“Markets of Dispossession”: how unaccompanied minors navigate their criminalization in Lebanon.

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Introduction

Media and policy makers have often argued how omnipotent criminal conglomerates of smugglers and traffickers have systematically enslaved, kidnapped and deceived masses of vulnerable and desperate migrants, especially women and children (Achilli and Sanchez 2021). Capitalizing on the misery of migrants, criminal organizations are believed to have amassed fortunes, thereby creating international networks of organized crime which often manage different criminal business simultaneously (Achilli and Sanchez 2021). This viewpoint is corroborated by official reports that unauthorized cross-border movements have enabled migrant smuggling, forced labor, and drug trafficking to become some of the fastest-growing criminal activities worldwide (OECD 2016). Europol, for example, argues how in 2015 alone, criminal networks aiding irregular migration reaped profits of EUR 3 to 6 billion (Europol 2016). Similarly, the United Nations estimates that networks along the US-Mexico border and in Central America generate approximately 7 billion (Blancas Madrigal 2017).

In mainstream academic and policy circles, the link between migrants and criminal actors is often framed as “modern slavery” (Naim 2010). Within this context, migrants are typically seen as unwilling participants: unable to escape due to exploitation and the threat of violence, they become objects of ownership (O’Connell Davidson 2016). This sense of impending humanitarian crisis has deeply influenced public and political dialogue, leading to stricter border security and migration measures (Pallister-Wilkins 2015). After the Cutro shipwreck, for instance, a tragic shipwreck where scores of migrants lost their lives while trying to cross the Mediterranean, Italian right-wing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced plans to impose a naval block in the Mediterranean and halt migrant departures in order to "combat the slavery of the Third Millennium" (Euronews 2023). This sentiment has been echoed by several European leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen who called for the need to crackdown on the “brutal business” of smugglers and other criminal groups who profit on the misery of migrants (Giuffrida and O'Carroll 2023).

This article seeks to unpack the complex relationship between migrants and criminal groups in Lebanon, particularly in light of the escalating punitive and criminalizing migration policies introduced in the nation. It will do so by examining the interactions of Syrian unaccompanied minors with migrant smuggling and human trafficking groups. What will be argued is that minors' interactions with these criminal actors frequently represent an act of agency rather than simply an unresponsive surrender to the seemingly expanding power and sophistication of large organizations. This perspective challenges the prevailing notion of ever-expanding and powerful criminal groups and underscores the active role migrant minors – especially unaccompanied minors – play in affecting migrants’ journeys and dynamics of crime formation. In so doing, while aligning with recent studies that spotlight state migration policies' role in fostering crime and marginalization (Reitano 2015; Triandafyllidou and Palumbo 2023), the article calls for a greater recognition of migrants' agency over their own displacement experiences.

In what follows, this article will delineate the study’s research methodology, rooted predominantly in ethnographic research. The subsequent section shifts away from stereotypical depictions of migrants’ interactions with criminal groups, redirecting attention towards migrants and the impact of migration criminalization on their lived experiences of crime. In this light, the article introduces and elaborates on the notion of "markets of dispossession" – understood as the ensemble of informal or illicit economic activities pursued by stranded migrants and other criminalized individuals, who engage in these survival

tactics to cope with a situation of protracted vulnerability. Through this lens, we gain a better understanding of the interplay between criminal markets and their participants, placing a renewed emphasis on the latter's agency. To elucidate this concept and present a more textured understanding, the article will then draw upon ethnographic documentation of the protracted displacement in Lebanon of unaccompanied minors fleeing the Syrian war, thus offering a comprehensive account of their agency amid their criminalization. Such a focus is particularly poignant considering the prevailing discourse around minors on the move as epitomes of vulnerability without agency (Christensen 2000).

Methodology

This study delves into the intricate relationship between migrants, specifically Syrian unaccompanied minors, and criminal groups involved in activities like smuggling and trafficking. Syria was one of the most frequent countries of origin for minor asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, at the peak of the European migration crisis in 2015 and in the following years (UNICEF 2017).

For the research, the majority of the unaccompanied minors interviewed fell between 15 and 17 years of age. Research participants generally referred to this age group as "al-shabab" (youth), a term in Arabic used to describe unmarried young men from their teens to early 30s. This perception contrasts with international standards on children’s rights, which view all individuals under 18similarly in terms of needs and assistance (Pupavac 2001). My informants distinguished between "shabab" and "awlad" (children not yet in their teens), viewing the former as more independent and capable of taking independent informed decisions, such as joining armed forces, getting married, or entering the job market.

Conducting fieldwork alone, especially with minors, presented its unique set of challenges. Ethical considerations were at the forefront. One key challenge was ensuring that the minors felt safe and comfortable during the interviews, given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed. To address this, I established a rapport with participants before formal interviews, spending time in informal conversations and allowing them to become familiar with my presence. This was crucial to ensure that they did not feel coerced into participating and that they understood their rights in the research process. I also ensured that our interactions took place in familiar settings for them, such as community centers or local cafes, which contributed to a more relaxed and open conversation. The majority of the minors were interviewed in youth facilities with specialized staff present. I consistently sought informed consent, with participants' anonymity maintained, ensuring that participants and their guardians (when applicable) understood the nature and purpose of the research. Consent was always informed and freely given. Given the precarious nature of their situations and their potential engagement in criminalized markets like forced labor and human smuggling, I adopted a non-judgmental stance, focusing on understanding their lived experiences without imposing any preconceived notions or judgments. Emphasizing my disinterest in their minute details of their everyday life, my research concentrated on the perceptions of the interactions between minors, smugglers, and other criminal(ized) actors.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the journeys of Syrian minors, multi-sited research was undertaken in significant transit and destination spots: Lebanon (September–October 2015; March–May 2017), Turkey, and Greece (across multiple dates between April 2015 and February 2017). In 2022, a month-long field visit was undertaken in both Italy and Greece. This addition allowed me to incorporate newer dynamics and changes that may have occurred over time, providing a fresh perspective and an updated context to the earlier data by reconnecting with some of the research participants.

I chose a multi-sited approach due to the trans-local nature of the minors' journeys. I gathered qualitative data in places like Beirut, the Beqaa Valley, Izmir, Bodrum, and various locations in Greece, conducting interviews with 35 unaccompanied minors. 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 interviewed also 43 members of humanitarian organizations and immigration authorities in Lebanon and Greece. The research also included 30 interviews with figures connected to migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and forced labor. While the research spanned multiple countries, it is crucial to note that a significant portion of the ethnographic data that forms the backbone of this study is rooted in the fieldwork conducted in Lebanon. Lebanon, given its geographical proximity and historical ties to Syria, became a pivotal ground of research, especially in understanding the initial steps of these minors' migratory journey.

Access to participants was achieved through gatekeepers like humanitarian workers and migrant activists, using my own social contacts acquired from long-term fieldwork and my association with an Italian NGO assisting migrants in Lebanon and Greece. After interviewing participants, their social networks served as referrals, expanding the participant pool.

While interviews were primary, I spent nearly three weeks observing a smuggling group in Turkey and several months volunteering for an Italian INGO working with unaccompanied children in Beirut and the Beqaa Valley. This short time participant observation was crucial to investigate children's lives and their involvement with criminalized markets, like forced labor and human smuggling. Ethnographic methods allowed me to observe closer the daily lived realities of these minors, capturing glimpses of the nuances, emotions, and intricate dynamics of their interactions with criminal networks. These direct experiences, combined with interviews and an extensive review of existing literature, enriched my data.

Undoubtedly, the research presented both limitations and challenges. Notably, while the majority of minors were interviewed in youth facilities with specialized staff present, there were instances when such optimal conditions could not be met due to the informal and spontaneous nature of ethnographic research. This posed an ethical challenge, as the absence of specialized staff meant the minors could potentially experience emotional distress without immediate professional support. Moreover, my positionality as a researcher sometimes influenced the narratives of the participants, who might have been cautious in revealing sensitive information regarding their interactions with smuggling and trafficking networks. Furthermore, the transitory and multisited nature of my research made in-depth research into the life of my research participants difficult, affecting the continuity and depth of data (Hage 2005).

Another noteworthy limitation was linked to the gender of my research participants. 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. As such, female unaccompanied minors were an actual, albeit underrepresented, presence during my research.

Through the Smokescreen: Problematizing the Crime-Migration Nexus

In prevailing migration narratives, criminal networks interacting with migrants are frequently delineated as inherently deceitful and exploitative, especially when their activities involve perceived vulnerable groups such as minors. These actors are often characterized as evil males hailing from the global south – Latinos (Sanchez 2018b) or Arabs (Achilli and Massari 2023) with inherently malicious intentions and only motivated by mere economic profit. Thriving on the vulnerability of children and other vulnerable migrants, these criminal networks are said to be grown. Mainstream discourse and reports suggest that these networks extend beyond isolated operations, evolving into an expansive

global industry encompassing activities like human trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, and drug trafficking (Achilli and Sanchez 2021).

Conversely, migrants are typically portrayed as desperate, uninformed, and submissive individuals at the mercy of these formidable criminal enterprises (Achilli and Massari 2023). They are often viewed as having little to no agency, merely passive actors in a dangerous play where they are moved and manipulated against their will (Sanchez 2018b). The prevailing narrative portrays children, especially, as epitomizing vulnerability (Christensen 2000, 42). The narrative that minors on the move are passive and vulnerable is so pervasive that it almost obliterates any reference to child smuggling in public discourse (O'Connell 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.

However, critiques of this dominant perspective have emerged from various quarters in the social sciences, all converging around a core assertion: while criminal outfits might indeed exploit children and other deemed vulnerable migrants, the role of states' protection regimes and security systems cannot be overlooked (Sharma 2005; Uehling 2008). Studies have shown how criminal sanctions have been implemented by states to discourage and manage migration, including child mobility, in both transit and destination countries (Bhabha 2000). They have illuminated the paradox where even the international rights systems established to safeguard minors can ironically contravene minors' best interests, resulting in both their criminalization (Lems et al. 2020; Pupavac 2001) and exposure to criminal groups (Achilli 2022).

Building upon this, particularly the latter concern of exposing children and other migrants to criminal entities, a growing body of scholarship has illuminated the criminogenic dimension of migration policies. Academics have robustly argued that the criminalization of migration inadvertently provides impetus to the perpetuation and deepening of migrant smuggling and human trafficking — the very issues these policies seek to address. This dynamic would inadvertently stimulate the birth and expansion of genuine criminal enterprises (Triandafyllidou 2018) that might oversee smuggling and trafficking efforts in tandem with other illicit ventures, such as migrant kidnapping and drug trafficking. This line of reasoning finds ample backing in empirical evidence (Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018) and resonates profoundly with the idea that the act of criminalization itself can often be a catalyst for the emergence of crime (Raineri 2023, 265).

This line of research is crucial in highlighting the fundamental processes and structures leading to crime and exploitation. However, while it is valid to argue that immigration policies and technologies generate crime, it is equally crucial to understand how crime becomes an experienced reality for migrants. In essence, while both criminal organizations and state apparatuses undeniably influence the exploitation and violence faced by children and other vulnerable migrants, concentrating only on the actions of these states or criminal groups may overshadow the role children play in shaping their own experiences of criminalization. This also has broader implications for understanding migration patterns and the formation of crime.

As Raineri argues, a criminogenic reading of stringent migration policies, too, "indulges in an understanding of social phenomena that is fundamentally deterministic [running] the risk of reproducing, reiterating, and possibly legitimizing the same epistemological standpoint that contributes to generating the policies they condemn" (2023, 265–66). Put it simply, when scholars suggest that stricter migration policies inevitably result in more crime, they potentially reinforce the perception of migration as a process largely controlled by external entities like criminal networks, with migrants often viewed as passive victims. This perspective aligns with the framework underlying many criticized migration policies, which typically approach migration as a criminal issue to be controlled with

sanctions. This can ultimately legitimize the same "criminalization" perspective that drives many of the policies scholars criticize.

Here, I do not deny the existence of abuse and exploitation within smuggling and trafficking operations. A plethora of studies and reports have indeed documented the often-horrific forms of violence that migrants may encounter during their journeys. I do not suggest either that minors on the move or other categories of migrants possess complete control over their journeys. However, I dispute the idea of ever-expanding and powerful criminal groups, as this notion neglect the complexities of migrants' lived experiences and inadvertently legitimize criminalizing migration policies. While I agree that stricter migration policies can heighten the vulnerabilities of migrants, pushing them towards involvement in informal, illicit, and criminalized activities ripe for exploitation, violence, and abuse, it is essential to also recognize the agency of migrants. This includes even those often viewed as the most vulnerable, such as unaccompanied minors.

In this vein, a growing body of scholarship offers a nuanced reading of child mobility by giving more attention to how minors on the move can assert agency amidst criminalization and limited choices (Achilli 2022; Christensen and James 2008; Knörr 2005; White et al. 2011). These studies illuminate minors' navigation through legal and institutional challenges (Heidbrink 2014; Kohli 2006) and delve into the nuanced social (Lems et al. 2020) and emotional contexts (Vogt 2018) of their journeys. Emerging research has also engaged with underage smugglers, focusing on their agency and reframing their experience beyond the binary of "criminals" or "victims" (Missbach and Palmer 2020; Palmer and Missbach 2017; Sanchez 2018a).

Drawing from and extending these scholarly insights, I develop the concept of "markets of dispossession" to explain the intricate relationship binding migration policy, migrant agency, and crime formation (Achilli and Sanchez 2021). At its core, the term describes the myriad of informal or illicit economic activities undertaken by individuals who find themselves on society's periphery – socially marginalized and economically deprived. These are not grand schemes orchestrated by criminal masterminds; they are the survival tactics of the desperate, born from an ecosystem of poverty, inequality, limited resources, and scarce opportunities for upward mobility.

These markets are prevalent in transit zones like big urban centers and borderlands where migrants 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). In these zones, migrants, disconnected from core familial, spatial and social networks, face both exploitation and new opportunities (Parreñas 2009). To navigate the precarity of their situation, migrants develop economic strategies and social relationships with one another and other actors. However, it is crucial to understand that the term "market" does not exclusively refer to physical places or locales. More aptly, the term describes a set of activities – often of illicit nature – that disenfranchised individuals, like unaccompanied minors or refugees, resort to in contexts where they are criminalized. This is their makeshift economy, a system they have had to adopt out of sheer necessity and in response to systemic and structural barriers.

The concept demonstrates that, while the criminal phenomena tied to irregular migration may have evolved, they do not always tend towards increased size and sophistication, or at the expenses of the agency of migrants. Rather than stemming from extensive criminal enterprises, the "crime" associated with these markets often emerges from myriad micro-interactions, decisions, and acts of resilience by individuals navigating restrictive policies and their subsequent criminalization (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005, 4). These activities are typically ad-hoc and reactionary, lacking in detailed structures or plans. A standout aspect of these markets is their accessibility; the barriers to participation are often minimal, permitting a large number of individuals to get involved in different criminal(ized) activity

simultaneously – e.g. migrant smuggling and labor trafficking. The recent outcry from the media and analysts regarding the purported convergence of illicit markets – where smuggling, human trafficking, and drug trafficking intersect (Achilli and Sanchez 2021) – can be explained through this perspective. These convergences can be a series of small-scale, pragmatic interactions where migrants gain some form of capital- be it social, financial, or in-kind. This capital becomes a lifeline, a means to secure services and support, even if it places them in precarious situations.

In the ensuing sections, I rely on ethnographic examples from my field research among unaccompanied minors in Lebanon to elucidate the dynamics of these "markets of dispossession." What emerges is that, even in the face of precarity spawned by increasingly exclusionary and criminalizing migration policies, engaging in criminal(ized) and exploitative activities grants these minors a unique form of agency, helping them navigate their circumstances or even enhance their mobility. These young individuals demonstrate resilience and adaptability, developing sophisticated strategies and intricate social relationships with each other and other stakeholders. While these relationships can indeed be exploitative, they also witness to their capacity to navigate an increasingly divided world.

Caught in Limbo: The Plight of Minors Navigating War, Migration, and Legal Precarity

The war in Syria erupted in March 2011. The violence that swept the country since the outbreak of the war has triggered one the most dramatic refugee crisis in modern history. It is estimated that over 5.6 million have left the country (UNHCR 2020). As of 2017, a considerable number of them were believed to be unaccompanied children,[1] creating the conditions for the proliferations of smuggling-trafficking rings in both countries.

For many minors, leaving Syria and reaching their destinations was far from being straightforward. If anything, the "refugee crisis" prompted EU member states to implement security-based migration policies. They expanded the budget and authority of Frontex - the European border agency - and gradually outsourced asylum responsibilities to third countries (Dastyari et al. 2022). The underlying assumption was that tighter border controls would protect both the security of EU member states and migrant safety by reducing migration pressures and hazardous Mediterranean crossings. Like their adult counterparts, minors largely depended on smuggling networks for movement and generally followed similar routes.

Minors who made the choice to reach Europe undertook a variety of migration routes. Some resided briefly in Lebanon before transitioning into Turkey, while others migrated directly from Syria. Once in Turkey, their journey proceeded overland into Greece via the Evros border, or they voyaged to Greece's Aegean islands via an array of boats and large cargo ships. Soon Greece surged as an essential transit hub to richer European countries for refugees and other migrants escaping imminent threats and economic instability (UNHCR 2020). Before March 2015, the journey was relatively unchallenging from Greece through the so-called Western Balkan routes, with countries such as North Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia issuing temporary transit documents permitting asylum seekers and migrants to cross their territories and use public transportation (Achilli 2022).

However, the situation took a dramatic turn in early 2016 when the EU and Turkey signed a pact to discourage illegal migration into Greece, ostensibly to dismantle smuggling networks and protect migrants. In return for economic and diplomatic incentives, Turkey reinforced border control, shared information, and revised migration policies. This policy modification notably curbed the influx of people

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[1] There was no comprehensive data on their number, though; and still there is not. Restrictive policies implemented by many countries have increased the number of refugees without valid documentation in the territory, and consequently heightened the complexity of monitoring and tracking unaccompanied minors who have naturally avoided the authorities for fear of being arrested (see Achilli et al. 2017).

through the western Balkan corridor (FRONTEX 2017). Yet, while irregular crossings through the Balkans dwindled, the risks faced by migrants noticeably escalated, leaving many stranded in Greece, Turkey, and Lebanon (Mandic 2017; Strasser and Tibet 2020).

This amplified sense of danger and uncertainty pushed many minors en route to Europe into a state of indefinite uncertainty. They found themselves stuck in transit for extended periods, ranging from weeks to years, attempting to navigate various land and sea borders, secure livelihoods, employ smugglers, find food and shelter, or seek protection. The story of Youssef, a boy I met during my research in Beirut, serves as a poignant exemplification of these struggles.

In 2016, Youssef had fled his hometown in northern Syria with the aid of a smuggler, seeking refuge in Lebanon. This journey, undertaken due to the imminent threat of forced conscription by the conflicting factions in Syria and the hope to procure employment that would enable him to provide for his family back home, mirrored the narratives of numerous others. Significantly, Youssef's plight was exacerbated by his solitary status in Lebanon, as he had no family ties in the country.

During the period of my research, Lebanese legal regulations stipulated that minors aiming for regularized residency were required to have a legal guardian. This regulation effectively ostracized all unaccompanied minors, such as Youssef, from securing legal status (Achilli 2022). Youssef shared his lived experience of this legislative constraint, recounting his perpetual state of fear induced by this irregular status:

> Each time we [Youssef and his friends] leave our homes, we're scared. We're always going out to get food, right? But it's not easy. It's scary. I remember one time I was just trying to get some bread. I saw a police car nearby and my heart started beating so fast. I thought they were going to stop me. […] It's not just me, either. I've seen my friends get in trouble too. Some of them were just in the wrong place when the police came by. We never found out what happened to them. It's really tough. When we go out, just to get food, we're always scared. It feels like we're always hiding, always running.

The vulnerability of minors like Youssef intensifies when they lack proper documents, leading to the issuance of departure orders. These orders, although rarely enforced, subject children to potential abuse, including violence, false legal allegations, and arrest. As scholars note, Youssef’s persistent threat of deportation, or "deportability", more so than the act of deportation itself, defines his state of “illegality” in the Lebanon (De Genova 2010). This concept of deportability embeds itself deeply into the daily lives of Youssef, his friends and other fellow undocumented migrants, becoming an enduring part of their existence, and fostering a unique lived experience characterized by practical, tangible consequences and a profound internalization of their circumstances. This illegal status seeps into every facet of migrants' everyday lives, progressively encroaching on their social circles and community connections, thereby transforming their social experiences and interactions (Sigona 2012). Youssef and his peers exemplify this process, their interactions and community fabric distorted by constant fear and vigilance, transforming the host community into a landscape fraught with potential dangers.

However, minors’ criminalization 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 2014). 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 the narrative of Adnan illustrates, administrative actions such as detention and protective custody can serve to disrupt the social networks of these minor migrants and augment their experience of social isolation. A common thread woven through both his and Youssef's stories is the manifestation of how deportation orders, protective custody, and incarceration can take precedence over the needs and desires of these children and lead to their criminalization. In the subsequent section, I will explore the subsequent repercussions of this reality. Notably, this adverse context catalyzes not only new forms of exploitation but also emergent forms of self-empowerment and alternative mechanisms of care (Parreñas 2009).

Voices from the Streets: Navigating Survival, Agency, and Exploitation in Beirut

During my fieldwork, I encountered numerous minors whose narratives challenged the prevailing paradigm: one that casts the unaccompanied minor as the "victim," the smuggler/trafficker as the "perpetrator," and the state as the "savior." These accounts underscored how minors' engagements with human smugglers and other agents in the criminal underworld often exemplify a display of agency from the grassroots, as opposed to a passive capitulation to the growing reach and intricacy of large-scale criminal outfits that seem to flourish amid migration crises.

Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood, all in their mid-teens, were individuals I met during my fieldwork in Beirut. Their stories were interwoven with tales of escape from southern Syria in 2016 to avoid forced conscription by warring factions. Each was driven by a quest for safety and the means to support families left behind. Youssef's story, which has been detailed earlier in this article, was particularly poignant, highlighting the shared challenges faced by these young migrants.

The boys' entry into Lebanon was facilitated by a smuggler, who would later play an instrumental role in guiding their livelihoods in Beirut. Lacking familial ties in the city, it was this smuggler who directed them to a "makal" (a shop/place) where they could procure petty merchandise like lighters, flowers, and napkins for street vending. Their reliance on a smuggler not only to cross borders but also to find means of livelihood in Beirut showcases the practical manifestations of these "markets of dispossession". Without family connections in Lebanon, they were pushed to the peripheries of society, where they turned to street vending, a form of informal economic activity, as their survival tactic. Although street vending was not the career they had envisioned, necessity dictated this choice. As Mahmood vividly shared in a discussion, "The person who helped us cross the border connected us with another boy who guided us on vending… khalas [that's it]."

Significantly, data from a UNICEF study highlighted that street vending (37%) and begging (43%) were primary occupations for minor refugees in places like Beirut and Tripoli (2015). At the time of my research, street-based children had an average daily income of 16,700 Lebanese Lira (L.L.), which is approximately US$11.13 (CRI 2015). Of these children, 56% contributed their entire earnings to others, 31% shared their income, while only 13% retained their complete earnings (CRI 2015). This data is further corroborated by the accounts of Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood, who reported earnings

roughly equivalent to 10 dollars and noted that, after covering merchandise costs, they could keep the money for their personal use.

Humanitarian organizations and local officials frequently express concerns about the potential exploitation of minors by organized crime groups of traffickers. An expert in child rights from Lebanon remarked, “Many of these kids are not just flower sellers, they are organized by criminal gangs” (Tarling 2013). This perspective was reinforced in an interview with a police officer, who highlighted the challenges faced by law enforcement: “We're not blind to their situation, but there are laws, and the streets can't be a place for kids, they end up in the hands of criminal groups. Many times, we just ask them to move along, and sometimes they get detained, only to be released after a few hours."

In my discussions with unaccompanied minors, it became evident that the statements made by police officers were in contrast to the experiences of these youth, particularly in terms of the involvement of state policing systems in their street vending activities. Data revealed that Syrian children, due to the strict border entry and residency renewal procedures, frequently faced arrests and mistreatment by security personnel. These policies made it virtually impossible for minors aged over 15 to regularize their stay (Achilli et al. 2017). Those without proper documents were theoretically subject to departure, although deportations were rare. Such regulations increased their need to rely on a number of precarious or illicit activities to cope with their socio-economic vulnerability (Achilli et al. 2017). Street vending was one of them. Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood's accounts illustrated this, as they spoke of consistent anxiety in interactions with the police. “Every time we see the police, our heart races. They’ve taken our goods several times, and once, they detained me for hours. I was so scared,” Youssef mentioned. Hamza added, "Many say that kids like us, selling flowers and tissues, are organized by criminal gangs. But this is *haki fadi* [empty words]. We work in the street because there are no other jobs available to us here. We are treated as criminals in Lebanon." To underscore their perspective, Mahmood observed, “The real mafia, if you ask us, is the Lebanese government. Every day is a new challenge.”

Acknowledging that stringent migration policies can amplify vulnerabilities, leading migrants to informal or illicit activities prone to exploitation, it remains imperative to foreground the agency of these criminalized children, and how their attempts to cope with their own criminalization has broader implications on migration trajectories and crime dynamics.

Several months post our discussions in Beirut, I received an update regarding Mahmood, Youssef, and Hamza. A concise message from Mahmood relayed, "We are now in Greece." Accompanying this communication was a photograph, with the unmistakable backdrop of the Acropolis, situating them in central Athens. Their attire was notably different, hinting at the cooler Greek climate and their evolving circumstances.

In a follow-up call, Mahmood provided insights into their journey to Greece. They used the money they had saved from street vending in Beirut, combined with some funds from their families and contributions from relatives already in Europe. Opting for an often-used route by irregular migrants, they travelled clandestinely to Turkey by boat from Tripoli. The leg of their journey through Turkey was particularly demanding. The enforcement of the EU-Turkey agreement had substantially heightened border surveillance, making covert passage increasingly intricate. The logistics of their movement involved nights in makeshift shelters, possibly old barns or abandoned structures, and days strategically planned to evade vigilant border patrols. Eventually the boys managed to reach Turkish western cost and navigate their way to the Aegean coast onboard of rubber dinghy. Upon arrival, they were placed in a center designated for youth migrants. The conditions in the center were acceptable, but the confinement and uncertainty about their future prompted them to seek alternative means of reaching

mainland Europe. Again, they made contact with smugglers who, for a fee, offered a way out. With their help, they left the center and eventually found themselves transported to Athens.

Upon reflection, Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood's narratives provide a counterpoint to the dominant discourse which suggests that young migrants are largely exploited by expansive criminal networks. Their experiences indicate that interactions with criminal markets, such as smuggling and forced labor, are not solely products of coercion by vast criminal enterprises. Instead, these interactions often arise from individual micro-decisions, prompted by the need of navigating restrictive policies and the consequent criminalization faced by these migrants. By participating in smuggling and trafficking markets, the young men discerned a realm of opportunity, enabling them to initially manage their prolonged displacement in Libya and subsequently to augment their mobility across international borders.

This perspective sheds also light on the interplay between restrictive state policies and the perceived overlap of illegal markets, where smuggling and human trafficking seem to intersect. Rather than viewing this overlap as solely top-down criminal impositions, Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood's interactions with smuggling and trafficking networks can be understood as a series of pragmatic, bottom-up interactions where migrants seek to acquire capital—be it social, financial, or in-kind. The capital acquired in these "markets of dispossession" served as a mechanism for securing essential services and support, albeit at the potential cost of increased vulnerability.

Navigating the Bekaa Valley: Intersections of Exploitation and Agency

Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood exemplify migrants who, rather than being mere passive subjects, actively navigate their criminalization, influencing their paths and shaping crime formations. Yet, it is crucial to avoid an overly simplistic view. These markets of dispossession, while providing some agency, also manifest patterns of domination, gender inequality, and social disparities, resulting in distinct beneficiaries and victims. As legal entry routes decrease and border controls intensify, exploitation risks within these markets escalate.

A case in point was the story of Fatima – a young girl who lived in the Beqaa Valley. Situated in eastern Lebanon, the Beqaa Valley spans between the western Mount Lebanon range and the eastern Anti-Lebanon Mountains. Its fertile plains have long played a pivotal role in Lebanon's agricultural scene. However, in recent years, it has also transformed into a poignant symbol of displacement. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the valley has witnessed an influx of Syrian refugees seeking sanctuary from the conflict. The Valley, with its sprawling farmlands and the panoramic backdrop of snow-capped mountains, has become an emblematic space where the aftermaths of the Syrian war are profoundly felt. Informal tented settlements (ITS) speckle the valley's landscape, constructed from ad hoc materials and often distinguished by the unmistakable UN logo. Many of these refugees, escaping dire conditions, find themselves in a new set of challenges in the Beqaa Valley. It was here that I encountered Fatima.

When we first met, she was in her fifteens, yet bore the responsibilities of someone twice her age. With her parents having abandoned her and her three younger siblings, she became their sole provider and guardian. "I am the one who takes care of them," she declared when I inquired about her family's caregiver. Following their legal entry into Lebanon on a tourist visa, the children were left in the Bekaa by their parents, who returned to Syria, promising to come back within weeks. Their parents, however, never returned. "I am the one who takes care of them," she told me one evening, her voice exhibiting a mixture of pride and resentment. "When my parents left us here, they promised they would come back. Every day my youngest brother asks about them, but I have no answers. We've waited too long."

The children resided in an unfinished building with raw, unpainted walls near an ITS. Fatima secured a job in a jam factory, laboring six days a week, 12hours a day, for a meager US$8 per day, from which US$2 was deducted for the "shawish," the camp coordinator. "The shawish takes all the girls there [to the jam factory]," Fatima admitted. "You cannot be employed if you are younger than 15 years old. However, he has a special agreement with the owner: he takes the I.D. of a girl over 15 and allows younger girls to work [...] sometimes smugglers take kids directly to the shawish who will find them a job."

The Bekaa Valley, rife with narratives of smuggled Syrian minors and their susceptibility to trafficking, has often been at the center of policy documents and humanitarian reports. Media and reports have pointed towards this nexus of smugglers and labor traffickers, holding vulnerable refugees in bonded labor (Reuters 2016; UNICEF and Safe the Children 2015; United States Department of State 2018). A recent report underscores that smuggled Syrian minors are particularly susceptible to labor trafficking in this region, where "traffickers hold Syrian refugee men, women, and children in bonded labor in order to pay for food, shelter, and the cost of transit to Lebanon, and contract out groups of refugees to work in the agricultural sector in the Bekaa Valley" (United States Department of State 2018).

But as my days in the valley stretched and as the narratives of the people there unfolded, it became evident that these were not merely black and white tales of victimhood. While Fatima admitted to the shawish being connected to smugglers, she also revealed a detail that emphasized the ad-hoc nature of these interactions. Furthermore, despite the palpable tensions between Fatima and the shawish—attributable to the chunk of her earnings he demanded—she acknowledged his centrality in her life in the valley. "You see," she began, her voice deep in contemplation, "the shawish has connections. Without him, there's no job for me. He takes some of my earnings, yes, but he also gives me work."

Over the next few days, I became acquainted with this enigmatic figure. The shawish resided nearby, merely a brief walk from Fatima's temporary abode. His dwelling was unremarkable, similar to the numerous other shacks within the settlement. Instead of fitting the stereotype of a criminal syndicate leader, he was a lean man, likely in his late forties. His sunken eyes and calloused hands betrayed a history of manual labor and hardship. It soon became evident that he was not just a figure of authority in the settlement, but also a Syrian refugee who had sought refuge in Lebanon, escaping the horrors of the war back home.

When I approached him, he was wary but not unwilling to speak. "The world sees us as exploiters, but they don't know our reality," he began, his voice revealing both a sense of fatigue and defensiveness. "I connect people. These kids, these families, they need work. The factories and farms need hands. I bridge that gap." Probing further, I asked about his connection with the smugglers, to which he responded, "The muharrib [smuggler] and I, we're from the same place. We know the land, the borders. They bring people who need work. I help them find it. It's not charity; it's business. But it's also survival."

In 1993, Lebanon and Syria signed a bilateral agreement that granted reciprocal freedom to residents of both countries to stay, work and carry out economic activities (Achilli et al. 2017). Child labor amongst Syrians is a widespread phenomenon, and legally, Syrians who are 15 years old and above can work in three sectors: agriculture, construction and manual labor. However, due to the difficulties that both minors and adults faced in finding an employer who is willing to sponsor them, the issuance of work permits for Syrians remains low (Achilli et al. 2017).

At the time of my research, indeed, all Syrians refugees entering Lebanon had to obtain an official document of entry at the border and then undergo a complex bureaucratic procedure to regularize their stay. Obtaining and maintaining valid legal residency, therefore, was a significant challenge. Between January 2015 and June 2016, there were two options for a Syrian national to obtain residency:

sponsorship by a Lebanese citizen or reliance on a UNHCR registration certificate (Achilli et al. 2017). If a Syrian did not sign a mandatory "pledge not to work", or if they were found by the authorities to be working, those registered with UNHCR would have to renew their residency on the basis of a sponsor. From June 2016, the "pledge not to work" was replaced by the "pledge to abide by Lebanese Law", which had to be signed on a yearly basis. Moreover, most Syrians wishing to renew a residency permit had to pay a US$200 fee for each person above the age of 15 (Achilli et al. 2017).

As a result of their involvement in irregular labor in the Beqaa Valley, Fatima and many other refugees feared that they could be detained or deported- a situation that seems to replicate a scenario already seen in Beirut with Youssef, Hamza, and Mahmood. All interviewed minors in the Beqaa Valley claimed to work, mostly irregularly and occasionally, for an average of five days a month: a level of employment that was hardly sufficient to cover their daily needs. Whereas Syrian refugees used to earn around US$10 for five hours of work, prior to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, in 2017 minors could work an entire day in the fields for US$4 (Achilli et al. 2017).

In one of our last conversations, Fatima confided, "The work at the factory is backbreaking, and the hours are long. But it is better [than nothing]" In recounting Fatima's story, her narrative simultaneously highlights the adversities she faces and underscores her agency. It is emblematic of others like her who found in the condition of forming connections and engaging in a network of relationships that often straddled the line between abuse and opportunity.

In one of our concluding discussions, Fatima expressed, "The labor at the factory is grueling, with exhaustive hours, yet it remains more favorable than complete absence of employment." Her narrative underscores the multifaceted challenges Syrian minors grapple with in their transitions. Confronted by rigid border regulations, limited legal avenues for entry, and complex administrative barriers, these minors find themselves ensnared in a continuum of exploitation, resorting to sporadic and undercompensated work by sheer compulsion. The intricate interplay of smugglers, labor intermediaries, and camp facilitators paints a nuanced picture. It goes beyond a straightforward dichotomy of victimhood, revealing a makeshift survival system wherein relationships and affiliations could spell the balance between sheer destitution and mere sustenance. Nevertheless, the undeniable element threading through these accounts is that children's agency is often rooted in patterns of exploitation. Notably, this exploitation is not always orchestrated by transnational criminal networks. More frequently, it is the result of close relatives, known associates, and community figures thrust into exploitative roles due to the dearth of viable alternatives.

Conclusion: converging dispossession?

In drawing our examination to a close, it is clear that criminalizing policies exert considerable influence on the lived experiences of migrants. Indeed, the significant involvement of unaccompanied minors in criminal(ized) markets seems to be a response to heightened border securitization. The policies that the Lebanese government – and similarly other countries along the migration route of these minors, such as Greece and Turkey – have adopted became increasingly punitive, imposing physical restrictions and surveillance measures that concomitantly criminalized and marginalized minors and other migrants. The interactions of minors with criminal or criminalized markets, at least in the cases examined, did not arise from the growth of powerful criminal networks. Instead, they were a result of minors resorting to precarious, illicit strategies to achieve their migration goals or merely cope with their ongoing criminalization.

Youssef, Hamza and Mahmood's participation in street peddling is not merely an unresponsive surrender to criminal organizations. It is a deliberate decision taken to address their immediate needs of survival and supporting their families back home. Their actions challenge the traditional view of a

minor refugee as a victim and show them as active participants navigating the criminal underworld to sustain themselves. Their actions exemplify the working of these "markets of dispossession," an informal economy driven by socio-economically marginalized individuals who resort to illicit activities to survive in an increasingly challenging environment. In this context, their exploitation in Beirut is not so much indicative of large-scale organized crime taking over illicit business but more of individual and decentralized survival mechanisms. Hamza and Mahmood are not only victims but also actors who engage in these markets to meet their basic needs, turning their situation of dispossession into a site of agency.

Fatima's story provides further evidence into the complex dynamics underpinning these "markets of dispossession". Even as she grapples with circumstances fraught with uncertainties and hardships, her interactions with the shawish, and indeed with the world around her, manifest the exercise of agency, a crucial element often overlooked when examining the lived experiences of minors in such circumstances. Rather than being cornered into static, unyielding employment conditions, Aisha strategically navigates her environment. She adjusts her employment situation to align better with her evolving needs and those of her siblings. Her decision to leave the physically demanding farm work, for example, was driven by a desire to protect her wellbeing and be more present for her siblings. Her subsequent job changes signal a response to her immediate socio-economic environment, underscoring her active role in managing her circumstances.

However, the temporal dimension of exploitation cannot be overlooked. While migrants might initially agree to exploitative labor conditions, viewing them as stepping stones to future mobility, the wear and tear of sustained exploitation over time can become an impediment. Extended periods of exploitation can result in heightened emotional distress, financial impoverishment, and physical weariness, potentially anchoring them in a state of forced immobility.

In sum, the research participants of this study are not merely passive victims of sophisticated criminal networks but they are first key actors who navigate their illegalization and, in the process, contribute to the growth or maintenance of criminal(ized) systems through their actions. However, the crucial backdrop to consider is that the agency of minors like them unfolds within a context of pronounced dependence and adversity. The actions they undertake are spurred by an immediate survival need and a lack of better options. This underscores a stark interaction with these criminalizing environments. Therefore, while acknowledging their agency, it is equally essential to highlight the systemic issues—poverty, inequality, and social instability—that compel their participation in these "markets of dispossession." This engagement illuminates the complex nexus of policy implementation, individual response, mobility dynamics, and crime formation, revealing layers of complexity that are often overlooked.

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