

A Lack of Legal Protection and Limited Ways Out: How Asylum Seekers Cope with Liminality on Greek Islands: Lesbos and Chios

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This article focuses on the experiences and coping strategies of those who have sought asylum on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios after the EU–Turkey deal of March 2016. Based on semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers and participatory observations on the two islands between July and August 2017, we explore the impact of the EU–Turkey deal on asylum seekers and how they cope with it. Although the implementation of the deal has an effect on their ability to cross irregularly to Europe, our findings show that many asylum seekers still come to the islands, aspiring to move on and, in some cases, succeeding. A combination of factors facilitates or hinders a secondary movement from the islands despite the structural constraints. We saw that, often, those with a genuine asylum claim choose to move on despite the risk of losing their legal status. In this way, our research challenges the discursive categorization of those who wait through containment as ‘deserving refugees’ and those who move on as ‘undeserving migrants’ and provides a critical analysis of current European migration policies.

Keywords: restrictive migration policies, asylum seekers, liminality, deservingness, Greek hotspots, EU–Turkey deal

Introduction

Almost 36000 asylum seekers are currently living in the Greek islands (Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos, Leros), which is more than five times the official capacity (HRW 2019), and the number of sea arrivals keeps increasing compared to the year before (UNHCR 2019). In September 2019 alone, 12530 people arrived in Greece by sea (UNHCR 2019). Initially, these hotspots were places of first

reception and registration for the sea arrivals in Europe but, since the EU–Turkey deal in March 2016, they have become places of containment, as the islands have been shut down to prevent onward movement to the mainland. Their transformation from temporary reception centres into containment zones means that migrants arriving in the islands have found themselves stuck and their trajectories disturbed.

The hotspot system has been designed to quickly separate arrivals into asylum seekers and migrants (Tazzioli 2017) through a fast-track procedure based on nationality and admissibility criteria prior to the assessment of individual asylum applications. In the Greek asylum procedure, nationality groups with a low recognition rate (below 25 per cent) are systematically detained on arrival in the islands and therefore risk being denied access to a fair and efficient asylum process (Alpes *et al.* 2017; Fili 2018). At the same time, nationality groups—such as Syrians—with a high recognition rate (above 75 per cent) are subjected to an admissibility interview in which they are questioned not about why they left their country of origin, but about their trajectories and specifically the time they spent in Turkey. The objective of these interviews is not to assess the asylum claim, but to determine whether or not Turkey is a safe third country to return asylum seekers to. Although the 1951 Refugee Convention dictates that asylum claims should be assessed on an individual basis without discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or nationality, Europe’s policy on asylum and migration uses these fast-track procedures and the safe-third-country concept to implement what may be viewed as deservingness criteria—prioritizing one over another before assessing the validity of the asylum claim (Sigona 2018: 457). Therefore, asylum seekers’ likelihood of gaining asylum in Greece is biased, based on their nationality or their pre-arrival trajectories.

In practice, both the fast-track procedure and the deportation of refugees to Turkey based on the ‘safe-third-country’ concept have proved to be all but straightforward (Alpes *et al.* 2017; Tazzioli 2017). The fast-track process is not, in fact, fast at all and many asylum seekers are forced to wait for months, if not years, for their asylum-application process in the hotspots—spaces that have thus become ‘the chokepoints of protracted wait’ (Tazzioli 2017: 7). The critical human-rights situation in Turkey, coupled with the lack of administrative and physical capacity to assess the applications efficiently in Greece, has resulted in a very low number of asylum cases being closed (EPRS 2018). Deportations remained relatively low: only 1652 people were deported under the deal between March 2016 and March 2019 (EC 2019). Although the deal has affected their ability to cross irregularly (EC 2019), people keep coming to the islands. As a result, more and more asylum seekers have become stuck and forced to live in limbo for prolonged periods of time.

In this article, the islands of Lesbos and Chios are referred to as liminal spaces where people are caught between nation states and their jurisdiction and between sociolegal categories. In these liminal spaces, asylum seekers are expected to wait through containment with limited or no information on the asylum process, its length and the likelihood of eventually receiving protection. They are expected to

live in degrading conditions within the hotspot camps—which were designed as temporary reception centres, not to accommodate asylum seekers in the long term.

Thus far, studies focusing on the experiences of asylum seekers during the asylum process argue that being in sociolegal limbo can force asylum seekers into an existential and temporal condition of waiting, liminality and feeling stuck (Brekke 2004; Hage 2009; Sutton *et al.* 2011; Kohli and Kaukko 2017). Other authors look more specifically at how liminality is created by the asylum and migration policies (Menjivar 2006; Mountz 2011; Papoutsi *et al.* 2019) and experienced by bordercrossers (Brekke 2004; Kohli and Kaukko 2017; O'Reilly 2018), locals and everyone else in between (Tsoni 2016).

This research aims to contribute to this debate by asking how the response to liminality plays a role in determining the deservingness of asylum seekers. Deservingness is here understood as the prioritizing of one over another before assessing the validity of the asylum claim (Sigona 2018: 457). We argue that, within the context of the EU–Turkey deal, the deservingness of asylum seekers is not only determined by nationality and vulnerability, but also by how asylum seekers deal with liminality. Hyndman and Giles (2011: 367) argue that those who wait in refugee camps are often considered innocent and helpless, and are therefore framed as ‘deserving refugees’ in need of help. However, once they move on, they are considered politically dangerous and self-interested, and framed as no longer needing protection and therefore ‘undeserving’. This argument is useful in the context of the Greek islands whereby those who wait through liminality are considered deserving refugees while those who contest and find ways to move out are criminalized and seen as undeserving. Drawing on 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation on the islands of Lesbos and Chios, this article looks at how asylum seekers deal with liminality and problematizes the assumed relation between responses to liminality and deservingness.

Greek Islands as Liminal Spaces

The concept of liminality was first introduced in 1960 by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, in his study of ‘rites of passage’. Van Gennep defined the liminal phase as a transition period—i.e. during a marriage ceremony—where individuals have completed one part of their life but have not yet entered into the next part (1960: 3). Victor Turner (1969) revived the concept and extended its implications beyond ritual ceremonies (Thomassen 2009), which made the concept applicable to other transition periods in human life. Turner (1969) emphasized the importance of understanding the experiences of liminality and how it shapes people.

The concept of liminality can be used in reference to the situation of asylum seekers who are stuck on the islands, as they have left the protection of their country of origin but are not yet incorporated into the social, economic and political life of a host society. As such, they are at a liminal stage in which they often wait for prolonged periods of time in juridical obscurity. Several authors have studied the liminal spaces that emerged as a result of restrictive asylum and border policies whereby asylum seekers are marginalized and excluded from society

(Brekke 2004; Hynes 2011; Mountz 2011; Sutton *et al.* 2011; Kohli and Kaukko 2017).

Agier (2011: 278) refers to these liminal spaces as *hors-lieux* (off-places). The time spent in off-places is relatively slow for asylum seekers as they wait and feel stuck while the rest of society gets on with their lives in a seemingly more rapid fashion (Griffiths *et al.* 2013). Asylum seekers in these off-places are expected to wait in an orderly fashion. Queuing and waiting symbolize being civilized (Hage 2009; Agier 2011). Thus, enduring waiting through a crisis can be considered as the internalization of self-government (Hage 2009) and used as a tool for sovereign nation states to legitimate their protection of the common good from ‘unorderly’ movement and the threat to social cohesion. It is migrants’ duty to wait in an orderly fashion until their turn comes to be incorporated into the host society.

Under the EU–Turkey deal, the deservingness of asylum seekers is determined through the fast-track procedure, where their right to protection varies based on their nationality. Moreover, only those recognized as vulnerable are granted the right to mobility within Greece. Asylum seekers’ deservingness is also emphasized in the one-for-one resettlement scheme within the EU–Turkey deal that aims to resettle one Syrian national from Turkey to one EU member state for each person returned. Between April 2016 and December 2018, 18640 Syrians were resettled from Turkey to the EU (EC 2019)—a significantly low number compared to the 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees living in Turkey (DGMM 2019). According to the one-for-one scheme, those who arrive on the Greek islands through their own means are punished, deemed undeserving of protection and therefore deported back to Turkey. However, those who wait in Turkey are considered deserving and might get resettled in Europe. In this article, we voice asylum seekers’ narratives and experiences of liminality and (im)mobility to challenge the discursive assumption of restrictive policies and containment.

Methodology

The fieldwork took place in July and August 2017 on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios. The empirical data was collected as part of a larger project—Evidence-based assessment of migration deals: the case of Turkey. The specific data underlying this article is based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with refugees who have sought asylum on these two islands in different localities and temporalities, including those who were stuck in the hotspots of Chios and Lesbos and those who had been sent or moved away from there. The interviews asked about respondents’ migration trajectories, conditions in the hotspots, the legal process, deportation and post deportation, and their future aspirations, enabling us to understand the decision-making process in the hotspots and the related coping strategies.

We reached our first respondents through key informants (such as lawyers, volunteers and refugees who were well connected in their communities). The rest were selected through snowball sampling. Deliberative efforts were taken to include participants from countries that produced the largest number of asylum

seekers on Lesbos and Chios (Afghanistan $\times 10$, Syria $\times 7$, Pakistan $\times 4$, Bangladesh $\times 3$, Iraq $\times 2$ and other $\times 4$). We conducted follow-up interviews with seven respondents 1 and 2 years later.

Among the 30 asylum-seeker interviewees, 13 were staying on the islands at the time. Eleven non-Syrians had been deported from there to Turkey—among whom only four were still in Turkey; another five were deported further to their country of origin and two were back in Europe. Five Syrians had ‘voluntarily’ returned to Turkey—two of whom were ‘secondary-return’ cases from Turkey to Syria. Last but not least, one was returned to Afghanistan directly from Chios. All 13 on the islands had been there for between 10 and 18 months, except an Afghan family and an Afghan man who had just arrived on Lesbos and Chios when we interviewed them. Among these, seven were in immediate danger of deportation, as their asylum application was rejected and appeals were denied. Among those who had been deported, only four were still in Turkey, three were deported to Pakistan, one to Afghanistan, one to the Ivory Coast and two were back in Europe at the time of the interview.

Although our sample is small compared to the number of people who have sought asylum in the two Greek islands, our goal is not to generalize our findings, but to shed light on the diverse ways in which asylum seekers perceive and respond to structural constraints imposed by European migration policies and practices.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the numerous cafés in the city centre; interviews in the refugee camps were not practical because entrance to them is subject to permission from the Greek authorities, with a limited time allowance. Due to overcrowding in the camps, many shelters were shared by multiple families, which also made it difficult to maintain privacy throughout the interview. It proved particularly difficult to interview those on the islands who had had their asylum applications rejected, as they risked detention and deportation. It was only possible to reach such people through refugees and volunteers who acted as gatekeepers. For those whose cases were extremely risky, we adjusted to the conditions imposed by the respondents: one interview was conducted in the house in which the respondent was hiding, another via mobile phone as the respondent was hiding from the authorities and did not want to disclose his location and, finally, another by mobile phone because the respondent was being held in the pre-removal detention in the hotspots.

In many cases, reaching asylum seekers after deportation was also extremely difficult, as they were immediately detained on arrival in Turkey and had their mobile phones confiscated. Moreover, neither the Greek nor the Turkish authorities were transparent in terms of the identity of the deportees or the time and date of the deportations. Our limited contact with deportees was established after they were released from the removal centres or were deported back to their country of origin. These connections were again possible through the key informants, who knew the respondents before their deportation and were able to trace their whereabouts.

Our desire to explore how refugees deal with liminality forced us to be mobile in our methodology. The objective was not only to understand how liminality had impacted on the daily lives of asylum seekers stuck on the islands, but also to learn

how some asylum seekers contested their containment there and found a way out. We were inspired by the trajectory approach (Schapendonk *et al.* 2020). Although we did not physically follow people to Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and other countries, we reached out and conducted phone interviews with asylum seekers who were once on the islands but had moved on. As such, we did not restrict our interviews to one country—on the contrary, we were flexible and interviewed people who were actually staying in eight different countries. This flexibility helped us to obtain a fuller picture of what being stuck on the two Greek islands meant for migrant trajectories and also allowed us to include return in these trajectories. Most research on transit migration focuses on onward migration whereas our context of liminality resulted in considerable return migration too. The difficulty in getting access to Turkey as a field and, more particularly, to Turkish detention centres where migrants who are sent back from Greece are held also forced us to think in flexible and creative ways about how to conduct interviews. Overall, phone interviews were considered safer and the respondents felt more comfortable explaining their situation. Although we acknowledge that phone interviews do not have the same quality as face-to-face in-depth interviews, they at least made it possible for us to connect with a diverse representation of people who had sought asylum on the two Greek islands—which would not have been possible otherwise due to the limitations of the project.

Asylum Seekers' Perceptions of the Deterrent Effect of Restrictive Policies

Restrictive policies are based on the assumption that those on the move are aware and able to understand changing policies (Crawley 2010). Following this logic, a containment and deportation policy was thought to have a deterrent effect on irregular movements. In fact, one of the major stated objectives of the EU–Turkey deal and the hotspot system was to ‘stop irregular migration flows from Turkey to Europe’ (EP 2016: 1).

After the deal, the number of arrivals dropped significantly due to Turkey’s intensified efforts to prevent irregular departures, controls on the Aegean Sea and relocation of people under refugee protection who were apprehended trying to cross to Greece from accommodation centres in eastern Turkey (EC 2019: 46). However, since then, the numbers crossing have increased, with 43683 sea arrivals on the Greek islands only between January and November 2019 (UNHCR 2019).

Our interviews revealed that asylum seekers were often not aware of the EU–Turkey deal and the exact implications of these new policies. None of our respondents had reliable and accurate information about the situation in Greece. Only one asylum seeker said that he knew about the deal but still decided to take a chance and come. An Afghan refugee who was travelling with his four children recalled the night they arrived on Chios by boat:

When we arrived at the beach, some of us fell into the water, we were all very wet. We walked around for ten minutes until the police arrived. Then, they took us by bus to Vial [the hotspot camp in Chios] ... I didn’t know anything about the problems in

Greece and nothing about the deal. We were just thinking that the EU is better than the war in Afghanistan. When we arrived, there was no war and no killing in Greece but there was something else, another problem. No-one was responding to our asylum claim and no-one was treating us like humans ... there were no human rights for refugees.

Like this family, many asylum seekers who arrived on the two Greek islands with the intention of moving on found that they were not able to exercise their right to seek asylum in their desired destination and that they had to stay in the hotspot camps on the islands until their asylum process was complete. Thus, for all our respondents, applying for asylum in the Greek islands was instrumental and directed at the specific goal of not being deported back to Turkey while gaining time to look for alternative strategies. These results show the limited effectiveness of deterrence policies and the need for a bottom-up understanding of how asylum seekers on the move perceive and respond to such policies of containment.

The Experience of and Responses to Liminality on Lesbos and Chios

Many non-governmental organization (NGO) reports have shown the inhumane conditions in the Greek hotspots (HRW 2016; Amnesty International 2017; MSF 2017). While the hotspots were supposed to be ‘temporary’, for those living there, the dominant feeling was of being stuck in a liminal space. As a Syrian refugee who had been in Chios for a year stated:

My mind is always exhausted. Living with people who don’t know what is their destination and who are stuck in this island, you can imagine, how the atmosphere is and how stressful it is.

Waiting was a recurring concept when the asylum seekers talked about their lives in the camps. They waited for food, for the toilet, for a doctor’s visit and for their medication, for a call from their lawyer, to be heard by officials and to be transferred. Waiting, coupled with feeling stuck, frustration, anger and anxieties were concepts frequently mentioned when asylum seekers described their experiences in the hotspots. While this situation led to psychological and physical problems among asylum seekers, passively waiting through this process was not their only option. Although they believed that nothing they did would have an impact on their asylum procedure, they continued with their lives, invested in language and vocational skills and/or looked for alternative strategies for escaping the islands.

Responses to Liminality

Our study shows that asylum seekers constantly resist the liminality imposed upon them by continuing with their daily lives, interacting with other actors in their migration field and developing coping strategies. Mountz (2011) illustrates that, while ‘waiting’, life continues; marriage and childbirth, sickness, death, learning a

new language and other survival strategies continue to occur. Therefore, the concept of waiting, here, is not considered a passive act but, on the contrary, as something actively experienced by those who are stuck. In the hotspots of Greece, asylum seekers who wait might incorporate this within their lives and actively choose between waiting—even if that means containment—and finding alternative pathways out of it. By resisting the state of liminality, refugees' actions challenge the link between asylum and lack of agency. In other words, such refugee actions problematize the link between the deservingness of protection and waiting or moving on.

We found three important strategies through which people in the Greek hotspots coped with liminality: 1) moving onwards via irregular means, 2) negotiating vulnerability and 3) reinitiating movement after voluntary return/deportation. These strategies mostly focus on circumventing regulations. The first and most obvious is the emergence of a new irregular crossing route between the Greek islands and Athens. These can be either individual attempts or crossings enabled by a network of refugees acting as facilitators. The second is negotiating vulnerability in a bid to be transferred to the mainland via regular channels, which contributes to a system that prioritizes vulnerability over protection. The third is voluntary return as a way of reinitiating movement or moving on after deportation. In these cases, refugees opt for voluntary return not out of a direct desire to go back to their country of origin, but because such a decision enables them to 'move on'. In the next section, we discuss these different strategies and the consequences for the deserving/undeserving dichotomy around asylum seekers in Greek hotspots.

Moving Onwards via Irregular Means

Many asylum seekers hoped to move on from Greece to a desired destination. Containment within the island did not seem to change their initial plan except in a very few cases in which they decided to settle in the islands. However, the risk of detention and deportation has led many to seek (irregular) means to move out of liminality.

Sayid is a 21-year-old Syrian man whom we met in a café close to the Souda camp on Chios. At the time of the interview, he had already been in Chios for 16 months. He had a deportation order and was in the process of appealing. He was hiding from the authorities in order to avoid detention and deportation, and was thus able neither to stay in the hotspot camp nor to receive the monthly stipend given to asylum seekers. Believing that there was no future for him in Chios, he attempted twice to go to Athens, paying a smuggler 1400 dollars. He was caught each time by the police at the port of Chios and held in detention for 1 and 4 days, respectively. Other respondents attempted to move to the mainland by paying facilitators and, in some cases, succeeded.

According to our interviews and observations, access to these facilitators was fairly easy. Everyone knew how and where to find them, their different *modus operandi* and the prices charged. However, the challenge was whether or not they

were able to afford to pay for an irregular crossing. For those who had exhausted their savings and/or those who could not risk losing their money, paying a facilitator was not an option. In some cases, asylum seekers had to choose between paying a lawyer or a facilitator—a difficult decision. While neither could guarantee protection, irregular crossing meant a faster way out than hiring a lawyer and appealing the negative decision. We also saw that, while most of the asylum seekers aspired to move on by whatever means were available to them, only a few had the financial capability to do so.

However, it is not only those who are at risk of deportation who consider crossing irregularly to the mainland; living in limbo and uncertainty, many others attempt to leave the islands by their own means, even though this results in their becoming even more vulnerable, as they lose their right to access asylum on the islands. One Iraqi asylum seeker who crossed to the mainland irregularly said that all his money was stolen in one of the transit cities. He could not go to the police and was not able to move on so had to return to Chios, from where he was subsequently deported first to Turkey and then to Iraq.

Our respondents argued that, despite the risk of detention or even post deportation, they would consider irregular ways to leave the islands. Those who had a social network and economic means were more likely to opt for this, as it did not depend on whether a person had a convincing asylum claim, received asylum status in Greece or was deported back to Turkey or their origin country. From their accounts, we know that almost all aspired to move on or return to Europe and that the main obstacle was money. In this way, the EU–Turkey deal has not decreased, but increased, the avenues for irregular crossing, by creating a further border between the island and the mainland to be crossed irregularly.

Negotiating Vulnerability

Within the context of the EU–Turkey deal, being vulnerable relates directly to the deservingness of asylum seekers, as only those officially recognized as vulnerable are allowed to go to the mainland to complete their asylum procedure. However, vulnerability assessments carried out on arrival in the hotspots are inadequate due to the lack of medical actors and other staff, including interpreters, translators and lawyers providing legal assistance to correct procedural mistakes (DRC 2017: 6).

Moreover, in a system that prioritizes vulnerability over protection, some refugees opt to circumvent the existing law and negotiate their vulnerability so they can move on. To illustrate this, some women or couples may choose to have a baby not out of a direct desire to become parents, but because this might allow them a faster asylum process under slightly better conditions on the mainland. Another volunteer spoke of couples resorting to physical violence so that the women attacked and the mothers abandoning their under-age children could all be certified as vulnerable (Ghulam 2019). Many others resort to self-harm in order to prove that their mental health is unstable. According to an MSF report (2018), there has been a significance increase in self-harm and suicide attempts by children on Lesbos as conditions in the camps deteriorate rapidly.

Hansel (2017: 2), who wrote about the dire conditions in Lesbos, quoted a young woman from Afghanistan:

They say you can only leave Moria when you are vulnerable. So they force us to stay there until we are made vulnerable. This is crazy, no one can live in Moria; especially for women it is really dangerous.

One could say that, due to the politics of humanitarianism, there has always been an emphasis on vulnerability. In order to require protection, one needs to suffer, be vulnerable (Ticktin 2011). As a result of this system, asylum seekers become further marginalized and more dependent on government and NGO aid. Emphasizing the fact that what makes refugees deserving of protection is their vulnerability, the system strengthens the representation of refugees as passive victims based on gendered assumptions. On the contrary, the narratives of asylum seekers show that they are able to circumvent the law in order to negotiate their vulnerability and thus challenge the link between vulnerability and lack of agency.

Voluntary and Forced Returns

During our fieldwork, we met a couple of asylum seekers with genuine protection claims who opted for ‘voluntarily’ return to Turkey or their country of origin as a way out of the situation. The Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme is directed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in cooperation with transit or origin countries. The official motto of the IOM is ‘to help migrants repatriate safely’. However, from our interviews, we know that refugees opted for this choice as a last resort and not willingly.

One year after their return, we were able to contact one family online who opted to return to Afghanistan ‘voluntarily’. At the time of the interview, Abed was in Kabul, Afghanistan, with his wife and three children. When he heard that we were contacting him from Chios, he immediately commented that it was no place for refugees to be. He explained why they decided to voluntarily return and how they were now regretting going back to Afghanistan because of the security issues they faced there:

Our decision to go back voluntarily was not made under normal circumstances. There was no food, no clean water. We had children and a baby, and Vial (the hotspot in Chios) was not an option to keep my baby alive It [going back to Afghanistan] was the biggest mistake of our lives Hundreds of people, civilians are dying every week. Maybe I will be the next one. I would like to go back to Greece where there is no war, no conflict and no firing of weapons.

However, the insanitary conditions in the camp were more pressing at the time of the decision-making, as they had a sick baby; if they had stayed there without proper treatment and medical care, they would have lost her. During the

‘voluntary return’, they were transferred to Athens and detained separately for 5 days—for Abed, these 5 days felt like 5 years.

The IOM uses detention during transfers so that people do not give up on returning to their home countries and decide to stay on in the transit zone. The contradictory concept of having to detain a ‘voluntary’ returnee is an excellent illustration of how *involuntary* these returns are. Refugees opt to go back not because of a real desire to return, but because they risk arbitrary detention, violence and deportation in the transit space and have little certainty about their future.

When the future and the possibility of incorporation into the host country are uncertain, those asylum seekers who cannot risk being stuck in the liminal phase for longer periods of time opt to return voluntarily. This is often a decision related to the wellbeing of their children. As [Kohli and Kaukko \(2017: 492\)](#) say, children who wait for prolonged and open-ended periods of time are at risk of long-lasting harm. For them, there is also the risk of never being fully incorporated into the host society. If those who stay in the liminal zone long-term maintain their feelings of frustration and anger, they may not be ready, even after receiving their refugee status, to be incorporated into the social life in the host country.

The ‘Voluntary’ Return of Syrians from Greece to Turkey and from Turkey to Syria

Thus far, there have been two separate return processes for Syrian and non-Syrian nationals. The latter were forcibly returned to Turkey and, immediately on arrival, detained in pre-removal detention centres before being deported to their origin country. On the other hand, Syrian nationals were able to voluntarily return to Turkey and were given the opportunity to either stay in the camp or move to a satellite city determined for them. However, they often struggled to register for their ID, access to healthcare, education and the labour market in these locations. While Syrians may register in any one of 81 cities, registration was temporarily suspended in 10 cities—including Istanbul and Hatay—by late 2017 ([HRW 2018](#)). Once registered in a city, Syrians’ mobility within Turkey is limited, as they can only travel to other cities with a special permit given by the government. Moreover, in practice, Syrian refugees can apply for a work permit, although only 38289 were issued by the end of 2018 ([EC 2019: 47](#)) compared to 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees ([DGMM 2019](#)).

Due to the consequences of suspended registration, lack of work and living in liminality, two out of five of our respondents returned to Syria. According to EC data, of 212 Syrians who returned voluntarily to Turkey, 16 decided to go back to Syria afterwards ([EC 2017: 6](#)). For our respondents, the main reasons for returning to Syria were the extremely poor living conditions in the camps, the lack of job prospects or government assistance in the cities and difficulties in obtaining registration-ID cards.

Adnan is a Syrian refugee who arrived on Chios with his pregnant wife. They were detained in Vial and given no information about their asylum status. They were told by the authorities that, according to the EU–Turkey deal, they would probably be deported to Turkey. Adnan repeated that the problems in the camp—overcrowding, no adequate healthcare or shelter for his family and the lack of food—meant that there was no way for them to survive there. They lost hope and decided to go back to Turkey. There, they remained in a closed camp for 16 months and had their first baby. They could not afford to live in the city so they stayed in the camp until the authorities told them that it was closing. With no other plausible option, the family agreed to return to Syria and were taken to the border by the Turkish authorities, who left them to their destiny. At the time of the interview, the family was in Syria, under siege and fearing daily for their lives and those of their two children. They said how much they regretted their decision to go back to Turkey and Syria, and still aspired to go to Europe, where they thought they could find protection. However, it did not seem possible to cross the Syrian–Turkish border again with their small children.

Going Back to Europe after Forcible Return to Turkey

Non-Syrian nationals who are forcibly returned from the two Greek islands to Turkey are faced with severe problems such as immediate detention upon arrival, a lack of access to asylum in Turkey and unlawful deportation to their country of origin. At present, Turkey has 18 removal centres with a capacity of 8276 persons and aims to open another 16 by 2020 (EC 2019: 46). However, the removal centres are not guaranteed to correspond to EU standards, especially regarding to access to legal counselling and the asylum process. Our respondents who were detained in removal centres were given no opportunity to apply for asylum. When they asked for international protection or legal assistance, it was denied because they had already been deported by ‘Europe’ so had no right to apply for asylum in Turkey. Furthermore, threatened with detention in Turkey for indefinite periods of time, they were forced to collaborate and sign voluntary-return papers. Some respondents decided to collaborate and return, although they were afraid because they found the conditions and the prospect of staying in a detention centre unbearable.

From the limited number of people who were released in Turkey, only a few remained in Turkey while others returned to Europe and other countries. Abdul is a 16-year-old Afghan refugee. At the time of his interview, he and his younger brother had been in a shelter for unaccompanied minors in Germany for 2.5 months. Abdul and his family fled Afghanistan in 2016, running away from Taliban forces targeting the family. They arrived on Chios just as the implementation of the EU–Turkey deal had started. They were among those who were deported despite expressing their wish to seek asylum in Greece. Like them, many asylum seekers were deported to Turkey without their case being processed early in the implementation of the deal.

In Turkey, the family was detained in a pre-removal centre for 6 months before being released. As they had no economic resources or social networks in Turkey,

they were forced to live on the streets and struggled to live with the help of relatives. However, as they saw no future for their children in Turkey, they wanted the two brothers to make the journey again, the prohibitive cost preventing them and their daughter from going with the boys.

Abdul's family was rightfully worried, as the chances of irregular asylum seekers registering and accessing protection in Turkey is very low (Alpes *et al.* 2017; Ulusoy and Battjes 2017). Turkey ratified the Geneva Convention with a geographical limitation—those who are from non-European countries are not granted refugee status. Instead, there is only partial protection status in Turkey—such as temporary protection for Syrians and subsidiary protection and conditional refugee status for individuals from other countries (LFIP 2013). What is common among these protection regimes granted by the Turkish government is that they expect the protection holder to either repatriate or resettle in a third country; therefore, they do not implement any long-term integration policy.

Since September 2018, the Turkish Directorate General for Migration Management or DGMM has been the main institution determining refugee status; however international-protection applicants have significant difficulty in registering and obtaining ID due to backlogs and long waiting times (EC 2019: 47). In 2018, Turkey granted international protection (conditional and subsidiary refugee status) to 72056 applicants (EC 2019: 47–48) compared to 370932 non-Syrian asylum seekers registered (46 per cent Afghans and 39 per cent Iraqis). Conditional refugees are required to live in one of the 62 satellite cities to which they are assigned (EC 2019: 48), meaning their mobility within Turkey is limited.

Like Abdul, another respondent went back to Europe after his deportation to Turkey from Greece—all our respondents expressed their *wish* to go back. The protection that was not granted for these respondents in Greece and Turkey was granted in other member states. In these and many other cases, the pursuit of safety and protection has become one of luck and not of legal claims.

Overall, being flexible in our methodology, not focusing solely on those who were stuck on the islands and following up with our respondents 1 or 2 years after the original interviews enabled us to gain in-depth insights into how people deal with liminality in Greek hotspots and what happens to those people who find a way to escape. Our data confirm studies that show that frustration and anxiety are common during periods of liminality (Brekke 2004; Hynes 2011; Mountz 2011; Sutton *et al.* 2011; Kohli and Kaukko 2017) but we also witnessed an active period of waiting, in which the asylum application was, in some sense, instrumental and asylum seekers continuously sought alternative strategies. The narratives we collected thus challenged the link between asylum and lack of agency while making us reconsider the general assumptions on which restrictive policies are based. Not restricting ourselves to one country and reaching people at different periods of their journeys allowed us to see the bigger picture of the impact of EU restrictive policies, especially those related to the readmission agreements with third countries and the hotspot system. We saw that detention and deportation did not always deter asylum seekers from reaching Europe, but were seen as yet another

challenge on their trajectories—challenges to which they actively responded in their search for the safety and protection to which they aspire.

Conclusion: Labelling Depending on How We Deal with Waiting

The literature on the decision-making of asylum seekers mostly focuses on their decision to leave the country of origin and motivation for a particular destination country. Work by [Carling and Schewel \(2018\)](#), [Kuschminder and Koser \(2016\)](#) and [Schuster \(2011\)](#) has focused on the decision-making process of individuals within asylum systems but mainly looks at how protection is understood by asylum seekers, the ideas they have on where best to find protection, and which countries are preferred by asylum seekers and why. Our article looks at how a specific context of liminality impacts on decision-making, where access to information is limited and where conditions are so poor that leaving there becomes more important than thinking where to go next. These decisions—like voluntary return—are not rational or logical and are certainly not always what people prefer.

The asylum seekers we encountered on the two Greek islands continue to exercise a degree of agency despite the structural constraints imposed on them. During their stay, they learn about the regulations, recognition rates and vulnerability clauses, and meet with others who are further along in the process and who shed light on their future and possibility of accessing asylum in Greece. While some gave up and returned to Turkey thanks to this knowledge, for others, even being deported back to Turkey did not stop their journey and they travelled back to Europe and sought asylum in another member state.

These findings confirm the need to study people's trajectories in order to understand the paradox between increasing restrictive migration policies and migration itself. We saw that asylum seekers adopt and react to the structural limitations imposed upon them by restrictive policies. Without the narratives of asylum seekers at different moments of their trajectories, it would be impossible to understand the impact of policies and how asylum seekers challenge them. Thus, the trajectory approach allowed us to go beyond the limitations of traditional migration research that takes the nation state as its centre. [Turton \(2003\)](#) questions the tendency among humanitarian organizations to cast refugees as helpless, passive victims of circumstances—as the objects of interventions rather than the authors of their own lives. Even if the refugee experience is marked by compulsion, those living as refugees may participate in the shaping of outcomes and conditions in their lives while also negotiating new forms of identity and membership.

There is a tendency among politicians and media to portray refugees as either criminals or victims, depending on how they deal with the waiting. If an individual stays put and waits through containments, s/he is more probably an actual victim who needs the protection of the North. This assumption separates asylum seekers into two categories: those who move on as undeserving migrants and those who stay put as deserving refugees. Our research questions the validity of this assumption by showing that there are a variety of strategies by which people cope with

waiting, regardless of why they left their country. Overall, our data shows that it was common to opt for crossing by irregular means for those who had the resources. Women and children were more likely to opt for the second option, which we identified as ‘negotiating vulnerability’, while those who were truly desperate and without any resources were likely to choose ‘voluntary’ return. Although there are many reasons for choosing one strategy over another, it is important to stress that the eligibility of the asylum claim was similar for all our respondents—in fact, they all claimed rightfully that they needed international protection. This is unsurprising considering that 90 per cent of arrivals on Greek islands are from refugee-producing countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (UNHCR 2019), though it is important to refute the common assumption that those who opt for alternative strategies are not genuine, undeserving asylum seekers.

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