointment in front of the Tabriz Communication Center (*Mokhabarat*). He was waiting for the “guide” that would lead them to the Turkish border and the five other passengers that would travel with him. Iraqi war planes were in sortie, and he did not dare wait in front of the Mokhabarat building in case of having been reported. Wandering around the building, he saw the “guide” he had met in Tehran a week ago. In those days, when demand was high for them, it was hard to find a trustworthy smuggler. He had heard stories of people who had been left on the road –literally, in the mountains– even before passing the Turkish border. It was not rare for guides to disappear after taking the first part of their money. However, he thought he had no other choice than to trust this guide, who had “helped” his friend Nasser to Turkey before. Nasser, now residing in Istanbul, had given him the guide's phone number.

Among the other five passengers there was only one that he knew, a comrade. There was a young Baha'i couple with their baby girl, a man in his late thirties, and a boy in his mid-teens. He would travel with them for five days, yet his knowledge on their “origins” would remain based on assumptions. They would not speak of anything about their lives in Iran; the only conversations were based on their daily routines on the road, frequently stemming from necessity. This condition of “limited

¹⁶¹ “*Kimse görmez dağın gördüğünü / Dağ kadar gördüğünü / Kimse susmaz dağ kadar gördüğünü*” Murathan Mungan, “Ne Kimse”, *Dağ* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları 2007), p. 61.

conversation,” not in terms of quantity or length but in scope, would become the norm when they arrived at Istanbul. It was not the “foreigners,” be citizens of Turkey, Sweden, or Germany, but the “natives” with which the Iranians on the road would abstain from coming into contact. Given the fact that the people fleeing the newly established regime did not compose a homogenous group, and that in a great number of cases fellow travelers involved sympathizers or members of various organizations renders the mistrustfulness that was dominant in the exilic relations understandable. Furthermore, it was well known that agents of the Islamic regime did stroll in the Iranian populated neighborhoods in Turkey and even queued in front of the UN building in Ankara to gather information.

Said’s travel mates included a Marxists guerilla, a Baha’i couple and a “un-identified” middle aged man. Said was a member of the Marxist guerilla organization, People’s Fadaiyan the Minority (*Aghalliyat*). His first choice had been not to leave Iran, but as more and more of his comrades were arrested, or “hospitalized” as it was coded, the more he felt that the ring was closing on him. Feeling the threat of being arrested each day, leading a secret life was getting harder. During the previous few months before he left Iran he had left Tehran and sought refuge in a provincial town of Gilan district in the north of Iran. Leaving Tehran did not mean putting an end to the political struggle. On the contrary, leading a secret life was a prerequisite of resuming his political activities in the “years of suppression,” that are mostly taken as starting from 1981 when the mass executions began.¹⁶² Halleh Ghorashi, herself a leftist militant in the revolutionary era, would cite a young woman militant’s perception of her political activities in those years as such:

¹⁶² Halleh Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), pp. 72, 101-118.

It was during those years of suppression that our political activities became really serious. [...] On the news you heard daily about 100 names of executed persons. [...] It was then after 1981 that the organization started its underground activities. For me it was the beginning of the serious political work. [...] The period of suppression was a period of becoming tempered for me.¹⁶³

However, the period of suppression did not have the same starting point for everyone. The organization which Said was a member of (Fadaiyan) had split in June 1980 into two branches, the Minority (*Aghalliyat*) and the Majority (*Aksariyat*) on the basis of different analyses of the post-revolution Iran. The terms Majority and Minority did not refer to the quantity of the supporters of the factions, but pointed to factions' representations in the central committee of the organization.¹⁶⁴ The Majority branch supported the Islamic Republic of Iran on the basis of its presumed anti-American quality. In the bi-polar world of the Cold War era, being anti-American was seen as proof of the government's revolutionary character as well as proof of its anti-imperialist nature. For the Minority, Iran was still a dependent capitalist state and the revolution had not been completed yet. Moreover, the Minority emphasized the anti-democratic stance of the Islamic Republic vis-à-vis the question of women and ethnic minorities.¹⁶⁵

Organizations' stances towards the Islamic Republic of Iran determined the extent of their activities as well as the extent of the suppression that they faced. The People's Mojahedin and the Minority branch of Fadaiyan occupied the first two spots on the government's black list. However, Iran's oldest leftist party, Tudeh, and Fadaiyan the Majority did not endorse armed struggle against the government and

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁶⁴ Maziar Behrooz, *Nasıl Yapılamadı: İran'da Solun Yenilgisi*, trans. Ercüment Özkaya (Ankara: Epos Yayınları, 2006), pp. 193, 196.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 187-208.

were able to pursue their political activities until 1983. Nikki R. Keddie states that Tudeh “was allowed to publish and spread its influence” until 1983, and it was in May 1983 that both Fadaiyan and Tudeh were declared illegal.¹⁶⁶ The spring of 1983 became the witness of Tudeh and Fadaiyan the Majority leaders’ arrest and their televised “confessions” that marked to a cornerstone in the elimination of the revolutionary left.¹⁶⁷

Therefore, being a member of the Minority, Said’s experience during the suppression years had a far longer history than most of the other dissident militants. He had succeeded at leading a secret life in Tehran for a couple of years and then had moved to Gilan. Later he would say that those years of secret life, or his “internal exile”¹⁶⁸ had provided him with the necessary tools to survive in Istanbul. While in “internal exile” he had pursued underground political activities and wanted to remain close to Iran and resume those activities even when he had to leave to be able to survive both physically and politically. However, his organization’s strong presence in France rendered the country an inviting destination. He was thinking of reaching Turkey successfully, then getting in touch with the organization’s Paris headquarters, and continue his journey to France by their help. Yet, he did not know anything about the route and it was hard to get help from the organization by 1985.

¹⁶⁶ Nikki R. Keddie, “Politics and Economics under Khomeini,” *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press 2006), p. 254.

¹⁶⁷ Ghorashi, p. 72.

¹⁶⁸ Referring to the pre exile years in Iran, Hammed Shahidian states that many militants had experienced “internal exile” in Abu-Lughod’s terms. According to Shahidian, it is the social estrangement of the leftist militants in an environment dominated by traditionalist and Islamists that shaped their internal exile. However, he accounts that it is not only social estrangement but also the secret life that most of the militants had to go under that made their pre exile experience in Iran an “internal exile”. See page 90.

Following the advice of his friend Nasser, he had found the smuggler that had told him to wait in Tabriz and follow the guides. He did so. Gathering in front of the Mokhabarat building, they all got into one car. Four men sitting behind and the Baha'i couple with their baby in front, they arrived at Salmas, the border town near Van, Turkey. Although there were police on the road, no one stopped them; it looked as if everything was arranged. In the car, the guide told the young woman to give pills to her baby to make sure that she would keep silent on the road. After half an hour, the driver who was their guide left them outside Salmas; someone was waiting for them. It was getting dark and the real "flight" was then starting.

They were told to hide behind rocks until they reach an orchard on the other side of the road. Then they were to run through the orchard as fast as they could until they were told to stop. Someone would be waiting for them in the orchard. However, it was not only the new guide, but also the "guardians of the revolution" that were waiting him at the other side of the orchard. There was a checkpoint at the end of the orchard. So, they had to keep silent and find the guide waiting for them in the orchard. He would be their key to passing the checkpoint. The sense of incalculability of the conditions stemming from lack of information that Said was struck with in front of the orchard would accompany him all through his journey. He thought passing through the orchard meant reaching Van. So, he ran as fast as he could. He heard someone among the bushes telling them to bow their head, stop or run. He did not know when the orchard would end. He stopped when he was told and continued to run when someone through the bushes said so. He was told not to look behind. He should have just run without knowing when the orchard would end. But it did end. Yet, he was not in Van.

The man waiting for them told him to wait for the other passengers. The boy in his late teens had preceded him. His face was pale. They were all out of breath. It wasn't just because of running, but of the fear that followed them through the orchard. It was the lights of the checkpoint and the whispered shouts of the "guides" telling them to stop or run. The baby girl in her father's lap was wrapped in a blanket. She was still and soundless. She was fed with syrup to keep silent.

They walked a few kilometers led by their guide and stopped when they saw two men with horses, some already loaded. They would continue with horses. One of the smugglers took the baby and each of the refugees was given a horse. The boy would share a horse with the other smuggler as he did not know how to ride; besides, the other horses were loaded with goods that were being smuggled, like them. However, it was harder to sit on the back of a horse because its bones pricked and were sharp. So the boy wanted to sit on the saddle of a horse and one of the loaded horses was separated for him. Loads were reorganized and he got a horse of his own.

Later, Said would tell that his inner thighs became sore and bleed as he didn't know how to ride a horse. "You shouldn't stick to the horse when it moves, you should move along with it." "Otherwise it would be like sticking to a chair that doesn't stand still and hits your thighs continuously." He didn't know, so he stuck to the horse. They rode all the night. When they reached a village, it was sunrise. They were brought to a house, welcomed by armed men. The house belonged to a family affiliated with the Kurdish armed struggle. The local people's familiarity with routes through the mountains and their knowledge of bypassing the checkpoints rendered them tailor-made for the business. Sometimes it was goods or drugs that were smuggled, sometimes people, sometimes both. That time Said and his travel mates were to be smuggled alongside goods; they had no idea what the goods were.

They had to wait until late afternoon to continue their journey as they could be identified easily walking on the snowy slopes. The light of the shimmering sun reflected as it shined upon the snow covered hills. Even when the light was not so bright, they had to hide in the snow when they were told to do so by their local guides. The duration of moments hiding in the snow was not calculable, either. They were told not to ask questions, but they would not have asked even if they had not been told not to ask.

Following the orders seemed to be the most practical way to get out of that unpredictable mess. At times nights ceased to be secure, as well. When the sun gave its place to moonlight, they would be vulnerable to be espied by inquisitive eyes. In the film directed by Reza Allamezadeh, *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* former nursery school teacher Pouri sitting in the lobby of the Hotel, narrates their march through mountains as such:

You come through the mountains yourself, you know. You can't expect anything from anyone there, everyone is on his own. The march, sleeplessness, the worst is the fear... it would pull even the most professional smugglers down. I don't even mention people like us. And think of Kurdistan's ice-cold weather. It was almost chapping our skin. Damn the winter moonlight! You can even see a rabbit from far away; I don't even mention fifteen to twenty people with horses and mules...¹⁶⁹

It was not only the weather that intensified their feeling of insecurity. They were guided by armed men and even hosted by them. No one would dare object to them. Said recalls the smugglers' handling of the forged passports that they had been

¹⁶⁹ "Khodetun ke az kooh umadin, midoonin. unja as kasi entezar nemishe dasht, harkasi be fekre khodeshe. Rah peymayi, bikhabi, az hama badtar tars...Hatta ghacaghchiyaye herfeyi ro az pa miandaze. Dige che berese be ademaye tippe ma. Un ham tu un sarmaye Kordestoon. Poostemoon dasht as saremoon miterekeed. La'nat be shabhaye zemestoon! Khargoosho az ye farsakhi mishe did, dige che berese be poonzdah bist nafar adamo, asbo, ghatero..." Pouri, *The Guests of Hotel Astoria*.

promised before. They had not given the teenage boy a passport, telling him that they had not been able to arrange one. He objected at first, but understanding the insanity of objecting to an armed man in the mountains, he kept quiet. The boy, sent by his family to avoid conscription in the Iran-Iraq war, cried all through the mountain route.

After riding for more than ten hours, they took a break at a village near the border. They were still in Iranian territory. They washed their faces and ate the food given by the host family. After resting for four or five hours, they started to ride again. They had to walk and ride for an additional day to pass the border. On their third day of walking and riding, at midnight, they approached the border. They stopped in several houses on the way. Every time Said dismounted, it took a while for him to feel his legs again and walk properly. His legs would tremble and resist to band together. After passing the border, their guides informed them about soldiers on the road from time to time and they dismounted and hid in the snow. On their third and fourth days they did not wait until late afternoon to resume the journey. They walked until they reached Başkale, Van.

Said had given more than a hundred thousand tomans (approximately twelve hundred dollars) to the smuggler that he had met first in Tehran and later in Tabriz. He had an additional 500 dollars sewed into the lining of his coat and sixteen to seventeen thousands tomans (approximately twenty dollars) in his pocket. When they arrived at Başkale, he had already lost/spent the money in his pockets. Although they were not supposed to pay on the road, extras dragged on. He had given all the money he had in his pockets to the people that had hosted them along the way. He was not verbally obliged to pay them, yet in those conditions, he did not dare object. They

spent a few hours in Başkale before they left for Istanbul. Their guide dropped them by the Van road and told them to wait for a bus to pick them up.

Five men, a woman, and a baby in ragged clothes, weary of walking, waited in a panic. It was obvious from their looks that they were not “ordinary passengers” and in fact, their appearance was the main reason for their panic. However, as they had been told, a regular bus stopped and picked them up after two hours of waiting. They were not asked any questions until the bus approached checkpoints, when the driver’s assistant came and asked them for money to pay the soldiers on the way. Said did not have any money left; the young couple gave all they had. The bus was stopped by soldiers who were conducting regular checks and the driver dropped off the bus before the soldiers got on. They did not see any money exchange, but assumed that it had taken place as they were skipped over in the id check.

After four days of walking and riding in the snowy mountains, traveling with a bus was the greatest comfort to them. Yet they could not sleep immediately. Said recalls what he was feeling when they passed the border. It was not only relief. At the moment that he left Iran, he was thinking of the day that he would return. He had to assure himself that he was not leaving Iran for his own wellbeing but in order to be able to continue the struggle. On the road he thought about writing to the French base of the organization informing them of his presence in Istanbul and wait for their advice to make his next plans. Initially, he wanted to get in touch with his comrades who lived in Istanbul and then leave for Paris. For the time being, the forged passport that was given to him by their guide in the mountains was his sole source of anxiety. It was so badly forged that he did not know whether he would even be able to use it. On their fifth day, they arrived in Istanbul. Not knowing where to go, Said followed his travel mates and found himself in Baran Hotel in Aksaray.

Mahnaz's Story

Tehran, 1989: Two policemen were knocking at the door. They were not wearing uniforms, but introduced themselves by showing their identification cards to Mahnaz. They asked for Hossein, Mahnaz's husband. He had been absent from his regular signing in Evin prison for a long time. She told them that she did not know where he was. He had left home nearly four months earlier and she had not heard any news of him since. She said she was worried about him and that she did not know where to report him missing. The men told her to visit Evin the following morning at 8:00 am.

After Hossein's flight, Mahnaz was frequently "visited" by the police. A militant of the Fadaiyan (later of the Majority branch), Hossein had been a prisoner both in the Shah Era and in the post-revolution years. After being released in 1986, he was continuously harassed by the police and finally sought peace in seeking asylum in Sweden. Mahnaz was 28 when Hossein left and Hossein was 38.

They had discussed for a couple of months finding a way of getting away from the police's daily surveillance. Hossein had to visit Evin each week, so they could not leave Tehran legally. They did not even think of moving to a provincial city as it would not stop the police control over them. Hossein had to sign in and inform the authorities about his whereabouts every week in another prison or office wherever they moved. Moreover, their moving to a provincial city would render them more suspicious. There was no legal way out, so it was decided that Hossein should flee first and seek asylum in Sweden. Mahnaz and the children would join him later. Due to his former connections, Hossein had learned about Sweden's asylum procedures. Most of his friends had fled to Sweden and written letters to him

from the camps in which they had been placed in. His case seemed to be a strong one: he could easily prove his membership in the Fadaiyan, he had served in prison both in the Shah era and in the post-revolution years, and the surveillance of the police did not cease after his release. He lived under constant threat as he had to inform the police of his every act each week. At the time when Hossein and Mahnaz decided in Hossein's flight to Sweden, they believed that after Hossein's admission to the refugee camp, they would not have to wait long for his family's acceptance to the camp.

Hossein did not have a passport. With the help of his friends, he got in touch with a smuggler who provided him with a forged passport to leave Iran. However, he was told to use the passport only until he met the second smuggler waiting for him in Bulgaria. He did not need to get a visa to travel through Turkey, so he bought a ticket and flew to Turkey with his forged passport. After staying in Istanbul, Aksaray for two days, he left for Bulgaria and from there continued his journey with the "guide" that had been waiting for him in Bulgaria. The guide was taking 30 people with him to Sweden by ship that would leave from Poland. Hossein fled to Sweden in 1989, yet despite his assumptions, he had to stay in the camp for three years until his papers were arranged and he was given a residence permit as a political refugee.

Before his flight, they had sold their house and Mahnaz had moved to her parents' house with the children. Hossein had taken five to six thousand dollars of the money and the rest was with Mahnaz to support her in Hossein's absence. They had some debts to be paid, as well. Thus, when the police knocked on the door, Mahnaz was in her parents' house and was thoroughly informed of her husband's flight. For the children's and her own sake, she had to behave as if she had been abandoned by his husband.

Before Hossein's flight, they had even thought that she might blame the police of his absence, but she did not do anything except imply that. The only thing that Mahnaz worried about was her parents' involvement in the case. They were traditionalist people who did not have any ties with political dissent. They were always afraid of Mahnaz's suffering with her children because of Hossein's case. So she decided not to tell them about her "invitation" to Evin. She would leave in the morning and tell them afterwards.

On a cold and gray Tehran morning she went to Evin, where she was blindfolded and taken to an interrogation room. Evin was so big that she was put in a car and given a lift to go to the building in which she would be interrogated. Blindfolded, she was told to sit and questions started. Mahnaz objected that she should be blindfolded as she "was not political," but "the wife of a political." She was asked whether Hossein had written letters to her and she said he hadn't. They asked whether she was also planning to leave Iran as she had applied for a passport and she said she hadn't. They told her that she had to inform them if she left Iran and she said she would do so. When she returned home, her family was having lunch. She told them of her morning visit to Evin. She didn't tell that she was blindfolded.

Taking over Hossein's role of being questioned by the police, Mahnaz waited for his call to leave Iran. After learning Mahnaz's invitation to Evin, Hossein told her to take the remaining money and leave for Turkey and wait there until he was given residence permit. It had been nearly one year since he had been placed in the refugee camp so he thought it would take less than a month for his papers to be arranged. In addition, he had met an Iranian in the camp who had offered to forge a Polish visa for his wife, and one of his camp mates had offered him to arrange for Mahnaz to stay with his relatives –two young women attending to university– living in Ankara

while waiting for the arrangement of her travel by the UN. Mahnaz and Hossein had a nine year old son and four year old twins, a boy and a girl. Thinking that her “passage” would not last more than fifteen to twenty days, she decided to travel to Ankara and apply to the UN to join her husband in Sweden.

Recalling police’s warning that she should inform if she left Iran, she was worried about not being able to pass the border securely. Yet, she had to try. Not informing anyone, even her parents, she took a bus from Azadi Square for Ankara. She was given the girls’ address in Ankara. Nothing seemed problematic. She was truly motivated to join her husband. She had bought two tickets for the children and herself. The twins were on her lap and her son was sitting next to her. When they approached Khoy, the bus stopped. Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*) got on the bus and took a few men off the bus. One of the taken men did not get back on. She was not afraid of being taken by the Guards as she did not have any charges against her. She was only afraid of not being able to leave Iran in case the police at Evin had informed the border police. She could not do anything but waiting. For the time being, she was trying to keep her children silent not to attract attention.

They arrived at Bazargan border (the Iranian side of the Iran-Turkey border), yet it was plain that they would have to wait long until they could really “arrive at” the border. Esmail Fassih, in his novel *Sorraya in a Coma*, which was published in 1985, describes the Bazargan border of the 1980 as such:

The Bazargan Transit Building is a big, old single-story edifice, with only one narrow Dutch door now open, but controlled by Islamic Revolutionary guards. Hundreds of travelers are crowded in front of it. There is no sign of regular police force. Only a few boyish *hezbollahi* youths, quite and polite, with G-3s and Uzi machine guns dangling from their shoulders, are assisting the passengers and attending to what has to be done. It is clear that one must wait for hours, perhaps even days, before getting through the rigamarole here. [...] A bearded, middle-aged man shouts out through the narrow doorway: If anyone

has extra currency, or gold, or any other valuable objects with them, they must be handed to the customs authorities and get a receipt. Otherwise, if anything is discovered, it will be confiscated, and the passengers turned back.¹⁷⁰

In the 1990s Bazargan, the boyish *hezbollahi* youth were present whereas their Uzis were out of sight. However, the military uniforms of the Revolutionary guards implied that Uzis were not far away. Mahnaz and the other passengers were led by their driver, who was trying to open a path for his passengers to get into the check point as quickly as possible. It was not hard for him as he was acquainted with most of the employees there. It was harder for individual passengers to reach to the check point.

Mahnaz had been informed that she could not take the money remaining from the house sale with her legally, so she had hidden the money inside the lining of one of the suitcases. It was a known, yet still successful tactic. In those days, even children's dolls would be disemboweled in search of money, gold, or drugs. However, a professionally sewed back lining was still the most secure way of "smuggling" a small amount of money.

She had to keep calm until they had passed through the check point. Nevertheless, the possibility of being "turned back" by the guards terrified her. Nothing happened and she got on the bus successfully. After waiting for a couple of hours, the passengers of their bus gathered together. Some had had to hand over the jewelry that they had tried to take with them, but they had not been turned back. After passing the border, Mahnaz could not stop crying. She thought she would never be able to return Iran. She had not even said goodbye to her family. However, the

¹⁷⁰ Esmail Fasih, "Excerpt from Sorraya in a Coma," in *Strange Times My Dear: The Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*, ed. Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak, (New York: Arcade Publishing 2005), p. 71.

thought of joining Hossein gave her strength. The police check did not end after passing the border. Every half an hour they saw soldiers on the road. Most of the time they were not stopped by them, but every one or two hours, soldiers would get on the bus and check their identity cards/passports.

Finally, they arrived in Ankara. Mahnaz had the address of the house that Hossein's friend had given so she got on a taxi and found the house easily. Two young Iranian girls were living in the house. Mahnaz and the children were welcomed by them. One of the girls wanted to learn how long she would have to stay in Ankara before her travel arrangements were made. She recounted what she had thought: ten to twenty days. After a couple of days, she was advised to stay in a nearby hotel where Iranians stayed, the Hotel Tandoğan. Trying to control three children in the apartment of strangers, it seemed to be a good idea for her. After all, she thought that she would not have stay for long so she could spend some of the money that she had "smuggled" to Turkey. Therefore, she was led by the girls to the Hotel Tandoğan where she would spend two years waiting for the arrangement of Hossein's residence permit in Sweden.

A Portrait of Flight

Turkey has been among few countries that do not require visa for Iranians, which is one of the reasons why it was a favorite country of transit for a great number of Iranians that fled form Iran in the 1980s. Pakistan, India, and Dubai were also used as transit routes to the West. However, the geographic condition of the borderland between Iran and Turkey, and the presence of big families (mostly Kurds) living on

both sides of the border experienced in the business of smuggling, rendered Turkey a favorite route, especially for the people that could not leave Iran legally.

For the Iranians leaving Iran in 1980, getting out of Iran was, for the most cases, harder than reaching the country of destination. Political militants that were under surveillance did not dare apply for passports (most of them were young and had not left Iran before) and males who had not served in the military (even if they were in their early teens) were not allowed to exit the national borders. Therefore, despite the fact that some sought riskier ways such as leaving “legally” with a forged passport, mountains seemed to be the only possible route for the rest of them.

Table 2. Routes Used According to the Gender of the Interviewees.

	Woman	Man	Total
On foot (Mountains)	1	6	7
Bus	3	6	9
Plane	2	3	5
Total	6	15	21

The stories of Said and Mahnaz disclose two different types of flight. However, their stories are far from being exceptional. I interviewed 21 refugees that had left Iran in the years 1982-1990. Six of them were living in Cologne, four in Malmo, one in Lund, and ten in Stockholm. There were six women and fifteen men. Among the 21 refugees, seven had fled by way of the mountains, nine had traveled by bus (via the Bazargan border), and five by plane (see Table 2). The routes employed were very much related to the degree of political affiliation, as well as other official barriers of exit (i.e., military service). The route through the mountains was not the first choice. Nevertheless, the lack of a genuine or finely forged passport rendered it a widely used route.

All of the travelers on foot were leftist militants from various organizations (three of them were from People's Fadaian the Majority). There was only one party professional among on foot travelers. Fleeing in the first half of the 1980s, two of the party professionals had left Iran by plane and one by bus. Four of the interviewees were party professionals and all of them were male. It is important to take these party cadres as a separate group as their experience was very much different from those of the other travelers. Their journey was mostly guided by the party and they were introduced contact persons to meet in Istanbul. All the four interviewees said that they had telephone numbers (in fact, those numbers were codes that would be added with a certain number to attain the telephone number) to be able to reach the contact person that would ease their "passage" through Turkey. Furthermore, two of them had been on duty when they were in Turkey. They had come to Turkey to serve as "logistic managers" for the incoming refugees. Having passports, genuine or finely forged, two of those cadres, Farhad had been in Iraq and the USSR before he came to Turkey and Hooman had been in Dubai.

Farhad defined his work not as a political activity, but as a "class activity" (*faaliyat-e senfi*). Nevertheless, it was only the militants of his organization and/or their families that he was responsible for helping, which at the time of the interview he criticized bitterly.¹⁷¹ "Logistic management" involved meeting the newcomers at Aksaray Hotels and settling them into the houses that they had rented in more "quiet" neighborhoods where fewer Iranians lived. Farhad had rented a house in Tarabya and Hooman in Bahçelievler.¹⁷² Keeping away from Iranians was their main security

¹⁷¹ Farhad, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 09 August 2007.

¹⁷² Hooman, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 16 August 2007.

precaution. They were transit migrants themselves, yet their duty heavily marked their experience. Their lives in Istanbul need further elaboration, yet for the time being, their presence as a distinct group is only emphasized to highlight the variety of the refugees' opportunities in their flight.

The degree of political affiliation mattered for the quality of flight plans. Most of the political militants (not party professionals) had made all the arrangements for their travel themselves. Those arrangements mainly involved finding and coming to an agreement with a smuggler (usually a tried and advised one), and then finding and bargaining for a cheap hotel after arriving in Turkey. Sympathizers shared the same destiny.

Interviews for this research were conducted with recognized refugees in Germany and Sweden, who at the time of the interview had acquired the citizenship of their countries of residence. Those refugees that were recognized as refugees in the 1980s and the early 1990s were granted asylum mostly for political reasons that had officially rendered them "political migrants/refugees." In addition to that, although some recounted "reasons for flight" were not related to political activities, most of the refugees called themselves as political (*siyasi*). However, their stories reveal that a distinction among the political(s) is necessary in order to convey their experiences as transit migrants accurately. Therefore, we can categorize the people interviewed as party professionals, political militants, and sympathizers of dissident groups. There was also one refugee who did not call herself political but "the wife of a political" (see Table 3). Nevertheless, first, it is crucial to define who is defined as political (*siyasi*) in this study.

Table 3. Interviewed Refugees According to Their Degree of Political Affiliation and Legality of Exit.

	Legal exit	Illegal exit	Total
Party professionals/cadres	–	4	4
Political militants	3	8	11
Sympathizers	5	-	5
Non-political	1	-	1
Total	9	12	21

In this text, “the political” refers to the people who engaged in the revolutionary movement that gave birth to the 1979 Revolution and/or participated in the anti-regime struggle after the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This definition is compatible both with the conventional usage of *siyasi* in the Iranian context, and with the terminology relevant with the asylum procedures.¹⁷³ However, using such a “thin description” of the political does not mean that frequently recounted causes of flight such as rejecting to comply with the suppressive laws against women, refusing to participate in war, and being subject to discrimination on the basis of one’s religion, or gender are not acknowledged as political by the author of this thesis.

Nevertheless, when we take into account the structural barriers against the flight of the people participating in the anti-regime struggle after the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the “internal exile” to which most of them were exposed before leaving Iran; expanding the definition to encompass everything political would obscure the diversity of the refugee experiences. This would lead to the generalization and abstraction of the refugee experience, thus to saying more words to tell less.

¹⁷³ According to the UN description , refugee’s fear of persecution should stem from her political opinion, race, religion, ethnicity, or membership of a particular social group.

The assessment of the quality of refugees' political affiliation is mainly based on their own self-descriptions. Taking into account the plurality of motivations in the case of the Iranian refugees of the 1980s, it is not easy to draw neat borderlines between refugees' degrees of political affiliation. Moreover, the organizational form of the dissident groups (there were no parties except Tudeh) renders it hard to differentiate between cadres and militants. However, the refugees' narratives enable such a categorization.

Among the 21 refugees, four claimed to be professionals (*herfei*). Two of them (Farhad and Hooman) had been in Turkey to facilitate their comrades' flight and carry out organizational work as mentioned before, and the other two had left Iran after fulfilling their two-year obligation of secret work (they were from the same organization). They had left illegally and were living in Cologne at the time of the interview. Three of them had used forged passports while one had traveled through the mountains. They all had had contact numbers to call when they arrived at Istanbul.

The axis of legal/illegal exit involves the routes traveled as well as the documents used. We have mentioned that seven refugees had used the mountain route. However, twelve refugees had employed illegal means in their flight. That points to the frequent use of forged passports. Employing illegal means of exit also suggests the existence of structural barriers (forming the objective conditions of the refugees) imposed on dissidents. The figures indicate that the objective conditions of flights (legal/illegal) are compatible with the subjective self-assessments of the refugees (see Table 3). While all the party professionals and most of the militants had had to leave Iran illegally, sympathizers and non-politicals had fled Iran via legal means.

However, the categorization of political affiliations needs further elaboration. While it is easier to recognize cadres and non-politicals, it is harder to assess the difference among sympathizers/non-politicals or sympathizers/militants. Except for one refugee who had been granted asylum to accompany her husband that were granted asylum beforehand, all refugees claimed to be political (*siyasi*). Nevertheless, their non-extensive life stories reveal that some had actively engaged in political activities while others had not. I chose to name everyone who called herself *siyasi* as political without asking further questions. Nevertheless, the people who did not mention any political cause for their flight are taken as sympathizers.

There were four “sympathizers”: four had left Iran in the first half of the 1980s and had mixed motivations, such as pursuing better opportunities for education, fleeing the suppression imposed on women by the Islamic government, and joining family members who had left before. The people named as political militants (eight people) had mainly used illegal ways as they were actively engaged in the political struggle against the Islamic Republic of Iran, while the rest (three people) had left the country before the threat had become serious. Political militants shared sympathizers’ sense of incalculability stemming from lack of knowledge that marked their travel plans as well as the cadres’ experience of internal exile and dealing with insecurity. The sense of incalculability or uncertainty mainly stemming from lack of knowledge is not specific to the beginning of the journey but can be tracked all through the transit period of the refugee life. Thus, before elaborating on the further stages of their transit migration, these two shared attributes, namely the internal exile experienced in Iran and the sense of incalculability marking the travel should be reviewed. The introduction of these two attributes will help to fill in the

historical quality which the recorded history of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s is deprived of.

Internal Exile

Most of the people defined as political militants in this study stressed that their lives had undergone a serious change even before leaving Iran. As stated before, “the suppression years” had not started at the same time for members of all organizations. Some had had to live secretly for several years before leaving, some had changed their houses or their cities and some had to double-check the streets that they used everyday to avoid being followed.

Sohrab, who had left Iran in 1986 in his mid-twenties, would recall those days as such:

By the year 65 [1986] things got to be really bad. They were arresting, executing, a lot of my friends had been arrested, they had arrested a number of them, they had executed a great number of them, they were getting closer [...] When we were walking in Iran, on the street, we had to look back all the time. Returning home after work we had to be sure that no one was following [...] When we wanted to go to the bakery, we had to be sure that no one was following us to learn where we lived. Everywhere, everywhere we went, we looked behind. We would double-check. The stomach ache that I had in Iran was because of all this. Fear, terror, when I saw a *pastar*, a *basij* [revolutionary guards], I was always thinking that someone was following me. In fact, they were getting closer, most of my friends had been arrested. I wasn't afraid that much in Turkey. We knew those kinds of things. [laughs] That's why we could make our way easier, because we knew those things. We knew where we should knit ourselves, where we should refrain from. Politicals did make their way faster. [...] They were able to organize themselves faster.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ “*Sale 65 khayli dige bad shode bood. Migereften, edam mi kerdn, khayli az doostamro gerefte booden, ye seri ro gerefte booden, khayli ha ram edam karde booden, nazdik dashtan mishoden behem. [...] Ma tu Iran rah miraftim, tu ye khiyaboon hemishe bayed poshtemoon ra negah mi kardim. Masalan mirim az sere kar be khoone hemishe motma'een mishodeem ke poshtemoon kasi ma ro taghib na mikone. [...] Noon vayi mikhastim berim negah mikardim, ke hich ki dombalemoon rah na yofte khoonemoon ra*

Sohrab related his stomach ache which had followed him all through the journey with the feeling of insecurity that haunted him. The stomach ache had disappeared on his first day in Germany. He had been hiding his identity both in Iran and Turkey, where the many smugglers at Aksaray Hotels, where he stayed, fueled his sense of insecurity. Nevertheless, his experience of dealing with insecurity had helped him to keep calm and continue with his plans. He claimed that the suppression that they (the politicals) had faced in Iran had empowered them to live in exile. In other words, they had acquired the know-how of living in exile already in their homeland.

In conformity with Sohrab's narrative, Hammed Shahidian argues that Iranian secular, leftist activists' exilic life had started before they left Iran.¹⁷⁵ Taking the term from Abu-Lughod, Shahidian defines this experience as "internal exile."¹⁷⁶ However, he introduces this term especially to stress the social estrangement that he claims had rendered Iranian leftists "social strangers" in their own society. He states that it was the ideology and the praxis of the Iranian left that shaped their exile at home. This ideology and praxis involved activism in the name of people, among whom those

peyda kone. Her ja, her ja mirafteem bayed poshteseremoon ra negah mikardeem. Do bar check mikardeem. Un darde medeyi ke man tu Iran dashtam bekhatare inha bood hamash. Tarso, vahshat o, ye pastar mididem, ye basiji mididem, hamishe fakr mikardem daren taghibem mikonem. Nazdik ham mishoden khob, khayli az doostamro gerefte booden. Torkiye an chenan tars nedashtem. Balad boodim injoor chizharo. [laughs] Be khatare inhahem, vaghti ke oomedim karamoon ro zootter rah endakhteem, bekhatare balad boodene in chiza. Rahatter midoonestim koja bayed josh bokhoreem, koja bayed khodemoonra door bokoneem, Avvalen beccheyayi ke siyasi booden, saritar kareshoon rah oftad. [...] Saritar tonesten khodeshoon ra jame joor bokonen." Sohrab, 48, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 09 August 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Hammed Shahidian, "Iranian Exiles and Sexual Politics: Issues of Gender Relations and Identity," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9, no. 1 (1996), pp. 43-72.

¹⁷⁶ Janet Abu-Lughod, "Palestinians: Exiles at Home and Abroad," *Current Sociology* 36, no. 2 (1988), pp. 61-69, cited in Shahidian p. 45.

“new intellectual activists” lived “vicariously.”¹⁷⁷ Therefore, Shahidian claims that the political activists had become strangers in their home, especially because of their ideology.

Nevertheless, Shahidian’s “lonely intellectual” is not the only explanation for feeling like a stranger in the home country. There are narratives parallel to Sohrab’s, stressing the role of the state’s suppression in the estrangement of the political militants. For example, Halleh Ghorashi, cites another woman exile’s, Taraneh’s, account of “the lost home inside home:”¹⁷⁸

The worst thing for me was that I became a stranger in my own country during that terrible period of suppression. This is a very bad pain, and when you think of it you really suffer. [...] The most terrible thing was that you had to lie constantly to protect yourself and the people whom you loved. We had to do everything in secret; we did not live there anymore. *It was actually then that we became refugees: it was as if we were not there anymore.* It was really painful, you saw a high and thick wall between you and other people and you told lies to protect yourself. You made up stories. You were obliged to do it. You had to do things that you did not believe in. *All those things you had to do because of the pressures from outside.* (my emphasis)

Taraneh’s account conveys how being a stranger in one’s own home is not necessarily a subjective assessment; a feeling of “otherness” among the people who do not share your ideology. Keeping one’s identity secret was seen as a prerequisite for security.

What is intrinsic to the definition of internal exile is the living conditions of political activists under the suppression of Islamic regime. The refugees interviewed for this study were from different parts of Iran (i.e., Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Gilan, Tehran, and Fars) and from families of various social classes (mainly middle and working classes). It was not the feeling of “otherness” among the masses that had

¹⁷⁷ Shahidian, pp. 44-46.

¹⁷⁸ Halleh Ghorashi, p. 116.

forced them to live precarious lives under surveillance, but the suppression of the government with which they were engaged in a continuing struggle. The fact that they hid their identities did not stem from their being challenged by traditionalists or Islamists for being Westernized, as Shahidian claims, but from the increasing suppression of the dissidents by the government, which included arrests and executions.

Nevertheless, his account of the practical conditions of “living in exile” that refugees had experienced while living in Iran and its influence on their adaptation to their exile in the West renders his introduction of “internal exile” helpful for our analysis. He states that:

[P]olitical activism under two dictatorial regimes has meant improvisation, quick adaptation to a changing and harmful environment. After the Islamic Regime’s widespread attack on the opposition in the summer of 1981, many activists had to migrate to new areas inside Iran where they could live incognito. They often had to familiarize themselves with new ways of life or even learn a new language –an experience not too different from living in exile.¹⁷⁹

The forced internal exile of the political militants empowered them to deal with the harsh conditions of flight from Iran and living in exile. Agreeing with Shahidian’s analysis of political activism’s quality under Iran’s two regimes, I argue that this experience of internal exile, which was not necessarily a direct outcome of strong party connections, had a serious impact on the formation of the “political refugee” subjectivity.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

The Sense of Incalculability

None of the political militants interviewed had prior knowledge of the mountain route's length. Some of them did not even know the conditions (i.e., the climate, geography) of fleeing via mountains. Some said that they would not have dared to use the route if they had had prior knowledge of it. The inability to assess the duration of the journey was mostly relevant to the users of the mountain route as the others had traveled with plane or buses, which had a somewhat standard route and timing. However, even for those who had used plane or bus, the checkpoints along the way were sites of anxiety and vagueness. We will first elaborate on the sense of incalculability intrinsic to the mountain route and second on the anxiety of passing the checkpoints.

All the mountain travelers had started their actual flight in Salmas, the border town between Iran and Turkey (Van). Brought to Salmas by car, they were told to run through the orchards outside the town. However, most of the interviewees stated that they did not know what was waiting for them on the other side of the orchard. Furthermore, two interviewees out of the seven (Said and Khosrow) said that they thought they would arrive at Van when the orchards ended.¹⁸⁰ They were given no information about the road, and did whatever their guides/smugglers told them to do. They did not know how far they had to run to find the other guide that was waiting for them in the orchards, how long they had to ride to reach a village nearby, or even how long they had to hide in the snow until it was safe to stand up.

¹⁸⁰ Said, 47, interview by the author of thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 30 August 2007; Khosrow, 43, interview by the author of thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, 28 August 2007.

Azadeh's narrative exemplifies the extent and effects of this incalculability. Fleeing Iran in 1983 with her husband and two year old daughter via the mountain route, Azadeh said that her daughter had not been able to drink water or pee for more than ten hours as their guide had lost the way because of the snow covered roads. In addition, she had not thought that their journey would last long and had only taken one small bottle of water and their clothes were not appropriate for cold weather. She had told her daughter not to pee her pants to keep her away from freezing. She stressed that the worst thing was the inability to assess the next step of the journey. It was the feeling of being totally dependent on the smugglers, who did not seem to be reliable that troubled her seriously.¹⁸¹

It is true that the conditions producing the sense of incalculability in the mountain route was much more severe as they pertained to the travelers' immediate life chances. Nevertheless, the people who even had a slight possibility of not being able to leave legally from the borders were stuck in constant anxiety while passing through the checkpoints, in a similar way. It was only at the moment that the Iranian border control was passed that most of the passengers relaxed. As related before, Mahnaz was afraid of losing the money left from their house during the border control and of not being able to leave the country as she had been told to inform the police of her absence. The fear could entail more serious effects for people who had actively been engaged in political opposition. One of the four party professionals, Mahmoud, described his passage from the border control as such:

They were distributing the passports. [...] At the last moment he read my name and gave my passport. I, even then, didn't understand what

¹⁸¹ Azadeh, 65, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 30 August 2007.

was happening. I had my suitcase in my hand, I would run away. The doors of the bus were open. I would get down, and one way or another would reach Khoy. Bazargan was not far from Khoy. [...] We were in the middle of two sets of fences. One side was Iran and the other side Turkey. [...] I had a different feeling when I was between the fences. [...] I thought no one could take me to the other side. Later, I learned that you can not trust Turks.¹⁸²

Both in his entrance, and in his exit from Turkey (to Germany) he was threatened by officers who refused to let him in or out without taking money. The first time, he was able to pass with the help of his fellow travel mates. However, he had to insert one hundred marks into his passport to be able to pass the border in his exit from Turkey. This practice of inserting money into passports was cited frequently by the interviewed refugees. Mahmood's story illustrates the vagueness of the travel conditions that affected the refugees and provides a hint at Turkish authorities' contribution to this incalculability, as well.

The incalculability of the conditions, not being able to evaluate the very next step in their journey, and the inability to stick to plans was not only a matter of their flight, or a factor contributing to the harsh living conditions of exiles, but was constitutive to the medium in which the political refugee's subjectivity was taking shape.

¹⁸² “*Passportha ro dashten pakhsh mikarden [...] Akharin lahze esmamro khund o passamo dad. Baz man nemifahmidam chi shode bood. Faghad in sak dastam bood, sakemro gereftem ke dar baram. Dare utubus ham baz bood. Ka biam payin [...] belakhere ye joori mitoonastam khodem ra beresoonam Khoy. Ziad ham fasele ne dasht bazargan o khoy. [...] Oomadim vasate dota mile. Ye taraf Iran bood ye taraf Torkiye. [...] Vaghti ke un vasat boodem, hasse acibi dashtem. [...] Fakr mikardem kesi mano nemitoone bebare un taraf. Bad'an fahmidam ke be Torka nemishe etminan kard.*” Mahmoud, 59, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 14 August 2007.

Concluding Remarks

Every story has a beginning. Most of the time, the starting point is chosen by the story teller according to its relevance to the chain of events to be narrated, the causality that is prescribed to the events, or simply to gather the attention of the reader at the first instance. The same is true for the narration of life stories. However, there is a difference between autobiographical narrative in the presence of (and initiated by) an interviewer and an autobiographical text, written mostly in solitude. Portelli argues that in the former case, it is the authority of the interviewer that defines the beginning of a story.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, this authority does not stay unchallenged as the dialogue proceeds: “both subjects bring to the interview an agenda of their own, which is constantly renegotiated in the course of the conversation.”¹⁸⁴

Our stories of transit migration started with the flight. In fact, most of the time, the first questions were asked by the interviewees. The answer given to the questions of “What do you want to learn?” or “What is interesting for you?” determined the selection of the beginning point. I asked them to tell me about their flight “from the beginning.” So, it was again their turn. Most of the time I contented myself with the answers and did not want to disturb them by asking questions, especially on their organizations, or the details untold, unless I felt it was possible to push for more.

For the purpose of this study, their lives prior to their transit migrant lives in Turkey were important. Although most of the Iranian transit migrants stayed in the

¹⁸³ Portelli, *The Battle of Vale Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 9.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

same hotels and struggled to find the same smugglers or the same routes to resume their journey, the conditions of their flight from Iran and the extent of the pressure to which they were subjected in their “home” was influential in the way they experienced transit migration and, all in all, the way they experienced being a refugee.

In this respect, the precarious life conditions in Iran which were reified in the internal exile that most of the interviewees had experienced one way or another (according to their degree of political affiliation) constituted an important cornerstone in their stories. It was both empowering, as it rendered them familiar with exile conditions, and inhibiting, as return/deportation had more devastating effects, and the incalculability of conditions that could give way to failure in resuming the journey caused more stress.

The stories of flight and the internal exile experienced in Iran are necessary to convey that the one and a half million Iranians cited in the statistics did not constitute an undifferentiated mass, and it is not fair to narrate a smooth transition of people a number of whom, at least physically, had walked for days through mountains; had feared to lose their frozen, blackened toes; had given pills to and cautioned their babies to shush in order not to be killed; had left their friends behind arrested or executed. Flight and their pre-flight life in Iran constituted the beginning of a story to be developed through their lives in Turkey, to be continued in the “final” destination.

However, although it was aimed to narrate two different stories (*vis-à-vis* their gender, routes employed, and political affiliation) it is possible to take these two stories as different aspects of the flight of political (leftist) migrants. Among the interviewees there were also people who had legally passed through borders, without having fear of being returned. They were also recognized refugees. They had bought

a ticket and fled to Turkey. Due to the reasons explained in the Introduction (dissimulation, and the composition of the sample) it was not possible to have access to various other forms of flight. So the story told is mainly of or related with the politically affiliated people.

CHAPTER V
LIFE IN TURKEY: PERCEPTIONS

*And my hidden lover on the other side of
the mountain range
Is awaiting the revelry
And I am here
with the backpack of a wounded generation
I am waiting for her
She is my hopes and dreams
And Istanbul is the pain and depth of our
separated love¹⁸⁵*

Turkey has a distinguished place in the memories of the Iranian refugees of the 1980s. Both the refugees who passed through Turkey and the refugees who have used different paths to reach the Western countries have something to say about being in transit in Turkey.

It has been argued that refugees do not leave behind their pasts and “start from zero” contrary to the infantilized picture depicted of them by international agencies and some scholars. It is true that the Iranian refugees of the 1980s carried a suitcase of experiences with them, both enabling and disabling. However, it was also representations of Turkey that seemed to foreshadow their life in transit, which accompanied them to Turkey.

This chapter will scrutinize the meaning of living in Turkey as a refugee for Iranians mainly through literary texts and films that were both the products of these

¹⁸⁵An excerpt from a widely circulated poem written by an anonymous refugee in Turkey. Cited in Janet Bauer, “A Long Way home,” p. 93.

representations and were used in their reproduction. Furthermore, the prominent place of Aksaray in the narratives will be analyzed to understand the neighborhood's role in the phase of Iranians' further migration.

Turkey as the Signifier of Hardship

Among the informal estimate of four million Iranians living abroad, Turkey is perceived to be the most popular transit route, although we don't have access to statistics on the share of its employment.¹⁸⁶ It is thought that a great number of the refugees in the Western European countries and the United States have passed through Turkey. Accordingly, the majority of the interviewed refugees assured me that it was quite easy to find refugees who had used the Turkish route. But finding such people was not as easy as it seemed to be. Being highly dependent on my interviewees, waiting for return calls tempted me to find alternative ways, which meant strolling in the neighborhoods where a great number of Iranians lived or worked, which provided insight on the Iranian refugees' general perspective of Turkey.

It was hard to find such particular neighborhoods in Cologne, but Malmö and Stockholm were appropriate for such trials. There were Iranian supermarkets (i.e., Tehran supermarket), butchers, bakeries, and several boutiques with Iranian names in Möllevångsgatan, Malmö.¹⁸⁷ In Stockholm, a big shopping mall in Kista, in the North east of Stockholm, was known as a place where Iranians spent time especially

¹⁸⁶ Amy Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A case study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis Series*," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2006), p. 357.

¹⁸⁷ It was even joked that Möllevångsgatan was known as "Malevan"sgatan; malevan meaning sailor in Farsi.

in/around the Iranian restaurant Saffron. There was also an Iranian shop called Mahan selling literally everything coming from Iran: music albums, cheese, pickles, rice, biscuits, chewing gums, and even canned chick peas. Mahan was in Rinkeby, the easternmost part of North Stockholm, where mostly Africans and more recently, Iraqis lived. Strolling in those neighborhoods might not have provided acquaintances for more interviewees, but insight into what people, particularly those who had not passed from Turkey, thought of passing through Turkey.

The people who had not passed through Turkey on their route to Sweden frequently responded to the question of whether they had used Turkey as a transit route by saying “unfortunately,”¹⁸⁸ to be followed by “or fortunately.”¹⁸⁹ The first answer was given for the sake of politeness as they would not be able to help, but the latter would follow to highlight that they felt fortunate not to have gone through Turkey. This short answer summarized effectively the Iranian refugees’ general approach to the idea of being in transit in Turkey.

Turkey is used as a signifier of tough experiences both by some of the refugees (especially by those who did not use the route) and in some literary texts with reference to this collective memory of the Iranian refugees. Mehri Yalfani’s novel *Afsaneh’s Moon* is an example of such literary texts. Yalfani narrates the story of four young Iranians (Afsaneh, Ramin, Bahram, and Negar) whose lives are intertwined in Canada.¹⁹⁰ It is a love story among those four people set in Canada; however, as Negar recounts her past we learn that Negar and Ramin had been transit migrants in Turkey on their way to Canada:

¹⁸⁸ “*moteassefaneh*”

¹⁸⁹ “*shayed ham khoshbakhtaneh*”

¹⁹⁰ Mehri Yalfani, *Afsaneh’s Moon* (Ontario: McGilligan Books, 2002).

I talked about life in Turkey, where I was depressed and wanted to go back to Iran. I cried night and day and made Ramin sick of me. I called my parents and told them I wanted to return. [...] Life in Turkey was so terrible that sometimes I was tempted to throw myself out of the hotel window. I wasn't ready for *that kind of life*.¹⁹¹ (my emphasis)

Although Negar asserts these words in the first part of the novel, it is not possible to find a clue of the quality of “that kind of life” in the next hundred pages of the novel. On page 135 we learn that she was not happy with the hotel, the people, or the Iranians living there from her dialogue with Ramin:

It was a year since they had left Iran. They were still in Turkey and couldn't find a way to enter a European country or Canada. Ramin liked the idea of Canada, Negar still wasn't happy about living Iran. She was sullen most of the time, not eating meals, complaining.
“Why did we come here?”
“You know better than me. We had to.”
“I was very young. I knew nothing.”
“You wanted to marry me.”
“*But this life, this disgusting hotel, these people, these Iranians! I want to go back. I'll die here. I miss Maman and Baba. I want to see Siamak.*”
He had hidden Siamek's execution from her, suffered his death alone without talking about it to anyone, for fear the news would reach Negar.
“You should be strong. For Siamek's sake you should be strong. He wanted you to leave Iran, to live in peace and study.”
“*I can't. I'm not made for this kind of life.*”
“When we get to Canada, all these hardships will be over. I promise you.”
“*I'll be dead before we get to Canada.*”¹⁹² (my emphasis)

These quoted parts are the only references in the novel to their lives as transit migrants in Turkey. Although in this second part the causes of Negar's sullenness are more explicit, still we have only access to the objects of her feeling. It's the life, the “disgusting hotel,” the people and the Iranians that bother her. Yet, we still do not know *how* they rendered her life so unbearable.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 135.

Perhaps, Yalfani doesn't feel the necessity of telling more. The phrase of "life in Turkey" is such a strong signifier that it connotes a set of experiences familiar to those who share the collective memory of being a transit migrant in Turkey. Accordingly, the two objects of her hardship, the hotel and the Iranians around, are the key words of transit migrants' narratives.

Corruption and insecurity were the main themes of Iranian refugees' narratives about Turkey. Apart from the opportunities of education in the Western European countries, it was mainly the sense of being vulnerable to exploitation by the people who knew their situation that rendered them reluctant to even think of staying in Turkey. Although no instances of exploitation by local people was reported (despite its frequent statement), police harassment for money was repeatedly stated.

Furthermore, the inability of calculating the next step in the journey constituted extra burden for the transit migrants. Most of the time, the inability to assess the next step impelled the transit migrants to save more than it was necessary and acted as a negative factor in their already deteriorating life standards. One of the interviewees (Sima), who had left Iran in the winter of 1985 at the age of 17 with her cousin who was a few years older than her, said that they had only eaten bread and Rama (a brand of margarine) for a couple of months as they had a common budget and her cousin was trying to save money. She stated that she had had enough money to live a better life, but the incalculability of conditions had impelled her cousin to save and she couldn't object her.¹⁹³ However, our aim is not to suggest that the deprivation in transit migrants' lives was a direct result of excess saving, as a great

¹⁹³ Sima, 40, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 31 August 2007.

number of migrants were literally deprived of money the longer they stayed in Turkey. It is only to highlight that whether they had money or not, most of the transit migrants felt it necessary to save money and that prompted them to stay in cheap hotels, which paved the way for frequent encounters by the Iranians with different life worlds in terms of class and political opinion.

Hotels are the main settings of refugee narratives and are recalled both as sources of grief and opportunity, just how Aksaray as a neighborhood and Turkey as a transit country connote. Most of the refugees who had stayed in Istanbul had at least spent their first night in Aksaray or Laleli hotels. In the following days, according to their budget and the duration of their stay, they had rented a house or continued to live in Aksaray/Laleli hotels. Abbas Kazerooni's novel, claiming to be based on a true story, relates how the Iranians found those hotels.¹⁹⁴

The Little Man accounts the story of a seven year old boy (Kazerooni), who had lived in Istanbul as a transit migrant on his own. His story involves many shared attributes with other accounts of transit migrant experiences in Turkey, such as eating one meal each day, exchanging money on a daily basis (as currency rates differed each day), and being accompanied by a taxi driver to find a cheap hotel. Given a list of cheap hotels at the airport by the man who was supposed to take care of him, "the little man" gets on a taxi and goes to check hotel prices. Telling Abbas that there are many Iranians in Turkey, the taxi driver states that, "[t]he hotels – most Iranians come with similar list– these hotels are famous in Istanbul for Iranians. Taxi drivers know them very good."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Abbas Kazerooni, *The Little Man* (Mustang: Tate Publishing, 2005).

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

None of the refugees I spoke with had had a list of hotels when they had arrived in Turkey, yet it was those hotels that were “famous in Istanbul for Iranians” in which they had settled in and in most cases, taxi drivers had led them to those hotels. The others had either been given the name of a hotel by the smuggler that had helped them to Turkey or simply looked for a cheap hotel when they got off the bus at its last stop near Aksaray. Aksaray and its “famous for Iranians” hotels had played an important part in the lives of transit migrants who were trying to leave for Western countries.

Aksaray/Laleli: An Empowering Trampoline or Unsafe Swamp

Laleli and Aksaray are two adjacent neighborhoods of Istanbul known as a center of trade and tourism. Doğan Kuban defines today’s Aksaray as a *transit* space. Kuban argues that the neighborhood is deprived of any in-city attributes due to the high number of underpasses and overpasses.¹⁹⁶ His account is interesting in terms of the space’s usage as a transit place by Iranian refugees in the 1980s.

Before the late 1950s, the neighborhood was partially residential with a number of stores around Aksaray Square and a bazaar known in the town, which rendered it more dynamic than its eastern neighbor, Laleli.¹⁹⁷ Çağlar Keyder describes the Laleli of that time as a “profoundly local world,” where residents and shopkeepers were acquainted with each other.¹⁹⁸ During the government of the

¹⁹⁶ *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, 1st ed., s.v. “Aksaray.”

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Çağlar Keyder, “A tale of Two Neighborhoods,” *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local*, ed. Çağlar Keyder (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), p. 174.

Democrat Party (1950-1960), Prime Minister Menderes' endeavor at urban engineering resulted in the annihilation of Aksaray and Bayezit Squares (on the east and west side of Laleli) and the construction of huge traffic circles in their place.¹⁹⁹ As the neighborhood lost its residential characteristics gradually, its advantage of geographical proximity to the historical sites of the old city was utilized by entrepreneurs, who converted the apartments to hotels especially for tourists on limited budgets.²⁰⁰ When it came to the 1980s, Laleli and Aksaray had been completely transformed into a center of informal commerce and tourism.

A short tour of the neighborhood is sufficient to capture its new inhabitants. While you hear people asking you in Russian whether you want leather or gold in Laleli,²⁰¹ you hear in Farsi whether you want beautiful women in Aksaray.²⁰² The opportunity of finding cheap accommodation and even a small amount of salary within the circle of the informal economy has turned the neighborhood into a drawing point for migrants of various ethnicities. Because of its being home to many Iranians, Bangladeshis, Afghans, and Africans (as well as internally displaced Kurds), Behzad Yaghmaian calls Aksaray a "migrant city within the larger metropolis of Istanbul."²⁰³ He states that in the 1980s many migrants came straight to Aksaray after fleeing from Iran and used the lobbies of those hotels to make deals

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 175.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 176-177.

²⁰¹ "Dyevuška, koja nada? Dveyuška, zolotoy nada? Sarafan nada?" in H. Deniz Yüksek, *Laleli-Moskova Mekiği: Kayıtdışı Ticaret ve Cinsiyet İlişkileri* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003) p. 11.

²⁰² "Khanoom-haye ziba, beautiful women," in Yaghmaian, p. 15.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 13.

with smugglers.²⁰⁴ Those hotels lost their “old role” in the 1990s with Turkey’s stricter border controls.²⁰⁵ However, the perception of Aksaray as the center of Istanbul and a key to the Western countries is hardly contestable for Iranians even today.

Aksaray has evolved to be an organic part of Istanbul’s representation for Iranians. For example, in a recently shot (2005) Iranian movie, *Aquarium*, a young rally driver gets on a bus to Istanbul to arrange his migration to the United States.²⁰⁶ In this popular movie shown in Iranian theatres, there is no explicit reference to the young man’s first destination until he is given the address of a hotel by phone. The man in the lobby says: “Write please, *Aksaray*...” We don’t even hear the rest of the address – as there is no need– and Aksaray is pronounced with so much stress that is impossible to miss. Being such a frequently referenced neighborhood, it signifies the center of the city, whatever that center may connote. It may represent the insecurity of Istanbul, as your purse can be grabbed the very moment that you put your step there,²⁰⁷ or used as an example of “rich neighborhoods where rich people dine in the restaurants in front of which the poor beg.”²⁰⁸ More important than its implied content, it is the authority that its mentioning gives to the narrator that exposes its organic place in the imagination of Turkey.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ *Aquarium*, directed by Iraj Ghaderi, Iran, 2005.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ From an interview with the economist Dr. Fariborz Raisdana. Fariborz Raisdana, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Tehran, Iran, August 2004.

Among the interviewed refugees, a great number of them had stayed in Aksaray/Laleli hotels at least in their first days in Turkey. Many had heard the neighborhood's reputation already when they were in Iran. Sima said that, "Istanbul was the escape hatch," while Sohrab stressed that he had heard in Iran that it was only enough to step in Aksaray to make your way to the West. Aksaray was either a trampoline,²⁰⁹ or a hole that you got stuck in²¹⁰ for the transit migrants of Istanbul. Likewise, a human smuggler had told Yaghmaian that, "Aksaray is like a swamp: once in it, you cannot escape it."²¹¹

Despite all the negative connotations of the neighborhood and its distrustful atmosphere, which former transit migrants frequently stressed, the main source of that distrustfulness, namely the Iranians' and smugglers' presence there, was at the same time a reason for the neighborhood's being a center of attraction for Iranian transit migrants. This may seem contradictory, but it is not. All the refugees interviewed had spent a great amount of their time in Aksaray hotels even after they moved to other parts of Istanbul. For example, Said, who after changing two hotels (Hotel Dünya in Taksim and Hotel Baran in Aksaray) had moved to a much more cheaper hotel in Taksim (Hotel Sivas), stated that every other day he would visit Hotel Dünya and stroll in the Aksaray streets. Khosrow had moved to a shared apartment with other waiting Iranians in Sarıyer; yet every day he had visited either Taksim or Aksaray Hotels' lobbies. Mahrou used to visit two different smugglers in their hotels in Aksaray every week to compare conditions and price. The party

²⁰⁹ Farhad, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 09 August 2007.

²¹⁰ Sohrab, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Cologne, Germany, 09 August 2007.

²¹¹ Yaghmaian, p. 15.

professionals cited before, Hooman and Farhad, visited those hotels to meet with their comrades who had recently arrived. Therefore, Aksaray was not only a source of cheap accommodation for Iranian transit migrants but also a source of information. And its latter role was much more important for the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s who could afford modest accommodation and daily expenses.

The interviewees stressed that they had “gathered information” on the streets as a main activity on a daily basis. If we return to our classification according to political affiliations, it should be stated that it was mostly militants that had not made travel plans before leaving Iran. Some had had to leave as soon as they had been able as they had been told that they would be arrested in a short period of time and the others mostly didn’t know where was “better.” Furthermore, leaving Iran was enough for most of the militants who wanted to pursue their political activities and thought that a regime change was near. The refugees interviewed, especially the militants, had mostly used smugglers in their flight from Iran. For the rest of their journey, they depended on the information that they “gathered” themselves on Aksaray streets or in hotel lobbies.

Nevertheless, it was not possible to attain coherent information from the streets and lobbies. For the people whose destination was the United States, the ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission) was the main address. However, the United States was not the preferred destination of any of the refugees I interviewed. Apart from all other reasons, this reluctance towards seeking asylum in the United States stemmed primarily from the geographical remoteness of the States (the same reason was frequently given for reluctance to go to Canada) and second from the perception of leftist militants of the United States as a capitalist, imperialist

state. Some leftist militants even stated that they had argued against of US capitalism in the ICMC office and left the office without filling out the application.

For the people who wanted to continue their journey to the Western European countries; there was more than one address and accordingly, information was much more diversified. However, the most popular route until the second half of the 1980s was getting a transit visa for East Germany, and getting to the Western side, or taking a train to Sweden. But, none of the routes was without risk so it was crucial to update the gathered information regularly. Plans were made in line with the general knowledge engendered in the Aksaray lobbies and modified in accordance with the updated information. Adaptation to altered conditions was vital for being able to keep track of the available travel routes. Hence, the incalculability of the next step which had haunted the transit migrants since their flight from Iran continued to be the main source of their grievance in Turkey.

Azadeh and Behrouz's travel plans exemplify the extent of modifications in action. Fleeing Iran in 1983, Azadeh and her husband Behrouz had passports issued in the Shah era which were legally invalid, but still accepted in the Western European countries. They were among the few people who had information about several Western countries, as both had studied in Sweden in the Shah era and Azadeh had lived in London for a short period. Due to their education in Sweden, they even had residence permits, which were no longer valid. Nevertheless, despite these perceived advantages they were not able to plan their next step better than the others. Sitting in a café at the Cultural Center of Stockholm (Kulturhusset) in 2008, Azadeh and Behrouz started to describe their plans in 1983 as such:

The first thing that came to our minds was to change those dates and go with those dates [of the invalid Swedish visa]. When we changed the dates, it was apparent, it was quite obvious that they had been

changed, our work wasn't really professional. Then we thought it wouldn't work, so let's go for a visa from somewhere, for example, East Germany. It was giving visas easily at that period; it didn't bother whether your passport was official or not official. It did this to suppress Western countries, in particular Sweden. It was a politics of obstinacy. We went to Ankara and got our visa. Then, we regressed, they told us that it is hard there, that entering Sweden from there would be problematic.²¹²

Azadeh stressed that it was ghastly (*vahshatnak*) to think about various routes all the time. It was the repetition of the same words (making a plan, regressing, and later returning to the former plan) that had rendered the discussion on routes unbearable. After regressing from going to East Germany they took a Syrian visa from a smuggler, and then got back to their first idea of using their invalid residence permit. For reaching Sweden, they flew to Yugoslavia and changed planes to Copenhagen.

Their story is a good example of the cacophony caused by the advice given in the lobbies of Aksaray hotels. The characters in the widely referenced movie, *Guests of Hotel Astoria*, were also subject to such frequent modification of journey plans. The main characters of the movie that were cited before, Pouri and her husband Karim, attempt to get a visa for Holland with an invitation sent by Karim's brother, who lives there. After being rejected by the Holland consulate, without being given any excuse, they begin to "gather information" from other transit migrants sitting in the lobby. Hence, they are introduced to a Turkish smuggler called Ali, who advises them to go to the Cuban consulate in Ankara and get a one-week visa. He promises

²¹² "Avvalin fekre ke be khateremoon resid in bood ke in tarikha ro avaz konim, ba in tarikha berim. Tarikha ro ke dast kari kardim, malum shod ke, kheyli moshakhhese ke dast khorde yani ziad maherane ne bood. Bad fekr kardim khob in nemishe, pas berim dombale chiz, in ke ye visa begirim az ye jayi masalan almane shargi ke un moghe rahat visa midad, kari ham nedaht ke to aslan pasportet ghanuniye, ghanuni nist, maksusen bekhater ke Suedo be tore moshakhhhas, ve keshverhaye gherbira tahte feshar gharar bede in karro mikard. Yek siyasete lajbazi dasht. Raftim Ankara visa gereftim. Bad peshimoon shodim, be ma ettelaat daden ke unja sekhte, moshkele, az unja vared shoden be Sued moshkel icad mikone". Behrouz, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 30 August 2007.

to buy a ticket for Cuba that stops in Amsterdam where they would have enough time to claim asylum. Pouri and Karim act according to Ali's advice and succeed in arriving at the Amsterdam Airport. However, after seeking asylum officially, they are deported to Turkey without being given any information.

Nevertheless, consistent with Azadeh and Behrouz's story, the flight plans were modified each day, according to the latest information available. Mrs. Ziai, an Iranian transit migrant sitting in the lobby of Hotel Astoria, told the migration story of one of her acquaintances. The woman had escaped via the Pakistan route and got pregnant in Karachi. When her baby was seven months old, she got a tourist visa for England and delivered her baby there. Thus, the baby was a citizen of England and her parents were given permanent residence permit there. Being assured by this story, Pouri, who became pregnant in Istanbul, decided to give birth to her baby in the United States to get a residence permit there. She gets a visa for the United States with a forged Italian passport. However, when she arrived there, she learned that her claim had no legal basis.

"Gathering information" on the streets and lobbies involved both the routes that could be employed to the destination desired, and the opportunities that asylum granting countries provided. This was another complex axis. Most of the transit migrants in Istanbul had not traveled abroad before and did not have enough information to choose a destination. Choices were many. Canada, Sweden, and Holland were among the most favorite destinations.²¹³ Various arguments were presented in favor of some destination countries. *Guests of Hotel Astoria* presents a scene that involves the absurdity of some of the assessments in this aspect.

²¹³ Hamid Naficy recounts France, Germany, Holland, and Sweden as European countries that had receptive immigration policies towards Iranians in the post-revolution era. See Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 18.

While all “the guests of Hotel Astoria” are sitting in the lobby having drinks and talking about their travel plans, Mr. Ziai, the previously cited Mrs. Ziai’s husband, comments on every expressed country. Pouri and Karim say that they are trying to go to Holland and Ziai states that in Holland, “they have roses [*gole mohammadi*] growing out of the ice in the middle of the winter.” His comment on France is much more detailed: “In France they have everything. It is true that the French are known best for their art and literature, but they are far ahead in everything compared to the rest. Cheese? Would you believe me if I told you French have 1700 kinds of cheese?”

The Guests of Hotel Astoria: Exilic Films and Collective Memory

To understand the role of *the Guests of Hotel Astoria* in our analysis, it is important to elaborate on the three sites that its meaning is made: the production, the film itself, and the site(s) of audiences.²¹⁴ The publicity booklet of the film describes the Hotel Astoria as such:

Hotel Astoria is a small guesthouse in Istanbul where Iranians who have fled their homeland are residing while waiting to find refuge somewhere in Europe or America. This entrepot is used by an Iranian smuggler for stockpiling his human merchandise until it is dispatched to its final destination. It is the focal point of the shortlived hopes and the endless cares of people who are prepared to face any hardship and alienation. These travelers have packed their bags and set out without knowing who will be their host in the end. They have left behind the inferno of “Khomeini” while before them lies a foreign world about which they are completely uninformed.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Gillian Rose, “Researching Visual Materials,” *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 16.

²¹⁵ Cited in Naficy, p. 250.

Although the film itself successfully reifies the aura of transit migration that is narrated by the refugees, it would be lacking in perspective to take the film as a representation of the transit migrant life in Istanbul in the 1980s, by this mere fact. What are more important than the story that it visualizes is its circulation in the refugee community, and the site of its production.

For the site(s) of audiences, I will firstly recount my story of having access to the film as it exemplifies its medium of circulation. The first time that I heard about the film was in Malmö, Sweden, where Hossein (Mahnaz's Husband) advised me to watch the movie to understand the atmosphere of those years. In every other interview the movie was recounted as a representation of transit life in Turkey. Traveling to Stockholm, I was repeatedly advised to watch the film, which I could find in none of the multimedia shops that I visited. Azadeh and Behrouz gave me the name of an Iranian publisher in Stockholm with whom, by coincidence, I had an appointment the very same day. He, Said, gave me the address of a bookstore, *Ferdovsi*, selling books on Iran and books by Iranian authors collected from various countries (mostly in Farsi and English), as well as movies and music albums in Farsi. However, they had run out of the movie. Finally, I copied Said's own dvd and watched it the very same evening with Khosrow. Therefore, the process of having access to the movie was totally collective.

Hamid Naficy's study of exilic and diasporic films²¹⁶ not only tells the problems faced in the distribution of films made in exile, but also provides an explanation for the previously cited inter-Iranian mistrust in exile, linking the two

²¹⁶ Hamid Naficy names the films made by exilic and diasporic subjects as accented cinema vis à vis the dominant cinema that is taken as universal and without accent. He states that the accent of those films emerge not from the accented speech employed in the film but from the "displacement of filmmakers and their artisanal productions." See Naficy, p. 4.

sites at stake: production and audience(s). Naficy gives an account of Iranian exilic and diasporic filmmaking. He states that Iranian filmmakers have produced the greatest number of films (307 of 920) among other filmmakers from sixteen Middle Eastern and African countries living abroad mostly in Europe and North America.²¹⁷ However, their productivity has not led to the formation of a collectivity. Unlike black and Asian film collectives in Britain and North African, South Asian, East Asian, and Caribbean filmmakers in France, Iranians have not created a formal, collective organization to deal with the production and distribution of their films.²¹⁸ Both the reasons for such a lack of collective action among the Iranian filmmakers, and the result of this lack are useful for our analysis of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s.

Naficy indicates the difference between exiles from post-colonial countries and Iranians with respect to their experiences of exile. He argues that émigrés from formerly colonized states are familiar with the language and the culture of their colonizers and have a shared experience of colonialism, which emanates a collective identity among them, whereas Iranians have no experience of direct colonialism, but a tug of war first between England and Russia and second between the United States and the USSR.²¹⁹ The secret agreements and coup d'états of the imperialist states, the factional politics of the revolutionary era, and the Islamic regime's operations abroad have led to "a deep sense of deep paranoia, conspiracy thinking, and ambivalence,

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18. Naficy stresses that it is hard to keep track of the history of many Middle Eastern filmmakers living abroad both because of the objective conditions of their shifting status of exile/immigrant and their diversified claims of identity. See Naficy, p. 295.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

²¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

which compounded the general mistrust that comes with political exile.”²²⁰ The highly factional exilic politics had added up to those historical experiences of mistrust and has resulted in the aversion of collective action.

Apart from religious minorities and the supporters of the former regime, most of the exiles have been sent into exile by the very revolution for which they struggled, which consolidates the exile’s sense of mistrust towards their fellow citizens. This distinct exilic condition enlightens Negar’s complaint of “these Iranians” in Yalfani’s novel *Afsaneh’s Moon* and the interviewed refugees’ frequent statements of a lack of communication among the transit migrants on the road and in Turkey.

When we take the site of the audience(s), we see that the reverse of production criteria is in force. While the production is highly “interstitial” in Naficy’s terms, the target population is highly communal. Here the difference between postcolonial émigrés and Iranian exiles come into force again. While the former have greater access to the host country’s language and mostly produce in that language, enabling their products even to be best sellers, the latter mainly write and shoot films in Farsi with Iranian casts and their products have access only to “exile outlets” where books on Iran or by Iranians, groceries from Iran and Persian music are sold (i.e., Ferdowsi Bookstore, Mahan Supermarket in Stockholm).²²¹ This communal consumption of the exilic films renders them instrumental in the formation of a collective memory of exiles.

The term “collective memory” does not simply indicate that groups remember the very same things. However, it detaches memory from the pure realm of

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

²²¹ Ibid. “Interstitial Production,” pp. 74-80.

psychology, stressing the affect of social conditions and social relations in its formation. In his review of Maurice Halbwachs' *The Collective Memory*, Paul Ricoeur states that the text stresses the necessity of others for remembering.²²² Put in aphoristic terms, according to Halbwachs, "one does not remember alone."²²³ This is both a reference to the social texture of the remembered experience, and to its recollection. Hence, memory is not a direct product of sensual experiences assessed in the physiology of the brain. It is always in making through communication with the "outer world," and it is alive until this communication ceases.²²⁴ Therefore, it is possible to take *Guests of Hotel Astoria* as functional in inflaming the political refugees' flight memories. By its very "tangible" form, the movie provides political refugees a medium of discussion, or rather to say, an opportunity to take position, which is functional in sustaining the collective "refugee subjectivity."

Said's account of his feelings when he first watched the movie illuminates that effect. The movie portrays a one-night affair between Pouri and a leftist militant staying at the Hotel Astoria when Pouri's husband, Karim, is in Ankara applying for a visa for Cuba. Said stated that such a relationship had been inconceivable for him when he watched the movie the first time. "We were idealist," he said. "How could he have an affair with a married woman?"²²⁵ His account rendered his communication with the movie visible. He compared himself with the leftist militant

²²² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 120.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²²⁴ Halbwachs cited in Mithat Sancar, *Geçmişle Hesaplaşma* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları 2007), pp. 41- 42.

²²⁵ Said, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 30 August 2007.

in the movie, who, according to him (at that time), had not behaved appropriately in terms of the revolutionary rules of conduct or (political) morality.²²⁶

During the eight months that he had spent between Taksim-Aksaray, he had not thought of anything except political struggle. He got in touch with the headquarters of his organization in France (which was depicted as the destination country of the leftist militant in the movie) in order to be introduced to his comrades in Turkey and engage in propaganda activities with them. He worked in copying propaganda leaflets delivered from France and distributing them among Iranian tourists mostly around Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. He began to think of not traveling to France and of going to Iraq instead to struggle against the regime. As a leftist militant, whose life was molded by politics, engaging in an extra-marital relationship (as shown in the movie) was inconceivable.

The movie was an instrument for the formation and sustenance of political refugee memory at the site(s) of audience, as well as a manifestation of such a memory itself. Following Naficy's analysis of exilic and diasporic films, we can also take *the Guest of Hotel Astoria* as the "performance" of its maker, Reza Allamezadeh.²²⁷

Naficy argues that the selection of the cast, scenes, and the cut makes the filmmakers' explicit presence unnecessary in the movie to render it the performance of the filmmaker's identity.²²⁸ According to the writer, "to perform by making films is to remember, to memorialize yourself (and your community), and to remind others

²²⁶ We will elaborate on this revolutionary rule of conduct in the following chapter.

²²⁷ Naficy, p. 282.

²²⁸ Ibid.

that you were there—even if you were in disguise.”²²⁹ His account of Allamezadeh’s life leads us to receive that performance in line with the other narratives involved in this study.

Living as a political refugee in Holland since 1983, Allamezadeh was imprisoned in the Shah era along with other prominent political intellectuals (i.e., Keramat Daneshian and Khosrow Golsorkhi) and spent five years in jail until he was freed in 1978 with the start of the revolutionary period.²³⁰ He became a member of the People’s Fadaiyan and worked in the organization’s film production branch. He made propaganda films for the organization and edited documentaries of revolutionary struggles in the USSR, Nicaragua, and Vietnam. As a result of the intensified suppression of the Islamic regime, he left Iran and fled to Turkey in 1983. He made *The Guests of Hotel Astoria* in 1989, six years later.²³¹ Hence, the movie should be taken as a cultural artifact in circulation sustaining the narratives forming the collective memory of transit migrants, and itself as a narrative of an Iranian transit migrant in Istanbul in the 1980s.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this chapter was to present a portrait of what it was like to be in transit in Turkey as depicted by Iranian refugees in Western European countries and the mediums of this representation that kept alive the collective memory of being in transit and maintained refugees’ dialogue with this memory.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ He was charged with life imprisonment. See Behrouz, p. 129-130.

²³¹ Allamezadeh’s biographic informations are taken from Naficy’s account based on his personal interview with the filmmaker. See Naficy, p. 249.

It is true that Turkey does not invoke positive memories for a great number of Iranian refugees. However, constituting the first step of a successful journey (all interviewed refugees had succeeded in getting asylum in Sweden or Germany), this “stop” embodied opportunities as much as hardship. Although there were several accounts that referred to “Turkey” as the source of this opportunity, the narratives mostly emphasized the daily struggle for gathering information to be able to find ways to resume their journey. Despite the lack of unity among the Iranian transit migrants due to the factional politics in the pre- and post-revolution period and the possibility of agents infiltrating their gatherings, de facto gatherings in the hotel lobbies and on the Aksaray streets functioned as sources of information for the transit migrants who had not been able to make their plans beforehand. Therefore, first being a necessity, being in Aksaray had evolved into a chosen action by refugees due to the very fact of the opportunity generated by the very people who were there out of necessity.

CHAPTER VI

LIFE IN TURKEY: TACTICS

A critique of the axes of differentiation among refugees and immigrants, bad and good, genuine and bogus refugees has been presented. The passive appointment of refugees to these categories without taking into account the real and thus complex reasons for leaving their countries was criticized, as well. Apart from the official categories, we differentiated the Iranian transit migrants in the 1980s in Turkey in terms of their degree of political affiliation, the route that they used for flight, and their legality of exit.

However, there are also other classifications that refugees themselves have employed. And these categories are not necessarily irrelevant to the objective conditions of their flight, but are formed through a continuous interaction between their past experiences and their chosen actions /reactions with respect to the particular conditions at stake. By this very fact of its formation through interaction, these self-imposed categories are not necessarily transitional as the former, official ones have to be.

This chapter presents refugees' concerns for self-differentiation with the other forms of their dealing with the everyday problems of living in transit in the 1980s' Turkey. It is argued that the struggle in the symbolic realm was another face of daily struggle over means of existence. Thus, first some tactics for coping with the

inefficient means of living will be presented; followed by refugees' attempts of self-differentiation.

Struggle over Means of Living

Although there is a tendency to assume that the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s were from middle or upper middle class, which “naturally” connotes that their passage through Turkey did not involve hardship in terms of daily struggle over means of existence, it is hard to make such a generalization. The quality of life in transit depended very much on the duration of being in transit. The longer passage took, the harder became the conditions for transit migrants as most of them did not have any means of living other than the money which they had carried from Iran or the money sent by some relatives abroad.

Thus, while some of the Iranians in transit had to spend cautiously from the beginning of their journey, when the periods of stay became longer than anticipated most of them sought ways for decreasing their expenses further or finding alternative ways of making money.

Eating less was the primary way of spending less. At times, when no money was left, the diets were mostly composed of bread and soup or bread and yogurt. Going to bazaars at late hours to buy cheap goods or to collect the dispersed fruits or vegetables [not frequently] were stated. Khosrow told that they used to wait till late afternoon to visit the Sariyer fish bazaar, where they could get cheap or free fish. Mahnaz stated that she bought meatless chicken bones to make soup for her children. Apart from eating less or having a lower quality diet, cooking and eating collectively was a widely used way of decreasing the expenses. Cooking and eating collectively

was also preferred as it made it possible to eat Iranian food. The other widely used way of spending less was aversion from using any means of transportation other than walking. For the people who lived in shared apartments, illegal use of electricity and water was stated as well.

Apart from individual attempts of selling pistachios brought from Iran and finding temporary jobs in construction works; making money out of the state's obligation imposed on them was a common practice. Most of the Iranian transit migrants in Turkey, particularly the ones that avoided registration, stayed in Turkey with their three-months visa, which meant that they had to exit Turkish territory every three months to be able to renew their visas, which was widely referred to as making *giriş-çıkış* (literally enter-exit). It was obligatory for the Iranians that did not want to risk deportation in case of polis arrest. Bulgaria and Cyprus were among the most favorite *giriş-çıkış* routes. Buying tax-free alcohol and cigarettes, which were not present in Turkey in the 1980s and selling them in the hotels was the most common way of earning money from *giriş-çıkış*. But it was not the only way. In addition to cigarettes and drinks, some sold jeans in Bulgaria and bought canned food that was much cheaper there for their consumption in Turkey. Such transactions compensated the expenses of the obligatory *giriş-çıkış* and served as an opportunity to make some money.

Those stated ways of decreasing expenditure are not particular to transit migrants. The very same experiences are recorded by Necmi Erdoğan and Aksu Bora in their studies pertaining to urban poverty in Turkey.²³² Erdoğan takes these

²³² Necmi Erdoğan, "Garibanların Dünyası Türkiye'de Yoksulların Kültürel Temsilleri Üzerine İlk Notlar" and "Yok-Sanma: Yoksulluk-Mâduniyet ve 'Fark Yaraları'"; Aksu Bora, "Kadınlar ve Hane: 'Olmayanın Nesini İdare Edeceksin?'," in in *Yoksulluk Halleri*, ed. Necmi Erdoğan (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları 2007).

practices as forms of the art of making do (*idare etme sanatı*). He defines those practices as tactics developed against the capital's strategies.²³³ These tactics involve appropriating the power-ruled spaces with deserting, making use of opportunities, and dissimulating.²³⁴ Erdoğan argues that these forms of the art of making do is composed of unsystematic, quiet, and individual attempts that do not target a systematic change but an improvement in the living conditions of individuals and their families, who employ them.²³⁵ Therefore, he states that these attempts can not be seen as forms of everyday resistance in the way that is defined by James Scott, as they are not anti-systemic practices that target the state or power relations.²³⁶

However, Scott's definition of everyday resistance stresses "prosaic but *constant*"²³⁷ struggle and he claims that "class resistance includes *any* act(s) by members of a subordinate class that is or are *intended* either to mitigate or deny claims [...] made on that class by superordinate classes or to advance its own claims [...] vis-à-vis those superordinate classes"²³⁸ Scott's definition does not render every attempt at making do a form of everyday resistance, but invokes attention to silent attempts at affecting the balance of power to the advantage of the subordinate.

Asylum seekers' dissimulation over their reasons for flight, their aversion from register with the police to avoid threat of deportation, and even the widespread collective act of refugees helping the ones, who did not have money to pay, to flee

²³³ Erdoğan, "Yok-Sanma: Yoksulluk-Mâduniyet ve 'Fark Yaraları'," p. 77.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Erdoğan, "Garibanların Dünyası Türkiye'de Yoksulların Kültürel Temsilleri Üzerine İlk Notlar," p. 40.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

²³⁷ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p. xvi.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 290.

from hotels without paying can be taken as forms of everyday resistance as they involve denial of the UNHCR's claim of assessing their fear of persecution, the state's claim of registering and controlling the refugees, as well as advancing refugees' claims of the right of accommodation. Illegal use of electricity and water can be added to the list if the attempts were continuous.

Aversion from Conspicuous Sexuality: Women

The interviewed women's remarkable efforts to define their difference from the other Iranian women in the hotel lobbies can be taken in line with the afore-mentioned survival tactics. The dominant medium of self-differentiation among women (chastity) necessitates further attention. Women's narratives point to more visible differentiation tactics, as well as stricter norms of self-control, especially in case of single mothers in transit. Their case illuminates women's perception of the living conditions of transit migration and the constriction they experience due to their gender.

Two out of six interviewed women refugees (all living in Sweden) had fled Iran with their children and without any adult partner. Minoo, had a little daughter and had stayed first in Hotel Kanada (in Aksaray) and later in a shared apartment with other Iranian transit migrants. Mahnaz had two sons and a daughter staying in Hotel Tandoğan (Ankara) with her. These two women, using different routes (Minoo had arrived at Turkey by plane and Mahnaz by bus), passing through Turkey in different years (Minoo in 1985, and Mahnaz in 1990), staying in different hotels, and even defining themselves in different ways (Minoo called herself as political, and Mahnaz as the wife of a political) said that they wore headscarves in Turkey at the

beginning of their stay there. For Minoo, it took almost fifteen days to take off her headscarf, while Mahnaz wore it for six months.

Minoo stated that she had no reason for not taking off her headscarf in Turkey as she had not worn it in Iran unless it was obligatory. She emphasized that she was neither traditionalist nor religious. However, she explained her behavior as an attempt of differentiating herself from the other women who had started to put on make up on the plane to Turkey. She said:

When we got out [from the plane], all the women took off their headscarves. I also put it on my shoulders. Then, when we came down, I saw that all those women went to the bathroom and when they came out they had been transformed completely into other persons, it was as if they had put on masks. I think I wanted to keep away from them. I don't know why, but I did not take off my scarf for a period of time.²³⁹

Her account of a woman living with them in a shared apartment depicted that “other” from whom she wanted to differentiate, further:

This woman was breastfeeding, she was really untidy. The very first thing that I did every morning was to put her breasts in her shirt (laughs) ... tak tak, I would put them in, and then I would go to brew tea.²⁴⁰

In Minoo's narrative, the inappropriateness of sexual conspicuousness merges with the afore-mentioned morality of being political, and points to her class position. She defines her difference and its source as such:

A man had come there, they had gathered, they were drinking alcohol. It was really annoying. Especially for me, as I had no familiarity at all

²³⁹ “*oomedim biroon hame khanooma roosarishoon ra berdashten. Man ham rooserim ra endakhtem ru shoonem. Badan oomedem payeen, didem in khanooma hemeshun raftan dastshooyi umadan biroon aslan, masalan ademaye digheyi shode booden, ye mask zade booden. Engar mikhastem ye faseleyi begerem. Ne midoonem delilesh chi bood vali ta moddetha roosarim ra hefs kerde boodem.*” Minoo, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 01 September 2007.

²⁴⁰ “*In khanoome bechche shir midad, akhe kheyli ham shalakhthe bood. Man sobha ke bolend mishodem avval sine haye ino mikerdem tu (khande) . . . tak tak mikerdem tu, bad meseln miraftem chay mizashtem..*” Ibid.

with such a language. I mean the lumpens' language. I did not know them at all. I was shocked and wondering which part of Iran those people came from. I had not seen such people even in Iran [...] It was too strange for me. I did not know this part of Iranian society. Well, we had fallen to the line of politics at the age of fifteen or sixteen, with political people, people had some kind of principles in the gatherings that we socialized.²⁴¹

Hers is an illuminating example of the boundaries' invulnerability in times of necessary co-habitation. Her insistence on not having familiarity with the "kind of people" that she had to live with, and her wearing headscarf can be taken as attempts to maintain the boundaries at risk. Her aversion to conspicuous sexuality was explicitly interwoven with her political subjectivity. However, the refugee women's obsession with restraining their sexuality –and at times that of the others– is not necessarily a direct effect of their political subjectivity. Mahnaz's story presents another version of "keeping the headscarf."

Mahnaz's whole story bore the stamp of chastity (*aberu*). She had grown up in a traditionalist family, but she hadn't worn a headscarf apart from the legal obligations. She stated that she was the "wife of a political" and her husband was a militant of the Marxist Fadaiyan. In her single mother days in Ankara, wearing a headscarf was a way of self-assertion as a devout mother. She spoke of her two years in Hotel Tandoğan with pride. She wore long sleeved shirts with trousers and spent her days looking after her children. On Monday afternoons (at late hours as it was cheaper then) she went to the bazaar and kept what she bought in wet linens put on

²⁴¹ "Ye aghayi oomede bood unja ba ina shebha jam mishoden, meshroob mikhorden, kheyli azar dahande bood, aslant vaghti ke mest mikarden sohbetashoon khayli azar dahande bood. Un ham beraye man ke aslan ba in adabiyat ashenayi nedashtem. Yani adabiyate fogholade lompeni. Man aslan inharo nemishnakhtem. Mundeboodem masalan inha az kojaye iran oomede booden. Ke man to iran ham injoor adamha ro nemishnakhtem. [...] Kheyli beram gharib bood. In faz az jameeye Iranro man neshnakhte boodem, khob masalan az poonzdah shoonzdah salegi oftade boodim be khatte siyaset ba bechcheye siyasi ve yekhurde principhayi ke adema dashten to jamhayi ke sohbet mikardim" Ibid.

the balcony for a week. She bought chicken bones, which they used to call *cenaze* (corpse) and cooked soup with it. She used to knit pullovers for her children in her spare time, and waited until four in the morning to be able to use the common kitchen for cooking.

She was proud to state that she was a sister to the hotel employees. According to her, it was because of her behavior. That sisterhood meant both security and control. Mahnaz exemplified the extent of this sisterhood as such:

They were really nice to me. For example if a Turk came, or a bad [erotic] movie was shown; they, the waiters themselves or the receptionists, would point at me and tell me to go upstairs. I was like a sister to them, they were brothers, cause they saw my behavior [...] they were feeling so responsible for me that even if I wanted to go somewhere [late] they were looking in such a way that... I would go to a right place... really they were brothers.²⁴²

She clearly depicted the “other” women:

I saw it with my very eyes. The girl had come; she wanted to get a greencard to join her husband. All of a sudden we saw that she was wearing a mini skirt, make up, she had taken off her headscarf and things, and had sat at the end of the saloon with a guy, and a sexy film was being watched [...] Then at night she went to a disco with that guy.²⁴³

Mahnaz stated that the employees saw her difference from the other women who went to bars and discos. While her self-assertion as a devout mother and sister

²⁴² “*Kheyli ba man khoob booden. Yani agar ye torki miyoomed Hotel ya ye filmi badi dasht midad aslan khode garsonha ve receptionha eshare mikardan ke to boro bala. Man dige ye khaheer boodem berashun, unha berader booden, çon mididen reftaremro [...] unghadr roo man hasab mikarden, age khodem mikhastem ye jayi berem ye joori negah mikarden man ye jaye dorost masalan dashtem miraftem ... vaghean beraderem booden*” Mahnaz, interview by the author of the thesis, tape recording, Malmö, Sweden, 24 August 2007.

²⁴³ “*Man ba cheshmaye khodem mididem. Dokhtere omede bood, mikhast greencard begire, bere pishe shohare. Bad yehe didim damene kootah pooshide o arayesh; roose pooseri hemesho dar avorde, bad rafte tehe salon ham nesheste, filme seksiham neshoon mide, ba ye pesere [...] bad shab ba un miraft disko*” Ibid.

resulted in being watched by the employees, it also made her life easier at the hotel. For example, she did not pay for baths as she was allowed to use it and she was so trusted that the Iranians who were leaving would give her their belongings to share them among the ones in need. She was a “wife” to the political, “sister” to the receptionists, and was called the “mother” of her elder son. Her compliance to the patriarchal rules of conduct had increased her life-chance as a single mother in transit.

Aksu Bora’s study of cleaning ladies and their employers illuminates the invalidity of a “sisterhood” perspective, which assumes a common base among women despite their differences, with regards to women’s relations with each other. Bora points to the construction of different womanhoods in relation with each other, challenging each other, and devaluating each other.²⁴⁴ She takes the womanhood not as a completed/integrated identity, but as a process that is evolved through relations, both with women and men. Therefore womanhood is a process that is not exempt from power relations and strategies are employed by each woman participating actively to her own subjectivity’s construction.²⁴⁵

Two “strategies” that Bora includes in her book are particularly relevant for the present study. These are avoiding conspicuous clothing and wearing headscarves. Citing Beverly Skeggs’ study pertaining to English working class women, she recounts that they were strikingly sensitive with regards to their clothes. According to Skeggs, demarcating womanhood from sexuality is the foremost attended distinction and this distinction is made through appearance which (in addition to behavior) is the indicator of respectability. However, too much concentration on

²⁴⁴ Aksu Bora, p. 58.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 22.

appearance might be evaluated as the indicator of womanly seductiveness.²⁴⁶ And respectability was accepted to be at odds with “attractiveness.”²⁴⁷

In our context, avoiding conspicuous clothing and wearing headscarves are in fact two halves of the same thing, the latter being an intense form of the former. Bora’s interviews with veiled cleaning ladies reveal that the headscarf might have more than one meaning and that it can be employed as an important means in women’s strategies of strengthening their positions; namely, as a strategy of women’s differentiating themselves from other women.²⁴⁸

Consistent with Minoos’ and Mahnaz’s narratives there are also feminist critiques that link women’s political subjectivity (leftist orientation) with their aversion from conspicuous clothing. However, this aversion is taken into account with the leftist movements’ constriction of women into traditional gender roles. Fatmagül Berktaş states that the leftist movement assumes that women are more prone to become bourgeois due to their gender and that it attempts to protect the revolutionary self by controlling women’s behavior and clothing.²⁴⁹

Although her criticism is illuminating with respect to gender relations in various leftist groups, her claim needs further elaboration as an operational definition of “leftist movement” (*sol hareket*) is necessary for the validity of such an assessment. For example, Hobsbawm, in an article criticizing the attempts of

²⁴⁶ Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender/Becoming Respectable*. (Londra: Sage Smith Dorothy, 1998) cited in Bora. p. 57.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 94.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 89.

²⁴⁹ Fatmagül Berktaş, “Türkiye Solu’nun Kadına Bakışı: Değişen Bir Şey Var Mı?”, *Kadın Bakış Açısından 1980’ler Türkiye’sinde Kadın*, ed. Şirin Tekeli (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1990). Cited in Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1992), p. 75.

merging identity politics with the leftist movement, makes a contrary operational definition of the left:

The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for *all* human beings. However we interpret the words, it isn't liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn't equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody.²⁵⁰

Thus assuming an ahistorical, constricting leftist movement without taking into account its political project (universal liberty, fraternity, and equality) and the contexts where it rather empowered women, would be misleading.

Accordingly, affiliation with the leftist movement was an empowering process for a great number of Iranian women, particularly during the revolutionary era. Women's narratives of Iran in 1979 highlight the effect of being political in their daily lives:

I felt for the first time that I was someone. I was always studying but when I became a member of a political organization, I was satisfied with the fact that I was someone. I was then 19 years old. Before that I was not responsible for anything, but all of a sudden I became a person who was in charge of some people and there was a person who was in charge of me. [...] I did not have to stay at home and wait until someone entered the door. It was really like that, before I became politically active.²⁵¹

I can say that those years were the better years of my life. I think that I never in my life enjoyed life like that. I gained a lot of personal freedom at that time and socially all those restrictions were not there anymore. You could go wherever you wanted to go, you could do whatever you wanted to do.²⁵²

That period felt like a paradise on earth, which was beautifully called the "spring of freedom." It was great; I became politically active in *Fadaiyan* organization and did my best to increase my revolutionary

²⁵⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, "Identity Politics and the Left," *New Left Review*, 217 (May-June 1996), p. 43.

²⁵¹ Samira, cited in Ghorashi, p. 84.

²⁵² Nahid, *ibid.*, p. 83.

self-discipline. [...] Everything was exciting and you felt that you were doing something important in life. I acquired a political identity, which was respected both socially and by my family.²⁵³

Therefore, for them affiliation with the leftist movement was more an empowering process than a restricting and controlling one. Accordingly, Mahnaz and Minoo's rule of conduct can be evaluated with regard to their attempt to differentiate themselves from the other Iranian women living in the same places with them. It is argued that those behaviors should be taken not as ahistorical and generic outcomes of a certain (repressive) leftist rule of conduct, but as voluntary and thought strategies in a given context.

To elaborate more on that context, we should pay attention to the circulation of rumors of prostitution among Iranian transit migrants in Turkey at that time. Bauer states that, "in Germany there was much talk and concern about the 'brothers and sisters' remaining in Turkey and particularly about the plight of women – where they forced to resort to prostitution?"²⁵⁴ Such rumors were widespread among the interviewed refugees. While some claimed to have known Iranian women prostituting themselves in Turkey, most of the interviewed refugees stated they had been informed of its existence.

Azadeh, Behrouz, Mahnaz, Said, and Hooman confirmed prostitution of Iranian women in Turkey while a great number of people mentioned that they had heard of it. It was also argued that the prohibition of prostitution in Iran and the subsequent atrocities committed against prostitutes in Iran (including burning alive), had led to the migration of Iranian prostitutes to Turkey. However, some of the

²⁵³ Ghorashi. p. 79.

²⁵⁴ Bauer, "A Long Way Home," p. 89.

transit migrants stated that they had not seen anything, but had learned that it existed only when they arrived in Sweden. Prostitution is a hardly recordable activity, particularly in the case of foreign women working in precarious conditions; thus it is hard to assess the validity of such rumors. However, our preoccupation with meaning rather than event necessitates a search for this rumor's meaning for the people participating in its dissemination and taking the cited women's aversion of conspicuous sexuality in the context of such rumors.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes's writings on organ stealing rumors in Brazil are illuminating in this respect.²⁵⁵ Elaborating on the rumors disseminated in the mid-1980s, Scheper-Hughes drives attention both to the segment of the population where those rumors were effectively spread, and to the "timing and the geographical mapping" of these rumors.²⁵⁶ First, the author notes the rumors' circulating widely in the shantytowns of Northeast Brazil, among people living at the margins of society who think that "their bodies are worth more dead than alive to the rich and powerful."²⁵⁷ Second, she underscores the specific time (military regimes, police states, civil wars, and dirty wars) and places (Brazil, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, and South Africa) that similar organ and child stealing rumors have arisen.²⁵⁸ Scheper-Hughes concludes that those rumors (which also have a material

²⁵⁵ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Theft of Life: The Globalization of Organ Stealing Rumours," *Anthropology Today* 12, no.3 (Jun., 1996), pp. 3-11; Scheper-Hughes, "The Global Traffic in Human Organs" in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, ed. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

²⁵⁶ Scheper-Hughes, "The Global Traffic in Human Organs," p. 288.

²⁵⁷ Scheper-Hughes, "Theft of Life," p. 7.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

basis) “signify a sense of alarm, warning people in the community that their bodies, their lives and those of their children may be in danger.”²⁵⁹

The interviewed women’s assertive self-differentiation from “other” women within the context of the rumors of Iranians prostituting in Turkey can also be taken as testimonies of the precarious life conditions of the women in transit. *The Guests of Hotel Astoria* provides a striking hint at the relationship between the sexual abuse of women (both by force and by means of prostitution) and the police threat upon transit migrants. In her interrogation by the Turkish police; the Iranian translator, who claims to be working with both regimes, threatens Pouri by implying to link her case with the arrested communist and offers her an escape way: to sleep with the police. In another scene, the same “translator” serves as the driver of a young girl who has become a prostitute in Turkey.

Davis, in his lecture on the Anthropology of Suffering, stresses that pains related to routine life and pains of external causes do not represent distinct phenomena. In addition, there are “continuities between the causes of exceptional suffering and routine suffering.”²⁶⁰ Giving the example of famine, he argues that it is not famine, but hunger that kills. Or in other words, that famine is in fact a part of daily life. Davis states that there is no rupture between ordinary social experience and the pains caused by suffering from war, famine; or we may say, *exile*.

It is argued that the everyday experience of women in transit, which is marked by sexual harassment, hunger, sense of incalculability, suppression caused by the responsibility of children, threat of deportation, harassment of the police, fear of state violence, et cetera, cannot be taken apart. In fact they are the mortar of the

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁶⁰ Davis. p. 150.

precarious conditions in which the transit life takes place, and rumors can be employed as “alarms” to state that they are/were in danger and (taking into account the context of the interviews) had successfully overcome them.

All in all, women’s concerns for differentiating themselves from the “other” women involved a struggle over both the material gains (including security) and symbolic ones. These two realms are interrelated. However, there are some forms of struggle that predominantly belong to the symbolic realm. The following part will elaborate on such a form of self-differentiation that can be taken as an attempt of asserting one’s subjective existence.

Claiming the Political Refugee Subjectivity

“I did not apply for a Swedish passport when I was granted the right to have one. It took several years. I didn’t want to take it. I had a political refugee passport. I considered being a political refugee was my identity (*hovviyet*),”²⁶¹ said Khosrow, in the south Stockholm home where he lived with his wife and daughter. A member of the revolutionary leftist organization the People’s Fadaïyan, he had fled Iran in 1984 by means of a smuggler to avoid the draft for the Iran-Iraq war. At the time of the interview he was a Swedish journalist in his mid forties.

What Khosrow defined as a “political refugee identity,” and is employed as “political refugee subjectivity” throughout this thesis (consistent with Aksu Bora’s argument on the latter’s being a concept referring more to relations and process

²⁶¹ Khosrow, 43, interview by the author of thesis, tape recording, Stockholm, Sweden, 28 August 2007.

rather than constructed and completed situations)²⁶² is a prominent axis of self-differentiation among the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s. It is also a good example of the effect of subjectivity in the assessment of categories pertaining to refugees. That is, while one of the “final solutions” suggests a linear evolution of asylum seeker to refugee, and refugee to citizen of the receiving country, being a political refugee might resist this linear evolution. It is argued that in the context of the post revolutionary Iranian refugees, being a political refugee was not necessarily a transitional category.

First, what we mean by “political refugee” must be defended. According to the framework of the international asylum system headed by the UNHCR, fear of persecution on the basis of one’s political ideas is among the five recognized reasons of eligibility for being a refugee. Accordingly, the people who claim to be political refugees have to prove the basis of their fear of persecution. Therefore, they have to define their degree of political affiliation as well as the hardship that they faced prior to their flight. Thus the reason for flight is taken as the primary basis of one’s being a political refugee. There are, of course, exceptions to that, as mentioned in the discussion pertaining to the Iranian refugees protesting in the United Socialist Party. One can be a political refugee after flight if s/he has engaged in political activity in the first country of asylum that puts her/him in danger of persecution in the case of her/his return. Both ways, it is assumed that it is the past political activities that render the person at stake vulnerable to persecution and that it gives eligibility to one’s recognition as a political refugee.

²⁶² Aksu Bora, *Kadınların Sınıfı: Ücretli Ev Emeği ve Kadın Öznelliğinin İnşası* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), pp. 33-34.

There is nothing wrong with that. However, those “objective conditions” of being a political refugee is not sufficient to understand the way it was experienced. While for most of the cases the above-mentioned “objective conditions” might have been effective in the official ascription of the category, it was also the activities pursued *after* being an official refugee that rendered a refugee “political.” If we recall Serebeny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi’s argument, exile can be taken as “the fundamental political strategy of current times,” that paves the way to resuming political activities.²⁶³ Thus, being a political refugee also means being political *and* a refugee, or being a refugee to be able to continue to political activities. Therefore, it may even resist the abolition of the official refugee status and cease only with quitting political activity.

However, it is not a static category and is formed through the refugees’ subjective assessment of their categories and their everyday life activities. Therefore, it is also the experience of living as a political refugee that brings forth the formation of the category itself. Or to put in more aphoristic terms, “the political refugee was present at his/her own making.”²⁶⁴

Interviews with Iranian refugees in Sweden and Germany point to such a formation of “political refugee subjectivity” through experience. In other words, refugee narratives reveal that their lives as political refugees had not started in their country of destination, which had recognized them as refugees, but had a much

²⁶³ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, “Iranian Exiles as Opposition: Some Theses on the Dilemmas of Political Communication Inside and Outside Iran,” p. 223.

²⁶⁴ Reproduction of E. P. Thompson’s statement on the making of the English working class: “The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.” In “Preface,” *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966). p. 9.

longer history, and their experience in Turkey was integral to the making of their political refugee subjectivity. For “making,” we borrow E. P. Thompson’s definition: “*Making*, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning.”²⁶⁵

Irrespective, but not totally irrelevant to their reasons and ways of flight, most of the refugees described themselves as political while stating that other Iranian transit migrants (either on the way or in the hotel) were “normal.” By “normal,” they referred to young draft evaders or people who sought better opportunities (both for education and employment) in the Western countries. When the political refugees’ narratives are taken into account, we encounter a clear pattern of behavior focused on self-differentiation strategies. This pattern is formed in dialogue with a set of norms that can be collected under the label of “political” morality or revolutionary rule of conduct. However controversial, “political” morality refers to the value system, in which political refugees have been socialized and not necessarily morality in the realm of political activity. Examples from narratives will provide access to the content of such a morality.

The political refugees’ uneasiness in socializing with non-politicals is mentioned in Bauer’s study on Iranian transit migrants in Turkey.²⁶⁶ However, despite the reluctance of many refugees to socialize with other Iranian transit migrants in Turkey (especially due to the question of security), they mostly inhabited the same hotels. Moreover, the longer their stay became some even rented shared apartments with those other transit migrants that they called “normal.” However, this co-habitation did not result in the borders’ fading out. In addition, differentiation

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Bauer, “A Long Way Home,” p. 85.

became the very tool of restating their political stance in life, or rather a restatement of their existence (in the way they defined themselves). Azadeh and Behram's narrative point to such a need to differentiate:

There were only Iranians... Everyone was just waiting, waiting for a call, making a call... They were sleeping all through the day and staying awake till morning. Playing cards... Children were running from this room to the other. It was disastrous!²⁶⁷

When we arrived at the hotel, we ran into a family that we knew from Iran, coincidentally. After the very first or the second day, we objected them. *"What kind of a life is yours?" we would say.* They had a little child. You are awake till the middle of the night, sitting in, suffocated with smoke, backgammon and drinking... Then you sleep till 13.00-14.00. The next day, it is the same. Our friend told us that if we stayed in the hotel for one or two weeks, we would start to act like them. *We stayed for two months and so but did not become like them. [...]* We made plans not to spend our time in vain. We had made plans for our self, we got up early ... And went to the bazaar. It wasn't far away, we used to walk. We did our daily shopping and then returned to the hotel. We cooked – we had bought an electric heater. After meal, we used to leave the hotel and go for a walk.²⁶⁸ (my emphasis)

We were trying not to be like them. Thus we had an organized life. We were waking up timely, going on walks...²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ *"Tu Hotelesh faghat Irooniha booden ... Hame ham montazar, hama ham telefon beheshun mishod, inha telefon mizeden... aslan tori bud ke inha hame rooz mikhabiden, shabha ta sob bidar mimoonden. Varagh bazi mikardan... badan becheha az in otag be un otag midoidan... Vahshatnak bood!"* Azadeh.

²⁶⁸ *"Vakhti ke ma oomadim hotel, yek khanevadeyi bood ke ma mishnakhtimeshun az Iran ba hasbe hadese unja didimeshun. Etefaghen. Bad hamoon rooze avval dovvom ke ma unja boodim be in eteraz kardim in che zendegiye, ye bechcheye koochik ham dashten, in che zendegiye ke shoma darin. Ta nesfe sheb bidarin, mishinin tu doodo takhte bazio, mashroob mikhoreno... Bad mirin mikhabin ta zohr, ta yek, ta do, dobare bermigerdin be hamin dastan... In dooste ma bergesht goft ke hala shoma ye yeki do hafte bemoonin shoma ham injoori mishin ... Ma do maho khurdeyi unja boodim, unjoori ham neshodim... Ma injoori fekr kardim ke chetor vaghtemoon ra mofeed konim, sob bolend mishodim, beraye khodemoon bername gozashte boodim... Miraftim bazaar, ziyad door nebood, kharid e roozemoonra mikardim, mioomedim hotel, ye ghezayi dorost mikardim – in defe ye ocaghe barghi kharideboodim... ghezamoonro mikhordimo mioomedim biroon gerdesh."* Behrouz.

²⁶⁹ *"Ma say mikardim ke ma ham dochare un vaz neshim. Beraye hemin nazm dade boodim be zenegimoon ... Be moghe mikhabidim, be moghe bolend mishodim, miraftim ghadem mizadim"* Behrouz.

Azadeh and Behrouz's narratives both point to the determination of assessing their difference vis-à-vis the other Iranians at the hotel, and to the determination of leading an organized life under unorganized conditions, or to repeat what we mentioned before, to restate their existence as political subjects.

British anthropologist John Davis argues that in times of suffering people strive hard to preserve their way of life and whatever is left from their culture. Citing Elizabeth Colson's anthropological study on the resettlement of the Gwembe Tonga of Northern Rhodesia (due to the government's dam project), Davis states that the effort of the Gwembe people to maintain the social order was in fact a "response to uncertainty and dismay, when people do tend to rely on known and certain sources of strength, and partly a determination to preserve the characteristics of humanity, to continue to be what they understood as essentially civilized and human."²⁷⁰

The political refugees' attempts to preserve their organized life in times of a lack of official status and incalculability of the next step of their journey can be taken as an attempt to "rely on known and certain sources of strength." Accordingly, Azadeh and Behrouz from their very first stop in Turkey (a hotel in Van) strived to maintain an organized life as opposed to a life based on mere waiting on transit. Their efforts to preserving their way of life were parallel to their attempt to keep a distance from the other Iranians in their hotel. They stated that the other guests of the hotel formed an "unusual group." Apart from three leftist guerillas, there were draft evaders and a woman with her son and a few other men around her. The woman had been deported several times and they thought that "she was probably a prostitute." She used to curse and swear and even use four letter words while speaking with her

²⁷⁰ John Davis, "The Anthropology of Suffering", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 5, no. 2 (1992), p. 156.

son of thirteen. Behrouz stated that although they “didn’t have anything to do with them,” their daughter, Aida, had started to use the very same words while they were in Van (which pointed to the “threat” of the abolition of boundaries).

To preserve the boundaries they used to have with those “unusual group,” they gathered the young boys and the leftists under a group to live as a commune. Because of their age (Azadeh was 40 and Behrouz, 34), they became responsible for planning the shopping and cooking with the collected money. They, by living a collective life with the people who belonged to “their life world,” repaired the boundary that was destructed by the necessary co-habitation with the “unusual group.” In line with what Davis states, theirs was an attempt to reclaim their identities as a response to the rule of uncertainty and dismay.

The attempt at leading an organized life involved taking morning walks and doing daily shopping and keeping a diary, visiting museums and at times engaging in political activities. There were other forms of self-differentiation as well. Said’s previously cited comment on the *Guests of Hotel Astoria’s* leftist militant is worth restating here. He says that the leftist militant’s extra-marital affair with a married woman (herself, a transit migrant) had been unbelievable for him at the time he had watched the film. He had lived in Istanbul for eight months, and had not thought of anything other than politics. He had spent all his days propagandizing to Iranian tourists and trying to find a way to transfer to another country (i.e., Iraq), where he could actively participate in the anti-regime struggle. He recalled Iranians who went to bars and brothels, showing the pictures of the girls they had affairs with, but according to him (especially ten years ago when he first watched the film), that kind of a life was incomprehensible for a leftist militant.

The list of incomprehensible attitudes for a leftist militant was longer than that. Said recalled his conversation with another Iranian refugee who had passed through Turkey, after his arrival at Sweden. While in Turkey, Said had worked in construction and when he ran out of money he had turned into a man of “*çorba*” (soup). For more than a month the only thing he had eaten was bread and soup. However, the man he met had told him that he had had a good time in Turkey and had not been deprived of anything; he stole whatever he wanted from supermarkets. He told Said that he used to have honey and butter every morning. Both for him and for Minoo, whom I met in our second meeting with Said, it was incomprehensible to steal as such. Minoo said “I don’t understand how people can steel. If you are hungry, I would understand if you steal bread. But of course not steak! There is a thick line between what is right and what is wrong; there are some principles!” Accordingly, the morality that we name as political morality is not morality in the realm of politics, but a set of referential rules pertaining to the everyday life experiences of the political (revolutionary) self (i.e., Minoo’s principles).

This political morality or the principles that are perceived to govern the revolutionary life need further elaboration. Sevim Belli’s accounts provide insight into the scope of this revolutionary rule of conduct. The TKP’s Paris representative in the 1950s, the Laborer Party of Turkey Central Committee member and the translator of the main texts of Marxism in Turkish, Sevim Belli, provides a framework for the principles of revolutionaries’ lives in her memoir. She doesn’t depict the revolutionary self only through the narration of her own experiences as a revolutionary militant, but also by direct descriptions of how a revolutionary should behave in everyday life.

Belli states that to be a revolutionary, one has to perceive “being revolutionary” (*devrimcilik*) as a life style and should internalize its principles. According to her, one is not a revolutionary only in times of active struggle (with or without arms). To be a revolutionary, one has to take every step with consciousness (*bilinç*). Being revolutionary means being aware of your place, your targets, and your plans; and taking a stance at every step irrespective of the conditions. To be determined and act according to the revolutionary consciousness at every moment, even while you are eating drinking, sleeping or having fun, is integral to the formation of the revolutionary self.²⁷¹

Examples from her personal life illuminate what she expects from a revolutionary in further detail:

I have never spent all my money until the last penny. I think you should behave cautiously before you come to that point. Or, I will prefer to stay hungry. I don't purchase anything unless it is really necessary, especially for myself. I have some principles, some norms which I don't know the basis of. They are quite tough. [...] A revolutionary of Turkey should not breach those norms that I define.²⁷²

²⁷¹ “*İnsanın devrimci olduğuna inanması başka şeydir; devrimciliği bir yaşam biçimi olarak algılamak ve özümsemek başka şey. Ben devrimciliği düzenin değişmesinden yana olmak, sosyalist devrime geçilmesi için savaşım vermek biçiminde anlıyorum. Devrimci olmakla da, her an silah elde olmayı kastetmiyorum sadece, isterse bu silah mecaz anlamda herhangi bir mücadele aracı olsun. Hayır. Ama devrimcilik, her an, nerede olduğunu, nasıl bir ortamda bulunduğunu, orada ne için bulunduğunu, nereye doğru baktığını, o gün nereye gideceğini, ertesi gün için neyi hedeflediğini, gittiği yerde ne yapacağını, yürüdüğü yollarda kimlerle nereye kadar yürüyeceğini, kime karşı duracağını, karşılaştıklarını nasıl ve hangi hedefe yönelik olarak etkileyeceğini, kime ve nasıl bilinç katacağını, kimden nasıl ve ne öğreneceğini, yerken, içerken, çalışırken; gezerken ve de eğlenirken, hatta uyurken bilinçle bilmek ve her an tavır belirlemek demektir; belirlediğin tavır davranışınla, eyleminle ortaya koymak demektir; bu bilinçle oturup kalkmak, bu bilinçle mutlu ya da mutsuz olmak demektir; bireysel sevinci ve mutluluğu da bu açıdan görmek demektir, bunun dışında başka bir ölçütü olmamak demektir. Ve de her zaman kendi kendisi ile tutarlı ve kendi kendisi ile barişik olabilmek demektir.*” Sevim Belli, *Boşuna mı Çiğnedik?* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 2004), pp. 639-640.

²⁷² “*Paramı son kuruşuna kadar harcadığım asla vaki değildir. O duruma gelmeden önlem alınmalıdır bence. Yoksa aç gezmeyi yeğ tutarım. Mutlaka gerekli olmayan hiçbirşey satın almam, hele kendim için. Kendime göre ilkelerim, neye göre ayarladığım belli olmayan normlarım vardır. Hem de oldukça katı. [...] Bir Türkiye devrimcisi bu benim koyduğum normların üzerine çıkmamalıdır.*” Ibid., p. 399.

Belli's account is not unique. The framework she depicts for the revolutionary self, the emphasis that she puts on acting with consciousness, are frequently encountered in the political refugees' narratives. This is not coincidental, but points to a value system formed through similar socializing practices. This naturalized principles, the basis of which are not even questioned (as in Belli's case), form the foundation of the transit migrant experience of political refugees.

Claiming the political refugee subjectivity and organizing daily lives according to the principles that it inferred, was an empowering tactic for the refugees living a life in a prolonged transit that enclosed uncertainty. It was a way of giving meaning to a life based on mere waiting. It was also a tactic of asserting a subjectivity the particularity of which was not recognized by the state or other decision giving authorities. Thus, refugees' concern for maintaining their distinction from "others" can be taken as an act of protecting their existence in the symbolic realm.

Last but not the least, refugees' accounts of celebrating the Labor Day can be taken as another form of struggle in the symbolic realm. Staying in Turkey for one year, Mahin's account points to a collectivity celebrating the Labor Day in 1988, at the time when Labor Day celebrations were prohibited in Turkey. She recounted her participation in such a celebration with other Iranian refugees from various leftist groups in a suburban park in Ankara. She recalled nearly two hundred people having picnic in the park and singing revolutionary songs. They were present in the park from morning until late afternoon, celebrating the day in the guise of having picnic.

Concluding Remarks

The victimized portrait of refugees renders the tactics that they employed in their life in transit unseen. However, it is not possible to avoid the power struggle ingrained in their relations with the state and other authorities that had a say in assessing their status, as well as in their relations with the other Iranians in transit. Although Iranians' living in same hotels and at times, in shared apartments brings forth the assumption that differences are diminished as a result of cohabitation, refugees' narratives point to concerns for self-differentiation among refugees for advancing their claims in the material and symbolic realms.

Those tactics ranged from ways of dealing with bread and butter issues to assertion of their subjective existence in a context that they were recognized either as tourists or illegal migrants. It is argued that those tactics were influential in empowering the refugees that employed them and increased their life-chances in transit. While it is hard to claim that all those practices of the art of making do can be defined as forms of everyday resistance, the forms that pave the way for the denial of the claims of the authorities in order to control and govern refugees and the practices that bring forth reclaiming rights that are denied by authorities can be evaluated as forms of everyday resistance.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to confuse a taken for granted depiction. Namely, that the Iranians who fled after the Iranian Revolution of the 1979 composed a homogenous group and smoothly transited to the Western European countries and the United States. It was not only an attempt to refute the material basis of this assumption, but more importantly to expose how such descriptions do not explain anything “naturally” by themselves. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to re-politicize the history of the Iranian transit migrants in the 1980s in Turkey, which has been reconstructed to form the background of Turkey’s experience with transit migrants.

Turkey’s asylum regulations and the geographic restriction that characterizes its asylum policies are among the hottest issues in its relations with the European Union, which improved in the late 1990s. Accordingly, an increase in the scholarly interest in the migration issue is observable. In the studies scrutinizing Turkey’s experience with transit migration, the migration of Iranians fleeing the Islamic Regime in Iran is taken as the first salient transit migration wave to Turkey. Therefore, 1979 is taken as a cornerstone in the history of transit migration in Turkey. However, pertaining to the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s, no information beyond numbers is available. All we may learn from these accounts is that there were many Iranians (up to one and a half million) in Turkey in the 1980s and that they had more opportunities of resuming their journeys than today’s Iranian

asylum seekers in Turkey. For the sake of comparison, their histories are abstracted and generalized.

To be able to decipher the myths ingrained in the written history of the people whose stories have been reduced to numbers, we dwelled first on the conditions of being a Non-European asylum seeker in Turkey in the 1980s, second on the transit migrants' pre-exile history that was influential in the way they experienced transit migration, third on their perception of Turkey and the role Aksaray played in their narratives, and finally on their inter-group relations. Apart from written accounts and a movie, we referred to the oral narratives of Iranians living in Sweden and Germany who had passed through Turkey in the 1980s.

The feeling of insecurity and uneasiness stemming from the inability to forecast the next step in their journey emerged as the most paralyzing effect of being in transit in Turkey in the 1980s. This stemmed not only from their fear of being persecuted in case of return to Iran, but also from their lack of security in Turkey. Thus it was first necessary to read through the layers of Turkey's so-called pragmatic and flexible policies with regard to Non-European asylum seekers before its 1994 asylum regulation. The post-revolutionary Iranian transit migrants stayed in Turkey at a time when there were no regulations pertaining to their status in Turkey. Thus, from the state's perspective, they were either tourists or illegal migrants, or at times foreign terrorists in collaboration with local terrorists.

The Turkish state's pre-1994 experience with transit migration is narrated as an era of pragmatic and flexible policies which transit migrants of the era (mainly Iranians) "benefited from." The present study argues that the lack of legally defined rights has added up to the ambiguity surrounding transit migrants and the resulting arbitrariness had paved the way for corruption and for the formation of opportunist

intermediaries who rendered transit migrants vulnerable to exploitation. Refraining from police registration is evaluated as a precaution/tactic against being the victim of those so called pragmatic and flexible policies that involved not only arbitrary deportations, but also cartel agreements.

With the formation of the 1994 Regulation, legal ways of resistance to deportations were opened. However, it is not assumed that a linear development was observed in Turkey's implementations vis-à-vis Non-European asylum seekers with the introduction of this regulation. Instead, the difference in policies can be taken as different strategies for managing different transit migration waves. The 1988 arrival of Iraqi Kurds should be taken as a cornerstone in switching to a different strategy.

It was argued that the history of the Iranian transit migrants passing through Turkey in the 1980s cannot be initiated from their arrival in Turkey. Refugees do not start from the zero when they arrive at a new country. They bring forth their histories with the conflicts and struggles that they involve. Thus the assumption that all the refugees, or for our case, all the Iranian post-revolutionary refugees experienced exile the same way (i.e., the discussions on "refugee experience," "refugee identity,") is far from explaining the situation. The present study argues that exile did not start at the same time (1979) for all the Iranian post-revolutionary refugees. The consolidation of the Islamic Regime (which at least took two years) and the start of the Iran-Iraq war should be taken as other high points for Iranian emigration. For example, most of the refugees defined as "oppositional groups" did not flee the 1979 revolution, but the suppression that they faced after the consolidation of the Islamic Regime.

Therefore, a simply worded statement for the sake of explanational clarity (taking 1979 as the starting point of the flight) not only blurs the characteristics of

the people in transit in Turkey, but also re-writes the history of the Revolution, disguising the presence of leftist forces in the Revolution as well as the political struggle in its aftermath. Thus, in this study, we tried to give an answer to the question of “when did exile begin?” with respect to the political groups involved. For most of the leftist political refugees, exile had begun before their flight to Turkey. Therefore, criticizing the legal categories’ (refugee/immigrant) explanatory inefficiency, we suggested differentiating the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s according to their degree of political affiliation. The narratives revealed that cadres, political militants and sympathizers had experienced “internal exile,” flight, and transit migration differently. While cadres were more organized in their flight plans, militants suffered from the same ambivalence of the flight conditions as sympathizers and non-politicals and their exit from Iran was much harder than sympathizers. However, having experienced exile conditions “at home” they had the “know how” to orient themselves to the insecure environment of transit migrants in Turkey (which involved people from various organizational backgrounds and also agents of the Islamic Regime).

Apart from drawing attention to the bilateral security agreements between governments and the arbitrariness stemming from the pragmatic and flexible policies of the Turkish state, the attempt to re-introduce politics to the history of the Iranian refugees in Turkey involved dwelling on the conflicts and alliances among Iranian transit migrants. Inter-group mistrustfulness was distinguishable among the written and oral narratives of the Iranian refugees. This also reveals that being in transit did not necessarily infer the presence of a shared denominator among Iranians in Turkey. Moreover, it is argued that the necessary cohabitation of Iranians from different political and class backgrounds brought forth the necessity of the affirmation of the

differences among Iranians in transit by the very fact of inferring the boundaries' disappearance.

The narrations of everyday life experiences revealed a continuous concern for affirmation of subjectivities, as well as other forms of tactics pertaining to struggle over means of living. Claiming political refugee subjectivity and a womanhood positioned in the discourse over chastity emerged as distinguishable attempts of self-differentiation among refugees. These two formations were not only taken as empowering tactics in transit lives, but were also outcomes of dispositions formed through the agents' socializing processes. Furthermore, women's contribution to prostitution rumors was analyzed as attempts at calling attention to their precarious conditions and finally as the restatement of their success in overcoming that direct threat to their woman subjectivity. Prostitution was a strong signifier for the feeling of vulnerability of exploitation by the local people ("Turks"), and the police.

This study was also concerned to trace the making of the political refugee in the case of the post revolutionary Iranian refugees. It was argued that "political refugee" is not a status ascribed by asylum granting authorities, but a lived category in continuous making through the interaction of the objective conditions of the refugee's flight and his/her subjective assessment of his/her category. Therefore, we argued that what made a refugee political might not necessarily be the pre-exile activities that impelled the flight of the refugee, but also the political activities pursued after being a refugee.

This was a humble attempt to question the clarity of the statement of "one and a half million Iranians" passing through Turkey smoothly. We tried to challenge this assumption by exposing the conflictual nature of Iranian transit migrants' relations

with the state and the decision giving authorities, the conditions of flight and their pre-exile life, and the politics embedded in the relations among Iranians in transit. An attempt was made to contribute to fill in the historical quality that the depiction of the Iranian transit migrants of the 1980s was missing.

However, the task is more complicated than the scope of this thesis and further research is necessary to dwell on the neglected stories of the transit migrants in the construction of the history of migration to Turkey. Their relations with the authorities having a claim of controlling and governing them, their relations with the police, and the inter-group conflicts and tactics should be scrutinized for understanding the phenomenon of transit migration in Turkey. This study presents mainly the leftist political refugees' experiences of passing through Turkey in the 1980s. However, it was not only political affiliation that mattered in the way the life in transit in Turkey was experienced. One of the interviewees told that police used to ask their religion to understand whether they were Armenian Iranians or Muslims. The meaning of being an Armenian transiting through Turkey particularly in the first half of the 1980s when ASALA was active needs to be examined. It was seldom mentioned that being a Kurdish Iranian and an Azeri Iranian mattered particularly in the relations transit migrants had with the police. While Kurdishness had to be hid, Azeris exposed their identities and most of the time worked as translators for other transit migrants in police. We did not have access to enough information and accordingly could not add the question of ethnicity to our analysis. Nevertheless, it deserves attention as well. Age and gender should also be mentioned as important variables in refugees' experiencing transit migration.

This was also more of an attempt to contribute to the interdisciplinarity of studying refugees with different concerns other than suggesting policies for solving

the “problem” without taking into account their implementations. It is necessary to question the taken for granted description of the refugee and its evolution to a medium of “therapeutic interventions” both by the decision giving authorities and by scholars studying refugees. It is hoped that this study has contributed to the critical literature that situate the “problem” not in the bodies and minds of people in transit but in the social and political structure that assert flight as a necessity.

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