

**Kurdish Asylum Seekers in Greece: the Role of Networks
in the Migration Process.**

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UNU/ WIDER Conference on Poverty, International Migration and
Asylum, 27-28 September 2002, Helsinki.

Abstract

The paper describes the role of social networks in asylum migration, aiming to explain how some people decide to stay in Greece and how others move on. Drawing from the example of Kurdish migrants in Athens, the paper examines how transnational and local social and family networks operate in the decisionmaking process, in the journey and in the period of temporary ('in transit') and permanent settlement. Regarding the journey, special emphasis is given to the description of the smuggling business, with the aim to add to a critical examination of the relation between smuggling and migrants. It is argued, that Kurds who are temporarily settled in Greece do not engage socially in this country, but are more oriented towards their homeland and other destination countries. Integration in Greece is an individual than an ethnic community effort, often assisted by social ties with the natives. An important division among Kurdish migrants is that between the non-politicised and the politically 'organised' - members of Kurdish parties who are active in homeland politics but dissociated from the refugee population.

Keywords: asylum seekers, Greece, smuggling, social networks, Kurds.

JEL classification: Z 13, I 310, J 61.

1. Introduction

Irregular migration has been one of the most pressing challenges for Greek external and social policy in recent years, because of the size of population flows, the fuzziness of borders and the adaptational pressures for Greece as a ‘new’ immigration country. Very often, especially in the summer months, a boat loaded with Kurdish, Iraqi, Afghani or Pakistani migrants reaches the Greek shores. Some of them apply for asylum, but many choose to remain undocumented with the aim to leave for another country. The short history of the phenomenon and lack of information have made this a puzzling story for the public, the media and the State. The present paper will pick up three myths about asylum migration and try to explain them with examples from a case study. The myths are: a) that smuggling is organized by crime networks b) that irregular migrants do not aim to stay in Greece, c) that migrant groups are homogeneous in the reasons of flight, their character, purpose and identity.

The paper searches for an answer to these myths in the internal mechanism of asylum migration, inspired by Koser’s (1997) idea to apply the social networks approach in the asylum cycle. Koser argues that it is relatively invalid to distinguish between labour and asylum migrants because of similarities in the migration process, evident in the role of social networks in the decision to migrate, the choice of destination and adaptation in the host society. Koser also argues that the interaction between social networks and migration varies between individuals through the asylum cycle. In the context of Kurdish migrants in Athens,¹ the present paper also argues that engagement in social networks differs between individuals through the asylum cycle and depends on other macro/micro factors, such as the structures of the reception country, ethnic group structures and the dynamics of individuals. The decision to stay in Greece or leave for another country is a result of the interplay of those factors. In other words, an integrative approach (Boyd; 1989) is taken, that brings together structuralist and functionalist explanations in the level of social networks.

¹The current paper draws from my PhD research – still in progress – and the fieldwork undertaken with Kurdish refugees in Greece in October 2001- January 2002 and June-July 2002.

The paper is divided in two parts: the first describes the operation of smuggling, and the role of networks in decisionmaking, in the journey and temporary stay; the second describes the role of networks in the settlement and integration, among Kurds and with Greeks. The conclusion recapitulates the main arguments and remarks.

2. Kurdish asylum seekers in Greece

First, some background information on asylum migration in Greece.² The relatively small annual number of asylum seekers and refugees gives the impression that the asylum issue in Greece is minor: 7,003 existing Convention refugees, 6,252 asylum seekers and 2,283 new applicants were registered in June 2002.³ These numbers do not, however, reflect the actual size of the asylum population, because of the reluctance of many migrants to apply, the extremely slow pace of the asylum process (two years on average) and the continuous illegal arrivals and departures. Irregular migration in Greece raises serious concerns for the country and for the European Union, because of its extent (Baldwin-Edwards; 2001), and because of the geopolitical role of Greece at Europe's southeastern end. The readmission agreement signed with Turkey in November 2001 is a result of these concerns.⁴

Regarding nationality, the majority of asylum seekers in Greece during the last decade have originated from Iraq, Turkey and Iran.⁵ Most of them are said to be Kurds,⁶ who came to Greece in three main waves: in 1991-1992, after the chemical weapons in Halabja, Iraq and the Gulf war,⁷ in 1994-5 after the escalation of violence in Southeastern Turkey, and in 1996-8 due to the ongoing conflict in Northern Iraq.

² Greece has ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 New York Protocol. In 1991, Greece acceded to the 1990 Dublin Convention (law 1996/1991) and in 1997 to the Schengen Agreement (law 2514/1997). In 1999, law 2691/1999 ratified the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty of the European Union.

³ UNHCR data, January-June 2002, BO Athens (2002a).

⁴ 'Protocol for the Implementation of Article 8 of the Agreement between the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Government of the Republic of Turkey on Combating Crime, Especially Terrorism, Organised Crime, Trafficking and Illegal Migration' signed on the 07/11/2001, and based on the Agreement signed on 20/01/2000, law 2926, Governmental Gazette issue 139,1,27/06/2001.

⁵ Roughly 50% of Convention refugees and asylum seekers, UNHCR, BO Athens (2000a), 'Statistics, Greece 1990-2000', and (2002b), 'Annual Statistical Report for 2001: Refugees and Others of concern to the UNHCR'.

⁶ There are no statistics for Kurds, because applicants are recorded according to citizenship (Iraq, Iran, Turkey), and not nationality ('Kurds'), which is mentioned in the hearing process only. The first UNHCR data on Kurds are now released for January-June 2002, (UNHCR; 2002a).

⁷ 3,000 Kurds from Iraq, Iraqis, Assyrian Christians and Iranians had arrived by 1992, (Black; 1992).

Kurdish migration has not stopped ever since. The total Kurdish population is difficult to estimate, because of the absence of statistics⁸ and the constant border crossings in and out of Greece: still, they are estimated to be between 6-7,000 and 10,000,⁹ out of which ca.1,600 live in the refugee camps, 2,000 in Athens, in flats, sheds or empty lots in downgraded inner city areas,¹⁰ some in other cities, and about 2,000 in Patras.¹¹

3. The journey and temporary settlement in Greece

3.1. Travellers and smugglers

To start with smuggling, it is almost an established practice for migrants from the Middle East to use smugglers for the exit, passage through third countries and entry in Greece. The smuggling business is organized by the *kaçakçı*, drivers in both sending and receiving countries. They are based in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and do the crossing of the Iran/Iraq and Iraq/Turkey borders, similar to the *coyotes* at the Mexican/US border (Spencer; 2001). The smugglers used in these borders are not always in contact with smugglers at the next border, the Turkish/Greek or the Aegean Sea. According to interviews, contacting a *kacakci* in Iraq, Iran or Turkey is very easy, since they are numerous and advertise their job in the local community. In Greece, *kacakci* are known in the refugee camps and within the migrant population, and are easily contacted through mobile phone. In fact, using the smuggling service is mostly a short-term, commercial relationship between the individual offering the service and the migrant paying for it. Among the Kurds interviewed, those who had paid a *kacakci* to cross approved of the practice, for being the only professional way to leave the country. *'They are doing their job. We would not be here otherwise'*, a Kurd told me once.¹²

Certain routes of entry are established through habitual practice: a) on foot, by crossing the Evros river in the Greek-Turkish border.¹³ Having crossed with the help

⁸ There are no statistics for Kurds, because applicants are recorded according to citizenship (Iraq, Iran, Turkey), and not nationality ('Kurds'), which is mentioned in the hearing process only. The first UNHCR data on Kurds are now released for January-June 2002,(UNHCR; 2002a).

⁹The first number mentioned in interviews and in 'Ta Nea' Newspaper 05/01/1998, the second in: Triantafyllidou; 2001.

¹⁰ 'Ta Nea', 08/11/2000.

¹¹ Newspapers 'Ta Nea', 19/07/2001, 'Eleftherotypia' 16/01/2002.

¹² Interview, 17/10/2001.

¹³ More than 5,000 are estimated to have crossed the border in the last three months (i.e. May – July 2002), 'Avgi' Newspaper, 10/08/2002.

of a *kacakci*, migrants usually hitchhike or hide in trucks/ trains, b) by boat, to the border islands of the Eastern Aegean (Samos, Kos, Rodos etc) or to the Greek mainland shores. When crossing the Aegean, it is common for the smuggling crew to abandon the boat in the sea to be picked up by the coast guard.

Some migrants also attempt to cross the sea or border on their own, with various degrees of success. A young Kurdish man I interviewed tried to cross the border seven times. About 40 migrants are reported to have died in the border minefield in the last five years.¹⁴ Having arrived in Greece, migrants also use the smuggling service for the journey to Western Europe, by plane, by car, over the Albanian border, or by boat from Patras to Italy.

In this case study smuggling is a business between individuals, not a network of organized crime, as the phenomenon of human trafficking in Greece (Emke-Poulopoulos; 2002). This does not dismiss the fact that the person's social and economic rights are abused, and that she/he ends up in a situation of political, economic and social insecurity, because of the illegal status and financial disaster she/he will face. The explanation proposed rather helps distinguish between *means* and *motivation* (Crisp; 1999), and prevent diminishing the person's claim to refugee status for illegal entry. It is a suggestion to consider that in some ways, smuggling has become the only way out of political and financial desperation in the homelands and, at the same time, as the only way in, in the absence of other legal entry paths into Europe. It is the restrictive entry criteria and the extreme difficulties in the asylum process in Europe that have driven people to the illegal, smuggled entry (Koser; 2001).

3.2. Social networks in the migration process

The smuggling business would not have been operating were it not for the migrant networks that mobilize in the asylum cycle, starting with emigration. Family, relatives and friends at home assist with the travel fees, by giving their savings and selling their property. In Europe, migrants also mobilize and send money to those waiting at home or in the transit country – something one could call 'journey remittances'. In turn,

those in Greece take up part-time jobs to pay off their relatives/friends; the capital, instead of being invested in one country, is circulating between homeland, transit and destination country.

In migration literature it is argued that social networks assist in the migration process by providing information to potential migrants and newcomers (Massey et al; 1987). Some Kurds with friends/relatives in Greece prior to emigration had been well informed about reception facilities, the asylum application process, welfare provisions for refugees, or meeting points and social life. By the time they reached the shore, they knew where to go and whether to apply for asylum in Greece or elsewhere. Most Kurds, however, are completely unaware of the situation and have had no information prior to emigration. Or, they have been informed by smugglers, who promise them safety, a house, a job and welfare coverage for all in Greece.

Thus, for Kurds with transnational ties in Greece or other destination countries, the decision and choice of destination is affected by those ties. If they have relatives/friends in countries other than Greece, most likely they will want to join them. Whether they do in the end of the day, is another question related to structural and individual factors. For Kurds with no ties in Greece or other countries, the choice of destination is taken according to hearsay, or based on the smuggler's information.

3.3. Being 'in transit'

Therefore the impression that all these Kurds do not want to stay in Greece needs some further refinement.¹⁵ Some interviewees in the reception camps stated their intention to leave soon. 'Soon', however, can be somewhere between three months and three years; all this time, migrants stay in refugee camps, empty lots, or shared flats, work in the informal economy, in jobs like constructions, services, or agriculture, and save money for the journey. The decision to leave Greece is not necessarily linked to the length of residence, but relates more to the persons' life

¹⁴ 'Ta Nea', 21/03/2002.

¹⁵ This impression was also shared among most public and NGO officials I interviewed (Ministry of Interiors (interview, 14/01/2002), Ministry of Public Order, Aliens Office (interview, 25/01/2002), Greek Council for Refugees, Border Monitoring Office, (interview 18/07/2002), Red Cross (interview, 11/01/2002), International Social Service, Lavrion Refugee Camp (interview, 24/01/2002).

stage, the degree of involvement in transnational social and political networks, and the social and political structures of reception.

For the 'in transit' Kurds, the maintenance of transnational ties in other destination countries is more important than the development of local ties with Kurds in Athens. Contrary to those who settle down, they are much more oriented towards their homeland and other destination countries, than towards the place they are staying. They may not socialize with other camp residents, but they speak regularly on the phone with their friends in Germany. Being 'in transit' can be argued as containing elements of an 'emerging transnationalism' (Al-Ali; 2002). Being 'in transit' proves to be a *process* rather than a *status*, a process of engaging/or not engaging socially and economically in the host country.

4. Settlement and integration

Being 'in transit' is a period of vulnerability, insecurity and socio-economic marginalization.¹⁶ The shift from temporary to permanent settlement depends from the stage of individual integration during this period. Greek reception structures do not seem to encourage permanent migrant settlement at the moment: extreme delays in the asylum process, poor reception infrastructure (few reception camps run by NGOs),¹⁷ scarce integration programs, and no subsidy for asylum seekers, as elsewhere in Europe.¹⁸ The right of asylum seekers to employment seems like a compromise for the lack of welfare provisions.¹⁹ Migrant participation depends on the knowledge of the language, social relations with Greeks, and invisible recruitment in a well-established informal economy (King et al; 2000). The latter has to do with the fact that, from the host society's point of view, migrant participation in Greece is understood as participation in the labour market.²⁰ In addition, as will be explained in

¹⁶ According to a survey on vocational training for refugees/ asylum seekers, 48% of the sample have had higher or technical education, but these skills are not used in Greece (Papadopoulou; 2001).

¹⁷ There are 7 reception camps for asylum seekers and a couple of hostels in the country in total. Also, there is no governmental body dealing with migration at the moment.

¹⁸ European Community (2000), DG JHA, Final Report, Part A, p.79.

¹⁹ Presidential decrees PD 189/1998, PD 61/1999. Asylum seekers in Greece have the right to residence, family reunion, humanitarian (de facto) protection, education for their children, UNHCR;2000b, 'Manual for the Process and the Criteria of Refugee Status Determination, According to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol regarding Refugee Status', 3rd edition, Athens: 2000 (in Greek).

²⁰ The liberal perspective is made clear in the latest regularization processes, (1998, 2001), that attached the migrants' right to stay (residence permit) to their work permit.

the following section, the existing Kurdish population cannot provide newcomers with social capital that an ethnic community would. In this context, settling down in Greece becomes a question of individual efforts.

4.1. Migrant ties and migrant communities

In his research on Kurds, Iraqis, Iranians, and Assyrian Christians in Greece in 1991, Black highlighted the role of family, locality and social networks as particularly important, in 'securing access to employment, housing, and resettlement overseas [...], loans or mutual support in the event of unemployment, bereavement, or other unexpected event'.²¹ He also identified a spatial concentration of Kurds in Athens that followed the thread of family networks. The situation has changed during the decade. Most newcomers found temporary - and often prolonged - shelter in refugee camps and hostels financially covered by NGOs, or being homeless, in abandoned houses in the city centre. There are only few cases of ethnic conglomeration, like the case of the Kurds in the municipality of Nea Smyrni, Athens - who are not families, but singles. This community consists almost exclusively of 250-300 undocumented young men, who live in the worst possible conditions in squatted houses and work in part-time construction jobs in the area. Migrant networks play here an important role: 79% of the Kurds came to N. Smyrni because of their social ties (N.Smyrni Municipality; 2002). Another ethnic concentration is known in the municipality of Aegaleo, this time of Iraqis, Assyrians and Chaldeans, but only few Kurds.

Apart from these two examples, where settlement is centred around social ties, in general, relations between Kurdish migrants are randomly formed, following the groups made in the journey and place of arrival (i.e. reception camps), and short-term, based on solidarity over survival needs, locality ties, or political affiliations. In addition, migrant relations may offer psychological and material support, but they cannot cover unemployment, that is assisted either by NGOs or by individual efforts. Kurdish newcomers may have a couple of isolated friends or relatives in Greece, but no reference point to a settled Kurdish community to support them. The reasons for that are a) the short history of Kurdish migration in Greece that has not enabled the formation of a Kurdish community, b) the fact that political divisions among Kurds

²¹ Black; 1992, p.16.

are transferred to the host society. This brings us to the third puzzle; contrary to the impression of homogeneous migrant groups, this case is an example of how migrants form various sub-groups based on contingent or social/political ties: the refugee camp populations, the homeless, the Kurdish party affiliates, the integrated but non-politicised refugees/asylum seekers.

4.2. Political networks and ‘organized’ migration

The distinction between politicized and non-politicized Kurds is not only one of ideology and socialization, but also one of different migration patterns: the ‘organized’ refugees²² on the one side, the ‘irregular migrants’ on the other. The number of ‘organized.’ i.e. party members, is rather small (a few hundred people in total), compared to the masses of undocumented/ asylum migrants.

The ‘organized’ are members of Kurdish parties from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, that opened offices in Athens and other Greek cities during the last decade,²³ in order to raise awareness and internationalize the parties’ political projects. For ‘organized’ refugees, migration means that they may share accommodation and everyday life with comrades, and definitely contribute to the party - financially, by working in the party offices, by joining demonstrations, hunger strikes, etc. According to interviews, the party provides its members with protection in the host country, and often with the guarantee of a safe journey, by employing other party members to cross the border, or using good contacts with smugglers – this is where smuggling meets political networks. Above all, ‘organized’ migrants distinguish themselves from the rest because of their identity as political exiles - a *Diaspora* identity rather than a *migrant* one. For them political action has been the reason and the pattern of migration, as participation in a transnational, but exclusive political community.

²² The term is used by Kurdish migrants when they refer to themselves as party members.

²³ The office of ERNK (the political wing of PKK) is said to have opened in Athens in 1994, together with two Kurdistan Committees, and a Kurdistan Cultural Centre. A second ERNK office opened in Thessaloniki in the same year, (Turkish Daily News, [TDN] 23/02/1999). According to interviews, the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party), the PUK (Patriotic Union Kurdistan) from Iraq and the KDP-Iran also maintain offices in Athens, and Rizgari Party of Kurdistan (RPK) in Athens and other cities.

The Kurdish parties' agenda in Greece has been homeland-oriented and confrontational, aiming to affect foreign relations for a political change in the homelands. The parties mobilized more as *political* than as migrant movements, because this is the context of 'political opportunity structures' they found - i.e. the way Kurds were accommodated in Greece up to the arrest of Ocalan in 1999 - as a *political* exile community within Greek-Turkish relations (Papadopoulou; 2002). They hardly mobilized for refugee issues, and as a result, became dissociated from the rest of the Kurdish migrants - contrary to the case of Kurds/ Turks in Germany, where, according to Ostergaard-Nielsen, homeland/Diaspora politics and migrant politics are inseparable categories.²⁴

Of course, not all Kurdish asylum seekers in Greece are fleeing persecution - many are fleeing economic deprivation. For them, migration means rebuilding their lives and not mobilizing for a political cause, even if they have been politicized in their homelands in the past. On the other hand, ex-party members (who had been active in Greece) stated that engagement in homeland politics made them feel insecure, dependent and excluded from the host society, because of the inter-party conflicts transferred over to the new environment. To sum up, the strength of political networks and the role of Diaspora politics for certain politicized Kurds have drawn lines of division with the others and weakened the potential of ethnic community formation to support integration.

4.3.Migrant networks linking countries

According to migration research, migrant networks are linking countries of origin and settlement. Kurds in Greece maintain links with their countries of origin, but these become gradually weaker after settling down. This is due to the precarious situation of migrants long after arrival - many of them remaining undocumented and in a state of temporary, but not decided residence in the country - and the equally precarious situation in the countries of origin, that hinder traveling. Most interviewees stated that they had not seen their family since they left, and they cannot and will not go back to visit them again. A mobile phone and a satellite dish, bringing Kurdistan TV and

²⁴ Ostergaard-Nielsen, (2001), p.6

Medya TV in the new settlement, are among the first investments in Greece, and the only means of maintaining contacts to their family, their town, their country. One would expect, that because links with home decline, migrant communities are now easier to form; here, however, pre-existing divisions are too strong to allow the formation of one ethnic community. This trend is also evident among Kurds in England, as Wahlbeck (1998) explains. Interpersonal relations are the continuation of the social relations the Kurds have had in their respective countries of origin.²⁵

4.4. Social relations with Greeks

Surprisingly enough, relations with Greeks sometimes become a promising source of social capital for Kurdish asylum seekers. Among the Kurds interviewed, it was those who had ties with Greeks who had more stable jobs and were feeling more integrated in Greece - even if migrant participation still fits in class boundaries between a Greek/dominant versus a migrant/marginal social stratum. Judging from three interviewees' cases, Kurds married to Greek women managed to overcome even ethnicity-based class boundaries. Almost all Kurds interviewed, who had spent more than a year in Greece, said that they feel a sense of cultural affinity with the culture, the mentality, the strength of family ties, etc. The affinity that Kurds, and Middle Eastern migrants in general, feel with the Greek society supports not only the socialization with Greeks, but also the access to the labour market and cultural adaptation. This factor was also mentioned as a motivation to stay, despite bureaucratic difficulties and welfare deficiencies. Needless to say, informality and familiarity may be a positive asset for integration programs, but cannot replace the need for institutional developments.

Another factor contributing to the good relations between Greeks and Kurds is the Greek experience of 'refugeeness' (Hirschon; 1998) in the 1930s, with the arrival of ca.1,5 million Greeks from Asia Minor, and their successful integration. Knowing how it is to be a refugee and to receive refugees in the same country has nurtured feelings of sympathy, understanding and solidarity towards other refugee peoples seeking shelter and work in Greece today. Even more, when these refugees are fleeing

²⁵ Wahlbeck (1998), p.140-141.

Turkey, a country-image loaded for Greeks with historical memories of conflict. It is remarkable, how the people of Nea Smyrni, now second and third generation of the 1930s' refugees, have been very welcoming and supporting towards the undocumented, homeless Kurds in the area (N.Smyrni Municipality; 2002).

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been twofold: to shed light on some misconceptions about the recent phenomenon of asylum migration in Greece, and at the same time, to display how the focus on social networks can help understand asylum migration and address policy-relevant questions. The focus on the social networks between Kurds, and between Kurds and Greeks has been used as a means to understand how structures and individuals negotiate.

In particular, the first issue discussed is the question of migrant smuggling; the description of the smuggling operation has shown that, in this case, using a smuggler is a very common migration practice and a short-term business relationship, not necessarily involved in organised crime. By no means does this explanation legitimise smuggling operations, or approve of those who make a fortune from people's desperation to leave their country and move in another. Instead, the explanation wants to suggest that the root of the problem of illegal crossing is not the illegal practice, but the absence of legal entry alternatives.

The second misconception addressed is that Greece is a 'transit' country and migrants aim to stay temporarily, before they leave for other European countries. This is true for some migrants; for others though, the plan is usually not clear. It is argued that the decision to settle down in Greece depends on the transitory period of arrival for each individual, the type of his/her migrant relations (between Kurds, local and transnational, or between Kurds-Greeks) and his/her negotiation with the political, social and economic structures of the reception country. A particular point made here is the positive contribution of informal, social relations with Greeks in the integration process – a case not very common in countries of Northern and Western Europe. In other words, migrants negotiate their decision to stay in a country on the basis of the policy framework as much as on their social relations.

Finally, the third issue raised in this paper is the question of migrant community. Apart from the obvious temporal factors (Kurdish migrants in Greece still are first generation), political divisions also discourage community formation. Between 'organized' and non-politicized Kurds there is a difference in migration patterns, in purpose, identity, way life in the host society. There is also a difference in reasons of flight, fleeing persecution, or poverty - but there are also cases where people are in between, and cases where they moved from the one situation to the other. For migrants, the consequence is that the existing communities cannot support migrant integration and participation in Greece at the moment. Another consequence is the problem that emerges, when this heterogeneous population is asked to fit in legal categories of 'labour migrants' or 'refugees', because every person has a different story of political, social and economic problems to tell.

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