The "Good Smuggler": The Ethics and Morals of Human Smuggling among Syrians
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Abstract
This article challenges the categorization of smugglers as wicked villains by exploring smuggling's moral economy. I present findings from two years of ethnographic field research on Syrian refugees and smugglers in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Italy, and along the so-called Balkan route (Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia). The relationship between the smugglers and the migrants appeared to be rich in solidarity and reciprocity and grounded in local notions of morality. Far from the dominant official narrative in the West of reckless criminals driven only by profit, smugglers sought and often found moral legitimation by using long-held notions of morality and religious duties when confronting the risky realities of their illicit enterprise.

Keywords: human smuggling; Syrian refugees; irregular migration; Eastern Mediterranean Sea; morality; ethics

Are human smugglers inspired by anything other than greed and disregard for human life? Contemporary mainstream narratives of migration tell us that smugglers are the most immoral people of our time, and that smuggling networks are mafia-like cartels of hardened and greedy criminals dedicated to the systematic deceiving and conning of migrants (see, among others, Ridgwell 2015; Sengupta 2015; *Guardian* 2015). These facilitators of irregular migration have earned notoriety especially in Western Europe and North America as orchestrators of human massacres, evil geniuses behind criminal trades, amassers of untold riches made at the expense of their victims (see, for example, Perry and Agius 2015), and human predators "waiting to exploit [migrants'] need for assistance and their dreams for a better life" (Europol-INTERPOL 2016, 3). The rhetoric that characterizes human smugglers as greedy and immoral depicts migrants as helpless victims, and calls for smashing smuggling rings and tightening borders, something advocates believe would ensure the very safety of migrants (see, for example, Andersson 2014; Van Liempt and Sersli 2013). A profusion of photos of migrants crammed into wretched boats circulates in the media; several accounts report the recklessness of smugglers who do not hesitate to toss human beings in the sea or sabotage their own vessels to force authorities to carry out rescues (e.g. Europol-INTERPOL 2016). On April 2015, for example, an overcrowded fishing boat capsized near the coast of Libya, causing the death of most of the 800-people stuck on board. Survivors claimed that smugglers locked most migrants in the hull and middle deck of the three-layered boat, trapping them when the boat sunk (Bonomolo and Kirchgaessner 2015).

Human smugglers certainly are responsible for many tragedies that we have witnessed in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. However, while effective in igniting a "moral panic" (Cohen 1980, 9) and demonizing irregular migration, the representations and stories above have consistently failed to account for the dynamics of human smuggling and explain the relationship between smugglers and migrants. Our knowledge of irregular migration facilitation is often plagued with fragmented perspectives on the sociocultural dynamics of the migratory journey and the facilitator-traveler relationship. This is hardly surprising. Scholarship on the facilitation of irregular migration often draws exclusively from the experiences of government or law enforcement entities, or of migrants

who were targets of threats, scams, or violence during their journeys (UNODC 2010). This research, while valuable in some respects, tends to obscure the perspectives of those playing a role in migrant transit. In this article, I address this lacuna by tracing human smuggling in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, which reveals patterns of cooperation and mutual support.[1] Challenging the notion that facilitators are merely ruthless profit-driven individuals, I argue that human smugglers feed into shared frameworks of morality with those whom they transport.

Literature Review

I began my field research for this article expecting that my investigation of human smuggling would reveal it to be a fundamentally abusive practice. Persuaded to document the abuses and deception perpetrated by criminals and endured by their victims, I was instead puzzled by what seemed to me an ostensible absence of exploitation. Between March 2015 and July 2016, I conducted field research in the Eastern Mediterranean corridor among Syrian refugees and smugglers. Contrary to my expectations, I learned how human smuggling carries a set of social and moral signifiers among both migrants and smugglers. Most smugglers operated by helping members of their immediate circles to reach the destination that would have been otherwise precluded to them through legal channels. They did it for money, of course; yet, deception and exploitation seemed to be less common than popular accounts suggest. As a matter of fact, human smuggling was rooted in patterns of cooperation and support. Where exploitation occurred among migrants and asylum seekers, this was more often the consequence of their protracted condition of deprivation and irregularity than the precise criminal intents of mafia-like organizations. This seems to confirm the situation of many refugees from Syria, whose need to support their families back in Syria has considerably increased their vulnerability and the likelihood of working in dangerous and exploitative conditions or getting involved in smuggling networks to enhance their own mobility.

In an effort to better understand one of the most discussed relationships in global migration, I draw on two bodies of literature on the moral scenario that defines the relationship between by smugglers and irregular migrants. This article benefits from the empirical value of a growing, yet still small, scholarship that has questioned over-simplistic depictions of the facilitator-traveller relationship and their communities. Doomernik and Kyle (2004) summarized the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants as a spectrum that ranges from the altruistic assistance provided by family members or friends to dynamics of exploitation based on the intent of hardened criminals. Since their work, empirical research has shown that trust and cooperation seem to be more the rule than the exception in the interaction between smugglers and migrants (e.g. Bilger, Hofmann, and Jandl 2006; Koser 1997, 2008; Spener 2004, 2009). Zhang, for example, points out how Chinese migrants coming to the United States often perceive smugglers as philanthropists (2007, 89); while Sanchez points out that the migrant-facilitator relationship in Mexico dwells "on deep, socially cemented ties spanning across countries" (2015, 17). A number of studies on Turkey have remarked the strong bond of trust that ties smugglers and migrants together (Baird 2016; FRA 2013; İçduygu and Akcapar 2016).

However, while these studies have begun to dismantle common stereotypes about the smuggler-migrant relationship, the assumption that smugglers are "service-providers" driven exclusively by profit remains evident in much of the relevant literature (e.g. Bilger, Hofmann, and Jandl 2006; Salt and Stein 1997; Staring 2003; Soudijn and Kleemans 2009). This approach represents a clear empirical and theoretical advancement in the field, but it may emphasize the commercial-based and business dimension of the relation between smugglers and migrants at the expense of other questions (Baird 2016). In particular, such an account tends to overlook the contexts in which motivations other than those involving economic utility drive and determine the relationship between migrants and smugglers.

Therefore, as a corrective to this, I turn to another body of literature, one that focuses on moral economy, understood here as "the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space" (Fassin 2009, 49).[2] This conceptual approach has the advantage of shifting the focus away from a business paradigm toward an analysis of moral landscapes and the sociopolitical context in which smuggling occurs. Such a move may seem counterintuitive at first: extracting money in exchange for help and preying on the misfortune of others could hardly be an instance of moral dispositions. However, for my informants—

both smugglers and migrants—the request for money in exchange for services did not necessarily point to any form of immoral behavior.[3] The complex relationship between human smugglers and migrants invites a rejection of abstract models of solidarity and liberal ideals of morality (Meagher 2005, 226; Osella 2015), and it calls for an inquiry into how the moral economies of human smuggling come to be.[4] Such an analysis would be more suitable than a "business approach" to unveil the nuances and complexities that characterize the relationship between facilitators and migrants. It also avoids the pitfall of relegating them into essentialist and culturally deterministic readings while we seek to restore the coherence and meaning of their actions.

Field Methods

This article builds on empirical research largely based on interviews with and participant observations of Syrian refugees and smugglers held in Southern Italy (March–April 2015), Albania (July 2015), Lebanon and Jordan (September–October 2015), Turkey and Greece (April, October, and December 2015, May–July 2016), and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)and Serbia (November 2015).

The study involved interviews with forty-five men and women formerly smuggled across the Eastern Mediterranean route, and conversations with around fifty migrants—mostly Syrian asylum seekers in Jordan and Lebanon [5]—who were either in the process of being smuggled or considered the possibility to migrate irregularly to Europe. I traveled with some of them during legs of their journey to Europe and sought to shadow their experience. I also conducted 23 interviews with border and immigration authorities as well as humanitarians. Perhaps most importantly, I carried out around thirty interviews with smugglers who worked, often interchangeably, as organizers, *passeurs*, looks-out, and intermediaries in Lebanon, Greece, and Turkey. In Italy and Albania, I met and spoke with a number of "retired smugglers" who were active during the so-called Albanian Crisis, between 1991 and 2001. I also had several informal conversations with hotel operators, taxi drivers, shop-keepers, and other smuggling market actors along the route who provided their services to both smugglers and migrants. While open and semi-structured interviews remained the main and most important mode of my data collection, I also devoted time to participant observation. Since I argue that human smuggling cannot be understood without attending to the interactions between migrants and facilitators, I spent almost three weeks with a smuggling group based in Elgar,[6] a coastal town in western Turkey. The intensive, albeit limited, exposure to the community of smugglers and migrants allowed me to identify their organization and the processes that they rely upon in the facilitation of smuggling, as well as the day-to-day interactions that emerge among the market's participants.

To recruit participants in the Eastern Mediterranean area, I relied on my social contacts in the field and my friendship with Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan, obtained through long-term fieldwork in the Palestinian refugee camps of Jordan (Achilli 2015) and through my involvement in an Italian NGO that worked with migrants and refugees in several countries along the Eastern Mediterranean route and the Balkan corridor. I thus began to meet Syrians and other communities of migrants who had migrated irregularly to Europe, people who claimed to know facilitators. I was able to extend my network of participants to these people's acquaintances, contacts, and relatives across borders.

Because smuggling is not a frowned-upon practice among migrant and refugee communities, I was able to contact more people who migrated irregularly but also some of their facilitators willing to share their experiences. No part of my field data collection involved concealment or deception. I adopted a series of precautions such as disclosing immediately to my informants the exact nature of my research, emphasizing my disinterests in the minute details of their business, and in general limiting my concern to how smuggling was perceived and discussed by those who were involved and their customers. I did not get involved in any smuggling activities. Much of my time in Elgar and my fieldwork across the route was spent figuring out how human smuggling acquires social and moral significance among my informants.

Getting Smuggled: Syrian Refugees' Flight to Europe

At the time of my fieldwork, Syrian refugees had two options to reach Europe: one was legal, through venues such as resettlement programs, family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programs, and private sponsorships. The other option was—for the majority of them—the

Balkan route: an exhausting and perilous journey that took them across two continents and several countries (i.e. Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia).[7] The former was by far the safest and quickest route. Yet the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to EU member states remained for the majority of Syrians a chimera (Achilli 2016).

Turkey soon became a gathering point for Syrian refugees traveling from Syria and its neighboring countries to Europe. However, while Turkey was and still is a necessary step for most Syrian refugees, how a person got to Turkey largely depended on whether he or she possessed valid travel documents. Syrians with a valid passport traveled regularly to Turkey either by plane from Amman, Beirut, or Erbil, or by boat from Tripoli in Lebanon. Flying to Istanbul, Izmir, or other urban centers in Turkey, was by far the fastest and safest solution. The flight was relatively cheap, approximately 250 euros. In addition, most Syrian refugees did not need a visa to fly to Turkey. My informants pointed out how even those among them who had lost or never had the passport could easily obtain one from the Syrian embassies in Amman and Beirut. "A year ago, this was almost impossible," a young man from Damascus, whom I met in a coastal city in Western Turkey in November 2015, pointed out: "Now, however, things have become much easier. It is only 200JOD (Jordanian Dinars – roughly 280 USD) if you want to renew the passport; and 400JOD (560 USD) to have a new one issued. … As soon as you get the passport, you can take a direct flight from the Queen Alia Airport [in Amman] to Istanbul. It's straightforward, you don't need any *muharrib* [smuggler]!"[8]

On the other hand, most Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs), Palestinian refugees from Syria, and those without a valid passport embarked on a longer and more dangerous journey that exposed them to greater risks of exploitation. These people had no other option than to cross the border into Turkey illegally. Many of them took the inland route, via the Syrian-Turkish border near the village of Khirbat al-Joz in the northern Syrian governorate of Idleb. Others were smuggled by boat from the Syrian coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus. Both routes were extremely dangerous and expensive as asylum seekers had to travel across areas controlled by armed groups. To do so, they often required the services of drivers and the guides (*dallala*), whose knowledge of the area was pivotal for avoiding checkpoints and smuggling them out of Syria. Stories of exploitation and bribery were not uncommon. Several refugees claimed that they had to pay prices higher than what was agreed upon. Reports also suggested the possibility that armed groups such as Da'ish and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) facilitated internal movement to the Turkish border in the areas under their control in exchange for money (ICMPD 2015).[9] In the last stages of the conflict, the journey seems to be made either independently or with the help of fellow travelers with cars who reportedly charge each passenger up to SYP 150,000-200,000 (around US$ 800-1,060) for the trip (ICMPD 2015).

Smugglers operated almost exclusively in Turkey.[10] When Noor and her husband left Lebanon for Turkey, they did not know what they would find, who they would speak to, and what the exact route was. "It was very easy," Noor told me when I met her in Srebrenica, near the Serbia-Croatia border: "You just fly to Istanbul or any other Turkish city and then you go in certain neighborhoods, everybody knows where. As soon as you step in the place, you will be approached by someone who knows that you are Syrian and what you are looking for. And you will find your smuggler or, in the worst-case scenario, someone who knows a smuggler."[11] After having found the smuggler, refugees departed onboard wooden and fiberglass boats, rubber dinghies, fishing boats, or big cargo ships. At the time of my field work, the majority of those interviewed indicated that they had reached Greece from the isolated areas near the Turkish port of Izmir and Bodrum. Here, smugglers arranged transportation, for around 1,200 USD per person to Lesbos or the numerous Greek islands near the border with Turkey. The proximity of the departure point with the Greek islands often meant a one-hour journey in a ten-meter rubber dinghy. Time and price varied based on the type of boat and number of people aboard, the weather conditions, and the relationship with the smugglers.

The rationale behind these connections reveals how unhelpful the description is of smugglers as cruel and reckless criminals driven exclusively by profits can be. Remarkably, accounts about the callousness of smugglers were often dismissed by those very people who risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean. The majority of migrants with whom I spoke did not perceive their smugglers as exploitative. On the other hand, they were vocal in their criticism of the EU failure to live up to the moral and humanitarian ideals it claims to champion. Smugglers offered a way to bypass the inherent shortcomings of a blocked system. The words of Mohammed—a man in his mid-twenties from Syria,

now an interpreter and social worker in Italy—are indicative of this awareness: "Smugglers are neither good nor evil. You pay for a service and you get what you pay for." Mohammed turned to smugglers when his family was refused a family reunification visa. He paid around 8,000 euros to have his brother smuggled from Syria to Germany. It was a long and tiring journey and Mohammed's brother crossed several states, via land and sea. This was the only available way to Europe, the only bridge to overcome the gap between the EU rhetoric of human rights and free mobility and its restrictive border policies. From his and many others' stories, human smuggling was perceived as part of a system of protection within the context of asymmetric distributions of power where people in certain countries have overarching incentives to move but few legal avenues to do so.

This smuggling process conjures up the "ethical scene" (Cohen 2011), through which migrants and smugglers constitute themselves as a moral community against an immoral "Europe." With few notable exceptions, all interviewed refugees who applied for resettlement had their application either rejected or left pending for an indefinite time. Mohammed's story echoes those of Sharif who concurred that European countries did not leave refugees with any other option than to take the illegal route to Europe. The father of two lived in a popular quarter in Amman. As Sharif's stay in the Kingdom was no longer sustainable, he applied for asylum in Sweden. His application was rejected. He then reapplied. He did it three times. All were rejected. When I met him in Amman, he was still determined to leave for Europe. Venting his bitterness against EU embassies, he burst out: "I spent three years waiting for an answer. Nothing happened. I lost money and wasted precious time filing resettlement application forms for European embassies. … Time that I could have used better if I made up my mind earlier." Shrugging his shoulders, he then added: "I will be flying to Turkey next week. From there, I will go to Greece [through illegal channels]. They [European embassies] are encouraging us to go; they need the smugglers to do their job."[12]

Tight Bonds in Flexible and Heterogeneous Networks

A small town on the Aegean coast of Turkey, Elgar is a seaside vacation resort in summer, quite popular among locals and foreigner tourists. Around 50.000 people live in this popular summer resort – mostly Turkish, even though British people have begun to buy summer homes in the town, establishing themselves as a sizeable community of many thousands. However, the number raises in summer time when people all over Turkey and Western Europe come to the city for its sandy shores, ancient ruins, and nice weather. Tourism and agriculture are traditionally the main source of income in this area. However, a new business boomed in recent time. When I first visited it, in fall 2015, the city was one of the many centers of human smuggling on the Western shores of Turkey. I went to Elgar because "a friend of a friend" vouched for me with a group of smugglers from Syria. I began my fieldwork with a vivid image in my mind of stepping into a field where secrecy and caution were of the utmost importance. I was taken aback when Abu Hamza—a man in his early fifties who managed one of the smuggling groups that I came to know in Turkey—insisted that he use his real name with me and that I take accurate notes about his job, in part, because authorities were already well informed of "what was going on and who was who."[13]

In Elgar, about half a dozen rubber dinghies departed at night when the sea was calm, carrying thirty to fifty people each (a total of 300 people) to the Greek islands of Agathonisi and Farmakonisi. There were Syrian, Kurdish, Afghan, Iraqi, and Pakistani migrants. The largest client groups were Syrian and Afghan asylum seekers. The majority paid around 1,000–1,300 USD per person. Crossing the stretch that separates Turkey from the closest Greek island takes around 50 minutes. Faster boats took only 15 minutes; for people who could afford, it cost around 2,000–3,000 USD per person.

Working in a market characterized by supposedly high competition did not seem to bother the smugglers who I encountered in Elgar. One of them—Rahell, a man in his mid-twenties, from Iraqi Kurdistan—explained how the high demand for his services gave little room for competition or violence among smugglers: "There are many smuggling organizations operating only in Elgar and the areas surrounding. … This does not usually create any problem among us; we actually prefer cooperation over fight. … If I don't have space on my boats, I send people to the other groups to help me to make them reach their destination".

Many benefitted from the revenues generated by this business.[14] The so-called refugee crisis also spawned a black market in fake documents: forged passports, ID cards, work permits, and any

other paper for the right price.[15] However, the flow of money did not only stream into the pockets of the "criminals": along with an illicit economy, a licit one flourished. When I visited the city in late fall 2015, Elgar seemed to thrive thanks to the human smuggling industry. Shops, boutiques, restaurants, grocery stores, bus and taxi companies, nightclubs, and pubs were crowded with migrants and smugglers. This coastal town that would have normally sunk into an economic lethargy during the low season found a new impetus in fulfilling the desires and needs of these so-called criminal entrepreneurs and their customers. Hotels offered half or full board accommodations at special rates for families of refugees; bus companies posted special offers and group packages for Syrians and other migrants on the windows of their shops. In the upmarket bazaar, boutique owners participated in the smuggling enterprise, for example, by selling life jackets showcased on mannequins and helmets with night lights. Grocery stores sold various types of merchandise to migrants and refugees, while restaurants stayed open late to feed the masses awaiting the right moment to depart.

My fieldwork in the Eastern Mediterranean corridor confirms the findings of studies that have shown that smuggling networks active in the area mostly consist of a system of flexible and independent organizations that enter into partnerships with one another for short periods (see Baird 2016; İçduygu and Akcapar 2016; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012). Even though these groups generally lacked centralized and hierarchical structures, a number of roles could be identified within the organizations. Along with the coordinators, who acted as veritable managers by taking the overall responsibility for the operations, there were the boat owners, either an individual or a group, depending on the size of the boat. There were the cashiers, who collected the money. Intermediaries who worked as veritable cultural mediators, serving the organization in a variety of manners from facilitating communication between smugglers and their local associates to taking care of refugees' needs, such as food and accommodation. Drivers took refugees from the hotels where they lodged until embarkation (in Arabic al-nuqta, "the spot"). Lookouts would signal the presence of police forces; while bodyguards or "hired muscles" would dissuade potential competitors from taking over the nuqta or other bits of the business. Migrants were also involved in smuggling activities.[16] Various shades of involvement—from tacit approval to overt collaboration—defined the collusion of local authorities with the smuggling enterprise.

The groups that I encountered in Turkey and Greece were often based on pre-existing kinship and friendship connections, and on the idea that helping people reach their destination was not only a legitimate form of labor, albeit criminalized, but a moral duty. This sociomoral proximity and the protracted condition of illegality facilitated a blurring of roles. Asylum seekers and labor migrants might work as recruiters, guides, or intermediaries—positions that were often covered by the same person. They might escort immigrants across the border because of their own first-hand knowledge of the route. They might recruit clients because they share the same ethnic networks. They would provide the various services needed to the migrants (food, accommodation, and so on) because of their long-term relationship with local communities in the transit countries. They would do all this to pay the required fees or have a decent livelihood.[17] This was the story of many people who I met, like Firat, who entered the UK illegally via Greece, Italy, and France. Years after his arrival, British authorities deported Firat back to Greece for residing illegally in the UK. Stranded in Athens with no money, he worked as a passeur for the same smugglers—people with whom he shared the same ethnic background—who had helped him to cross the Mediterranean.

Unsurprisingly, many depicted their involvement in a smuggling network as belonging to a family. This family-based understanding of the smuggling network is something that was common among smuggling groups of different origins. The concept of "family" (‘aa'ila), of course, brings to mind membership in mafia groups.[18] My informants, however, used the word to indicate more the relationship of equality and trust that ties members of a family together than the sturdy hierarchical bond that researchers have observed within mafia-like criminal organizations. Indeed, a high degree of flexibility seems to characterize these groups. For example, a person whose main role in the organization is to recruit prospective clients might also work as a cashier by collecting money if needed. Likewise, people are not bound to the organizations by long-term agreements. The captain of a group operating in the area quit overnight after a two-year involvement in the business. Although the pay was good and his companions were like brothers to him, the risk proved too much for him. Just a week prior to our meeting, Turkish coastguards nearly intercepted him upon his return from Greece. He managed to escape detection but not without harm. When I first met him in Elgar, he still

had deep scares across his arms and chest from hitting a rock after he jumped into the water from the moving boat. He later became a migrant/refugee himself, and embarked on the journey that eventually took him and his brother to Germany.

The smuggling groups that I met were also made up of "freelancers"—individuals who participated occasionally. My informants maintained that these were often locals who provided peripheral services to ensure that the smugglers could operate undisturbed. This was evident with Abu Hamza and his group. While his closest collaborators were mostly Syrian refugees who explained their involvement in the group as a consequence of their ethical commitment to helping their fellow Syrians, a broader nebulous of people—mainly locals—flowed around this inner circle. These people played a number of roles—spotters who would provide specific information about the presence of the authorities, drivers who would take the customers to the *nuqta*, or landowners who would rent a piece of land near the shore to be used as a departure point. Abu Hamza did not consider these people part of his "family," but freelancers who were paid for each service delivered. Abu Hamza compensated his closest collaborators differently: "I give them around 1500 euro each month, but this is an average. … If they need more money to send to their families back home, I give them more. I am like a father to them."[19]

The Call: Becoming a Smuggler

A plethora of studies and articles have shown how violence and abuse are recurring features of the migrant-smuggler relationship, especially when it comes to collecting money and enforcing contracts (e.g. İçli, Sever, and Sever 2015; UNODC 2010). Even some of the smugglers who I interviewed conceded as much: "Smugglers are not all good," I was told by a few of them. Nonetheless, the majority of smuggling facilitators who I met described themselves as service-providers who provided something that people could not get through legal channels. They were aware that they were part of a highly unstable and dangerous market and said that was the reason they asked such high fees from their clients. They claimed to operate a moral economy by helping people to escape misery and danger (cf. with Webb and Burrows 2009). This perception was largely shared by those migrants who had requested their services (see also Van Liempt and Doomernik 2006; Soudijn and Kleemans 2009; Sanchez 2015; Staring 2003; Zhang 2007).

It is obviously impossible to draw a homogenous profile of "the smuggler." Still, a closer look at the inner dynamics of human smuggling draws a complex picture. Violence and solidarity, deception and trust, they all can occur simultaneously in the smuggling business. Studies show, for example, how Chinese migrants smuggled to the United States willingly decided to become smugglers themselves to protect their fellow migrants from the same abuses that they had to endure during their irregular journey (Zhang 2007). Against this backdrop, one may ask: What does honest and ethical smuggling entail? Answers to this question should take into account local notions of morality and the broader sociopolitical context in which the act of smuggling takes place.

Syrians use the Arabic term *muharrib* to indicate the "smuggler." The word does not necessarily have a negative connotation – although it often does. The term can simply refer to someone who sneaks something or someone for either positive or negative intents. Among my informants, for example, smuggling was not just about profiting because the *muharrib* was not necessarily driven only by material gain. It entailed a range of practices encompassing honesty and moral conduct. It involved the smugglers restricting their margin of profit, using good-quality boats, and displaying civilized and refined manners with their customers. They regarded as immoral any misconduct relating to the smugglers' quality of services or treatment of customers and, in general, the intention to profit off migrants. This was the story of Abu Hamza.

Abu Hamza was well known among Syrian refugees for being a *muhtaram* (respectable person). The first time I met him was in Elgar, in the courtyard of a four-star hotel near the city center. He was sitting at a table sipping a cup of tea while juggling three mobile phones. He was arranging the arrival to the city of a new batch of people wishing to cross the narrow stretch of water that separates Elgar from the Greek shores. With him were several boys and young men whom Abu Hamza introduced to me as his crew. As I came to discover soon after, it was a mixed group that comprised both migrants and smugglers. It was difficult to tell them apart. Nothing distinguished "smugglers" or "their clients" as belonging to two distinct social types. They were all Syrians; all stuck along the route to Europe. Even Abu Hamza was seeking asylum to Europe. As many others

like him, he left Syria in 2012, taking the route to Italy, via Libya. However, his journey abruptly ended in Egypt, where local authorities detained him for a few months before sending him back to Lebanon. He tried again. The second time he took the Balkan route: Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. Again, he did not make it. While waiting on the western shores of Turkey to be smuggled into Europe, Abu Hamza changed his mind: "I could not any longer watch my fellow country mates suffering in Syria or being exploited by smugglers and locals in Turkey. I decided to do something for them."[20]

A smuggled migrant himself, Abu Hamza knew the basics of the job. Hamza owned a jewelry shop back in his village in Syria, so he had some financial liquidity to help set up his business. He found a Turkish associate to help minimize risks—the man's personal contacts and knowledge of the country were crucial to set up the business. This was how Abu Hamza became a smuggler, a good one, as he put it. At the time of my research, around thirty people worked for the organization, helping fellow country-mates to reach their destination in Europe.

Abu Hamza and his group worked for money, of course; yet financial gain did not seem to disqualify the morality of their actions in their own eyes and those of the migrants who required their services. In a recent article, Filippo Osella shows how brokers and middle-men in Kerala are "judged to be immoral when they cheat would-be-migrants by taking money for non-existent visas or jobs, not because they put a price to connections that normally should be provided as part of wider obligations between kin and friends" (2015, 370). Likewise, in Elgar, moral assertions about human smuggling were made on the basis of the quality of the services provided than on the economic dimension of the contracts. As Abu Hamza put it, "I help my fellows [Syrian refugees] cross the sea. They call me *muhtaram* because I charge them much less than any other smuggling group and I give them a far better service: safer boats and better treatment!"[21]

It was not enough to be fair and reasonable in business transactions to be considered trustworthy and respectable. The migrants and smugglers who I encountered in Elgar assessed the moral standards of other smuggling groups by the presence or absence of decency and humanity. The importance of being morally respectable (*muhtaram*) and kind (*tayyib*) was, interestingly, often stressed by smugglers themselves. As Nader, one of Abu Hamza's associates put it:

> There are lot of smugglers in Turkey. Already in Elgar there are six, seven groups. Not all are good. Some of them have no good manners with people [the customers]. They forg[e]t that these people are human beings like them. When you do this job, you should remember that you are dealing with human beings ('*insan*). If you profit off them [it] is no good. If you scare them [it] is no good. Kindness is very important. Sometimes I meet elderly people that when I shake their hands I can feel the[m] tremble [with] fear. I reassure them. I call them "*hajj*."[22] After a while, their mood changes completely; they feel at ease, they are not afraid anymore. … Each of my new *shabab* [boys] take[s] a course [on] good manners before starting to work with people.[23]

Among my informants, *muhtaram* and *tayyib* were not abstract virtues. However, being a good smuggler implied more than behaving properly and being well mannered. Human smuggling drew social and moral significance from the broader moral and political universe that smugglers and migrants shared. Not only did the majority find no contradiction between smuggling and being pious, they were convinced that facilitating irregular migration was a political and religious duty. Abu Hamza's story is a case in point.

Most of Abu Hamza's customers came from his same village of origin in Syria. His associates—the *shabab*—came from the same place. In the first two years following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Hamza's village saw fierce armed clashes between the government forces and the Free Syrian Army. It was subsequently occupied by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2013, which still controls a large part of the area. The intense fighting between the various factions over the years deprived the village of basic commodities. The resulting hunger, disease, and high death rate forced many to leave. For Abu Hamza, helping his fellow villagers to escape the extreme misery in which they live was a duty. He felt that his piety influenced his decision to smuggle people:

> We are different from many other smuggling groups. There are smugglers who don't care about their customers. For us it is our duty to help them. These people are not only my customers: they are my *ikhwan* [brothers]. I help the[m] because they are on the wrong side of

the world… we all come from the same place. I help them escap[e] the madness of Daesh [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant]. … This is *jihad*. Do you know the difference between mine and Daesh's jihad? Daesh is only a bunch of *muta'assibin* [narrow-minded people] who don't understand that *jihad* has little to do with killing people. The real *jihad* is different, it means to strive to become a better person. This is what I do when I help my people, this is the real *jihad*.[24]

Abu Hamza's comment is important in many ways. On one level, is his use of *jihad*."[25] Of particular importance, however, is that Abu Hamza wanted to point out a connection among politics, Islam, and smuggling human beings to make a distinction between different forms of smuggling along a scale of morality. His grievances unveil the deceptive and exploitative nature of some network connections. In what follows I give some ethnographic texture to this ambivalence as I witnessed it during my fieldwork in Turkey and Greece.

Smugglers and Refugees

The human smuggling that I encountered in Elgar revealed itself to be a business that requires trust. For migrants, smugglers constitute a valuable resource, one that allows them to escape misery and extreme danger. At the same time, smugglers also depend in part on the migrants to refer other prospective "clients" (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012) because their services are tied to specific locations. Those migrants who survive a journey can operate as a pull factor by tempting kin and friends to embark on a similar journey. Some of the successfully smuggled migrants who I interviewed relied on smugglers to reunite their families left behind in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, or Iraq.

Ahmad was one such person. In his late teens when he left Syria for Sweden in 2012, it took Ahmad and his 16-year-old brother around four months to reach their destination. I met Ahmad in Turkey. He flew from Sweden to meet his mother, sisters, and bride whom he entrusted to the same smugglers who helped him and his little brother to reach Europe years earlier. He spent the few days prior to their departure with them, instructing his family on the different legs of the journey. When his family finally departed, Ahmad was able to track his family's journey to Greece using GPS. He left Turkey only when he received confirmation from his bride that they had reached the Greek shores.

Ahmad's decision to entrust his family members to the same smugglers was based not only on cost-benefit calculations but also the idea of relying on the same ethnic and moral community in exile. The time migrants spend with smugglers was functional for strengthening this social bond.[26] For smugglers, many of the migrants are not only customers but friends, fellow nationals, or simply individuals who carry a personal story. The time prior to departure provides migrants and smugglers opportunities to engage that go beyond simple working relationships. Kurdish smugglers operating in Greece, for example, are known to spend a large part of their time with their clients on the mountains of Igoumenitsa, sleeping with them, sharing the same food. I found similar practices among other smuggling groups elsewhere. In Elgar, for instance, smugglers and migrants slept in the same hotels, ate at the same restaurants, and hung around in the same bars. This everyday practice of coexistence among smugglers and migrants formed a bond between both parties. Mahmud, a Syrian man in his early 20s, was an example. The young man spent over a month in Elgar with Abu Hamza and his *shabab*. He first waited for his brother to send him the money to pay for his journey to Greece. He then waited for the sea to be calm enough to allow his departure. When the time finally came, Mahmud no longer wanted to leave: after a month spent living together with the same people who were supposed to smuggle him to Greece, he established a solid friendship with many of them. When I asked him the reason for his reticence to leave, Mahmud replied: "I left my family in Syria; I found a new one here. Now, I don't want to lose again my family." Mahmud eventually left, with a promise to his new friends that he would come back as soon as he obtained refugee status in Germany.[27]

That smuggling may at times be cemented within social ties between smugglers and their customers does not necessarily protect the latter against exploitation and violence. The strong social bonds that researchers have witnessed may be facilitated by the fact that smugglers and migrants share the same ethnic backgrounds or other social ties. In this sense, the establishment of smuggling networks on an ethnic basis serves to reinforce what Ilse Van Liempt aptly calls "chain of trust"— ethnic solidarities between smugglers and migrants that tend to fade the further migrants are from their country of origin (2007, 171). The establishment of a smuggling network would work to protect

fellow nationals from the systematic exploitation of smugglers of different ethnic background. However, when border controls intensify and channels of legal entry diminish, migrants' likelihood of being abused and exploited increase precisely within these ties of kinship and ethnicity. One of the main conclusions of a recent study on the effects of the Syrian war and refugee crisis on human trafficking in Syria and the surrounding region indicates "that much of the exploitation taking place is not carried out by organised transnational crime groups, but rather involves family members, acquaintances and neighbours [who] are often left with no viable alternatives for survival other than situations that can be characterised as exploitation." (ICMPD 2015, 6).

A striking example of this comes from Mahdi. When I first met him in Elgar, Mahdi was in his early twenties and had left Syria a year earlier during a period of full-scale conflict. Mahdi came from the same village as Abu Hamza, so he contacted Abu Hamza, who agreed to bring Mahdi's family to Europe if Mahdi would work for him to pay the smuggling fee. When I asked Mahdi whether he was forced into smuggling human beings or got involved in the business voluntarily, he replied: "Look, it's a dangerous job, if the Turkish or Greek police catch you, you can spend up to 10–15 years in prison. So, if I could have chosen, I would have never done that. But—*hamdulillah'* [praise to Allah]—Abu Hamza was there when I needed him. Had it not been for him, my family and I would have died in Syria."[28] While working in Elgar, Mahdi was waiting to have the last member of his family in Syria smuggled to Greece before quitting smuggling and leaving for Europe.

Things, however, did not go as Mahdi had planned. Upon my departure from Elgar, he had agreed to do a last job for Abu Hamza. He had to escort a dozen well-off clients, who could afford a journey onboard a fast boat, to the closest Greek island. In theory, this last job should have earned him a few thousands euros and he could then rejoin his brothers who were waiting for him in Greece to continue their journey to Europe, following the Western Balkan route. On his way to Greece—a few hundred meters from the Greek shores—the boat was intercepted by Greek coastguards. Mahdi, identified as one of the potential smugglers onboard, was arrested.

I saw Mahdi again in Athens on a sunny day in spring 2016. We arranged to meet at a coffee shop in Omonia Square—the once commercial center of Athens that at the time of my research was serving as a meeting point and a makeshift detention camp for thousands of irregular migrants stranded in the capital of Greece. Here Mahdi told me how after being detained in a Greek prison, he was temporarily released to wait for trial. At this meeting, a different picture emerged of Abu Hamza, one that clashed with Mahdi's earlier depiction of his benefactor. "He was good with me when I was in Elgar," Mahdi conceded. Yet, he argued, "Abu Hamza forgets about his associates and friends in the moment of need. I tried to reach him several times, but I never got a hold of him. The only thing that he did was to send my cousin 1,000 euros that served to pay part of the lawyer's fee. Now the lawyer wants more money and I don't have any left."[29] Mahdi felt that he was already a prisoner: if he returned to Syria, he would almost certainly be forcibly conscripted by Assad's security forces. Unable to afford a private lawyer, he was fully aware of the bleak prospect of a court-appointed attorney. Most likely he would serve several years in prison. He could have continued his journey to Europe, but the EU-Turkey agreement went into effect on March 20 of that year, and the decision of Macedonia (FYROM) to seal its border with Greece in February 2016 considerably stemmed the flow of people through the Balkan route. Before bidding farewell, Mahdi asked me to lend him a hundred euros: the money should have allowed him to purchase a bus ticket to Salonica, and then to the border with Turkey, near Edirne. Last I heard from Mahdi, he was in Istanbul looking for a job as a mechanic.

Mahdi's story problematizes simplistic categorizations of smugglers and migrants. Not only does his journey illustrate the limited capacity of refugees to navigate rapidly changing geopolitical scenarios, but, more importantly, Mahdi's ambivalent relationship with Abu Hamza is a potent reminder of the complex ethical and moral dimensions in this illicit enterprise. On one hand, the "morality of smugglers" operates as a sort of counter morality to a discourse that in the name of rescuing poor refugees justifies the criminalization of both migrants and those who facilitate their journeys. On the other hand, the existence of a moral universe equally inhabited by both smugglers and migrants does not prevent ties of reciprocity and mutuality from quickly turning into deception or even exploitation. The fragile status of migrants on the move reveals the ways in which border controls shape transnational mobility. It also recognizes the role of policing and surveillance apparatuses *in generating the conditions for the exploitation of people*. It is hard to say whether Mahdi

and many others like him were the exploited, the exploiters, both, or neither.[30] What these stories ultimately tell us is that a protracted condition of illegality exacerbates the vulnerability of Syrians desperate to leave their war-torn country. In this context, more stringent border policies and practices are doomed to fail because they bolster the very phenomenon that they intend to fight.[31]

Conclusion

The discourse and practice of human smuggling among my informants reveals a deeper understanding of how migrants and smugglers perceive, talk about, and take part in human smuggling. Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to recognize the complex system of moral values surrounding smuggling and the strong bonds between the smugglers and migrants.

Media reports constantly point to the brutality of smugglers and the plight of migrants, but they fail to account for the brutality caused by states' efforts to enforce a border controls, and neglect to acknowledge the ability of smugglers to help people navigate the unequal geographies of mobility. The resilience of smuggling networks amid hostile attempts by nation states to dismantle smuggling organizations is a reminder not only of migrants' determination to flee their countries but also of the strong bond that form among smugglers and their customers. This bond, I argued, feeds into a shared framework of morality and piety built and maintained by both parties.

Of course, Abu Hamza and other like him may have used moral tones to appear righteous in their otherwise illicit activities. It can be argued, indeed, that they spoke in these terms to mitigate their involvement in a difficult and unsavory business. This could certainly be true, but it would not be sufficient to explain the social bonds between smugglers and their clients that I witnessed in Turkey and Greece. My fieldwork in Turkey attests to the centrality of ethics in the lives of both migrants and smugglers as they separate from home and prepare for the journey to Europe. Their moral values are intertwined with ideological and political affiliations and come to define the experience of smuggling and being smuggled. While social networks can be supportive, kin and social networks can be deceiving and envious; religion and ethnicity might be used to justify deception and exploitation.

By highlighting the moral economy of human smuggling, I want to draw attention to the relationship between smugglers and their customers. Eradicating these organizations without addressing the causes of clandestine migration may prove difficult because smuggling networks are deeply enmeshed within migratory processes. Most importantly, the militarization of border control may not only be ineffective in stemming migration and smuggling but may ultimately trigger a vicious dynamic. Researchers have demonstrated that the increase in the effectiveness of control policies has accompanied an increase in smugglers' capacity to deliver specialized services to would-be migrants in a systematic and standardized way. In this context, the intensification of border control may lead to the disappearance of "chains of trust" (Van Liempt 2007) and pave the way for a more depersonalized way of conducting smuggling where profits and the commodification of the migrants would entirely replace any other ethical consideration.

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Notes

[1] In so doing, this article seeks to make a contribution to the small, yet growing, literature on human smuggling in the Eastern Mediterranean. See, among others, Achilli (2017); Antonopoulos and Winterdyk (2006); Baird (2016); İçduygu (2007); İçduygu and Toktas (2002); İçduygu and Yukseker (2012); İçli, Sever, and Sever (2015); Mandić (2017); Papadopoulou (2004); Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012).

[2] As of this writing, no studies have systematically examined how ethics and moral values interact with the choice of smuggling human beings. Very few have investigated these dimensions in relation to the migrant experience and decision to leave. For a notable exception, see Julie Chu's (2006) analysis of Fuzhounese migration through human smuggling networks as tied to moral aspirations (see also Ahmad 2011; Hagan 2008; Sarat 2013).

[3] For a similar argument, see Osella and Osella (2000).

[4] To understand the bond of trust and forms of cooperation that define the interaction between facilitators and migrants, I instead build on Michael Jackson's call to conceive morality and ethics as a field of indeterminacy and struggles, where good and evil are the temporary outcome of mediation processes (2011, 70).

[5] In this article, Syrians traveling to the European Union are often referred to as both "refugees" and "asylum seekers." Each term has a distinct meaning that carries different international obligations and consequences. The use of the two terms can be explained by the ambiguous situation of Syrians. Most Syrians who left Syria after the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 and who entered a country of first asylum were registered with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees in the respective countries. However, since their status has not yet been definitively determined in Europe, these people are still asylum seekers while finding a way to Europe.

[6] To protect the anonymity of my informant, the name of the city is fictitious.

[7] The situation has changed since early 2016. The EU-Turkey agreement on March 20 and the decision of Macedonia (FYROM) to seal its border with Greece in February seem to have considerably stemmed the flow of people along the Balkan route but increased the dangers faced by Syrians on the move (Achilli 2017; Mandić 2017).

[8] Interview, Beirut, 9/10/2015.

[9] Also referred to as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State (IS), "Da'ish" is the acronym of "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham" (literally "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant"). The Free Syrian Army is one of the main armed opposition groups in Syria, founded in July 2011 by officers who defected from the Syrian Armed Forces.

[10] For an overview of migrant smuggling flows and trends in Turkey, see İçduygu and Akcapar (2016).

[11] Interview with Noor, Srebernica, 22/10/2015.

[12] Interview with Sharif, Amman, 25/9/2015.

[13] Interview with Abu Hamza, Western Turkey, 28/10/2015. Note that other smugglers who I encountered during my fieldwork were more cautious and less inclined to divulge the minute details of their business. For obvious ethical reasons, the names of places and people in this article are all fictitious.

[14] According to a report published by UNODC (2010), human smuggling along two of the main routes—from Africa to Europe and from South America to North America—generates about $6.75 billion a year.

[15] I agree here with those who have argued how the "crisis" narrative is part and parcel of a European discourse on "migration" or "refugees" that fails to reflect the empirics and ultimately depoliticize the context in which migration occurs (see, among others, De Genova and Tazzioli 2016).

[16] Such was the case of a chauffeur, a migrant who would drive the boat for a free ride. These people – often without any basic nautical knowledge – were instructed by the smugglers on how to pilot a boat a day or sometimes a few hours before the departure.

[17] For comparative literature, see Lucht (2012).

[18] See, for example, Gambetta (1993). Human smuggling studies based on criminological models have often overestimated mafia involvement in smuggling networks (Pastore, Sciortino, and Monzini 2006). For a corrective to this understanding, see those studies that have shed light on how smugglers can be part of migrants' social and familial networks (e.g., Bilger, Hofmann, and Jandl [2006]; Herman [2006]; Koser [1997, 2008]; Staring [2004]).

[19] Interview with Abu Hamza, Western Turkey, 28/10/2015

[20] Interview with Abu Hamza, Western Turkey, 1/1/2015

[21] Interview with Abu Hamza, Western Turkey, 28/10/2015

[22] The term is an Arabic word for addressing in a respectful manner any elder person.

[23] Interview with Nader, Western Turkey, 5/12/2015

[24] Interview with Abu Hamza, Western Turkey, 28/10/2015

[25] His use of the term *jihad* refers more to the Islamic duty of assisting others, a term without militaristic connotations, rather than the holy war against infidels. Abu Hamza's difference between true and false jihad evokes the distinction in the Islamic doctrine between lesser jihad (*al-jihad al-asghar*) and greater jihad (*al-jihad al-akbar*). On the concept of *jihad*, see Kepel (2002), Roy (1994).

[26] Recent scholarship has shed light on the coexistence of friendship and kinship ties with commercial interests within smuggling networks. See, example, Herman (2006), Staring (2004), and Spener (2009).

[27] Interview with Mahmood, Western Turkey, 6/11/2015

[28] Interview with Mahdi, Western Turkey, 29/10/2015

[29] Interview with Mahdi, Athens, 1/5/2016

[30] For comparative literature on how the categories of "victim" and "perpetrator" overlap into the smuggling-trafficking nexus, see Palmer and Missbach's analysis of underage facilitators of irregular migration in Indonesia (2017), and Shen's investigation of female child traffickers in China (2016).

[31] I have argued elsewhere about the importance of approaching trafficking and smuggling in the area as ultimately interconnected phenomena insofar as different means through which people enhance mobility in situations where channels of legal entry are limited if not absent (Achilli 2017).