Title
Waiting for the smuggler: tales across the border

Abstract
According to mainstream media and political discourse, human smugglers are the cruellest figures of our time, individuals who prey on migrants' need for assistance. Motivated by the circulation of this pejorative view in media and political discourse, I carried out ethnographic research with Syrian refugees and smugglers in Turkey, Greece, Jordan, and Lebanon with the ultimate goal of documenting what being a smuggler entails for the very actors of this unfolding drama. My fieldwork showed me how human smuggling was rooted in patterns of cooperation and support. And yet, most if not all my informants, including the "smugglers" themselves, spoke of smuggling in negative terms. What I argue in this paper is that the smuggler, a category functional to the security apparatus, is not only manufactured within law enforcement circles and mainstream media, but even by those very people who are discriminated or targeted by states' migration policies.

Introduction

In September 2015, the image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi lying on a beach after drowning while trying to reach Greece from Turkey sent waves of indignation around the world. A few weeks later, equal moral outrage was generated by the suspicions that Abdullah Kurdi, Alan's father, could have been one of the smugglers who that night caused the death of his own baby and other refugees – including his wife and other son.[1] Accusing him were the two alleged smugglers under trial in Turkey for the deaths, who framed the man as the ultimate executor of the tragedy, claiming he had organized the trip and piloted the boat that sunk. Abdullah, whose responsibility in the deaths was eventually dismissed by the accused, denied any involvement, stating: "If I was a people smuggler, why would I put my family in the same boat as the other people?"[2]

Indeed, why? Who was the smuggler, then?

"Human smuggler" does not mean, for most people, what the official definition says it means. The UN 2000 Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and its accompanying "Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants" state that human smuggling is "the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident."[3] Accordingly, the smuggler is a person who transports people illicitly into a third country. Media and political discourses, however, have placed more emphasis on the moral dimension of this actor than on their logistical skills. A profusion of photos and narrative accounts of migrants crammed into wretched

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[1] Ali, N. and Majeed, S. (2015). "Account of Capsized Migrant Boat Is Disputed" *The Wall Street Journal edition*, June 10, p. 1.

[2] Ali, N. and Majeed, S. (2015). Account of Capsized Migrant Boat Is Disputed.

[3] United Nations (2000). *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and The Protocols Thereto*, pp. 54–55.

boats or trucks circulates in the media worldwide and sketches out the moral traits of one of the cruellest figures of our time, an individual who preys on migrants' "need for assistance and their dreams for a better life."[4]

Motivated by the circulation of this pejorative view in media and political discourse, I started research on Syrian refugees' irregular migration to Europe with the ultimate goal of documenting what being a smuggler entails for the actors at the very centre of this unfolding drama. It all began – as we shall see later – with a misplaced question: are human smugglers motivated by anything other than greed and disregard for human life?

To answer this question, my research benefited from the empirical value of a growing, yet still small, body of scholarship that has questioned oversimplified depictions of the relationship between the smuggling facilitator, the travellers and their communities. As early as 2004, Jeroen Doomernik and David Kyle summarized the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants as a spectrum ranging from the altruistic assistance provided by family members or friends to the exploitative and abusive practices carried out by hardened criminals.[5] While the dominant narrative has continued to favour the smuggler-as-criminal line, the last ten years have seen the advent of both scholarly and journalistic work which has indeed showcased the strong bonds of trust and care that often tie smugglers and migrants together.[6]

Inspired by this body of research, between 2015 and 2017, I carried out ethnographic research largely based on interviews and, to a lesser extent, participant observation with Syrian refugees and smugglers themselves in Turkey, Greece, Jordan, and Lebanon. The moment was, to use an infelicitous choice of words, propitious. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians had fled their homes and sought refuge in Europe and elsewhere following the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. At the time of my research, smugglers operated especially out of Turkey, which soon became a gathering point for Syrian refugees travelling from Syria and its neighbouring countries to Europe.

As my fieldwork unfolded, a more complex picture emerged. The time spent with my informants showed me how human smuggling held strong social and moral significance for both migrants and smugglers. Despite assumptions of deceit and deception, trust and cooperation seemed to be the rule more than the exception in the interaction between migrants and those behind their journeys. Most smugglers operated by helping members of their immediate circles to reach the destinations that would have been otherwise precluded to them through legal channels. Remarkably, not only did smugglers depict themselves as service providers who privileged ethical choices over mere profit, but even migrants described them as *muhtaramin* (decent and respectable persons). Indeed, human smuggling appeared to be rooted in patterns of cooperation, protection, and support.[7]

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[4] Europol (2016), Migrant Smuggling in the EU, p. 3. EUROPOL.

[5] Doormernik, J. and Kyle, D. J. (2004). "Organized Migrant Smuggling and State Control: Conceptual and Policy Challenges" *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 5(3): 93-102.

[6] Khosravi, S. (2010), *Illegal Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan; Sanchez, G. (2015), *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings*. London and New York: Routledge; Tinti, P. and Reitano, T. (2017). *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Savior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[7] This seems to confirm what other studies have remarked in the Eastern Mediterranean route and elsewhere. See, for example, Baird, T. (2017). *Human Smuggling in the Eastern Mediterranean*. London: Taylor & Francis. Zhang, for example, points out how Chinese migrants coming to the United States often perceive smugglers as philanthropists; Sanchez shows that the migrant-facilitator relationship in Mexico dwells "on deep, socially cemented ties spanning across

And yet, most if not all my informants, including the "smugglers" themselves, spoke of smuggling in abstract terms as a very abusive and evil practice. Crucial elements in a mechanism of protection from below, smugglers were widely perceived by migrants and even themselves as abusive exploiters who prey on the need of safety of their victims, the migrants. This inconsistency bothered me.

When interacting with smugglers, they never called them with the Arabic equivalent – *muharrib* – a word with a negative connotation that evokes exploitation and violence. Neither they used this term privately when they spoke of a facilitator with whom they were in good terms and trusted. A *muharrib* could not be *muhtaram* by definition. In fact, migrants referred to their own facilitators by using their personal names or honorific appellatives such as *hajj*[8] or *ammi* (litt. paternal uncle). However, my informants, including the "smugglers" themselves, used the word *muharrib* to refer to smugglers at large. And, when asked to comment over the inner characteristics and moral dispositions of these facilitators of irregular migration, their narratives did not diverge from mainstream narratives of migration. Smugglers were bad.

I was ready to romance resistance, to enjoy my research participants debunking of the derogatory ways that media and political leaders used to describe human smuggling; yet, that did not happen. At that point in my fieldwork, I was not still prepared to understand the near unanimity with which migrants and even smugglers complied with mainstream narratives about human smuggling as a fundamentally predatory activity. Interestingly enough, however, the way my informants represented the smuggler was not unique. Sharham Khosravi notes[9] how the perception of irregular migration as fundamentally predatory and dangerous in nature is evident in the terminology used for indicating human smugglers and their clients across the world – respectively *coyotes*/*pollos* (chicken) in Latin America, wolves/sheep in Morocco, *gosfand* (sheep)/*darposte gosfand* (in the skin of sheep) in Iran, while smugglers are called *shetou* (snakehead) by their fellow nationals in China.

My intellectual and ethnographic wanderings brought me back to the starting point. If anything, this going in circles helped me understand that I needed a better compass, a new research question. My field research showed me that the discourses around smuggling and smugglers were more about moral judgments than the real-life people involved in everyday practices of irregular migration. As we will see in what follows, the point was not investigating whether a smuggler – a person intrinsically bad in the eyes of my informants – could be good. It was rather to shed light on the broader circumstances in which an individual earned the smuggler label, through or by whom, and why.

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countries". Zhang, S. (2007). *Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings: All Roads Lead to America*. Westport, CT: Praeger, p. 89; Sanchez, G. (2014) *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings*. London: Routledge, p. 17. However, while these studies have begun to dismantle common stereotypes about human smuggling, the assumption that smugglers are criminals driven exclusively by profit remains evident not only in media coverage but even in much of the relevant literature. See, for example, Soudijn, M., Kleemans, E. (2009). "Chinese Organized Crime and Situational Context: Comparing Human Smuggling and Synthetic Drugs Trafficking" *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 52(5): 457-474. UNODC (2018). *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants*. Vienna: UNODC.

[8] The word is used to refer to someone who has successfully completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. In the Middle East is also often used as an honorific title for an older and respected person.

[9] Khosravi, S. (2010), *Illegal Traveller*.

To follow this line of reasoning, here I will pursue a brief excursion into the social and moral world of the facilitation of irregular migration. In so doing, I will focus less on the empirics of human smuggling and more on the way the term is used among migrants and facilitators. My goal is to show how actors do not merely inhabit official categories, but they actively re-enact their authoritative messages. A category functional to the security apparatus, the smuggler is not only manufactured within law enforcement circles and mainstream media, but also by the very people who are the target of the label created by the states' migration policies.[10] By reiterating the same message, migrants and facilitators introduce minute displacements into the discursive regime in which it was articulated,[11] disrupting the indexical connection between the smuggler as a concept and its referent in the field. To put it simply, the more people spoke about the smugglers and human smuggling in abstract term, the less clear it was who (or what) exactly the smugglers were or stood for in the field. Here, I will show this by glimpsing into the figure of Abu Hamza, a man whose actions in Turkey in 2015 would certainly gain him the legal appellative of "human smuggler." What follows is a fragment of his story, as it was told to me by himself and other people I met during fieldwork.

The "Smuggler"

"I am not a *muharrib* [smuggler]!" Having said that, Abu Hamza paused for a moment reflectively, and then added: "look, I am known for being *muhtaram* [respectable person], this is how people who really know who I am call me".

A man in his early fifties, Abu Hamza was himself an asylum seeker from Syria. The first time I met him was in Elgar, a coastal town of West Turkey, in the courtyard of a four-star hotel near the city centre. The man was sitting around a table where he was 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 that he introduced to me as his crew. As I came to discover soon after, it was a mixed group that comprised *both* migrants *and* smugglers. They were all Syrians who had become stuck along the route to Europe. Even Abu Hamza was seeking to reach Europe for asylum. 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

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[10] Along these lines, Ruben Andersson argues that irregular travellers actively participate in the construction of the category "illegal migrant." By drawing upon Ian Hacking's notion of "making up people", Andersson sheds light on how the illegal migrant "becomes a lived-in category in the borderland 'matrix' of the illegality industry." Andersson, R. (2014). *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe*. Oakland: University of California Press, p. 16. Hacking's idea of "looping effect" is particularly relevant to my analysis for it highlights the role of people in interacting with and manufacturing their own categorization. As the Canadian philosopher puts it, "people … can become aware that they are classified as such. They can make tacit or even explicit choices, adapt or adopt ways of living so as to fit or get away from the very classification that may be applied to them." In doing so, however, they inevitably change the original categorization: "what was known about people of a kind may become false because people of that kind have changed in virtue of what they believe about themselves. … This phenomenon [is] the looping effect of human kinds." Hacking, I. (1999). *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard university press, p. 34.

[11] Yurchak, A. (2013). *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

shores of Turkey to be smuggled into Europe, Abu Hamza changed his mind: "I could not any longer watch my fellow countrymates suffering in Syria or being exploited by smugglers and locals in Turkey. I decided to do something for them. […] These people are not only my customers: they are my brothers. I help them because they are on the wrong side of the world."

Abu Hamza explained to me how he decided to put together a group of his own and help Syrian asylum seekers. In Elgar alone, in 2015, there were half a dozen of groups of facilitators and about the same number of rubber dinghies departing at night. Each of these embarkations carried thirty to fifty 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 to reach Greek territory. Crossing the stretch that separates Turkey from the closest Greek island took around 50 minutes.

Abu Hamza ran one of these groups. Yet, he felt he was different from the other smugglers. He claimed that he was not like those who capitalized on the hope and desperation of people who would do anything to reach Europe. In truth, he said, he did not even think of himself as a smuggler. "If I were [like these smugglers]," he told me, "I would not have so many friends around Europe, so many people praying for me!" "I've never sent anyone to death," Abu Hamza insisted. "I never overload my boats with men, women and children. I do not send them adrift waiting for the coastguard to rescue them." Interestingly, financial gain did not seem to disqualify the morality of his actions in his own eyes. "What I do it is very expensive […]," the man argues, "sometimes I pay with my own money the journey of people who cannot afford the cost. There are months that I lose more money than what I earn." Abu Hamza even claimed to operate a moral economy and privilege ethical choices over mere profit. He would thus prioritize the transport of their nationals, guarantee a full reimbursement or a free passage to the client if the first journey was unsuccessful, and carry some passengers – generally children, elderly and the disabled – for a discounted fee.[12]

At a certain point, something apparently went wrong, and Abu Hamza had to interrupt his work. Last time I heard from him, he was already in Norway where he was waiting to know the outcome of his asylum claim. In a long conversation on skype, he explained me how he was happy to be there, and how he had finally reunited with his wife and children who had arrived a year earlier. When I asked him about his activity in Turkey, he replied immediately that he really loved helping people but unfortunately facilitating their migration was no longer sustainable. Indeed, the EU-Turkey agreement on March 2016 and the decision of many Western Balkan countries to seal their borders in the winter of 2016 considerably stemmed the flow of people across this route and curbed smuggling operations in Turkey.[13] As Abu Hamza put it, "After the EU-Turkish deal, the Turkish government started to make our life impossible. It was too dangerous, I could be arrested at any time […] Who will take care of my family, then?! […] I said 'stop' and I left the country when I still could." The flow of Syrians fleeing the war did not stop, though; yet, the risks for migrants increased. Indeed, counter-smuggling operations along this route only redirected unauthorized migration flows on different, more dangerous routes.[14] According to Abu Hamza, "There is no smuggler working without the police knowing that. When Turkey decided to shut down the route, they [the authorities] simply made it more expensive. […] They [the authorities] are the real smugglers!"

The Associate

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[12] See also, among many others, Sanchez, G. (2015), *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings*.
[13] FRONTEX (2017). FRAN Q2 2017 - Frontex Risk Analysis Network Quarterly Report. Warsaw: FRONTEX.
[14] FRONTEX, p. 17.

Many of Abu Hamza's associates equated their involvement in the group as belonging to a family. "Abu Hamza is a good man, he's like a father to me." This is how Mahdi described the man to me a few days after I met him in Elgar. Mahdi – in his mid-thirties – was not the only one in the crew to think that way. This family-oriented description of the role of Abu Hamza was shared by other members of the group. In this sense, Mahdi was adamant to set Abu Hamza and himself apart from the so-called smugglers: "*muharribin* [plural for smugglers] are those people in Libya who make all these *masakin* [wretched ones, the poor] die every day in the sea."

Abu Hamza's group was 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 labour, albeit criminalized, but a moral duty. As a matter of fact, most of the members, and many of their costumers, had a story similar to that of Abu Hamza. They came from the same village in Syria. So did Mahdi, who contacted Abu Hamza for help. In the first two years following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the village saw fierce armed clashes between the government forces and the Free Syrian Army. It was subsequently occupied by the Islamic State (IS) 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. Mahdi was one of them. Abu Hamza agreed to bring Mahdi and his family to Europe if Mahdi worked for him in exchange. When I asked Mahdi whether he believed he had been forced into smuggling human beings or had gotten 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 it. 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." While working in Elgar, Mahdi was waiting to have the last member of his family in Syria smuggled into 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 thousand 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, however—a few hundred meters from the Greek shore—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 centre 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 him as a 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 legal fees." Mahdi went on by giving vent to his frustration: "Can you believe it? He made a fortune in Turkey!" When I confronted Mahdi with the fact that he, too, should have made money out of his involvement in such a lucrative business, he looked at me and asked abruptly, "You think that I was a *muharrib*?" I nodded yes. Mahdi gave me a long and contemplative look, after that he replied resoundingly, dismissing my reference to him as a smuggler: "I am not *muharrib*. I was just the captain. Do you think that if I were a *muharrib* I would be in this condition now? *Muharribin* make a lot of money! If I were one of them, I would not need money to pay my lawyer now." To

him, smugglers were Abu Hamza and other associates of him, who were deeply involved in the business, sharing the profit; on the contrary, he spoke of himself as the "captain" – simply a service provider. Abu Hamza was the leader of the pack, in truth a "big *muharrib*," as he then stressed, someone with wide reaching connections who "just cares about making money."

The Migrant

Like many others, Ahmad used the Arabic term *muharrib* to indicate the "smuggler." Yet, every time he referred to Abu Hamza during the short time we spent together in Elgar, he rather preferred the word *hajj* over that of *muharrib* to refer to him.

When I first met him in Elgar, Ahmad was in the hall of the hotel where other migrants were sleeping, right next to Abu Hamza's fancy hotel. Ahmad left Homs in Syria when he was still an adolescent along with his brother, younger by a few years. Like many other families, theirs covered the cost of the journey by liquidating the few assets that they had left after months of severe siege and starvation. It is a decision akin to gambling: as young men leave for Europe, families get into debt and lose an economic lifeline within their already stranded households. At the same time, if the sons succeed, they become a mainstay of the family's survival. Indeed, domestic survival hinges largely on the remittances periodically sent by family members who have migrated. Furthermore, acting as veritable trail-blazers, those who successfully migrated can facilitate the migration of their kin left back in Syria, constantly monitoring their movement and giving them useful advice on the duration of the journey, the permeability of the borders and sharing important contacts. Ahmad flew to Turkey precisely with the goal in mind of facilitating the journey of his family.

Ahmad's collaboration with Abu Hamza was not unusual. It is rather common for migrants to work together with those facilitating their journeys performing roles that would legally fall into the category of smuggling – such as piloting boats, recruiting migrants, watching for police, etc. During my fieldwork, I saw this type of collaboration unfold in different manners. 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; recruit clients because they share the same ethnic networks; and 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. This is what Ahmad – like many others – did to pay part of the smuggling fees for his family. He facilitated the connection between a group of Syrians stranded in Istanbul and Abu Hamza's group. This overlapping of roles introduces a further layer of complexity by blurring the boundary between smugglers and their customers and weakening even further the analytical grip of the term *muharrib*. It is not surprising that Alan Kurdi's father was accused of being a smuggler.

Ahmad had left Syria four years earlier. It took him and his brother almost four months to reach Sweden. A long and dangerous journey that they did via Libya, through the central Mediterranean route – a sea corridor that has tellingly gained the appellative of *al-tariq al-mawt* ("the death road") due to the number of people who lost their lives in the attempt of crossing.[15] After obtaining asylum in Sweden, Ahmad flew back to Turkey to get married and, afterward, arranged the crossing of his family who had previously moved to Turkey along with his now wife. When I met him at the lobby he was waiting for the Turkish taxi drivers who picked up his family and took them to a *nukta* (the

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[15] In 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 12,781 people lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean through this route. IOM (2017). Migrant Deaths and Disappearances Worldwide: 2016 Analysis. *IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre*.

spot, point of departure) on the beach where around 30 other migrants were on board a ten-meter inflatable boat. When his family finally departed, we joined Abu Hamza in his room where he was tracking the boat's itinerary using a GPS app on his mobile while instructing the pilot using his other phone, on the right direction to keep. Ahmad left Turkey only when he received confirmation from his wife that her and his family had reached the Greek shores. Before bidding farewell, he confessed that he feared that Abu Hamza could be like any other smugglers, unconcerned of the people who requested his services, but he was relieved to know that "in truth, he is 'really a good person' [*shakhs ktir tayyeb*]."

The sociomoral proximity between migrants and facilitators as well as the protracted condition of illegality that they inhabit facilitates these collaborations. Yet the sense of mistrust, or that something can indeed go wrong never leaves the minds of the migrants who work with facilitators. To Ahmad, his family's successful journey dispelled any doubt that Abu Hamza could have been like any other smuggler. When Ahmad used the word *muharrib*, he referred to someone wicked, evil. I encountered such a pejorative view in my conversation with many migrants: "*muharribin* are bad," I was constantly reminded by many of them. However, even if *muharrib* carried a negative connotation, the person who facilitates irregular journeys was not necessarily bad. He or she can simply be someone who sneaks something or someone undetected. Among my informants, the facilitation of irregular migration was not just about profiting because the smuggler was not necessarily driven only by material gain. It entailed a range of practices encompassing honesty, empathy, solidarity, 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. However, the more the smuggler stuck to this moral "code" or principles, the less he was considered a *muharrib*. The outcome of the smuggling process substantially contributed to determine the appellative: *muharrib* if it was bad, *muhtaram* or any other term with a positive connotation if successful.

Conclusion

As my field research progressed, my initial assumptions about the inner moral inclinations of the "smugglers" were displaced and an altogether different picture emerged, or rather disappeared, from the scene. In the field, nobody was a smuggler, and yet I was surrounded by facilitators of irregular migration and people who required their services.

Was Abu Hamza a trustworthy facilitator or, conversely, a vicious smuggler? This question does not lend itself to an easy answer. Many of the people I met had not doubt about his moral skills, others were unsure, and some changed their mind. And yet, they all referred to the same person and the same actions. Narrative coherence was out of the frame, of course. Narratives were contested and multiple, and not only was the same story told in different ways from different people, but the same person could tell the same story differently over the time. Waiting to see the outcome of the journey, Ahmad – who at first was dubious – enthusiastically described me Abu Hamza as a respectable person, a *shakhs ktir tayyeb*. The "captain" embraced a rather opposite approach when he first spoke of him as a father to them and then, a few months later, accusing the man of being a reckless *muharrib*. Even Abu Hamza's self-narrative was not so straightforward. However eloquent Abu Hamza description of himself as a good person may be, his obsession to distance himself from the infamous category of smuggler is indicative of the intrinsic fragility of this endeavour. Even for the best of the facilitators there were different and opposing voices who questioned his/her moral rectitude and concur to stick to the label "smuggler."

At the end, whether Abu Hamza was a good or a bad person is irrelevant here. However, with this brief narrative excursus in the actions of Abu Hamza in Turkey, I had two interrelated goals. First of all, and perhaps most importantly, I wanted to show how those very actors who are the blunt side of the border control and security apparatus – facilitators and migrants – reproduce a discourse aimed to criminalize irregular migration. Indeed, quite alike the "vox populi" in Europe, even for my research companions the smuggler was a constant source of social anxiety. Certainly, differences emerged in the way the figure of the smuggler was sketched out in their accounts, and how the different actors positioned themselves in relation to this character. However, the degree of consensus was surprising: smugglers were fundamentally evil. The real wonder was that "smugglers" and migrants shared with mainstream narratives of migration the same understanding of what a smuggler ultimately is: a reckless criminal who preys on migrants' vulnerability. But does this come as a surprise?

It is worth reminding that a plethora of studies on enforcement have demonstrated how the tightening of border controls and the implementation of restrictive immigration policies reduces safe migration mechanisms and favour the emergence of increasingly dangerous routes where relationships between migrants and their facilitators tend to be more exploitative.[16] Furthermore, narratives of smugglers as violent, especially if circulated by powerful media, have the tendency to be resilient and highly contagious.[17] As the militarization of the Mediterranean increased the risks faced by irregular migrants, migration flows along the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2015 reinforced in the European public opinion the feeling of being under siege. In mainstream media, the smuggler was blamed for the countless deaths of migrants and the alleged invasion of Europe. Press coverage of crime and violence provided a language that placed the "refugee crisis" on the shoulders of the smugglers at the same time that it afforded the European Union (EU) with a means of distancing itself from the evident failure to protect and support asylum seekers.[18] Small wonder that facilitators of irregular migration and migrants so anxiously dissociated themselves from the criminal label stuck onto them by iterating dominant narratives in expressing outrage and condemning the "smuggler mafia." "Nobody takes pride in being called *muharrib*," Ashraf told me. A formerly smuggled migrant from Syria who spent over a year with Syrian smugglers in Greece, he knew that his friends "might be proud of smuggling, might even enjoy what they do, but they would never be happy to be called smugglers."

Secondly, I wanted to shed light on how the term "smuggler" is morally-laden and in fact fails to identify any actual person on the field. More than anything else, smuggler and his vernacular equivalent "muharrib" speak of a generalized condition of moral panic over immigration and about migration both in the Mediterranean and elsewhere that media have concurred to generate. The simultaneous ubiquity and evanescence of the smuggler is largely explained by the absence of a clear referent. Blame is located firmly on the smuggler; yet, it is less clear who the smuggler is. This does not mean that migrants were unaware of who was organizing the journeys, neither were they naïve when it came to facilitators' economic interests and the chances of being exploited and deceived. At the same time, however, they did not underestimate the importance of their services and often referred to these facilitators of irregular migration as saviours. In Elgar, Abu Hamza was

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[16] See, for example, Achilli, L. (2018). "The 'Good' Smuggler."

[17] Charles L Briggs, (2007). "Mediating Infanticide: Theorizing Relations between Narrative and Violence" *Cultural Anthropology*, 22, (3): 315–56.

[18] 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, N. et al. (2016). "Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of "the Crisis" in and of Europe", New Keywords Collective. *Near Futures Online*, pp. 1–45.

an honourable person when things went as planned; a smuggler if migrants believed he did not keep his promises. What the struggle to pin down the smuggler ultimately tells us is that the term has lost its capacity to describe local contexts of human movement. As Wendy Vogt aptly put it, smugglers "are the boogeymen of the migration industry, an omnipresent danger, but disembodied and difficult to see."[19] Against this background, the smuggler becomes the taunting spectre of our age: easy to evoke, hard to locate.

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[19] Wendy V., (2016). "Stuck in the Middle With You".