

# Bridging the gap between new refugees' integration processes and their future mobility intentions

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## Introduction

International immigrants leave their countries of origin for a wide range of reasons: to seek better jobs, to reunite with family, to flee war or natural disasters or to look for political and cultural freedoms. At the core of migrant agency is the ability and intention “to defy [potential] government restrictions, discrimination and xenophobia by migrating over closed borders” (de Haas, 2021, p.8). Migrants and refugees take courageous steps to pursue legal pathways to migration but at times are forced to take much more dangerous routes to reach a new place to settle and make a living (Andersson, 2016; Collyer, 2010; Massey, Pren & Durand, 2016; Snel, Bilgili & Staring, 2020). Irrespective of the motivation, the level of voluntariness or preparedness for migration, the act of moving to a new place is typically accompanied by hopes and aspirations for a ‘better life’ (Carling, 2014; de Haas, 2021).

However, migrants and refugees often face challenges when settling into a new place, adapting to different ways of living and responding to the increasingly complex requirements and expectations of integration policies. While the impact of such challenges on integration outcomes receives a lot of attention, scholars tend to assume that the mobility phase in a migrant’s life course has ended after arrival in the host country. In reality however, migrants may reevaluate their plans and future aspirations in light of unexpected, disappointing or arduous experiences in the integration process. Moreover, regardless of reception and

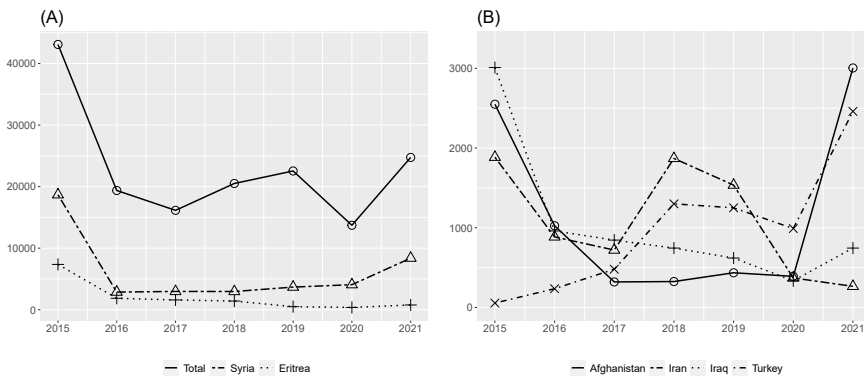
settlement success, migrants may decide to move on due to economic, social or political developments in their origin and destination countries, or move sequentially for practical reasons including (but not limited to) acquiring necessary resources (Ahrens, Kelly & van Liempt, 2016; Paul, 2011). As such, migrants' aspirations and plans for the future may change over time after arrival in the destination country. Yet most of the literature focused on immigrants in receiving countries (implicitly) assumes that the country of residence is the final destination, that successful integration is their 'ultimate goal', and that intentions are clear from the start and fixed over time.

In this chapter, we challenge some of these assumptions in order to better understand the future plans, aspirations and associated settlement and mobility trajectories of recently arrived refugees in immigrant receiving countries in the global North. We do so by reflecting on the case of Syrians in the Netherlands. Recent research projects, including the Bridge project that we draw on in this paper, highlight the multifaceted structural and socio-cultural integration challenges that Syrian refugees face following the years after immigration. Their experiences may not only matter for integration outcomes but also potentially affect future mobility aspirations with regards to long-term settlement, onward migration to a different country or return to the origin country (Schiele, 2021). While integration outcomes are firmly positioned in academic research and policy debates, future mobility aspirations remain underdeveloped. As such, the aim of this chapter is to point to recent evidence about experiences of the (early) integration process of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, and reflect on how these experiences may affect their consideration to move across borders. In that context, we argue for a transnational perspective on mobility aspirations of immigrants which takes into account the social, economic and political situation in not only the destination but also the origin country. Moreover, we underline the importance of a longitudinal approach sensitive to settlement experiences in the host country, and how these may interact with changing opportunity structures back home or in alternative destination countries.

### **Asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands: a brief statistical overview**

The Netherlands has been a refugee receiving country for decades, but the last seven years have been influential in shaping the composition of its refugee population. Therefore, we first provide an overview of asylum seeker and refugee flows between 2015 and 2021. The aim is to highlight that Syrians became a core part of the overall refugee population almost a decade ago, and continue to play an important role in spite of fluctuations in (relative) quantity of inflows in recent years.

Figure 1a and 1b show the number of first asylum request in the Netherlands over the period 2015-2021. Applications halved between 2015 and 2016 (from more than 40,000 to less than 20,000). Since then, the numbers have fluctuated between 15,000 and 25,000 annually. For context: in 2021 approximately 43.5 percent of all individuals who applied for asylum (approximately 10,093 individuals) were granted either refugee status or subsidiary protection. The 2015-2021 period is marked by a shift from the majority of asylum applicants originating from a few origin countries to an increasingly diverse composition. More specifically, where more than 60 percent of all first applicants in 2015 originated from Syria or Eritrea, the same countries only make up about a quarter until 2020, when the number of Syrians starts to increase again. Applicants from Eritrea and Iraq in particular have continued to decline over recent years, ceding ground to countries such as Nigeria in 2019, Algeria in 2020, and Iran more generally.

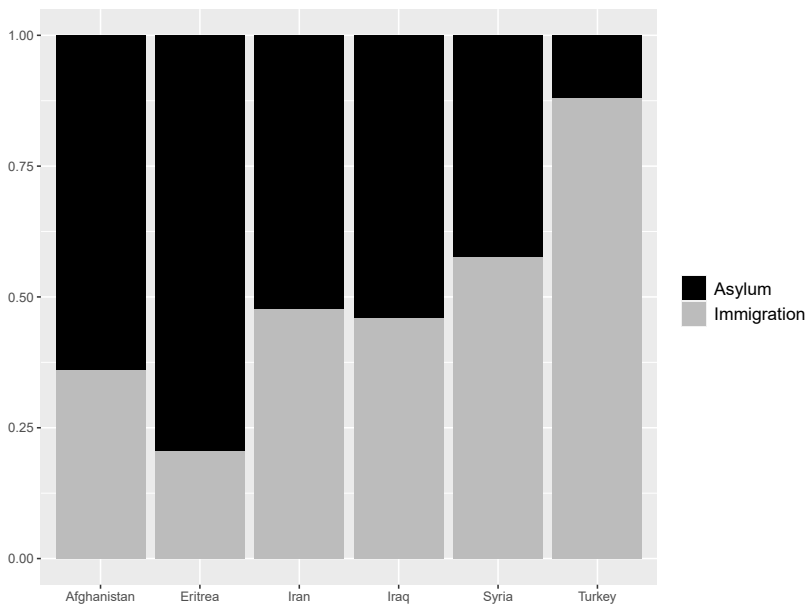


**Figure 1:** Number of first asylum applicants in the Netherlands by citizenship. Source: CBS

Available statistics over the period 2015-2020 in Figure 2 show that first asylum seekers form a majority of all immigration from countries like Afghanistan (64 percent) and Eritrea (79 percent). Other countries show more diversity, such as Syria, where 42 percent of all immigrants (more than 80,000 between 2015-2020) are first asylum applicants. Note that a proportion of the non-asylum immigration in this figure includes family reunification related to the initial asylum request (so-called 'nareizigers'). For Syrians in particular this is a sizeable group, with the number of nareizigers remaining relatively high in 2016-2017 (approximately 8,500 annually) after the number of first asylum applicants already decreased.

Importantly, immigration from some origin countries only contains a small proportion of asylum seekers, yet are still a significant contributor in absolute

terms because the overall immigration flows are large. For example, while only 12 percent of all immigration from Turkey over the period 2015-2020 constitutes first asylum applicants, this still amounts to 4,310 individuals, a number comparable to more typical ‘asylum’ countries like Afghanistan (5,045), Iraq (6,515) and Iran (7,265). For some groups, the inflow of first asylum applicants during the 2015-2021 period constitutes a substantial proportion of all immigrants from that country residing in the Netherlands. For instance, the number of individuals born in Syria in the Netherlands numbered almost 100,000 in 2021, whereas the total number of first asylum applications including nareizigers between 2015-2021 amounted to more than 80,000, or about 80 percent. In contrast, for migrants from countries like Iraq or Afghanistan the asylum and nareizigers inflow during the 2015-2021 period amounted to about 23 and 24 percent of all migrants from those countries in the Netherlands in 2021 respectively.



**Figure 2:** Proportion first asylum applications of total immigration by origin country (2015-2020). Source: CBS.

In sum, the refugee population is increasingly diverse in the Netherlands. For some origin countries, humanitarian migrants make up a small proportion which is still sizeable in absolute terms (e.g. Turkey). Other origin countries have been generating continuous flows of humanitarian migrants over the decades, albeit with fluctuations in quantity given long-term conflict situations

(e.g. Afghanistan). Overall however, the last decade has been characterised by a shift in the composition of the refugee population in the Netherlands due to a substantial new Syrian population for which the humanitarian motives remain central, and which far-outpaces most other refugee groups in quantity of inflow. For this reason, in the next paragraph, we will focus on the experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands.

### **Early structural and socio-cultural integration outcomes of recently arrived Syrian refugees**

As the largest refugee group in the Netherlands, Syrians have received a lot of attention from migration and integration scholars. To understand and monitor their experiences, multiple national projects were developed in past several years. In this section, we rely on one of these studies, namely the Bridge project, which applied a longitudinal survey design in the city of Rotterdam to map integration outcomes and experiences of about 1,000 Syrian refugees during their first years after receiving asylum status in the Netherlands since 2016 (for a complete overview of findings as well as a description of data and methods see Dagevos & van der Linden, 2021). We discuss the results of this research project for two reasons. First, we aim to give an overview of the early settlement process of Syrians in the Netherlands and how these experiences align with their hopes and aspirations. Second, we use this as a starting point to reflect on the importance of a longitudinal and transnational perspective when studying mobility aspirations of refugees more generally.

One of the central modules of the Bridge project focuses on integration indicators. Integration is conceptualized in a broad sense, including socio-cultural (e.g., language proficiency, social contacts, identification or values) and structural (e.g. paid/unpaid work, education or income) integration (Bakker, 2016; Castles et al., 2002) with the aim of answering multiple questions: how do the experiences of refugees evolve over time once they are in the Netherlands? How quickly do they find employment, and to what extent do they enjoy social mobility? Do they develop social and cultural connections, and do these ties extend to the native population?

The project findings paint a complex picture of recently arrived refugees' integration, but one point stands out: Syrian refugees are motivated to integrate and show signs of active effort to meet their socio-cultural and socio-economic goals, despite the difficult conditions under which they have reached the Netherlands. For example, according to the respondents, language is key to realizing their preferred social and structural position within the Netherlands

and to be considered an “independent citizen” rather than a member of a refugee group (Damen et al., 2022). Indeed, all respondents report having invested in improving their Dutch linguistic capabilities. However, despite their positive attitude towards learning the native language, progress in this regard is slow. Many Syrian refugees who have participated in the study indicated that one of the main obstacles is little room to apply what they have learned outside the classroom and practice their language skills with native speakers (Damen et al., 2022). In fact, many refugees still consider their Dutch language skills insufficient three years after their arrival in the Netherlands. Moreover, the project shows that two in five refugees do not have Dutch friends or acquaintances and more than half does not have social contacts with Dutch neighbours. Particularly striking is that these numbers have not changed over time despite refugees’ strong motivation to have more social contact with the native population and learn the Dutch language (van der Linden & Dagevos, 2019). These results thus suggest a mismatch between Syrian refugees’ aspirations and observed outcomes in the socio-cultural domain of integration.

The situation is comparable when we focus on socio-economic integration outcomes. Many Syrian refugees struggle to find paid employment after arrival. The share of refugees who had paid employment increased from 4% in 2017/2018 to only 18% in 2019, based mostly on temporary contracts. However, Syrians seem to maintain a pro-active and constructive attitude in the face of these challenges. For example, the Bridge data show that refugees are investing in unpaid employment; between 2017/2018 and 2019, the share of refugees who participated in volunteer work more than doubled from 17% to 39%. However, since evidence for the potential of volunteer work to be a stepping stone towards labor market integration is mixed, it remains unclear whether this will help Syrian refugees meet their economic aspirations over time.

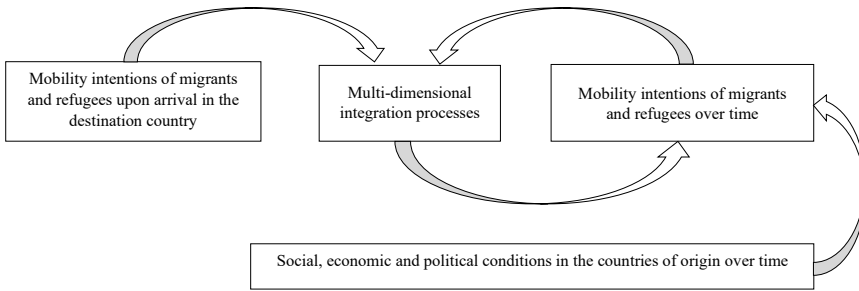
In sum, progress in socio-cultural and socio-economic integration is slow, despite Syrians’ ambitious aspirations and ‘migrant optimism’. Moreover, these refugees have limited control over some of the obstacles that they face. As such, feelings of disappointment may gradually overshadow initial optimism. It is this potential change over time that raises the question whether refugees will reconsider long-term settlement in the Netherlands or contemplate options such as onward mobility or even return migration. The Bridge project provides some basic information on this as well.

According to the survey results, very few refugees consider a return to their country of origin. When asked about where they expect they will be in five years, 93% of refugees in the Bridge project answer they expect to be in the Netherlands and 4% expects to be partly in the Netherlands and partly in the country of origin.

Only 1% expects to return to their country of origin or migrate to another country. These results indicate an almost absolute absence of expected return or onward mobility in the future. But as we argue below, we do not think that these results should be taken for granted and considered as set in stone. Researchers need to think systematically about how to account for the fact that socio-economic standing, emotional wellbeing and legal status of refugees may change over time. As suggested by the Bridge project results, we also need to take seriously the mismatch between refugees' aspirations, motivations and active engagement to make a new life in the Netherlands and the rather disappointing outcomes in practice. We posit that these are important issues to take into account when studying their future mobility intentions.

### **Interactions of early integration processes and future mobility intentions**

Having established a descriptive account of recently arrived Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and their initial settlement experiences, in the final section of this chapter, we draw on migration and integration theories as well as concepts underlying longitudinal approaches to problematize the static outlook on migration trajectories and mobility intentions. With this reflection we aim to highlight promising avenues of future inquiry which will help to address the interactions of early integration processes and future mobility intentions situated within the broader social, economic and political (transnational) contexts that encompass not only the country of residence but also the origin country (see Figure 3). To do this, first we discuss migration as a process, rather than a one-time act and propose to take seriously the possibility that in the eyes of many refugees, the wish to move on and settle elsewhere may be implicitly present from the initial arrival to a place and country that is typically considered to be a 'destination' point. This perspective may then affect the ways in which refugees approach their integration process. Second, we highlight that future intentions are not set in stone and may be affected by integration processes which at times can be challenging and increase the wish to leave and move elsewhere. Third, we bring forward the relevance of contextual factors in understanding these dynamics.



**Figure 3:** Dynamic associations between integration processes, mobility intentions and contextual factors. *Note.* authors' own figure.

*Migration is a process, not a one-time act: the host country is not always the destination country*

Migration research often assumes that the arrival in the destination country marks the end of the migratory phase in immigrants' lives. This is particularly true for studies focusing on refugees, for whom it is assumed that return migration is not an option. Although this assumption may be correct in many cases, it reflects an oversimplification of migration as a transition from origin to destination country. In reality, migratory movements are more complex and dynamic, constituting many border crossings (Dahinden, 2010; Schapendonk & Steel 2014; Snel et al., 2021). Due to financial, legal or logistic constraints, migrants may stay in one country for some time whilst accumulating the necessary resources and capital with the intention to continue with the next part of their journey. For instance, the previous section revealed that the pace of socio-economic integration among Syrian refugees is typically slow. As such, it can take years to successfully finance and continue with the next part of the journey. However, this argument extends beyond the accumulation of financial resources into social and legal domains as well. For instance, migrants may decide to invest in becoming a citizen of the host country to facilitate onward migration (de Hoon, Vink & Schmeets, 2020). Especially EU-citizenship can be seen as an instrument of mobility, but in most cases naturalization in the Global North will improve visa rights more generally. Furthermore, opportunities to hold dual citizenship may be interesting in the context of circular migration, facilitating movement between the country of residence and origin. Since most countries in the Global North have a residence requirement (the minimum period of legal residence before one can apply for the host country citizenship) of at least five years, time spent in transit can be substantial. As such, even if survey research indicates that migrants expect to remain in the country for the next couple of years, that is not to say that they are



committed to permanent settlement. Integration research would benefit from a more sophisticated, process-orientated understanding of migratory pathways, and more generally should acknowledge that migrants' integration efforts are not always geared towards the goal of permanent settlement. Paradoxically, integration can be a pathway to mobility.

*Future intentions are not set in stone: consider the effects of dynamic early integration processes*

The initial years after migration are demanding and often chaotic. Migrants have to invest in finding their way in a new society, learning the language, establishing new social connections, navigating institutions and securing an income. While progress is often slow, the first years in a new country are typically characterized by change. Yet research on mobility aspirations, which generally draws on a cross-section in this process, often presents migrants' intentions in that moment as fixed. We claim that there are many reasons why future prospects may change over the long term.

First, the psychological wellbeing of refugees may initially be so that capabilities to plan for the future are limited. Yet the potential trauma associated with having fled may diminish with time spent in relative safety, or worsen as refugees find themselves socially isolated in the country of residence. Similarly, waning migrant optimism may put structural obstacles to integration in a different light and increase the propensity for onward/return migration. Secondly, as social connections develop over time, migrants receive new information which may lead them to reconsider their options. Again, the potential for citizenship as a mobility instrument may play an important role here. Navigating requirements for naturalization can be arduous and complex, and the benefits are not always evident in advance. However, research shows that migrants living in neighborhoods with a high proportion of naturalized migrants get informed about the benefits of acquiring the host country citizenship and are more likely to naturalize themselves (Leclerc, 2022). As such, migrants may only discover at a later stage in the settlement process that there are ways to improve their mobility options through legal status transitions.

In sum, indicators of refugees' future intentions need to be sensitive to changing socio-economic, psychological, social and legal circumstances. Given these important temporal dynamics, we argue that researchers should focus less on whether migrants (plan to) move, and more on why migrants plan to move (and especially why not), pinpointing more precisely the diverse motivations that shape their intentions. This way a more meaningful connection between integration processes and future intentions of refugees can be made that takes

into account their unique experiences, changing circumstances and various options of mobility, including onward and (temporary) return migration.

*Include the origin country context as an important (moderating) factor in mobility decisions*

In the minds of many migrants, the question of returning back to the origin country is an essential one. The desire to return waxes and wanes over the life course and the country of origin is considered at times the *real* home and at times a last resort or even an unwanted destination (Bilgili, 2022). Migrants and refugees' complex association with return migration can be understood through various migration and integration theories (Bilgili & Siegel, 2015). For example, both neoclassical economics theories and the New Economics of Labour migration discuss return intentions in relation to economic integration outcomes (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Stark, 1991). While the latter argues that migrants may decide to return when their (economic) objectives are achieved (e.g. accumulating sufficient resources); the neoclassical economics approach implies that return is a consequence of a failed migration experience where migrants may for instance not be able to find jobs and reach their economic goals due to precarious situations they find themselves in.

Both of these approaches assume that goals are fixed up front, and fail to account for how aspirations may change in light of experiences in the country of residence. In that context, classical assimilation theory assumes that the longer migrants stay in a destination country, the more they will integrate in economic and socio-cultural domains (Castles & Miller, 2003; Portes, Parker & Cobas, 1980). It is argued that those migrants who integrate successfully will benefit more from migration and thus not return to the origin country (Waldorf & Esparza, 1991). In line with this argument, migrants who adopt the destination country culture and build a social network there will weaken their ties with their homeland and will be less likely to return (Bilgili & Siegel, 2015; Carling & Pettersen, 2014; De Haas & Fokkema, 2011; Piotrowski & Tong, 2013). This argumentation also implies that those who struggle to integrate into the residence country will consider returning back to the origin country.

A limitation of these theories is that they do not consider the situation in the country of origin. This is clearly pertinent to humanitarian migration, as we discussed with the case of Syrian refugees, where (short-term) return to the origin country may not be an option due to security concerns. Economic reasons or individual-level challenges to integrate may in that case not be sufficient or meaningful to explain permanent return. Models on mobility intentions of refugees would thus benefit from two additions. First, economic, political and

social dimensions of the origin context should be included as determinants of return and onward migration, including measurements sensitive to temporal fluctuations in these indicators. Examples include not only country characteristics like GDP or political stability, but also legal arrangements such as visa waivers or historical network ties. Second, scholars should consider how characteristics of the origin context condition the relevance of traditional determinants at the individual and host country level. For instance, limited success in developing a desired social network among natives or securing a well-paid, stable job may not translate into a high propensity for return migration if circumstances in the origin country are problematic.

The empirical evidence we provided in this chapter suggests that intentions to leave the Netherlands are rare among the Syrian refugees. However, refugees' aspirations may change over time due to contextual developments. Earlier evidence from the Afghan community in the Netherlands for example has shown that when there is hope for change and reconciliation in the country of origin, refugees' views on mobility change. In the turn of the millennium, there were a lot of development efforts to reconstruct Afghanistan via the wide range of diaspora engagement policies and programs as well as temporary return programs (Oeppen, 2013). International organisations with supporting goals considered the Afghan diaspora as an invaluable asset in this period. For many Afghans, especially those with Dutch citizenship, this provided an opportunity for more mobile lives (Bilgili & Siegel, 2015). Thus, even though permanent settlement in the Netherlands was the initial preference of many Afghans in the Netherlands, temporary return remained a latent desire which got activated as soon as this became a realistic scenario. Therefore, we propose to take into account the changing social, legal, economic and political circumstances in origin countries as an important (moderating) factor in mobility considerations of refugees.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we sought to draw attention to the importance of a longitudinal and transnational perspective on integration processes and mobility aspirations of refugees. While there is substantial scholarly attention for the settlement success of immigrants and refugees, such research often assumes that the country of residence is the final destination, that migrants wish to integrate into said country and that their objectives are pre-determined, well-defined and fixed over time. We asked ourselves the question what happens if we were to consider simultaneously the dynamic nature of integration processes, the potential variations in the future mobility intentions of refugees and the changing social, political and economic

conditions in the countries of origin and residence. To inspire our reflections, we relied on recent empirical evidence on the early integration processes, attitudes and intentions of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands.

While many refugees may indeed aspire to build a life in places that are commonly considered to be their host country, and have no intention of leaving in the short-term, we argue that (1) this may not be the case for all refugees, (2) these views are likely subject to change over time and that (3) traditional theories of migration are ill-equipped to model and predict such change. It is therefore important to conceptualize migration as a process rather than a transition from point A to point B and recognize that migration does not always have a clear endpoint and countries and places we consider as destinations can become points of departure over time (Ehrkamp, 2019; Flikweert, Bilgili & Caarls, *forthcoming*). This dynamic, complex and potentially sequential character of migratory movements may have consequences for how immigrants and refugees manage, but also instrumentalize over time, their integration efforts. Put differently, the goal of integration efforts in the country of residence may not always be with the aim of a long-term settlement but also to accumulate the necessary financial, social or legal resources to move onwards.

What we particularly highlighted in this chapter is that even if pre-determined goals of refugees are to settle in the country of residence, this perspective may change over time. Namely, we have illustrated that while refugees are optimistic and motivated, the process of integration is slow and challenging. As such, a growing mismatch between ambitions and reality may over time incentivize migrants to move elsewhere. Finally, we concluded by arguing that the relations between refugees' integration processes and future mobility intentions cannot be understood without taking into account the changing social, legal, economic and political circumstances in origin countries. As many cases have already shown, such changes may provide them with new opportunity structures for return or circular migration. In short, to better capture these temporal and transnational dynamics, research on mobility intentions of refugees would benefit from more focus on *under what conditions* and *why* migrants aspire or plan to move or not rather than whether they intend to do so.

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