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Article

Trafficking and Syrian Refugee Smuggling: Evidence from the Balkan Route

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Abstract
As of March 2016, 4.8 million Syrian refugees were scattered in two dozen countries by the civil war. Refugee smuggling has been a major catalyst of human trafficking in the Middle East and Europe migrant crises. Data on the extent to which smuggling devolved into trafficking in this refugee wave is, however, scarce. This article investigates how Syrian refugees interact with smugglers, shedding light on how human smuggling and human trafficking interrelated on the Balkan Route. I rely on original evidence from in-depth interviews ($n = 123$) and surveys ($n = 100$) with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Serbia, and Germany; as well as ethnographic observations in thirty-five refugee camps or other sites in these countries. I argue that most smugglers functioned as guides, informants, and allies in understudied ways—thus refugee perceptions diverge dramatically from government policy assumptions. I conclude with a recommendation for a targeted advice policy that would acknowledge the reality of migrant-smuggler relations, and more effectively curb trafficking instead of endangering refugees.

Keywords
anti-smuggling; anti-trafficking; asylum; Balkan Route; forced migration; migrants; refugees; Syrian; smuggling; trafficking

Issue
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1. Introduction

The Syrian refugee wave on the Balkan Route in 2014–2016 has rekindled interest in the intersection of trafficking with migrant smuggling. Not only has the transnational human smuggling operation stretching from Turkey and the Middle East to Western Europe transported over a million people in less than 18 months; but government anti-trafficking efforts have failed to effectively isolate traffickers thriving within the broader category of smugglers. Indeed, smuggler bribes and patron-client arrangements have infiltrated state organs to such a dramatic extent (Reitano, 2015) that many traffickers operate with impunity while low-level smugglers and refugees are persecuted.

This article suggests that this failure is in part a result of a misperception of the role of migrant smugglers: whereas governments predominantly treat them as dangerous criminals enabling trafficking, the refugees themselves perceive them as guides, advisors, and allies. The latter perception—whether we like it or not—must be acknowledged in any pragmatic anti-trafficking policy aimed at aiding refugees. In addition to being exploitative, smugglers are crucial middle-men who shape refugee outcomes where governments fail to do so. Below I offer a description of smugglers' understudied roles in five areas and propose a "Targeted Advise" policy that acknowledges these realities to decrease trafficking risk.

2. Literature Review

Scholars of forced migration have theorized the modern growth of a "'migration industry' consisting of smugglers, traffickers and other 'illegal operators'" (Castles, 2003, p. 15). Against state-centered narratives—and the proclaimed agendas of many national governments themselves—they argued that repressive border management policies are a *cause*, not a consequence, of the expansion of smuggling. "The growth in people trafficking [in the post-Cold War period] is a result of the re-

strictive immigration policies of rich countries" (Castles, 2003, p. 15). Gibney (2006) likewise points out that migratory risks through illegal channels have dramatically increased in significance, bringing private middle-men to the fore. Migratory decision-making has increasingly been shifted from state representatives to "unaccountable actors [such as] smugglers and traffickers," who have been "empowered" by increasingly repressive border management since the 1980s (p. 143). This study explores the consequences of this empowerment.

The literature on forced migration has historically reflected "an overwhelming tendency to focus on the cause of refugee movements within the nation-state rather than at a more systemic level" (Skran & Daughtry, 2007, p. 24). Migration research methods more broadly have been criticized for treating the nation-state as "container" (Faist, 2000) within which migratory decisions are determined. Many approaches to the Syrian refugee crisis have, furthermore, suffered from "methodological nationalism" (Schiller, 2009) in failing to consider the Balkan Route as a transnational entity. In the wake of Yugoslav disintegration, neoliberal reforms and regional EU integration processes, the post-Cold War Balkan Route has served as a dominant bridge for drug, arms and other contraband entering Western Europe from Turkey. Each Route nation serves as a critical bridge country for transnational smuggling operations (see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015, and preceding yearly reports). Given the coherence of the Balkan Route as a rooted, historically-robust criminal grid for movement of contraband, ideas, and people (Von Lampe, 2008), investigating the Syrian refugee wave in a single site (typically a European destination country) is limiting.

Alternative approaches have emphasized transnational processes (Portes, 2003; Vertovec, 2004; Wimmer & Schiller, 2003), including the smuggling of asylum-seekers into Europe (Koser, 2007). Though my five-nation sample does not exhaust the sites that constitute the transnational Balkan Route, it is a significant supplement to single-country case-study approaches. By considering common smuggling experiences, state responses to trafficking, and border management policies across bridge countries, I at least *approximate* systemic features of the Balkan Route as a transnational social space.

Notoriously, migration management policies often have counter-intuitive effects. Portes (1997) famously applies Robert Merton's approach to unintended consequences of social action to theorize incoherent, and sometimes counterproductive, unforced migration management (cf. Castles, 2003, p. 25). Scholars and policymakers alike have recognized that anti-smuggling policies are often futile symbolic gestures aimed at political gain (Kyle & Koslowski, 2013; Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012). With the rise of anti-migrant sentiment in Europe, governments were increasingly under pressure to institute bombastic measures aimed not at desired migration outcomes, but at *perceived* strength of anti-migrant commitment. Unintended consequences have grown accordingly: "the countries that complained the most about the existence of border fences and walls, and vowed to bring them down forever, are now busily constructing them" (Park, 2015, p. 11).

On the Balkan Route—the dominant channel by which the Middle Eastern migrant crisis spilt into Europe—anti-trafficking policies were the pillar of migration management. Governments and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have elevated the challenge of refugee smuggling to the European level, G-8 summits and United Nations (UN) conferences, warning that it threatens regional security and stability. Indeed, "crackdown" on migrant smuggling has been the defining posture of national governments affected by the European refugee crisis (Albahari, 2015), and the core of multinational efforts by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and Frontex to curb immigration (NATO, 2016). Both in rhetoric and policy, smugglers and traffickers have been a preoccupation of governments during this crisis.

On the Turkey-to-Greece segment of the Route, anti-smuggler policies have generated considerable counter-productive effects, including the well-known drownings of 3,078 migrants in the Mediterranean by July 2016 (United Nations News Center, 2016). Indeed, research has documented that thousands of drownings and near-drownings were in effect *caused* by government rescue operations (Heller & Pezzani, 2016). By conflating trafficking with smuggling, emphasizing seizure and destruction of smuggler vessels, and militarizing the Balkan Route, European states and their partners have made an already frail asylum system riskier for migrants (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2016).

Meanwhile, many Syrian forced migrants are denied non-smuggler mechanisms for obtaining asylum-seeker and refugee status. Formally, Balkan Route countries uphold international laws. Informally, there is growing concern that the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the European Schengen and Dublin Accords, were regularly violated during the refugee crisis, both before and after the EU–Turkey agreement (Maurer, personal communication, 2016). The Common European Asylum System has proven difficult to maintain, as it requires migrants to be on the territory of the state in which they wish to seek asylum while "EU law makes it virtually impossible to get to that country safely and legally" (Costello, 2016, p. 12).

Castles, De Haas and Miller (2013) and Watters (2013) have emphasized that meso-level agents such as smugglers have been neglected in forced migration studies, including in the burgeoning literature on "ecomigration" (House, 2007; Reuveny, 2007). To make matters worse, sex and forced labor trafficking is often conflated with migrant smuggling (Paszkiewicz, 2015), though the former is a relatively small subset in the refugee context (International Labour Organization, 2012; Shelley, 2010). While human smuggling into western Europe and

Germany is by no means a new phenomenon (Morrison & Crosland, 2000; Neske, 2006), little is known about when, how and why migrants find and decide to interact with smugglers (for exceptions, see Bauer, 2016; International Organization for Migration, 2015; Liempt & Sersli, 2013).

Bottom-up qualitative investigations of the smuggler-migrant relationship have been particularly rare. Partly due to an unfortunate habit of the literature to minimize or neglect refugee agency, investigations of Syrian refugees rarely employ interview or survey instruments with displaced Syrians themselves. Policies against smugglers are often designed with little empirical insight into how trafficking devolves into smuggling, and what motivates refugees to relate to smugglers as they do. One study purportedly addressing "why migrants risk their lives" via smuggling networks relies on no data from the migrants themselves, inferring their motivations from government policies (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2014). This study is a corrective measure in this urgent research field.

3. Methods

Qualitative data was drawn in 2015 and 2016 in five countries, including destination countries Germany and Jordan, as well as key Balkan Route transit countries Turkey, Greece, and Serbia.[1] Trained researchers conducted in-depth interviews (1–4 hours, average of 1.5; recorded and transcribed) with Syrian refugees ($n = 123$), complementary quantifiable surveys (written) ($n = 100$) and ethnographic observation at thirty-five refugee sites. These sites included refugee camps such as Za'atari in Jordan and Preševo in Serbia, as well as improvised migrant settlements at border crossings. Smuggler-migrant dynamics were the focus of ethnography in urban spaces such as parks, piers, train and bus stations, public squares and areas inhabited by migrants near camps.

At several sites—including Azraq Camp in Jordan and Fluchtlingsunterkunft Borbecker Stase Camp in Germany—we enjoyed rare access unavailable to most investigators and journalists. Restricted access was gained through the institutional support of a sponsoring academic institution with ties to local Ministries and NGOs. A notable obstacle to our original research design was the July 2016 attempted Turkish coup, which aborted our access to camps and jeopardized the safety of our researchers. Similar, lesser political events occasionally prevented us from accessing certain sites, or forced us to re-sample and seek out new chain-referral informants.

The in-depth questionnaire and survey focused on costs of migration, information sources, the subject's background, life in Syria, decision to leave Syria, arrival and transit in foreign countries, perceptions of host populations and governments, and migration methods with emphasis on transactions, contact and relations with smugglers. The male/female ratio, age distribution (from 18 to 65), range of regional Syrian origins, socioeconomic status and education levels were all reasonably balanced. Political allegiances (predominantly anti-Assad) and ethnic background (disproportionately Kurdish Syrian) were understandably tilted, given the differences between Syrian IDPs and refugees. Interviews were almost exclusively conducted in Arabic either directly by a native or fluent researcher or through an interpreter; the exceptions were nine interviews conducted in English and another two in German.

The shorter instrument of the survey—with closed-ended items and scales—was administered and filled out by the researchers, and was completed in 20–40 minutes, gathering data from individuals who were unavailable for the full hour required for in-depth interviewing. Missing values on any given survey item never exceeded 12% of the sample. No two respondents were drawn from the same traveling unit or nuclear family, and none overlapped with the in-depth sample. The survey was intended to complement in-depth interviews with precise quantifiable estimates of such things as smuggler prices, length of migration and other information that would require too much interruption and elicitation during in-depth conversations.

While ethnographic observation was modeled on Allan's (2013) anthropology of Palestinian refugee camps, in-depth interviewing was designed following Hagan's (2008) conversations with irregular migrants across the US–Mexico border. Interview data was extracted through content analysis of transcripts to document the following: failed attempts at border crossings and migration via smugglers; positive, neutral and negative evaluations of smugglers; indications of reliance on smugglers for *anything* other than smuggling—including information, protection, childcare, social capital, emotional support, advice and entertainment; all instances of other Syrians recommending, advising against, or evaluating smugglers; mentions of smuggler-government collaboration, witnessed or perceived; and indications of trafficking, as defined above. Positive, negative, and neutral evaluations of all smugglers and other "middle-men" was compared throughout. Ethnographic observation of the subject's environment often led to secondary "coding by ear" of the audio recordings to supplement the transcripts.

The research team consisted of six fieldworkers and the author, who was Principal Investigator. Researchers underwent extensive training on interview-based and ethnographic methods, and on interacting with sensitive and traumatized populations. Interviewees were sampled—with informants' and experts' assistance—to diversify age, gender, socioeconomic status, traveling unit size, migration route, length of residence in country, and regional Syrian origin. Experts and informants

[1] Full methodological appendix available upon request, including sampling strategy, country subsample differences, list of sites and informants, response rates, exact dates, and limitations.

included government officials, NGO or INGO workers, camp volunteers, and residents. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed in written consent forms, and debriefing carefully invited requests for deletions by the subjects.

4. Results: Smugglers as Guides, Informants, and Allies

Following convention (Aronowitz, 2001; Iselin & Adams, 2003), I differentiate between *smugglers*—those facilitating or seeking to facilitate illegal border crossings—and *traffickers*—who threatened or employed coercion and/or deception towards migrants. Intra-national trafficking is of course possible, but outside the scope of this study. For present purposes, I treat trafficking (i.e., *international*) as a subset of migrant smuggling. In our data, cases of smuggling devolving into trafficking were fortuitously clear because questionnaires explicitly inquired about "anything" being arranged or done by the smuggler "without your consent" and "without your knowledge." Thus, when migrants experienced *any* exploitation (labor or otherwise), or *any* coercive (including nonviolent) or deceptive (including for the migrants' alleged self-interest) behavior on the part of the smuggler, this was operationalized as trafficking. Survey items also inquired directly about labor exploitation, violence, choice, and threat—as further cross-validation.

A central finding is that the overwhelming majority of the subjects (∼75%) did *not* report trafficking experiences:

- only 7.9% of the sample reported being asked to engage in labor at any point during migration;
- 26.8% of the sample reported experiencing deception at the hands of smugglers (compared to 36.6% who reported deception by soldiers, policemen or other state officials);
- 12.2% reported involuntary family separations caused by smugglers (compared to 17.6% who experienced the same caused by government officials).

More generally, the "horror film" stories (as a young respondent memorably put it) about *government* officials' behaviors—both witnessed and anticipated—made reported problems with smugglers appear minor and infrequent. Statements of positive evaluations of smugglers (e.g., "They saved us," or "I owe him my life") numbered in the dozens across the sample. Comparable statements about *any* government or relief agencies ("They give us clothes, food," or "They were good to us at the Camp") were noted a handful of times. This is especially striking given the settings of most interviews.

The subset of trafficking experiences, furthermore, consisted mainly of *relatively* noncoercive and nonviolent violations of trust: minor theft, pursuit of unagreed-upon migration routes, changing dates of departure and arrival to avoid law-enforcement, exaggerating the comfort of the means of transportation, threatening (without realization) to cancel travel arrangements mid-way, lying about life vests, and underestimating number of co-travelers. Exceptions were rare: two respondents reported being threatened by a smuggler with a deadly weapon; and one indicated (albeit ambiguously) that smugglers kidnapped her daughter. Overall, however, even a conservative operationalization of deception and coercion led to the conclusion that *most* of the smugglers did not engage in any prolonged social relationship beyond the voluntary exchange of money for services.

Below I explore six features of the refugee-smuggler relationship, suggesting that intelligent analysis and resulting policy must carefully differentiate traffickers from smugglers in each domain. I conclude with a policy recommendation for a targeted advice campaign to decrease risk of trafficking.

For brevity, each section merely summarizes overall trends and illustrates with ideal-typical examples. All data is from interview transcripts, surveys or ethnographic fieldnotes, unless otherwise noted.

4.1. Trust

Positive evaluations of smugglers permeated the interviews. Subjects overwhelmingly expressed favorable views of smugglers and their handling of the migration; solidarity was often formulated in religious, ethnic, and even familial terms. Strikingly, one woman who nearly died because of her trafficker's negligence ("My job is to put you on the boat," he cynically told her on the phone during a near-death experience *he* caused, "If you drown, this is up to Allah"), nevertheless maintained a sympathy towards him that is thoroughly typical throughout the sample:

> Smuggler for us was very good. I know this smuggler is working in illegal way, but he help us. They help us. Maybe they took some money, but the problem is that they are afraid….He is like us. I don't blame him….This smuggler is our friend, our friend.

On a five-point scale of satisfaction with their smuggler, 73.7% of survey respondents gave the highest score ("very satisfied") to their criminal ally, with several indicating "10" to emphasize their gratitude. Only 16.4% were either "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied," of whom several clarified that they were referring to only one smuggler experience (i.e. one leg of the journey), to be differentiated from the main smugglers. Refugees were overall unambiguously opposed to policies targeting traffickers, which they (understandably) perceived as targeting Syrian refugees.

4.2. Access

Subjects primarily found smugglers at public places such as parks, bus/train stations and ports in transit countries (47%) or through a recommendation by Syrian friends

and family or other migrants (33%). The overwhelming majority of word-of-mouth recommendations were ethnic- or kinship-based and reliable. Only 12% of survey respondents indicated that the smuggler found them, and—crucially—*those* subjects were more likely to experience trafficking. Interview respondents who recalled recommendations for smugglers mostly relied on advice from Syrians in their immediate vicinity, secondarily on recommendations from their predecessors who traveled the Balkan Route months or years before them.

Much has been made of the importance of social media in the refugee crisis (Gillespie et al., 2016). It is certainly true that Internet access and cellular phone chargers have empowered subjects to study route maps, to keep in touch with contacts at destination countries, and to learn of incidents at borders and camps. On the whole, cell phones have allowed greater adaptability and quicker reaction to changes in border management. But this conceals an equally-important datum: online information about traffickers hardly matters at all. *Not a single respondent* identified the Internet as a means of finding a smuggler. This migration decision—arguably the most consequential—is decidedly done offline. Thus, measures targeting traffickers online may not be the ideal priority.

4.3. Costs

Smugglers were by far the greatest relative cost of migration (Table 1). Survey respondents indicated a mean of 954.96 Euros given to smugglers per individual (with or without families). Among those not traveling alone, half the sample gave on average less than 1,000 Euros for their family, 38.1% gave between 1,000–5,000 Euros, and 11.9% more than 5,000 Euros (see Figures 1–2). The uppermost reported cost per 16-person traveling unit was as high as 35,600 Euros, while the maximal reported cost per person was 4,000 Euros for a journey from Turkey to Serbia. Disaggregating the average costs per individual per segment of journey (i.e., a single smuggling trip, as opposed to multiple trips by different smugglers or by different transportation means), we see costs increase significantly as refugees get farther to their destination countries. Among those going to Europe (i.e., excluding the Jordan sub-sample), 54% pay between 1–1,000 Euros per person per segment of journey; 25% pay 1,000–2,000; and 21% pay 2,000–4,000.

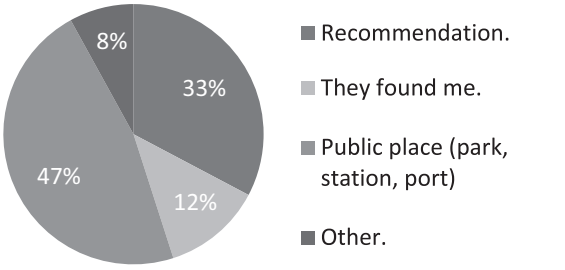

Figure 1. Means of finding smuggler. Note: Means responses also included "Internet," which 0 respondents selected; "Other" included fill-in-the-blank option: answers included "By luck," "By chance," "Accidentally.").

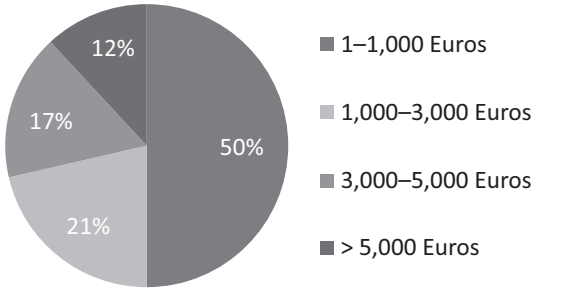

Figure 2. Average smuggling cost per family. Note: Means responses also included "Internet," which 0 respondents selected; "Other" included fill-in-the-blank option: answers included "By luck," "By chance," "Accidentally."

Table 1. Relative migration costs.

Most Common Rankings	**Smuggler + Buses/trains/taxis**	**Smuggler + Buses/trains/taxis + Food**	**Smuggler + Theft/loss of money/resources**	**All Other Ranking Orders**
Percentage of Respondents	25.5%	17.6%	3.9%	53%
	#1 Most Costly	**#2 Most Costly**	**#3 Most Costly**	
Smugglers	76.5%	5.9%	2.0%	
Buses/Trains/Taxis	21.6%	51.0%	2.0%	
Food	2.0%	11.8%	23.6%	
Theft/Loss of Money/Resources	2.0%	7.9%	7.9%	
Medicine/Doctors	0	3.9%	5.9%	
Lodging/Shelter	3.9%	0	0	

Notes: Additional response format categories "Clothing," "Government Fees, Forced Payments," and "Money/resources for family/friends other than migration companions" yielded zero responses. Respondents indicated whether they were major expenses or not, then ranked the top three. Expense category orderings were randomized so that five sets of 15 survey questionnaires had this item with 15 different answer orderings.

Among the refugees who journeyed into Europe, the financial burden of traveling in a family group was greater than traveling alone or with strangers. Traveling with children under 18 or the elderly (over 65) resulted in a higher total cost per family unit. Approximately 75% of respondents in the highest quartile of reported travel costs—that is, three-quarters of those who spent the most money to reach Europe—were traveling with dependents. As may be expected, refugees traveling with as many as seven or eight family members paid more overall than refugees traveling alone.

Finally, the interview subjects who traveled before the March 2016 closing of the Balkan Route apparently paid up to 500 Euros less than their peers who traversed similar paths after the EU–Turkey agreement. Subjects migrating prior to the closing of the Route paid a mean 1,000 Euros for the boat ride (children were uncharged); a few reported paying 600. The mean per leg of journey (i.e., per single smuggling segment between two points) increased on average 33% after the Route closing. The data clearly suggests that anti-smuggler repression simply made smuggling more lucrative. With increased anti-smuggler crackdowns, the boat ride to Europe and the preconditions for it became much riskier—making the entire journey more perilous and expensive. Put differently, smugglers were asked to accomplish a trickier feat; and—from the refugee's perspective—smugglers became more inaccessible and costly.

Consequently, refugee narratives about labor-based trafficking were much more common among those traveling in the post-closure period. Not a single respondent traveling before March 2016 reported trafficking experiences. In contrast, seven reported being offered to work for a trafficker to pay off debt when traveling after the Route closure. Discussed jobs included hairdressing, restaurant serving, construction work, translating and recruiting customers for the voyage. One subject understood the steep price, noting: "They also have to pay the police. The police are also customers for the smugglers."

4.4. Shelter and Care

Counterintuitively, many subjects appeared to have enjoyed a comprehensive, all-inclusive service from their criminal providers *without* experiencing trafficking. They relied on a single smuggler's network of shelter for the full journey from Turkey to Serbia and even Germany. Various safe houses along the way were included in the service—even, occasionally, medical care. Residents and experts in bridge countries readily listed various criminal sites (motels, private houses, outdoor garages, campsites) reportedly used as illicit safe houses for refugees. A local motel/inn where the author resided during fieldwork was one such safe house.

While other subjects slept in public parks for weeks, waiting for their smuggler contact or a new criminal recruiter to approach them with directions for moving on, the ones in smuggler safe houses were ironically better protected from harsh weather, violence by hostile locals, and—arguably—traffickers.

Subjects even described a criminal health care arrangement (though it sounded exceptional). One refugee was quite satisfied with his: "[Smuggler] was good. He had organization. He took care of everything. Full service, everything organized, doctors organized, doctors included in the price. He was very good."

Though this is by no means common, it is striking to contrast with the considerable skepticism about state-sponsored medical resources, including at camps. Far from exaggerating an illness to expedite the trip to Germany, many refugees seemed instead to *hide* it. Scarred by war-related interrogations in Turkey, Syrians feared that revealing any weakness would jeopardize their movement:

> Q. Did you go see the doctors here?
> A1. No, no. No thank you. They will say you are sick, goodbye. I am healthy, I am educated, I will be no problem in Europe.
> A2. Yes, my daughter had a cold. They were very good. She got medicaments, she is better now. But you know, we don't trust doctors. The doctors in [Turkish camp] ask how did you get this injury? Are you for the revolution or for Assad? And then you are finished. You will never leave.

But officials hardly shared this worldview. Well-aware of the elaborate network of criminal hiding and sheltering, border patrolmen, policemen, soldiers, and camp guards were on the lookout in all five countries, particularly Jordan, Turkey, and Serbia. One policeman confessed that the first danger he is worried about is "terrorists and lunatics." The second: "traffickers" who are infiltrating the Camp to recruit customers. Whenever he sees anybody moving around between traveling groups on site, "I send the translator to listen." At the outer gates of his Camp, where migrants waited to board buses, watchful guards chased any potential recruiters, drivers, or motel advertisers away. Comparable measures in effect fail to differentiate between smugglers (who may in fact be reducing risk) from predatory traffickers.

4.5. Trailblazers, Expectations, and Smuggler Adaptation

Cumulative causation and the role of networks in migratory outcomes is a staple of the migration literature (Fussell & Massey, 2004), apparent also in Syrian migration in this study. A sizable minority of in-depth subjects were not pioneer migrants: they are following their family members, friends or countrymen who acted as trailblazers on the Balkan Route. These informants provided encouragement, expectations, suggestions, and smuggler introductions. Such "chain migration" is a familiar phenomenon (Palloni, Massey, Ceballos, Espinosa,

& Spittel, 2001), but primarily in conditions of economic migration and consistency in border management.

Syrian refugees encountered nothing of the sort. The advice given to them by their predecessors related to the Balkan Route of six-to-thirty months before their own journeys. Information on which borders to cross and how, what smuggler prices and services to expect, how many people to travel with, where to sleep, and how to navigate camps, was often outdated.

A consequence of such misleading expectations was increased risk of being trafficked, as smugglers increasingly engaged in deception when describing and offering transportation. Many crossed the Mediterranean with false information from their trafficker about how many people would be on board, and whether there would be a pilot. This was a substantive change from the trailblazer experience:

> Q. How was your father's journey, his travel, compared to yours?
> A. …He have no problems in the sea. Safe. But…we…we had swimming time. My sister fall in water. She fall in…cold water, as ice. You know, so it was bad situation. We have problem keeping her warm, we garbage her shoes, her clotheses. [shaking head]. So, she had swimming time because they let us go alone. My father had a pilot.

Another elderly female subject complained about her trailblazer's advice because it made it sound "easier than it was."

Relatedly, there is evidence for the decline of "One Stop Shop" smuggling. Namely, whereas the trailblazers reportedly relied on a *single* criminal organization, their followers encountered a Route that is inhospitable to this possibility.

> Q. How did you find [the Turkish smuggler]?
> A. Through word-of-mouth. My friends [who left a year earlier] told me. He was recommended. It was for the full travel, from Turkey to Germany. He had drivers for them [in every country]….We thought he would be good.
> Q. But things have changed.
> A. He didn't call us for three weeks after we gave him the money! [imitating] Don't worry, tomorrow. He said in Greece his partner will wait for us, and nothing. Bandits! That's why today people use six, seven, eight smugglers for the full travel. You need to start again, each contact.

Naturally, each new arrival and border-crossing requires migrants to search for new smugglers, exposing them repeatedly to new trafficking arrangements.

More generally, when a set of embarkation and disembarkation points are efficiently used by the smugglers, their experience in transporting their clients guarantees a certain degree of certainty and predictability. When government controls at these points intensify, the smugglers adapt by pursuing other routes to avoid capture. Given their inexperience and ignorance of the new paths, these new routes tend to be longer and more dangerous for the migrants. Hence many subjects paid dearly—not just in money but in physical health—for smuggler adaptations to state crackdowns. Some became victims of trafficking.

Almost all the interviewees (116/123) reported repeated failures at crossing borders—ranging from three to a record thirteen. Dozens were arrested or detained against their will for attempted crossings. Thirty-four subjects were arrested or detained *repeatedly* in Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Macedonia or within Syria itself, trying to cross borders. Most subjects who passed through Turkey repeatedly failed to get to Greece the first time around. A typical failure resulted in fingerprinting, detention, or deportation to Syria. One subject was separated from her 17-year old son, reunited only six days later. Another woman survived several days of "walking in the mountains from Latakia to Turkey" *on foot* from Syria (some sixty km of hostile terrain), not too far from intensive battles.

Other serious risks to life, health, safety, and integrity of the travel unit were commonplace. These risks primarily came from soldiers, policemen, guards, and other state representatives. Secondarily, they came from smugglers adapting to state crackdown by abandoning their clients.

> A. He [the smuggler] was complaining.
> Q. What did he say?
> A. He said business is bad. People don't have money. Police are stronger. He said before, he could not keep up with all the customers. [imitating smuggler] Thousands every day, not enough boats! With us, he said he needed. He also used cheap boats now. Because he loses them.

Another consequence of criminal adaptations relates to documents. Many Syrian refugees have no documents to begin with. A Camp Coordinator in Preševo estimated that less than 10% of Syrian refugees arrived with passports. Syrians in particular, especially the ones who had been politically exposed as anti-Assad, risk being labeled traitors for wanting to leave the country. "They ask for my passport," a former combatant said incredulously, "Getting a passport is a death sentence." Others, however, gave their documents to the smugglers as collateral: "[I have] no passport. My wife has passport, my childrens. Smuggler wanted passport, I give my passport. If you give them document, you are priority."

4.6. Smugglers as Informants

Given the inconsistency of border management across the Route, refugees are often obstructed from effectively avoiding risk, planning safe travel and interacting

with smugglers in a transparent, relatively safe way. Consequently, subjects became more dependent on smugglers who promised to reduce uncertainty about how and when to cross borders. Dozens upon dozens of risky border-crossings, within-country movements between camps or sites, and voluntary separations or mergers with other traveling groups were done directly because of smuggler advice.

Interviewees sometimes reported not being certain of which country they are currently in, let alone national, linguistic, and other nuances. They rarely if ever knew the difference between EU and non-EU states, where Schengen ends, or what the relevant territorial jurisdictions are. In such circumstances, smuggler information (and its associated offers) ironically appeared to be a stable basis for deciding. As dependence on smugglers for advice increases, the potential for trafficking naturally follows.

Dependence on smugglers for information is exacerbated by belief in the corruption of state organs. "Who can trust them?" asked one subject in Greece. "They want just to arrest us," suggested another in Germany. This perception is not restricted to the migrants. Multiple expert interviewees—including a Secret Service professional who interrogated traffickers deported backward along the Route, a seasoned UNHCR fieldworker, and two government officials in Ministries dealing with border controls—reported that elements of the police, army and government were integral to smuggler operations. One UNHCR expert went even suggested that corrupt police elements prefer to arrest innocent refugees on false charges of smuggling (as indeed happen to a man in the Greece subsample) than to arrest known criminals who bribe policemen.

Finally, smugglers enjoy such a privileged position as information-providers because governments and refugee aid managers diligently *avoid* topics of illegal border crossings. Fieldwork revealed that bridge country refugee camps, transit centers, humanitarian sites and other government-regulated sites emphasize only a narrow selection of information through their material and staff. Typically, the scope is restricted to legalistic and security matters (asylum procedures, national laws) and humanitarian procedures governing the sites (food, clothing, shelter). Daily tasks of camp workers rarely allow for private, secure information exchange that grants migrants honesty without fear of penalty. Staff communicating verbally with migrants focus on their immediate duties, rarely discussing the migrants' lives outside the immediate jurisdiction of the site or camp. Pamphlets, posters, signs, maps, and Wi-Fi hotspot homepages present thousands of words—sometimes in a dozen languages and dialects—of obscure legal verses on asylum law. Refugees are barraged by information they neither need nor understand.

Concurrently, information about smuggling is consistently avoided. Representatives conducting face-to-face informing typically ignore smuggling as a phenomenon for fear of jeopardizing their jobs. The Syrians, naturally, reciprocate in avoiding the topic for fear of compromising their legal status or access to goods or privileges. Mid- and low-level informers, such as interpreters, guides, aid volunteers, coordinators and (above all) security staff consider the phenomenon a taboo subject, or irrelevant to their work. Specialized informers—such as medical doctors and legal advisors—carefully evade the issue when talking to migrants to avoid responsibility for unsound advice. Many NGO-run sites studiously refuse to acknowledge that smugglers exist—sometimes hundreds of meters away from the checkpoint at hand. Others only mention trafficking to deter with grim warnings to migrants not to associate with them.

The findings suggest that this approach is counterproductive. The sampled subjects typically did not care about information given to them by governments and aid staff. Instead, they favored information from each other and—vitally—from smugglers. Rumors about smugglers is decidedly the most important category of information to the migrants themselves. They will pursue it with or without official guidance. Refugees care naught to read obscure passages about their legal rights. They prefer to engage with smugglers despite warnings, with the full knowledge of the trafficking risk they take. Posters on reporting human trafficking pervades refugee sites; yet nothing is communicated about who and where these traffickers are. Information that could save a refugee families' health and lives is frequently withheld from written material for fear of endorsing or encouraging criminals.

5. Conclusions: Targeted Advice Policy Recommendation

From mid-2014 onward, and especially since March 2016, Balkan Route countries have implemented border militarization unprecedented since World War II. At sea, Coast and Border Guards are coupled with Greek, Turkish and international military. On land, massive fences and walls, surveillance cameras, and interrogation facilities supplement police and military units deploying rubber bullets, batons, watch dogs and teargas. Most of these policies—ill-advisedly, I have suggested—do not differentiate between persecution of smugglers and traffickers.[2]

I have suggested that the Syrian refugees' smuggling experience overwhelmingly did *not* include trafficking. The evidence surveyed sheds light on six aspects of the smuggler-migrant relation. First, migrants trust and identity with smugglers, expressing considerable satisfaction with their criminal services. Second, social capital through family and kinship/ethnic ties secured access to smugglers; the refugees mostly sought out the

[2] At certain phases of the Syrian refugee wave, European policymakers acknowledged that smugglers are not the root cause of the problem, allowing for more precise targeting of traffickers. Notably, the transition from operation Mare Nostrum to the Frontex Plus/Triton in 2013–2014 resulted in the arrest of hundreds of traffickers and balanced rescue missions with selective persecution efforts. This encouraging step has, however, been exceptional.

smugglers, not the other way around. Third, while average smuggling costs varied along travel unit size, distance traveled, etc., anti-smuggler repression drove costs up and trafficking was more common for those traveling after the Balkan Route closure than for those traveling before. Fourth, smugglers were often providers of shelter and care, including sometimes medical care that was superior to—and more trusted than—government alternatives. Fifth, the refugees relied on trailblazer information that had become outdated and nullified by smuggler adaptation to state repression. Sixth, the smugglers served as precious informants for critical decisions the migrants took, routinely against competing government and NGO guidance.

What can be done? As indicated, current efforts at information dissemination to refugees offer a narrow scope of information, systematically ignore the topic of trafficking and smuggling, and engage in futile attempts at deterrence. Information aimed at disincentivizing refugees from employing smugglers—whether by withholding information or frightening them—simply does not work. The question is not whether they will take risks through smuggling channels. Rather, it is whether they will take *informed* or *uninformed* risk. It is here that policymakers can improve outcomes.

When it comes to decisions exposing them to trafficking risks, Syrian refugees rely almost exclusively on information from social capital: their trailblazer family members who traveled the Route months earlier, other migrants at the site, and local smugglers and recruiters in public areas. As governments refuse to communicate about smuggling with refugees except when persecuting them, Syrians in turn studiously avoid asking any informed representative, government or civilian, about the migrant smuggler market. The information that leads to their choosing a particular smuggler, a time of migration, a transportation method, and a border crossing is almost never guided by intelligent policy. Consequently, these choices are often ill-advised. They put refugees in physical danger of injury and death, in legal dangers of arrest and deportation, and at risk of becoming prey to traffickers.

A more effective policy should aim at *targeted advice* about smugglers, delivered to refugees directly, honestly and with transparent opportunities for migrants to inquire without fear of penalty. Clear, updated information about the local smuggling—and hence trafficking—landscape can fruitfully be shared in two areas:

— *Smuggler organizations, recruitment sites, and reputations*. Relying on advice from other Syrians, and especially from the smuggling network from the preceding bridge country, denies refugees critical information on alternative smuggling groups, where to reach them, and how to assess them. Typically, no single smuggling operation occupies the market. Rather, one smuggling group may be known to authorities for its use of coercion and deception, its handling of unaccompanied minors, and its engagement in trafficking. Another—equally illegal—may be known to authorities for its nonviolent operation, its relatively reliable service, and its reluctance to cross the line into trafficking. Analogously, some public spaces—parks, ports, bus/train stations—are known to be safer recruiting grounds than others. Police in Greece, Serbia and Turkey gather such information routinely. Other security organs already have informants' networks among smugglers, regularly updating intelligence. In sharing selections of it with migrants, they not only deter refugees from reckless risk-taking out of ignorance; they also obstruct the more egregious trafficking operations that they otherwise fail to dismantle.
— *Border crossing risk comparisons and alternative options*. Even the most educated, economically well-off respondents had limited knowledge of bridge country geography, border crossings, or the nature of neighboring countries' regimes. Having left the Middle East and Turkey, respondents had no idea, for instance, that Greece and Macedonia have dueling border patrols that make certain crossings bloodier and deadlier than others; or that the Hungarian border with Serbia is the most militarized in Europe, whereas the Croatian alternative is more porous and unlikely to end in beatings, teargas and attack dogs; or that certain periods of the month—when trucking volume is high, or when bribed customs officers are on shift—are more hospitable to safe smuggling than others. Knowing these and other facts can mean the difference between asylum and deportation, forced detention and hospitalization, life and death. Policy should aim at clear, visual representations—through maps and figures—of illegal border crossing options and their relative risks. Currently, it is smugglers and traffickers who are *de facto* informants in this area. Their advice is hardly disinterested.
— *Smuggling prices*. Full standardization and transparency in smuggling service costs is impossible. But a meaningful step in that direction would be to publicize and regularly update street prices for smuggler services throughout the country—modeled on Taxi tariffs for specified distances and routes. This is particularly salient for bridge countries. Most governments have excellent estimates of smuggling prices; and even modest ethnographic excursions can help revise price fluctuations. Refugees waste precious resources on moving within a bridge country to reach supposedly cheaper smuggling routes, only to be disillusioned. Others discover that haggling produces significant price differences between their family and their traveling companions. Some suffer deception and local currency manipulations. Many fall prey

to traffickers. Quality, public information on prices would be an elegant and effective intervention to improve matters.

Information aimed at deterrence is largely ineffective, while targeted advice on smugglers can produce direct reductions in trafficking risk. Legalistic material is unpopular and largely inconsequential to Syrian refugees. In contrast, any of the above information—which law enforcement largely possess already—would be treasured and acted on. Finally, such transparent guidance would help refugees take informed, safer risks, thereby reducing the immense *government* costs of ignorant risk-taking: hospitalization, hunger, restlessness, and violent assault.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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