Cover page

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Abstract

Child migration has generated shock, the global public appalled by photos of corpses of children washed ashore or abandoned in deserts. However, despite the growing visibility of child migration there has been scant research into the practices and interactions often associated with the smuggling of minors. We still lack a clear understanding of the interactions between minors and smugglers that go beyond a stereotypical predator/victim frame. This paper is grounded in the conviction that any understanding of the complex interactions between minors and migrant smugglers requires an epistemic reversal in conventional learning and debate. Instead of investigating the systematic exploitation of vulnerable migrants at the hands of criminal rings, we need to focus on the capacity of minors to exert agency and craft new spheres of possibility in situations characterized (also) by exploitation and extreme dependence. The article does so by investigating the day-to-day interactions between facilitators and Syrian minors who left their country following the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. What will be shown is that minors' interactions with human smuggling provide them with new forms of action, while contending with exploitation, constraints or dependency.

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"Protection" on my own terms: human smuggling and unaccompanied Syrian minors

1. Introduction

My research informants asked me whether I wished to accompany the migrants to the beach and see with my own eyes what human smuggling entails. Abu Hamza, the man who managed the small group of facilitators, had told me "things are not like what they show in the TV, we are not murderers, we help them [the migrants]." –In the taxi from our hotel my companions were apprehensive, afraid of what was to come. They were all familiar with pictures of sunken boats and floating corpses of the kind that have populated the media since the beginning of the modern refugee 'crisis.' It was the middle of the night when we were dropped off in a seemingly abandoned coastal area near Bodrum, western Turkey. To reach the beach required a 20-minute walk through thick Mediterranean maquis. We were in a group of around 20-25 people. When we reached the embarkation point, I saw that another dozen people were already waiting next to a ten-meter rubber dinghy heading to the nearest Greek island. They were all from Syria – both facilitators and migrants. In front of me, a boy in his early teens was travelling alone. He struggled to keep pace with the group. "*Habibi* [my dear]", Jalal – a seventeen year-old smuggler – spoke to the kid, gesturing him to climb onto his shoulder, "come, let me help you". Then, turning to me, he added with a hint of pride: "we are not *aiwanat* [animals]. We take care of our own."

The experience was striking in many ways. At one level, it confirms the argument that the relationship between smugglers and migrants can also entail solidarity and reciprocity and be "grounded in local notions of morality" (Achilli 2018, 77; see also Bilger, Hofmann, and Jandl 2006). Of more specific importance, here, is that it problematizes simplistic representations of minors on the move as ideal victims due to their lack of agency (Bhabha 2000; Uehling 2008). The public discourse that minors on the move are passive and vulnerable is so pervasive that it has

almost obliterated any reference to child smuggling' (Davidson 2013. As they are perceived as unwilling and innocent victims, children can only be 'trafficked', for the idea of them being 'smuggled' would entail admitting they have some degree of agency. The sense of looming danger forever faced by children and vulnerable migrants has been broadly communicated through mainstream academic and policy writing and has had considerable influence on public and political discourse. It has served as a key legal, moral and political justification for consolidating more intrusive and authoritarian forms of border security and migration policies (Pallister Wilkins 2015).

Against a Western liberal discourse that has overemphasized the cruel, passive, and exploitative condition of minors on the move (Davidson 2013), this article aims to shed light on minors' agential capacity in criminalized contexts.[1] Due to their position in the dominant modern discourse minors on the move have become the embodiment of "weakness itself" (P. H. Christensen 2000, 42). Focus on smuggled children – especially unaccompanied minors – is revealing, allowing us to unearth patterns of protection and agency amid violence and exploitation. This study calls for an epistemic reversal in conventional learning and debate on unaccompanied minors' mobility: rather than investigating the systematic exploitation (or lack thereof) of vulnerable migrants at the

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[1] According to Article 1 of the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), a child (or a minor) is any human being below the age of 18 years, regardless of his/her level of maturity, unless the laws applicable to the child in a given country state otherwise. Numerous studies have demonstrated how terms like 'minor' and 'child' obscure the vulnerability as well as the capabilities of those who fall under these categories. Hashim and Thorsen, for example, have pointed to the lack of utility of the Western concept of 'childhood' in many African societies where adulthood is embedded in social relations and generational hierarchies, rather than in terms of chronological age and cognitive development (2011). In this article, I use the term 'minor' (or 'child') only in operational terms, to refer to a specific legal and discursive category with which some individuals are daily confronted and, at times, use themselves.

hands of criminal rings, we need to focus on the capacity of minors to engage exploitative

conditions in order to craft new spheres of possibility in an increasingly divided global order. What

will be argued here is that minors can exert agency and find protection in their interaction with

criminal groups and in situations characterized by exploitation and extreme dependence. This article

will show this by investigating the complex relationship between Syrian unaccompanied minors and

the 'bad guys' in mainstream narratives of migration identify, those who are behind their

exploitation: the human smugglers.

A plethora of reports have highlighted the great risk of violence, exploitation and death that

smuggled minors face during migration (McAuliffe and Laczko 2016; UNICEF 2017a). The

complex interactions between criminal actors and minors (or other supposedly vulnerable categories

of migrants) tend to be characterized primarily by their non-consensual nature. In effect, the

condition of being a 'minor' "in effect amounts to becoming an object of ownership" or a "thing"

(O'Connell Davidson 2016, 7). Criticism of this representation comes from across the social

sciences, with scholars highlighting the difficulty of accurately assessing phenomena as relative and

vague as child exploitation (Davidson 2013). They have pointed out the many calamities entailed in

the legal framework relevant to protection of smuggled and trafficked unaccompanied minors (see,

among many others, Bhabha 2000; Howard 2014). In short, although criminal practices may

seriously lead to severe forms of exploitation and abuse among so-called vulnerable migrants, it is

also crucial to consider the role of both protection regimes and security systems in producing the

very conditions leading to the exploitation of children (Sharma 2005; Uehling 2008).

This article echoes the critical state of the art. If it is correct to claim that security and

protection policies create the demand for criminal services, it is equally important to explore what

crime enables in terms of protection, recognition, and dignity. These dimensions have been amply

debated in human smuggling studies. As early as 2001, Kyle and Dale (2001) summarized the

complex relationship between smugglers and migrants as a spectrum that ranges from altruism to

exploitation (see also Bilger, Hofmann, and Jandl 2006; Koser 2008; Spener 2009). More recently,

studies have pushed further this line of investigation by questioning the binary constructions of smugglers as 'predators` and migrants as 'victims' (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Zhang, Sanchez, and Achilli 2018). This body of literature has shown how the interactions between migrants and smugglers across the world go beyond the cost-benefit rationale and underlie a complex set of motivations that entail friendship or spiritual and religious motivations (e.g., Achilli 2018; Ayalew Mengiste 2018; Campana 2018; Galemba 2018; Khosravi 2010; Kook 2022). What makes these studies relevant here is their attempt to articulate a rethinking of the state-dominated narratives about smuggling and irregular migration by untangling the smuggling practice as grounded social and cultural practices spanning across countries (Sanchez 2017).

In order to unpack the complex relationships between minors and smugglers, my study aims to combine this scholarship with the growing body of studies that has shed light on unaccompanied children's agency. Despite growing public concern in and outside Europe about child migration, scant research has been conducted on the transnational mobility of unaccompanied minors (Lelliot 2018). Only recently have studies begun to investigate youths' decision-making process prior to and during migration (Echavez *et al*. 2014; Menjívar and Perreira 2019). An important swathe of this scholarship has shown how minors can exert agency during journeys characterized by a restricted range of options (P. Christensen and James 2008; Knörr 2005; Laoire, White, and Skelton 2017; White et al. 2011). Researchers have traced the way minors navigate law and institutional interventions (Heidbrink 2014; Kohli 2006) as well as the complex social (Belloni 2020; Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020) and emotional (Vogh 2018) landscapes in which their journeys are enmeshed. A few pioneering works have also been documenting the experience of underage smugglers and problematized their designation as either 'criminals' or passive 'victims' of transnational crime syndicates (; Missbach and Palmer 2022; Palmer and Missbach 2017; Sanchez 2018; Sanchez 2021). These studies have been crucial to forging a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of minors on the move. This paper aims to extend this scholarship by unpacking the complex mechanisms through which unaccompanied minors exert agency and find

protection in their interaction with criminal groups and in situations characterized also by violence and extreme dependence.

This article begins by outlining the displacement patterns of Syrian minors fleeing their country after the outbreak of the war in 2011. It will then shed light on how the child protection regimes and migration policies in place in the three countries under examination – Lebanon, Turkey, and Greece – have crippled minors' agency and exposed them to informal channels of mobility. The article will conclude by providing insights into how minors' interactions with human smuggling provide them with new forms of action while contending with exploitation, constraints or dependency. It will show how patterns of exploitation, care and empowerment among minors on the move cannot be easily disentangled from one another during their long and perilous journeys.

2. Methodological notes

This article provides new insights on the relationship between human smugglers and unaccompanied minors from Syria. At the time of this study, Syria represented the most common country of origin among minor asylum seekers and, after Afghanistan, the second largest communities of unaccompanied minors seeking protection in the EU (UNICEF 2017b). Although minors from other national groups (such as Afghans, Iraqis or Pakistanis) have been investigated during my field research, they appear in this study merely as contrastive cases to highlight the specific displacement patterns of Syrian minors as well as to appreciate shared features.

Most of the unaccompanied minors that I interviewed for this research were males between 15 and 17 years of age – an age group that my informants referred to as *al-shabab* (youth). This is a relatively broad category in Arabic and was deployed by my informants to indicate unmarried young men between their teens and early 30s. Significantly, the way my informants understood the category fundamentally diverged from international standards on children's rights, which are based on the idea that all people less than eighteen years of age share the same needs and should,

therefore, be targeted with the same type of assistance (Pupavac 2001). On the contrary, among my informants, *shabab* were fundamentally different from *awlad* (children not yet in their teens). While the latter were fundamentally dependent on adults, the former were believed capable of taking informed independent decisions – such as entering labor markets, getting married and even joining armed forces.

Multi-sited research was employed to track the journey of Syrian youth in Lebanon (September–October 2015; March-May 2017), Turkey and Greece (April, October, and December 2015; July 2016; January-February 2017) – important transit and destination points for Syrian youth on the move during the refugee 'crisis'. The trans-local nature of minors' journeys makes traditional single-sited fieldwork inadequate for grasping the complexities of the phenomenon. I conducted qualitative work of an ethnographic nature in selected communities in Beirut and the Beqaa Valley (Lebanon), near Izmir and Bodrum (Turkey), and in Lesbos, Central Macedonia, Athens, and Epirus (Greece). In these sites, I had semi-structured interviews and informal conversation with 35 minors who had been smuggled. I conducted several informal conversations with adult migrants from Syria who travelled or were travelling with unaccompanied minors, and therefore able to comment on the conditions of smuggled minors. I also interviewed 43 members of humanitarian organizations (local and international NGOs and UN agencies) in charge of minors' protection as well as four border and immigration authorities in Lebanon and Greece. Finally, the study also involved 30 interviews with smugglers and other key actors in smuggling markets – such as hotel operators, taxi drivers, and shopkeepers.

I accessed participants through gatekeepers – humanitarian workers, migrants, and smugglers. To do so, I relied on my social contacts in the field, obtained through long-term fieldwork in the areas (author 2015, 2018) and through my involvement in an Italian NGO that worked with migrants and refugees in Lebanon and Greece. Initially, subject recruitment took place primarily at youth facilities and accommodation centres established by the international community in the three countries. Upon completion of the interview, research participants' social contacts

served in turn as referral sources for additional subjects. I was therefore able to extend my network of participants through their friends, acquaintances, and family members. Because smuggling is not a frowned-upon practice among migrant communities, I could also contact some of their facilitators who were willing to share their experiences (see also Zhang, Sanchez, and Achilli 2018).

While open and semi structured interviews remained the main and most important mode of my data collection, I also devoted time to participant observation, especially in Turkey where I spent almost three weeks with a smuggling group operating near the coastal town of Izmir. The intensive, yet limited, exposure to the community of smugglers and migrants afforded me insight into the organization and the processes underlying human smuggling. I combined *in situ* research with the use of mobile phone and social media to keep in touch with respondents after they had moved on for clarification or additional interviews and support. I also conducted a comprehensive survey of existing knowledge, focusing on the written sources, including published governmental and non-governmental organizations reports, academic studies, and news media reports. Together, these data constituted the background material for both filling gaps in the empirical research and triangulating information obtained through interviews with migrants and their facilitators.

Almost all minors were approached in the youth facilities and accommodation centers and interviewed in the presence of specialized staff. Eight minors were interviewed in informal tented settlements in the Beqaa Valley (Lebanon) and in urban centers in Greece and Turkey. I always obtained freely given and fully informed consent and preserved the anonymity of all research participants through the use of pseudonyms. No part of my field data collection involved concealment or deception. I adopted a series of precautions such as informing interviewees from the outset about the exact nature of my research. I consistently emphasized my disinterest in the minute details of smuggling and migrants' journeys, and in general limited my concern to how the interactions between minors and smugglers were perceived and discussed by those who were involved. Issues concerning the operational patterns of smuggling networks were tackled, but in a broader and more generalized manner.

Interview transcripts have been analyzed through inductive methods – most notably thematic content analysis and narrative inquiry. Through the former I identified common themes and patterns across the dataset as I searched the materials organically. This allowed me to draw out core principles from diverse contexts and situations encountered by the young men and women, allowing theory and empirical insights to emerge together. The second approach – narrative inquiry – helped me acquire a better understanding of how people were representing themselves and their experiences to themselves and to others. The complex relationship between them and smuggling groups invites a rejection of abstract models of agency and Westernized ideals of morality (Achilli 2018) and calls, instead, for an enquiry into what exploitation means and what it entails for people who are involved in criminal(ized) activities. What emerged from this analysis were the diverse ways that my interlocutors talked about their experiences, the moral and symbolic implications that they drew from these interactions, and – to a lesser extent – the way these representations differentiated according to age and gender.

Finally, my field trajectory led me to adopt a privileged focus on young men and adolescents on the move to the detriment of other categories, most notably that of girls. Female unaccompanied minors were an actual, albeit underrepresented, presence during my research. I met and interviewed six female minors who were stranded in one of the informal tented settlements of the Beqaa Valley, a rural area of eastern Lebanon. However, none of them had crossed the border with Lebanon unaccompanied but had been left alone subsequently when their parents moved back to Syria. Although their perspectives allow a better insight into the gendered patterns of exploitation and agency among unaccompanied minors, it is less informative of the day-to-day interactions between minors and smugglers. It should be emphasized that this is not a study of unaccompanied minors at large, but rather of a particular group: 35 male adolescents from Syria.

3. On the move: Lebanon, Turkey and Greece

According to UNICEF, the peak of the "Europe migrant crisis" has witnessed a record number of unaccompanied and separated children crossing the Mediterranean Sea (UNICEF 2017a).[2] It has been estimated that over hundred thousand minors from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and, to a lesser extent, from Africa arrived in Europe in 2016 alone, mostly in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Bulgaria (Eurostat 2016). A third of them were classified by the relevant authorities as unaccompanied or separated children, generally young men in their mid-teens who fled violence, chronic economic stagnation, and political turmoil in their countries (Eurostat 2016). As a general rule, most countries have adopted the definition contained in the CRC which states that "unaccompanied minor" is a person under the age of eighteen who lacks the supervision of a caregiver. Separated children are minors "who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives" (Article 1 and Comment 6 of Section 7-8 CRC).

Mohammed, whom I met in early 2017 in Veria refugee camp near the Greek city of Thessaloniki, was one of them. The boy was waiting to be relocated to Europe. Between March 2015 and September 2017, the EU introduced the Emergency Relocation Scheme (ERS) which allowed for transfer of a number of asylum applications from the EU frontline states (like Greece) to other member states in order to relieve the migratory pressure on the countries of first entry in Europe.

There was deep frustration in Mohammed's words: "many people who are bored and tired of waiting just leave", the 17 year-old explained to me. "They don't want to wait for relocation. It can take up to a year or more, and even then, it is unlikely you will be relocated where you want.

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[2] I build on a growing body of research that argues how the language of crisis has been used to justify highly exclusionary and discriminatory migration policies and practices (see, among others, De Genova *et al*. 2016), especially in connection with the figure of the unaccompanied minor (Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020).

Leaving with smugglers is faster. You pay them and you go". The boy had left the north-eastern Kurdish region of Syria with his older cousin two years previously, fearing forced recruitment. The two cousins crossed Syria's border with Turkey so as to rejoin their uncle in Mersin (Turkey). The group eventually reached Turkey's Aegean coast where they hired a smuggler to cross to Greece, hoping eventually to reach Germany via the so-called Balkan route. They spent over a month near the border with North Macedonia (formerly the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). Fed up with wasting time without any clear prospect of crossing, they eventually opted to take a bus to Veria and wait there for relocation to Europe. Here, however, the group split. Mistrusting the efficacy of legal channels of mobility, the uncle and cousin found a smuggler who helped them cross into North Macedonia and move onward. Mohammed, still a minor, opted for relocation.

Mohammed's story touches upon three crucial elements of minors' mobility: their agency, the fast-changing scenario of border control, and minors' reliance on smuggling networks. Among my informants, the leaving was a complex decision (Belloni 2020). Departures were forced decisions imposed by the breakdown of protection mechanisms in their war-ravaged country, but also a calculation that minors often took in consultation with their relatives in order to guarantee the household's survival in Syria through the sending of remittances. When I met Mohammed, the boy was seriously questioning his decision to wait for relocation under the ERS and with good reason. Relocation could take up to several months during which time minors were put into in specialised shelters and safe areas run by both governmental and non-governmental entities across Greece. Furthermore, relocation decisions also disregarded the preferences of the applicant in determining the place of relocation. When the European Commission's report on the progress of its relocation and resettlement was published in September 2017, only 27,000 refugees had lodged applications through the scheme. Fewer than 20,000 had been relocated (European Commission 2017).

For many other minors I encountered during my field research, relocation was neither a viable option nor the most desirable. Moving, however, was anything but easy. Notwithstanding temporary emergency measures put in place to enhance legal channels of mobility such as the ERS,

the migrant crisis` persuaded EU member states to pursue further the tightening of border controls by expanding the budget and scope of Frontex – the European border agency – and through the progressive externalisation of asylum responsibilities to third countries (Andersson 2016). The underlying logic was that stricter border controls would ensure the security of the EU member states and the safety of the migrant by reducing migratory pressures and ending migrants' perilous crossings of the Mediterranean. As in the case of their adult fellows, minors relied largely on smuggling networks for moving. They followed similar routes and channels to those of their adult counterparts during their journeys.

Like most migrants, minors who entered Europe had reached Greece from Turkey with the help of smugglers. While some of them settled temporarily in Lebanon before entering Turkey, others crossed from Syria. Once in Turkey, they travelled overland into Greece via the Evros border or reached Greece's Aegean islands aboard wooden and fibreglass boats, rubber dinghies, fishing boats and large cargo ships. Greece became a key transit country to the richer countries in Europe for refugees and other migrants fleeing both immediate danger and economic distress (UNHCR 2020). Before March 2015, the journey was relatively easy. Western Balkan countries issued temporary transit papers that allowed asylum seekers and migrants to cross their territories and use public transportation (Achilli 2018). The situation changed in early 2016. Under the alleged imperative of cracking down on the smuggling business model and protecting migrants, the EU and Turkey signed an agreement seeking to deter migrants from illegally entering Greece. In return for financial and diplomatic incentives, Turkey strengthened border control, information exchange, and migration policies. The change of policy considerably stemmed the flow of people across the western Balkan corridor (FRONTEX 2017). Yet, while the number of people crossing irregularly through the Balkans dropped, the risks faced by migrants increased substantially, with many stranded in Greece, Turkey, and Lebanon (Mandic 2017; Strasser and Tibet 2020).

Either as transit countries or 'final' destination, Lebanon, Turkey and Greece represent three key global hotspots for minors on the move. At the crossroads of transnational flows and global

connections, they are "precarious transit zones" where minors on the move are often caught up in what scholars have called "regimes of mobility," produced at the nexus of exclusionary state policies and increased circulation around the globe (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Here, they live in a liminal state of transit for weeks, months or even years as they attempt to cross land and sea borders, earn enough to live on, hire smugglers, secure food and shelter, or find protection.

4. Whose 'Best Interest'?

Minors' reliance on irregular channels to cover some of the legs of their journeys to Europe might be surprising if we consider that Lebanon, Turkey and Greece have all signed the CRC. An answer might be found in the convergence of seemingly antithetical approaches: child criminalization and child protection. This ambivalence is aptly captured by Jacqueline Bhabha: "[a]s a society, we are stymied by a fundamental contradiction in our approach. We view the state as having a protective obligation toward vulnerable children in its role as parens patriae, parent of the nation; but we also expect the state to protect us from threatening, unruly, and uncontrolled outsiders, even if they are children" (2014: 19-20; see also Humphris and Sigona 2019).

On the one hand, scholars have abundantly shown how states have been adopting criminal sanctions to deter and control migration (including child mobility) in transit and destination countries (see, for example, Bhabha 2000). A large body of literature now exists on the criminalizing dimension of powerful policy and border regimes (e.g. Bigo and Guild 2005). A strand of this scholarship has established the new subfield known as the criminology of mobility, which investigates states' construction of irregular migration as a crime and a security problem by mobilising ideological and coercive powers usually reserved for criminal or military threats (Aliverti 2013; Pickering, Bosworth, and Aas 2015).

On the other, the very international rights regime designed to protect minors can, paradoxically, fundamentally infringe minors' best interests and lead to their criminalization

(Pupavac 2001). As Lems *et al*. argue, the general association of childhood with victimhood in this discourse "can create a backlash against those who do not fulfil the expectations of children as apolitical and muted victims" (2020, 327). Losing their characterization of innocent child, unaccompanied minors started to blend with a range of other figures, such as the deceptive scoundrel who fakes his/her own age or the young criminal who is not interested in integrating into the host society. Scholars have explored the ambivalent slippage from 'victim' to 'risk' surrounding unaccompanied minors in mainstream narratives about irregular migration across the world and how these have been translated into restrictive and punitive policies and practices (Heidbrink 2014; Menjívar and Perreira 2019; Ticktin 2016).

During my fieldwork, the criminalization of minors' mobility happened with dramatic regularity in the countries where this research was conducted (Achilli *et al*. 2017; Kovner, Zehavi, and Golan 2021; Strasser and Tibet 2020). In Lebanon and Turkey, my informants often related arbitrary arrest and systematic abuses at the hands of security agencies. The systematic violation of the CRC principles found justification partly in the general idea that children, because of their passivity and weakness vis-à-vis adults, would more easily fall under the spell of criminal networks or terrorist groups (see, for example, Achilli *et al*. 2017). The belief was so widespread that it seemed to have inverted the presumption of innocence and in its place imposed one of guilt. Ekhlas, a female board member of the Union for the Protection of Juveniles in Lebanon (UPEL) – an NGO contracted by the Government of Lebanon to assist minors at risk in the country – was in no doubt of this. When I met her in her office on the dusty outskirts of Beirut, she told me that "minors – especially if they are adolescents, above 12 – are first regarded by the authorities as a security issue, and only then as children in need of help." During her time at UPEL, she reported having seen several cases of minors treated as legal adults and subject to indefinite detention by the immigration authorities while their cases were being considered.

Ekhlas' testimony chimed with the account of Hamza and Mahmood. Both boys were 17 year when I met them in Beirut. In 2016, they had left their town in southern Syria and, with the

help of a smuggler, entered Lebanon. Like many others before them, they fled forced conscription at the hands of the fighting parties in Syria with the goal of securing a job that could support their families back in their country. Neither had any relatives in Lebanon. At the time of my research, any minor who wished to regularize his/her status in Lebanon needed a legal guardian, a situation that inevitably barred from legal residency all unaccompanied minors (Achilli *et al*. 2017). As Hamza told me: "we live in fear of being arrested and beaten [by the authorities] every time we step outside our homes for food." Those found by the authorities to lack proper documentation were subject to departure orders. Although these orders were seldom enforced, the regulations exposed children to a number of abuses at the hands of security forces – including violence, indictment, and arrest. Hamza and Mahmood's best attempts to hide from authorities were insufficient to escape state controls. Random checkpoints and searches for irregular(ized) migrants happened with dramatic regularity in Beirut and other municipalities. One day Hamza was stopped, questioned and eventually detained. As Mahmood put it, "the only solution is to leave Lebanon [for Europe]. I would do that already if I had the money".

The general disregard for minors' best interest was also manifested in the carceral nature of the very regime intended to protect them. In Greece, for example, it was the widespread tendency among governmental and non-governmental actors to enact protective custody for unaccompanied children in order to guarantee their appropriate care provision (see also Heidbrink 2020). This is what happened, for example, to Adnan – a Syrian adolescent who was living in an abandoned building near the Thessaloniki train station. When I first met the boy, he was sharing a tent with a friend around his age in an unfinished building amid piles of scattered debris. Surrounded by coarse walls with iron cables butting out from the reinforced concrete, the entire place was a sort of temporary shelter, peppered with other tents of migrants of different ages and nationalities. Adnan told me how he had left a refugee camp at the outskirts of the city a few weeks earlier, where he was held in a closed facility along with other minors. "The building was better than being here. We had toilet and food, and a bed to sleep in," Adnan conceded. Yet, he argued, "they put me in a

shelter with only Afghan boys… they don't like Syrians. I was alone. I could not speak with them even if I wanted, we do not understand each other. […] I did not escape a prison [Syria] to end up in another one." Adnan was waiting to be smuggled to North Macedonia by the same people who had helped his cousin to reach Germany a few months earlier.

As Adnan's story shows clearly, administrative detention and protective custody have often disrupted minors' social relationships, increased their social isolation and exacerbated their vulnerability. In 2016 alone, over 20% of separated children in Greece went missing within 24 hours of their placement in special reception facilities for minors (Fili 2014). While media reports blamed trafficking organizations for the disappearance of Syrian minors (Digidiki and Bhabha 2017), field research revealed that on many occasions allegations of child trafficking simply involved minors who left protective custody voluntarily in order to journey through Europe with the help of smugglers. In this sense, although the individual contexts in Lebanon, Turkey and Greece are unique, challenges faced by minors on the move have a common theme: implementation of deportation orders, protective custody, and incarceration have taken primacy over children's needs and desires. As we shall see below, this disconnection from official spaces of protection has opened the door not only to new types of exploitation but also to new forms of agency and alternative mechanisms of care (Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006; Parreñas 2009).

5. Care and accountability

Human smugglers are a cog in wider informal networks intended to provide migrants with protection and opportunity for mobility (Zhang, Sanchez, and Achilli 2018). Available studies draw attention to the multiple and conflicting understandings of care and protection encountered by unaccompanied people (Heidbrink 2018) as well as the importance of informal networks in minors' mobility patterns (Heissler 2013; Lelliot 2018). By providing minors with financial, intelligence and logistic help, they link individuals and groups together through ties of family, nationality,

ethnicity or friendship. As Gabriella Sanchez aptly put it, these networks are conducive to "a series of complex mechanisms of protection crafted within migrant and refugee communities as attempts to reduce the vulnerabilities known to be inherent to clandestine journeys" (2017, 10). What is important here is that these mechanisms of protection are predicated upon the agency of migrants, including that of minors. Recent research shows how community practices of reciprocity regulate the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants across the eastern Mediterranean (Baird 2016; Içduygu and Toktas 2002; İçli, Sever, and Sever 2015; Mandic 2017). Smuggling groups operating in southern Turkey, for example, seem to take great care to establish and maintain a relationship of trust with migrants by keeping their 'word by restricting their profit margins,, using good-quality boats and even being well mannered (Achilli 2018). In the case of minors on the move, my informants reported how smugglers are also chosen by virtue of their reputation as trusted and reliable guardians who care for the needs of the children and protect them against the risks inherent in the journey while escorting them to their destination or the next stop toward their destination. Any conduct deviating from these standards of service would be considered reprehensible and even immoral by the migrant community.

Over the course of my research, most minors I encountered actively engaged with smuggling networks through social and community connections. Ethnographic research concerning human smuggling has suggested that migrants' agency can be deeply transformative of their situation and persona. More than just a negative coping mechanism, migrants' active involvement in human smuggling involves a complex relationship that can entail the development of friendships and love affairs (Vogt 2018), the mobilisation of political activities and ideology (Kook 2022), and even the strengthening of spiritual and religious credos (Hagan 2008). Ahmad's story was a case in point. Still underage when he left Syria on the long journey to Sweden in 2012, the boy was 20 years old when I met him near the Turkish port of Bodrum. The four years on the move were, in his own words, a lifetime: "I was a child when I left; I am a man now." As soon as he had obtained asylum in Sweden, Ahmad flew back to Turkey with a European passport to help his family cross

the border to Greece. He acted as an intermediary, introducing his relatives to the same smugglers who had helped him reach Europe. 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.

Scholars have documented how migrants' decision to use certain facilitators rather than others is not only based on cost-benefit calculations but also the idea of relying on the same ethnic and moral community in exile (Zhang, Sanchez, and Achilli 2018). This was certainly true in the case of Ahmad who shared the same ethnic and national ties with his facilitators. Significantly, this feeling of closeness is also reinforced by the logistics of smuggling. Studies have demonstrated how this everyday practice of coexistence between migrants and their facilitators forms a bond between both parties (see Khosravi 2010). While waiting for the next tranche of payment to come through, for the propitious weather conditions or for the temporary loosening of border controls, migrants might spend weeks, months and even years with their facilitators. The time Ahmad spent in Turkey at the time of his first journey to Europe provided him with opportunities to engage with his facilitator that went beyond simple working relationships. He slept in the same hotels, ate at the same restaurants, and hung around in the same bars. In other words, albeit criminalized for different reasons, Ahmad felt more communality with the smugglers who facilitated his journeys than with the humanitarian personnel who could have, ideally, rescued him from these criminal groups. As he put it, "I trust them [his smugglers] because they are like us, they are refugees [from Syria], they know what escaping the war and live in fear of being sent back mean."

If bonds of trust and commonality informed the interactions occurring between my informants and their facilitators, these ties did not always shield the former from exploitation and violence. As we shall see, minors' exploitation was not uncommon. Yet, if migrants are at a blunt side of a relationship of power with smugglers (Van Liempt and Doomernik 2006), this does not mean they lack any form of agency whatsoever. What needs to be acknowledged is that smugglers

are kept accountable by migrants for breaching the protection-based relationship that lies at the core of the provision of smuggling services. This is what happened to Baram, the coordinator of a group of facilitators from the Kurdish region of Syria that operated in the Greek port of Igoumenitsa. He would hide onboard a lorry ready to board a ferry headed to Italy dozens of migrants, mostly young men from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Since only a few migrants made it to the lorry each night, and not every night, people could spend up to several months in the company of their facilitators. One such person was an Afghan child of twelve separated by his family and stranded for weeks with the other migrants – including other Afghans – in the mountains facing the Greek port city of Igoumenitsa. Waiting to be smuggled to Italy, the child was under the custody of Baram. During this time, the child was raped. The police arrived after a few days and it transpired it was not Baram who had committed the crime but an associate – Merwan, a youth in his late teens from the same region in Syria – who fled after having raped the child. When it was clear that retaliation against the real culprit was impossible, the child accused Baram, the person in charge (and therefore accountable) for his protection, who was consequently arrested. Baram was only released after four years of detention when a DNA test on the clothes of the abused child led to his acquittal on the charge of rape.

During my research I encountered various examples of how human smuggling could give way to the worst forms of exploitation and violence. What makes Baram's account particularly relevant is the clarity with which minors' protection mechanisms and agency emerge also amid exploitation and violence. His incarceration was a demonstration of migrants' capacity to enact punishment even in a situation of extreme vulnerability for the breach of a social contract between them and their facilitators. Of course, we should exert caution in approaching Baram's experience as an emblematic case of retribution against smugglers. Of the many crimes (including sexual assaults) committed against irregular migrants, an exceptionally small number result in any form of sanction. My findings here resonate with other empirical research conducted on human smuggling and related crimes, which has questioned binary constructions of criminals as predators and

migrants as victims (e.g., Davidson 2016; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998) and shed light on the

multiple and complex mechanisms of protection and defense enacted by migrants in situations

characterized by severe exploitation and a restricted range of options (e.g. Vogt 2018; Zhang,

Sanchez, and Achilli 2018;). In short, while we must not resort to a simplistic, romantic view of

migrant interactions with criminal groups, the tendency to focus mostly on their exploitation can

overlook the enabling potentials of migrants' agency.

6. Exploitation and agency

As shown above, the establishment of smuggling networks along the eastern Mediterranean route

sought to provide precarious crossing services for those minors (as well as other migrants) I met

during my research. Yet, if facilitators like Jalal – at the onset of this article – took pride in claiming

how they would take care of 'our own,' the account of Baram and the Afghan child suggests that

those who do not belong within the bounds of one's own might receive a different treatment.

Notwithstanding the protection (and punishment) mechanisms engrained within the facilitation of

irregular migration, we must not lapse into a simplistic, romantic view of minors' interactions with

smuggling groups. Clearly, there are patterns of domination, gender inequality, social difference,

and thus winners and losers in criminal markets, perhaps even more clearly here than elsewhere

(Bauman 2013). It is no secret that violence and exploitation are deeply entrenched in human

smuggling.

To sum up, child smuggling is a complex phenomenon: exploitation and protection,

deception and trust concur to define it. Studies have shown that where exploitation occurs this is

more often the consequence of migrants' protracted condition of deprivation and irregularity than

the precise intent of criminal groups (Achilli 2018). Child abuse can hardly be disentangled from

the increasingly restrictive migration policies imposed by states over child migration (Bhabha 2000;

Heidbrink 2020). Most importantly here, however, is that exploitation does not always point to the

demise of minors' agency; on the contrary, it is often one facet – albeit dramatic – of their attempts to navigate an increasingly divided global order. The fragile status of unaccompanied minors exposes the complex interplay of exploitation and protection. When border controls intensify and channels of legal entry diminish, the boundaries between solidarity and exploitation blur, and migrants might perceive participation in criminal enterprises and self-exploitation as the only way forward. So regardless of whether exploitation is carried out by strangers or by well-known family members, it is often consciously embraced by its very 'victims' as a means to craft new horizons of possibility (Vigh and Sausdal 2018).

A closer scrutiny of Jalal's narrative helps reveal the deep ambiguity surrounding child exploitation. The boy was 15 years old when he left Syria. Like many of his kind, he came from the same village as his facilitator. Additionally, Abu Hamza, the head of the group, was his distant cousin. By the end of 2012, the war in Syria was taking a heavy turn. It became clear to Jalal that staying put would have inevitably led to forceful recruitment by the Syrian regime or its foes. Disengagement was no longer an option, least of all for young men of an age for enlistment. Leaving, however, was anything but easy in war-torn Syria. When the fighting spread throughout his village, he reached out to Abu Hamza who agreed to take him onboard. Jalal's decision was the result of a cost-benefit analysis. His involvement in the smuggling group soon became the mainstay of his family. Although the boy did not receive money from his involvement, his family in Syria heavily depended on the remittances occasionally sent by Abu Hamza. Furthermore, acting as facilitator, the boy eventually helped his kin left back in Syria to leave the country. Yet, the boy was aware that it was a decision akin to gambling, which entailed considerable protection risks for someone like him who, already of age, could face serious prison time. "I like what I do. I mean…. Helping people, making money for my family. My life has changed so fast. Before it was my father, now it is me [to provide for the family]. But if the police catch me, I go in prison for years," the boy confessed to me, the day after the night-trip to the beach.

Jalal's experience is emblematic of the ambiguity surrounding minors' journeys. His experience of displacement would irremediably consign the boy to the category of "trafficked child," as enshrined in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its accompanying protocols: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (United Nations 2000). In the framework of this definition, the concept of "exploitation" lies at the core of the distinction between smuggling and trafficking. Whereas the relationship between migrants and smugglers ideally ends when the journey is completed, the purpose and profit behind human trafficking revolve around the exploitation of the minor (or any other individual). In this context, whether or not Jalal agreed to be exploited by Abu Hamza is irrelevant if he experiences coercion or abuse in the process. Significantly, "coercion", within this definition, is not only understood in terms of brute physical force or mental domination, but also in more general terms as "the abuse of a position of vulnerability" (*ibid.*, 43). According to this definition, Jalal is a clear victim of trafficking. There is no doubt that Abu Hamza exploited Jalal's situation of vulnerability to his own profit – i.e., making the boy working for him for free. And yet, was the boy only exploited by Abu Hamza? Has not he also benefitted socially and materially from his association with a smuggling network?

The problem here is to account for the complexity of Jalal's experience of displacement and those of many others like him who do not easily fall into categories of victims and exploiters. What this and other studies on minors on the move show is that minors actively engage in smuggling networks, and this engagement is not only exploitative but can be simultaneously empowering (Palmer and Missbach 2017; Sanchez 2018). In this interaction, the boundaries between protection and exploitation blur. Jalal's story is a case in point. It is hard to say whether he was exploited or empowered by his encounter with Abu Hamza. Certainly, the very sharing of ethnic and family links did not prevent patterns of exploitation. Abu Hamza was hardly a disinterested benefactor: he made money out of a minor's involvement in a criminal(ized) activity – human smuggling. Yet, Jalal's encounter with his 'exploiter' provided him with new horizons of actions. Not only did Jalal

find a way out of Syria, but he also even became the breadwinner of his family, since household survival hinged largely on Jalal's involvement in the group.

7. Conclusion

This study contradicts the widely accepted belief that unaccompanied minors are passive victims at the mercy of trafficking rings. The facilitation of irregular migration can certainly take forms that are repugnant. Rather than repeat a narrative already abundantly circulating in media and policy circles, I have sought to approach the issue from a different angle. This, however, has not meant acknowledging that minors' interaction with smuggling groups are often forms of agency from below, grounded on community-based notions of cooperation and solidarity. I have tried to bring out dependence and submission to certain forms of authority as conditions for achieving the subject's potentiality and prompting forms of agency.

Mainstream narratives of irregular migration define unaccompanied minors by their vulnerability, dependence, and passivity (O'Connell Davidson 2013). Critical scholarship has pointed out how migration studies and government policy documents have traditionally paid limited attention to the migratory experiences of unaccompanied minors, assuming the unconditional subordination and dependence of children to adults (Bhabha 2000). As Uehling put it, "children are typically flattened and simplified into roles as adults' accessories or as victims" (2008, 841). The ideal construct, the minor, is perceived as a particular kind of person: a victim without agency and connectivity networks. Encoded in the phrase 'unaccompanied minor' are images of dependency, helplessness, and misery. Delinked from the historical conditions that have led to such situations of emergency, child salvation is predicated upon the external help brought by the authorities that have vouched to intervene on his/her behalf (see Fassin 2012). Against this background, the militarization of border control and stricter immigration policies have become the only effective measures to fight these criminal organizations and rescue minors.

However, this policy approach creates a number of problems, which ultimately set up the very conditions of migrants' exploitation, whose welfare represents the official justification of policy and practice in the first place (Bhabha 2000; Heidbrink 2020; O'Connell Davidson 2011). If minors fleeing the Syrian war end up interacting with transnational criminal groups, this is largely due to states imposing increasingly restrictive migration policies. These have provided a breeding ground for human smuggling (and trafficking) by exacerbating people's vulnerability to exploitation, forcing them into crime for survival and creating the need for clandestine mobility services. This study unearths some of the specific meanings and forms of agency displayed by Syrian minors who engage with criminal(ized) phenomena. Of course, the intention here is not to minimize minors' suffering and exploitation. On the contrary, it is to investigate their active capacity to cope with these dimensions in an increasingly divided world. When exploitation occurred, this was often an attempt to cope with a protracted condition of vulnerability rather than just a blatant manifestation of passivity.

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