Re-Thinking Migrants’ Networks and Social Capital: A Case Study of Iranians in Turkey

Sebnem Koser Akcapar*

ABSTRACT

Existing research on international migration has focused on the importance of social networks and social capital in the countries of origin and destination. However, much less is known about the importance of social networks and associated social capital in transit countries. Drawing on ethnographic research on Iranian transit migrants in Turkey, this paper argues that migrant networks and social capital are equally important in transit countries. These networks, however, do not always generate positive social capital for Iranian migrants as there are scarce resources and there is no “enforceable trust”. Iranian migrant networks reorganized in a transit country like Turkey are not static structures and they are largely affected by macro-variables such as current immigration and asylum policies of Turkey and Europe, transnationalism and globalization, and other place-specific features like Turkey’s location bridging East and West, the existence of human smuggling networks, and its proximity to Iran. But Iranian migrant networks in Turkey are also affected by micro-variables, such as gender, religion, and ethnicity of individual migrants.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have always underscored the significance of friends and kin in facilitating international migration (see e.g. MacDonald and Mac-Donald, 1964; quoted in Menjivar, 2000; Ritchey, 1976; Tilly and Brown, 1967). However, only recently has the international migration discourse incorporated such concepts as social networks and social capital (Koser, 1997). Social capital – a metaphor used to describe social ties

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as a form of capital – is closely linked with social networks (Vertovec, 2003) and is defined as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119). Although scholars recognized the importance of migrant networks in facilitating international flows in the early twentieth century, the sociologist Douglas Massey and his colleagues were the first to apply the concept of social networks and social capital to the study of Mexican immigrant communities in the United States (Massey, 1987; Aguilera and Massey, 2003; Palloni et al., 2001).

Most of the current scholarship, however, focuses on the importance of social networks in countries of origin and destination (Boyd, 1989; Gurak and Cases, 1992; Kritz and Zlotnik, 1992; Böcker, 1995; Boyle et al., 1998; Bauer et al., 2002), including the role of complex networks of family members and friends in the home country as well as abroad in affecting potential migrants’ decisions to migrate; the role of both formal and informal networks in providing assistance with finding housing and employment; facilitating adjustment to new surroundings (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002); and spearheading ethnic community development in the destination country (Castles and Miller, 2003). Much less is known about the role of social networks and social capital in transit countries. Indeed, the importance of social networks in transit areas cannot be underestimated. Examples of transit zones abound. Mexico is a transit country for many Central Americans (Remellon, 2004; Mittelman, 2000: 59), Azerbaijan for nationals of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Middle East and South Asia (IOM, 2003), Egypt and Sudan for Eritreans and Ethiopians (Le Houerou, 2004), the Russian Federation for Chinese immigrants as well as immigrants from the former Soviet Republics (IOM, 2003; Ivakhniouk, 2004). Likewise, Ukraine (Uehling, 2004), former Yugoslavia (Wieschhoff, 2001), Tangier, Morocco (Charef, 2004), Greater Tunis, capital of Tunisia (Boubakri, 2004), Central and Eastern European states have also turned into transit countries for many nationalities (see e.g. Okolski, 2000; Wallace et al. 1996).

The international community has a universally accepted definition of migrants in transit; “transit migrants are defined as aliens who stay in the country for some period of time while seeking to migrate permanently to another country” (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2003: 7). In this paper I use a case-study of Iranians in Turkey to discuss the role of social networks and social capital among transit
migrants. Iranians in Turkey who identify themselves as “transit migrants” include asylum seekers, refugees waiting for resettlement, rejected asylum seekers staying in Turkey illegally, and “tourists” in search of opportunities to go elsewhere. Despite their different immigration status, most Iranians think of themselves as temporary or transit migrants who are stopping in Turkey on their way to reach the West. Iranians come to Turkey for economic as well as political reasons, pushed out by poverty and religious discrimination. Even those Iranians who are accorded a refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considered themselves as transit migrants or transit refugees. Turkey is still holding the geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, not accepting non-European refugees. Therefore, asylum seekers from Iran, who constitute the largest number of asylum seekers in Turkey, have to be resettled elsewhere outside Turkey, when given refugee status by the UNHCR office in Ankara in cooperation with the relevant authorities in the Turkish Interior Ministry.

The importance of Turkey as a transit country is related to the increased securitization and politicization of the asylum process in “Fortress Europe.” Transit migration in Turkey is often regarded as a way to “negotiate” the restrictive migration policies in Europe (see also Papadopoulou, 2004). The existence of an UNHCR office in Turkey and the option of resettlement constitute an additional ‘pull’ factor for some Iranians. According to some ‘guestimates,’ the number of Iranian nationals with irregular status in Turkey has fluctuated from 10,000 (İçduygü, 2003: 21) to 100,000 to 200,000 (İçduygü, 1996: 6), and even up to 500,000 (Narlı, 2002) between 1990 and 2000. Therefore, it is very difficult to determine the number of transit migrants in Turkey. However, because so many transit Iranians are in Turkey without authorization, social networks and social capital are even more important for their survival in the country.

IRANIAN TRANSIT MIGRANTS IN TURKEY

Emigration from Iran to Turkey has a long history and goes back as far as 13th century (See e.g. Pahlavan, 2004: 263; Fathi, 1991: 2). More recent emigration dates back to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when many opponents to the new regime as well as many religious minorities had to leave the country. In the absence of official statistics, it was estimated that 300,000 to 1.5 million Iranians entered Turkey after 1979.
and stayed in the country until the end of the 1980s (Ghorashi 2002: 111; see also Kirişçi, 2003: 85; İçduygı, 2000: 360). Although initially most of these migrants considered Turkey to be a transit country, due to difficulties in reaching their final destinations some chose to remain in the country; a minority obtained residence permits and even citizenship (Kirişçi, 2000: 11–12; Pahlavan, 2004: 270). In contrast to the political migration of the 1980s, after mid-1990s migration from Iran is reportedly more economic and less political in nature (Roy, 2003:174–175; Bozorgmehr, 1997: 88).

Despite their economic motivations, many Iranians choose the asylum route to migrate to the West. In fact, Iranians constitute the highest number of asylum applicants in Turkey (See Table 1 below). The number of Iranian applicants for political asylum increased twofold in 1999 in comparison to 1998. After 2001, the number of applicants fluctuated; it went down from 3,385 in 2001 to 2,505 in 2002 but increased again to almost 3,100 in 2003 only to go down to 2,029 in 2004. The UNHCR office in Turkey reported that almost half of asylum seekers are rejected when they first apply for political asylum in Turkey. Among the registered asylum seekers coming to Turkey, there are large numbers of Persians, Kurds, and Azeris, and smaller numbers of Lurs, Turkmen, Armenians, and Assyrians.

Since the 1980s Iran has also been one of the most significant source countries of asylum seekers seeking refuge in the West (Koser, 1997). Table 2 shows the number of Iranian asylum applicants lodged in industrialized countries and the total number of refugees and asylum seekers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Iranian Asylum Applicants in Turkey</th>
<th>Total Number of Asylum Applicants in Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1,654</td>
<td>2,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1,979</td>
<td>3,570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3,843</td>
<td>5,134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3,860</td>
<td>5,209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>3,385</td>
<td>4,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,505</td>
<td>2,591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3,092</td>
<td>3,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>3,929</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from Iran in main countries of asylum (e.g.; Germany, United States, Iraq, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands) between 1999 and 2004. According to UNHCR, Iranians are still among the top-10 on the list of asylum applicants and there has been a 50 percent increase in the total number of Iranian refugees and asylum seekers after 2001 but the number started to decrease again in 2003 and declined to 115,149 by 2004 (UNHCR, 2004). Today, it is estimated that almost four million Iranians live outside their homeland, scattered in Western countries, mainly in the United States, Canada, Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Mohammadi, 2003: 1).

THE STUDY

This paper is based on exploratory ethnographic research with forty-three Iranian transit migrants in various cities in Turkey with the largest concentration of Iranians, including Ankara, Istanbul, Kayseri, and Van. An additional ten interviews were carried out with Iranians who were smuggled to Belgium and Germany via Turkey. The research was carried out between 2002 and 2004. This research combines two types of complementary data sources: 1) group discussions and in-depth ethnographic interviews with Iranian transit migrants in Turkey and Iranians who settled in the West after transiting through Turkey; and 2) key informant interviews with representatives of governmental and non-governmental as well as international organizations working with Iranian transit migrants.

Fieldwork with irregular migrants is a difficult enterprise; researchers working with undocumented migrants run the risk of encountering suspicion and even hostility (See Eriksen, 1995; Kohlpahl, 1994). There

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### TABLE 2

ASYLUM APPLICANTS FROM IRAN, 1999–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Iranian Asylum Applicants</th>
<th>Number of Iranian Refugees and Asylum Seekers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>19,040</td>
<td>86,855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>36,736</td>
<td>88,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>21,499</td>
<td>92,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>15,696</td>
<td>138,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>16,136</td>
<td>132,544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>13,240</td>
<td>115,149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were times when the identity of the researcher was questioned by the interviewees. While they welcomed the opportunity to talk about their problems, they were often afraid that something bad might happen because of the secrets they revealed about themselves. Therefore, it was crucial to establish trust and long-term relationships with frequent contacts in order to get reliable information. I usually approached the community through an insider, including staff members of non-governmental organizations, inter-governmental organizations, international organizations, community leaders and gatekeepers who are well-connected and working with irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey.

I had chosen ethnography as my main data collection method, because “the great benefit of ethnographic fieldwork is its up-close, in-depth knowledge of the day-to-day lives of individual people, and (anthropologists) should continue to emphasize this strength in (their) work on immigration” (Foner 2003: 27). Face-to-face interviews were conducted with only one member of any given family, but interview data was further supplemented by information elicited during group discussions with other family members and close friends, as well as participant observation. The convenience sample was chosen using snowballing technique. While the sample is not representative of all Iranian transit migrants in Turkey, it does provide rich ethnographic detail about their migration experiences. The interviews included 53 open-ended questions under seven general headings: background information, life in Iran, route to Turkey, life in Turkey, preferred destinations, use of networks, and future intentions. The role of informal networks, including human smugglers, was also recorded. Each interview lasted anywhere from two to three hours.

The sample

The study participants in Turkey included people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Most of the informants were Persian (29 out of 43), seven of them were Azeris, and the remaining seven were Kurdish. Of the 43 respondents, seven were Sunnis (Kurdish origin), and 12 were Baha’is (ten Persian and two Azeri origin), four Shiites (two Persian and two Azeri origin), and 20 Christian converts from Shi’a Islam (17 Persians and three Azeris).

As for gender distribution, 18 out of 43 respondents were female (40%) and 25 of them were males (60%). The sample included a large propor-
tion of married people with children. The ages of the respondents varied; the youngest respondent was 17 years old and the oldest one was 66 years of age. The median age of the entire group was 34 years of age. The majority of the interviewees were either born in big cities or were living in urban areas before emigration. Almost half of them (21 cases) were born and lived in the Iranian capital of Tehran, whereas 14 of them were born and lived in other large cities.

Forty per cent of the respondents were employed in their homeland prior to emigration and seven of the 18 employed respondents owned small businesses or were managing family-owned businesses. In terms of their earnings, more than 70 per cent (31 respondents) described their earnings as low or below average; whereas only three persons stated that they had good standards of living before migration. However, they did not specify the amount of money they were earning. Six said they were making a little more than US$ 150 a month and four indicated they were getting almost US$ 500 a month. When compared with the initial flow of Iranian transit migrants just after 1979 Islamic Revolution, more recent Iranian transit migrants have fewer economic resources. This situation may point to Iranian transit migration flows in Turkey that involved people who come from lower socio-economic classes, even though they themselves or their partners were economically active in their homeland.

As for educational levels, 27 respondents (around 60%) graduated from high school, five of whom claimed that although they started university or vocational school, they could not finish their studies. Only three respondents were university graduates, and there were also eight middle school graduates and four with primary school diplomas. One respondent from the rural part of Iran, however, did not have any formal education.

The respondents in Germany and Belgium included six males and four females. The age of the respondents differed, but at the time of emigration, all respondents were quite young and single. This group included seven people of Persian origin; two of them were Azeri and one was Kurdish. There were no Christian converts among this group. As for reasons of departure, six out of ten respondents indicated membership in dissident and/or political groups in Iran as a reason for emigration; while for one informant political and social restraints were factors for his departure; for three of them, social factors constituted the main reason for departure. The female respondents cited social reasons as the
most important reasons to leave Iran. It seemed, however, that a combination of social, economic and political reasons played a major role in their decisions to migrate. The high unemployment rate, social restraints, gender relations, and lack of freedoms were especially significant for young people. But in general, the respondents had the dream to provide themselves and their families a better living in the West.

**Human smuggling**

Almost half of the respondents (22 out of 43) in Turkey resorted to human smugglers at one point of their migration. Sixteen respondents in Turkey used human smuggling networks to enter Turkey illegally, four of whom entered from northern Iraq. These individuals are Iranian Kurds who applied for asylum in Iraq before. Only two respondents entered Turkey with legal documents but they tried to exit Turkey using human smugglers and were caught. In total, four respondents used human smugglers to both enter and exit Turkey. Even though these four respondents came previously to Turkey through legal means and overstayed their visas, after deportation they arranged with human smugglers as means to go back to Turkey. Needless to say, their efforts to reach Western countries were unsuccessful and they have remained in Turkey.

The respondents in Turkey also reported that it was quite easy to find human smugglers in Istanbul, Turkey, in Urumiye, Iran, and in Erbil, Iraq. These respondents were generally Shiites of Persian and Azeri origins and Kurdish Sunnis who came either directly from Iran or from northern Iraq. Two exceptions were young men of Baha’i faith, aged 17 and 25, who had to cross the border illegally as they did not do their compulsory military service in their homeland. There was also one interviewee who told the interviewer that although he and his family entered with legal passports, he burned the passports and told the Turkish offi-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illegal Entry to Turkey only</th>
<th>16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illegal Exit from Turkey only</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of illegal entry and exit</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No human smuggling</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL Number of Respondents</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
cials and the UNHCR that they entered illegally hoping to secure an easier approval process.

The security forces along the eastern border in Turkey near Doğu Bayazid believe that although there are opportunistic people smuggling migrants, human smuggling is mainly an organized crime with well-structured and hierarchical international links and that human smuggling, women trafficking and drug trafficking are all interlinked (See also DiNicola, 2005: 187). They noted that Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) and other terrorist organizations were also involved in human smuggling and trafficking and as they used some intermediaries, it was difficult to arrest the person responsible for the whole operation. Martin et al. note that there are three main types of human smugglers in Turkey: 1) PKK sympathizers, 2) International syndicates capable of moving large number of persons, and 3) Local, smaller and often opportunistic smugglers (2002: 126). The migrants’ accounts of human smuggling pointed out that opportunistic gangs or persons operate between Iran, Iraq and Turkey and between Iran and the Western European countries and between Turkey and Western Europe. This shows that between the Middle East and Europe, human smuggling takes a more complex, international form with people from different nationalities operating with a vast knowledge of asylum procedures and entry points of various countries.

All other respondents in Germany and Belgium used human smugglers to reach their final destinations and their stay in Turkey was generally shorter, ranging from a couple of days to one to two months. Only one respondent in Belgium stated that she stayed for one year in Ankara. As for their legal status, four respondents who arrived in the early 1990s have already become citizens of the host countries, two others had residence permits while their asylum requests were under consideration, two were undocumented, one of them was just accepted as a refugee after long years of waiting, and the other one was rejected in the first instance and appealed. Notwithstanding the exploitative role of human smugglers, existing smuggling organizations operating between Iran and Turkey have become part of migrants’ networks, as they facilitate the flows and, in some cases, migration agents belong to the same migrant community (See also Papadopoulos, 2004: 176). Furthermore, human smugglers operating in Turkey, who are well aware of the gaps in immigration and asylum policies of individual nation-states, seem to play a role in choosing destination countries; many respondents abroad claimed that they wanted to go to other countries like Canada, the Uni-
ted States or the United Kingdom but found themselves in Germany and Belgium instead:

“In 2000, I left Iran and I paid the human smuggler 2,500 US$. I wanted to go to the UK. I started the journey from Ahraz and arrived in Urumiye. We passed the border on foot and arrived in a village near Van, Turkey. We were taken to a car from there; it was waiting for us, and then arrived in Antalya, Turkey. We stayed one night in Antalya and were then taken to a safe house in İstanbul. We stayed in İstanbul for two weeks, always changing places. From İstanbul, smugglers arranged a place in a container for us. There were twenty people in the same container. After two weeks of traveling in a container, we arrived in Belgium. Along the way, we were stopping in every country – I could tell from the different languages” (Mahmoud).²

“I wanted to go to Canada or the US but did not have enough money. But when I think about Turkey, bad memories became alive. I am from Tebrisi. In 1998, human smugglers took me to Turkey, sometimes on horseback sometimes on foot. Then we arrived Doğu Bayazid near the Turko-Iranian border. From there on, there was a bus arranged for us and we came to İstanbul. In İstanbul, they arranged forged passports. We stayed in İstanbul one and a half or two months – somewhere near Bakırköy I think. We changed places quite often though. There I met two Iranian girls in a safe house in İstanbul. We were waiting to be transported to the West. The girls told me that before this attempt, they were beaten up badly and raped by other human smugglers. They took the girls by boat to one of the Prince’s islands and left them there on the shore. But the girls had to try again. You cannot trust a human smuggler but there was no other alternative... The first time, they took off with lots of my money. They gave a promise and did not honor it. For the last time, I contacted an Iranian smuggler and he brought me here in Belgium” (Arsalan).

**VARIABLES IN THE ORGANIZATION OF IRANIAN MIGRANT NETWORKS IN TURKEY**

Because of anthropology’s concern with theorizing the relationship between structure and agency, social networks as interlinking units of analysis have received the greatest attention (Pessar, 2003). By “combining macro and microanalysis of the migrant through the filter of network theory not only brings the migrant as decision-maker back into focus but
also reintroduces the social and cultural variables that must be considered in conjunction with socio-economic variables” (Brettell, 2000: 107). Network theory and social network analysis also provide a deeper understanding of how migration flows are perpetuated despite changes in economic and political policies that serve to constrain or halt them (Brettell, 2000). However, it seems that a more critical approach to social networks and to the theory of social capital is necessary in terms of the mobilization of social capital through migrant networks, and their negative effects as well as the element of change in the organization of social networks.

The case of Iranian transit migrants in Turkey provides a rich resource for charting and assessing the differences in migrant strategies in the course of transit migration and the accumulation of social capital in various migrant networks. There are certain variables that affect the organization of social networks among the Iranian transit migrants, both at the macro- and micro-level. At the macro level, these variables are current migration and asylum policies of destination and transit countries; the place-specific variables, such as Turkey’s location bridging East and West, its proximity to Iran, the existence of a UNHCR office, and accessibility by Iranian nationals; and the impact of transnational links and globalization. At the micro level, these variables can be cited as religion, gender, and ethnicity.

**Current migration and asylum policies in the West and in Turkey**

One of the reasons that Turkey was chosen as a transit country by the Iranian respondents was the difficulty of reaching the West due to restrictive policies and the resettlement option of the asylum process in Turkey. Most of the Iranian respondents entered Turkey after selling their property and all belongings. As stated by other researchers in different settings, it seems that the very poor are not the first to migrate (see e.g. Portes, 1995: 20–22; Massey, 1999: 48). In other words, emigration was a planned process for many transit Iranians in Turkey. However, whether the emigration process was well planned or not, most Iranians had no way of knowing how long the asylum process could take. Some respondents applied for asylum only after their arrangement with human smugglers failed. Some of the respondents who applied for asylum directly did not know their legal rights, although they have been in Turkey for some time:

“We came to Turkey first in 1997. But we did not go to police and register. We did not know that and we were afraid that they might send us
to the eastern border. We were accepted as refugees by the UNHCR but we could not go anywhere. Instead we were deported to Iran. This is the second time we came by human smugglers and applied for asylum” (Amin).

The prospect of having a better future in terms of living standards, cultural and religious freedoms, and education and career opportunities played an important role in the respondents’ decision to migrate in the first place, but these also factor into their preferences for destination countries. Some of them believed that the immigration policies in Europe have become discriminatory making life difficult for asylum seekers and refugees in Europe, as illustrated below:

“I want to go to Canada. I don’t like Germany. I think ‘Europe is dead’. Life is difficult for asylum seekers and refugees. There is crisis. There is no employment. Therefore, Canada is better. In the past, Europe is considered a heaven for the refugee rights but not any more. Nowadays, Europeans deport people. There are right-wing governments. I heard Norway is still better in that respect. Australia used to be good place for refugees. Now they make lots of pressure. Besides, English is much easier than German” (Reza).

Some other respondents, however, still wanted to go to Europe. They usually based their knowledge about a preferred destination country on information flowing inside their social networks, including friends and relatives who have been living there:

“I want to go to the UK I heard from friends that it is good there. Their states are good and just, and their people are good. They give freedom to their people. You can raise your voice and object. They don’t mind other’s business there. But on the other hand, I have a friend who has been to the UK and he told me that people don’t care for each other. For example, he was lost one day and asked another man in the street the way, but he did not even get an answer” (Farzan).

The dissemination of information among Iranian migrant networks in Turkey has a clear impact on preferred destinations. While some respondents left their homes aiming for a particular destination, many others either came to Turkey without any particular idea where they want to settle permanently or they went through a second decision-making process in Turkey mainly due to limited options and information flow among their social circles. There are “imagined worlds”, partly shaped
by the media, and partly by the social networks. The existence of strong social ties, including the presence of family members, in the destination countries, the relative ease of learning English compared to other European languages, and even the climate in some destination countries affected future intentions of the study participants.

**Place**

The viability of migrant networks also depends on place-specific factors (Menjivar, 2000: 237). The effects of the political instability, regime change and turmoil that characterizes many of Turkey’s neighbors makes the country a desirable transit route for those who want to reach Western Europe and beyond. Since the 1980s, Turkey has indeed been a major actor in international transit migratory movements (İçduygu, 1996). The proximity of Turkey to Europe, the already existing human smuggling networks, visa exemption for up to three months,\(^3\) the beaten paths of relatives and friends who had chosen Turkey as a transit country in the past, the existing social networks, and the information on Turkey they gathered before emigration are the main reasons why Turkey became a preferred transit country for the Iranian respondents.

“Where could I go anyway? Look at our neighbors. A friend of mine told me that it was best to go to Turkey as there is a UNHCR office. There was also the option of Pakistan. But Pakistan is worse than Iran. You cannot get a visa for anywhere else. I did not know then the meaning of being a migrant. I learned along the way… Besides, there are smugglers taking you to Turkey” (Firuz).

“I thought of going to Arab countries, like Dubai and Kuwait. But it was more expensive to get there and it was also more dangerous. There is the sea. Then you have to take small boats to cross the sea and reach the shores. Coming to Turkey was easier, safer and cheaper” (Zahir).

“I came to Turkey before and I speak some Turkish. Moreover, Turkey does not require a visa for Iranians for three months. I could not have gone to another country. Turkey is like a door. And İstanbul is the best city for a refugee or an illegal migrant. It is a big city and there is every kind of people. It hides you. Besides, my close friend in Iran had a friend who helped us when we first got here” (Nasrin).

The majority of the respondents stated that they did not know much about their legal rights and regulations in Turkey and they could not
get any legal advice from private lawyers because of a lack of financial resources. Only a minority stated that they received legal assistance from Interparish Migrants Program (IIMP), an NGO working with churches in Turkey at the time of the fieldwork for asylum seekers. Some respondents asserted that they learned about the procedures on their own over a number of years whereas others heard something from their friends, but there were also many instances of misinformation and misguidance.

“I have not received any legal advice. But after couple of years you hear a lot of stories, and you learn your way. I learned something through the most difficult way, by experiencing it myself. The UNHCR also gives papers, leaflets telling you your rights in everybody’s language. But it does not even realize the duties stated in these leaflets. I don’t also know much about my legal rights. Why did the UNHCR not give me another chance for another interview? I still don’t know. The UNHCR rejected me for the second time without asking me further questions” (Javeed).

“There is no legal assistance and someone to consult to in Turkey. We struggled on our own and learned what is there to know. But nobody is helping you. We have not received any help from Turkish people. In Turkey, this process takes such a long time. I heard that it is not like this in Greece or in any other EU countries” (Farhad).

Most respondents (almost 95%) had prior knowledge about Turkey before arrival thanks to widespread satellite dishes in Iran, despite the ban, airing Turkish programs. They also received information from their friends and from their relatives or they visited the country before making their decision to emigrate. However, some of the information they heard from friends was erroneous, and generally, the informants had no idea of what to expect in Turkey.

“I heard Turkey from friends. Friends who migrated before me to Turkey told me about the difficulties of being a refugee in Turkey. So we knew the difficulties beforehand. But we did not have much choice – we either had to live in a dungeon or we had to overcome the difficulties ahead!” (Mohammed).

“I used to watch Turkish TV in Iran. I saw life in Turkey on TV. But I have never thought it would be so hard…” (Shirin).

An important concept related to social networks and social capital is “embeddedness” (Granovetter, 1985) and “convertibility” (Coleman,
Portes notes, “Social capital is a product of embeddedness and may carry hidden or explicit costs” (1995: 13–14). But as in the case of Iranian respondents in Turkey with very limited resources who cannot pay back in any form, migrant networks do not always create social capital. In other words, individuals may not automatically assist each other simply because they are relatives, friends, or co-ethnics. The kinds of resources available to immigrants also matter. If immigrants do not have access to desirable goods or when there is a scarcity for available sources and information - no matter how strong their ties are - it may not yield any benefits (See also Menjivar, 2000 for the case of Latin American migrants in the United States).

What make social networks “convertible into social capital” are not only access to desirable resources but also the obligations of trust and expectations that adhere in relationships (Coleman, 1988: 101). Migrant networks do not bring positive results especially when there is lack of trust or rather no “enforceable trust”, which result when individuals refuse to help or swindle others in their community (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). My study among Iranians also indicated that although “strong” ties, like relatives and close friends, assisted some respondents in their migration project by sending journey remittances and by providing legal assistance, “weaker” ties established with Iranians whom they met in Turkey for the first time could be obstructive, oppressive, and exploitative. In Turkey, many Iranian migrants confirmed that they were victims of their own community as there was disloyalty, deceit, lying, misguidance, and even sexual exploitation among the community. Most cases of rejected asylum seekers confessed that they distorted facts and lied about the reasons for emigration from Iran to the UNHCR officials, as a result of misguidance by one or more Iranian personal networks. Those who arrived in Turkey for the first time were told that they had to tell an invented story to the UNHCR officials if they wanted to buy the ticket to go “West”. There were even some opportunistic people who made a profit out of writing life-stories for asylum seekers. Unfortunately, some migrants were trapped in these kinds of exploitations, losing not only their money but also their refugee status granted by the UNHCR. Nadiya gave an example of how social networks could mislead and exploit new arrivals in the Iranian community of transit migrants:

“Some friends told me that I had to lie in order to become accepted as a refugee. They told me that I could have never become one if I told the
truth. They suggested I should tell the officials at the UNHCR that I became Christian. There was one Iranian man. He helped with the papers and he deceived me. I paid him 3,000 US$ and he gave me fraudulent documents about my religion to be given to the UNHCR. He said that they would accept me as a refugee immediately. Everything was a lie of course. Two weeks later, the UNHCR officials called me. They recognized the fraudulent document and closed my case and never helped me again. I am now a real Christian, but the UNHCR does not believe me any more” (Nadiya).

Armin and his family, whose asylum applications were rejected but who has nonetheless been living in Van illegally for the last five years, had more or less the same experience:

“The socio-economic conditions and the regime made us flee from Iran. But we lied to the UNHCR. We said we converted and became Christians and we had fear of persecution. One Iranian man in Turkey advised us to do that and he got our money. He also said that our situation would be finalized within four or five months. One year later, UNHCR found out the truth and our file was closed and here we are still in Turkey without papers after five long years. Everyone in Iran heard these kinds of stories that if you have a good story – or if you say you are a Christian – then you get what you want and go to West. If we had said our real problems, we could never have the chance to be accepted as a refugee”.

Transnational links and globalization

Most of the Iranian respondents were able to maintain transnational networks and connections by establishing personal relationships with “transmigrants” and/or relatives and friends who migrated before them. They also engaged in economic and social transnational activities. At the economic level, money transfers or remittances were important. Family, close friends and relatives at home and abroad sent remittances, sometimes just to help them survive in the transit country, amounts could be as low as US$ 200 up to € 7,000 in so-called “journey remittances” to pay for human smugglers. At the social level, while they entered into new relationships and alliances with a wide range of people in Turkey, they established and maintained relations with family and friends in Iran and abroad. These relations included convenience marriages with successful migrants, finding sponsors in some destination countries through religious organizations, calling and sending e-mails to
close friends and relatives living abroad, watching Iranian TV in Turkey through satellites broadcasting from Los Angeles, and consulting lawyers and/or friends in some destination countries for advice on their migration strategies.

An overwhelming majority of the informants (95%) in Turkey had contacts in the West before migration – both strong and weak ties – and these contacts served as catalysts for migration (See Table 4 below). Most of the respondents mentioned that they followed the “beaten path” of relatives and/or close friends. In the past, relatives or close friends of the respondents used Turkey as a transit route to reach one of the countries in the West. This serves as a source of information in choosing final destinations, but it also has attracted them and others to come to Turkey and to seek asylum or use other methods to go elsewhere. Therefore, potential migrants’ access to resources can have an impact on migration selectivity, deciding who does and who does not migrate. For those individuals lacking relatives and friends abroad who are willing or able to help financially, transferring social capital abroad is very difficult.

Transnational networks may weaken when immigrants/asylum seekers do not have much to share due to physical and material conditions (Menjivar, 2000: 156). Some respondents, for example, could not receive much assistance from their relatives who have been living in Western Europe, mainly due to lacking resources. Afshin, whose elder sisters had been asylum seekers in Turkey just like him but who were recently

| TABLE 4 |
| COMPOSITION OF INTERVIEW SAMPLE IN TURKEY BY SOCIAL NETWORKS BEFORE MIGRATION |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong Ties*</th>
<th>Weak Ties**</th>
<th>Combination</th>
<th>No Ties</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shiite converted</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiite non-converts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurdish</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’is</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Strong ties are taken as close family members, including spouses, parents, children, brothers and sisters.
** Weak ties are taken as distant relatives, with whom respondents have fewer contacts, non-relatives, such as friends, co-ethnics, co-religionists.
resettled in the West, were not in a position to receive help from them mainly due to lack of resources. Pakhshan is in a similar situation, although his mother and brother have been living in Norway for many years, they could not assist him in any way because of their poor health (his mother is old and his brother is hospitalized due to psychological disorder), economic hardship, and loss of contact. For this reason, some Iranians in Turkey have to re-create their symbolic social capital by entering into new relations.

For Iranian respondents, the process of learning to live as a survivor, extracting the greatest benefit from the leanest of opportunities, readjusting existing options with flexibility, and developing a transnational attitude with increasing contacts with relatives and close friends abroad and in the country of origin and maintaining other personal contacts through ethnic and religious ties are the outcomes of living in a transit country.4

As Castells points out “the global system is a network society” (1996), connecting people beyond time and space. Although the term “transnationalism” is far from being new (Foner, 2005; Salih, 2003), in today’s world, globalization and advances in communications and transportation make transnational ties of migrants much more visible (Gardner and Grillo, 2002: 181; Portes et al., 1999: 224; Foner, 2005: 69–70; Vertovec, 1999: 447; Vertovec, 2004: 971). But, there is also a need to extend the definition of “transnationalism”. Like social networks, transnationalism is also a dynamic process (Al-Ali et al., 2001) and the “bridging effect” of transnationalism in a transit country is evident, though it is experienced differently at the individual level. As defined by Glick Schiller and her colleagues, “transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interactions across national borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state” (1995: 48). If we extend the definition of transnationalism to having transnational networks cutting across at least two countries, without any “quantitative limitations of transnational activities” (Salih, 2003: 158), then Iranian transit migrants in Turkey are par excellence transnational migrants, because they live, interact, operate and define themselves and others in different social fields in Turkey and between their countries of origin and destination. In this transit phase, which is a particular transnational space, the Iranian transit migrants rethink and readapt not only their identity, but also their migration project. Transit migration is, therefore, emblematic of the phenomenon of transnationalism in the migratory movements.
Religion

One of the impacts of long asylum-seeking procedures and illegality among some of the Iranian respondents is on the migrants’ belief systems. It seems that in a predominantly Muslim, yet secular country like Turkey, non-Muslim social networks (Christian and Baha’is) offer more to Iranians than Islamic institutions. One reason for this may be attributed to the sectarian differences between Shi’a Iranians and Sunni Turkish majority and the lack of involvement of Turkish Islamic organizations in extending much assistance to Iranians. During the time of the research, none of the respondents acknowledged getting any help from mosques in Turkey. The ministers of some of the churches in Istanbul also emphasized that they offered the assistance Islamic institutions and other organizations have failed to provide (Koser Akcapar, 2006: 841).

Another reason may be due to the long-standing non-Muslim minority identity and already established non-Muslim institutions in Turkey that help refugees. Throughout history, it is documented that churches and church-related organizations elsewhere were involved in the protection of asylum seekers and refugees. Many of these churches and organizations even became sanctuaries (Ferris, 1989: 170–172; Lippert, 2005). Besides their functions to serve as institutions of protection, religious organizations may become new territories for migrants and an important identity marker. Religion may also provide a link for migrants to build up new social networks. Case-studies of Iranian transit migrants, particularly Iranian converts to Christianity and Baha’is in Turkey and their accounts illuminate how in an (im)migration context, “The role of religion may extend beyond private worship” (Dumont, 2003: 369). Some Iranian respondents received psychological, financial and institutional support from churches and Baha’i spiritual assemblies in Turkey and abroad.

Last but not least, one of the cited reasons for the respondents to come to Turkey was to escape religious oppression and social restrictions in Iran. Therefore, detachment of Islam and from any Islamic institution was understandable. There was a high level of secularism and opposition to the Islamic regime among all respondents in Turkey. Furthermore, all Muslim-born respondents stated that they were not practicing Islam in Iran even in the private sphere (Koser Akcapar. 2006: 843):
“There is oppression in Iran. The regime made us hate Islam. They fired me because I did not fast, I did not pray for five times a day and because I wore jeans. Why do we fast anyway? For God or for the State? Is the State then my God?” (Javeed).

During the two-year course of the fieldwork, I realized that some Iranians converted to Christianity and attended church activities regularly. The religious conversions usually took place in Turkey, since only five respondents stated that they converted in Iran. Within a period of eight months, even the asylum seekers and irregular migrants who came to the church after services merely to talk in Farsi and to discuss their problems ended up converting (Koser Akcapar, 2006: 828). They were also one of the most vulnerable groups not only because of their precarious condition in Turkey, but also as conversion is a capital offense in Iran, thus they wanted to avoid deportations. It would be misleading to argue that most Iranian asylum seekers convert; however, conversion cases are important, since this paper deals with the accumulation of social capital within migrant networks.

For some converts, a church in Istanbul may become a place where they can find peace of mind, maintain a positive self-image, gain self-esteem, make new friends, and raise hopes for the future:

“I had many troubles. I cried and cried... My only hope is this church. I don’t have any other hope. But I heard a voice from above saying that all would be good at the end” (Farahnaz).

However, one respondent who converted to Christianity in Iran criticized some converts in Turkey, saying that there were Iranians just pretending to be Christians to get financial help from churches:

“I don’t think that some Iranians who converted in Turkey really feel Jesus in their hearts. If you want to do something, you can do it anywhere, even in Iran, even under oppression. But these refugees convert not to get the deportation order. They converted to get financial help from the churches. I want to study theology and become a priest. My house will become the house of God. But they (those converted in Turkey) are not like that! They will do anything to go to the West. Many of them say that they are Christians but they don’t even know which denomination they really belong to” (Behrouz).
The transnational character of religious networks and organizations in the world are well documented (Foner, 2003: 38; Levitt, 2003: 848). The Baha’i respondents and those who converted to Christianity in Turkey belong to worldwide religious institutions that accept them as members wherever they are (see e.g. Balmer, 2003: 57; Meyer, 1999: 159–160). Thanks to religion’s global reach, some of the Iranian respondents are linked to others in countries of destination and origin and in fact, found refuge in some countries of resettlement through sponsors found by the churches:

“My daughter has no identity card and she does not have a country. She was born in Turkey but we are staying illegally. My husband went to the UNHCR Ankara but they closed our file. They did not open it again. Some countries in the West like the USA, Australia, and Canada grant sponsorship in case your file is closed. We applied for that with the help of the church and we are accepted. We are going to Canada” (Shirin).

Gender

Gender is another important factor in building social capital within Iranian migrant networks in Turkey. When Iranian men have to work in the informal economy, it is women who are in touch with other members of their social groups; sharing experiences, getting information and making connections. Women’s social networks can be described as “horizontal” as opposed to men’s “vertical” access to different kinds of information and to different individuals (Bauer, 1985: 168–169). Some women respondents receive legal and financial help from relatives in the West, and others still continue their relations with their ties in countries of origin. Women also form new social networks in the transit country to provide support for themselves and other women in similar situations. They were quite capable of forming their own small social networks in Turkey to discuss their problems and to give conciliation to each other. As their relations mainly consist of close friends – co-ethnics and/or co-religionists – and kin, their social networks in Turkey are similar to those they had in Iran.

Although women respondents in Turkey, especially single women and single mothers, are at a disadvantage in exchanges of financial or material help, and although they have fewer financial and material resources, they are nevertheless in a better situation to seek out the assistance of community organizations and other institutions to fulfil their needs or
those of their families. As they spend more time in these places, they create informal networks of support. Single women and single mother respondents in Turkey had to come up with different ways to cope with their situations. In some situations, single women became heads of households and assumed many responsibilities. For some women respondents, escaping Iran meant running away from family troubles and social pressures. Despite the hardships in Turkey, it seems that migration provides an opportunity for these women, especially those from fractured family structures. One of the respondents came alone to Turkey with her two sons. She said that the social pressure turned her into a foreigner in her own neighborhood and in her own country:

“I did not want to stay in Iran. I had problems with the state and with the regime. I also had economic difficulties. After my first husband passed away, I had a love affair with a man who had ties with Hizbollah. My parents did not allow me to marry him. My father was a teacher and he had different political opinions. Apart from that, the people in the neighborhood started to gossip that I was a whore. We thought nobody knew. But I was with the man I loved. I had two children at that time, so I just could not take it anymore…” (Nasrin).

Other women married Iranian nationals who were granted refugee status out of convenience:

“I made a marriage of convenience with another Iranian in Turkey. But his hand never touched mine. I am keeping my honor for my children. He was accepted as a refugee and was sent to the USA. He said he would help me and he applied for family reunification but he became sick there. I have not heard from him for a long while” (Nadiya).

But in other cases, single women are exploited or turn to prostitution in Turkey.

“Here in Turkey some Iranian women live alone or with their children. The UNHCR does not help these women financially until they are accepted as refugees. When there is no way out and when they have no money, they are forced to become prostitutes. It is not their profession. They are driven to that…”(Mohammed).

As gender is not one of the bases for persecution listed in the legal definition of “refugee”, another challenge facing women applying for asylum is that they have to prove that their persecution is based on one of
the five protected grounds (Martin, 2004: 32). Although several states, including Turkey, have recognized that the category of “social group” can include cases in which women have a well-founded fear of persecution based on their gender, they failed to incorporate gender as the sixth ground on which an asylum claim can be based (Copeland, 2003: 102).

Regardless of the religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of the respondents with families, the need to secure their children’s future was cited by these respondents as the reason for leaving their homeland and enduring hardships in Turkey. The almost repetitive pattern was that parents sacrifice their lives for their children. Ironically, children suffer most from the consequences of migration due to a variety of reasons. First, children are not involved in the decision-making process to cross borders. Some children even blame their parents for making such a decision. Second, they suffer from the negative results of illegality: restriction of movement, social pressure, lack of economic resources, and even physical violence within the family. Third, formal education opportunities are quite limited for children of Iranian transit migrants. Although Turkish regulations allow asylum seekers’ children to attend schools in Turkey, fearing deportation, the families are hesitant to send their children to school if they have no valid residence permit (as in the case of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers) and if their stay in Turkey is relatively shorter (as in the case of Baha’is).

**Ethnicity**

The study participants reflect the multiethnic structure of the Iranian society as they come from different ethnic groups: mainly, Persian, Azeri and Kurdish. Persian and to a lesser extent Azeri origin Iranians choose to convert and become a part of the newly recreated social networks in Turkey. The Iranian Baha’is – although they are of Persian and Azeri origin – organize themselves under their established religious networks and their ethnic identity seems to play a secondary role.

It was observed that inside the religious organizations, ethnicity was less pronounced, but some Iranian ethnic associations in Turkey also have transnational links. One of the most influential was the Iranian Azeri Association, also called The Azerbaijan Cultural Organization, which brings Iranian Azeri students of Turkic descent to Turkey for further study. Some students use this channel as a migration opportunity; many who are still in Turkey do not wish to go back to Iran after completing their studies. Coming from a Turkic culture and speaking a
Turkic language, some Iranian Azeris maintain closer ties with Turkish people, because they already have a linguistic capital and an ethnic affiliation with the majority in Turkey. This social capital affords the Azeris more access to the job market in Turkey.

The Iranian Kurdish respondents, on the other hand, distinguished themselves from their co-nationals who claim asylum from the start. They saw themselves as “real refugees” fleeing persecution because of belonging to a political party or an ethnic group. Coming from the same ethnic background, however, does not result in establishing stronger ties with their co-ethnics in Turkey. First, Iranian Kurdish people speak a different dialect, unintelligible to most Kurds of Turkey. Kurds of Turkey speak Kurmanji dialects, whereas most Iranians speak Sorani. Second, they not only come from different countries but also from different social classes and educational backgrounds and they may have divergent attitudes towards religion.

Among the respondent group, four out of seven asylum seekers of Iranian Kurdish origin entered illegally from Northern Iraq. As the government of Iraq under Saddam Hussein was prohibited resettlement after 2000, these respondents regarded their escape to Turkey as the only solution to be resettled in the West through UNHCR. When the fieldwork was initiated in 2002, their situation was more problematic in the sense that there was no recognition on behalf of the Turkish government and the UNHCR about their refugee status given in Iraq. After the second Gulf War and since the overthrow of Hussein’s regime in Iraq, the UNHCR opted for non-refoulement and Turkey maintains a ban on the forced return of any person to Iraq. In order to find a solution for Iranian Kurdish refugees coming from Northern Iraq, the Turkish government and the UNHCR began consultations at the end of 2003, and as a result UNHCR-Turkey decided to grant the Kurdish asylum seekers from northern Iraq formal papers acknowledging their refugee status and encouraged them to apply for residence permits. Even after this decision was reached, fees for residence permits can be quite costly – especially for large families – sometimes adding up to almost US$ 1,000.

It is documented that political ties and diaspora politics are also important in establishing transnational links for Kurdish people (Wahlbeck, 1999; Faist, 2000: 280). But for the Kurdish origin Iranians interviewed in Turkey, it seems that their political connections seem to play a less important role than their ethnic origin and family ties in establishing contacts with those in Iran and in the West. Similarly, in research
carried out among Kurdish asylum seekers in Greece, Papadopoulou asserts “for many Kurdish asylum seekers in Greece, migration means building their lives than mobilizing for a political cause” (2003: 356). She also notes:

For (many Kurdish asylum seekers), homeland politics is a burden, because of the parties’ patronizing role over the migrant population, and because of the fact that party conflicts are transferred over to the host society...Political participation would mean that they have to face once again the situation they are fleeing from, and risk of getting caught, in separate, mutually exclusive political groupings (2003: 357).

Although fear of persecution resulted from their political engagement with outlawed parties in Iran and their passage to Turkey or elsewhere was most often arranged by the political parties they belonged to in the past, all the informants, regardless of the place they live in Turkey, expressed their discontentment with politics because they believed that previous involvement in political parties ruined their family lives:

“I left Iran because of political reasons. I was a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI). My life was in jeopardy. I cannot think about going back unless the regime changes. Now I said to myself and to my wife that I was not going to be involved in politics. I have to think about my family and my children now” (Mohammed).

The Kurdish respondents also said that once they reached the West, they wanted to stay away from politics. It seems, however, that they were keeping their ethnic identity very much alive in the transit country and that they longed to form an imaginative homeland in the West for themselves and for their children.

CONCLUSION

Although it is well established in the migration literature that interpersonal networks are a source of social capital (Espinosa and Massey, 1999), when the concept of immigrant social networks is used in relation to the term social capital, it is often wrongly assumed that the former will automatically result in the latter. This research indicates that although existing social networks among Iranian migrants in Turkey are known to lower the initial costs of migration, in many cases they cannot be relied upon for support. This is due to various reasons, such as
distance and loss of contact if the stay of migrants is extended in a transit country, scarcity of available resources to those already in Turkey, and lack of trust among community members. However, the re-created social networks in Turkey among Iranian migrants or their “weak ties” sometimes provide better opportunities and access to information and assistance (Granovetter, 1973; Wilson, 1998). As noted earlier, these weaker ties may be exploitative unless there is an “enforceable trust”. Therefore, while migrants look elsewhere for support and create new social and symbolic capital in the transit country; at the same time they try to keep their existing transnational links alive. Especially inside religious organizations, “weak ties” of immigrants may turn into “strong ties” after a particular period of time spent in Turkey.

Current migration and asylum policies, ever-increasing contacts, advancements in transportation and images of the West disseminated at a rapid pace due to globalization, as well as religious organizations and other institutions play a determinant role in redefining the migration strategies of Iranians in Turkey. This research also shows that the social ties of a great majority of Iranian migrants in Turkey were weakened in the country of origin prior to migration and that “de-territorialization” started back in Iran due to a combination of social, economic, and religious reasons. The research further points out that for the Iranian transit migrants in Turkey, intensive contacts with those who have reached destination countries and the existence of successful cases transiting Turkey, in one way or another and even after long years of waiting, increase hopes about their future and their migration project.

In the course of the two-year long fieldwork, a number of respondents left Turkey and resettled in the West either through church-found sponsors or UNHCR Turkey. Most of them, however, engaged in secondary migration within the destination country in order to be closer to their social networks. Therefore, reconstituting social networks is an ongoing process (Simich, 2003). Similarly, some of the respondents in Belgium and Germany who transited Turkey with human smugglers were still waiting for a decision on their refugee status and they were still in a betwixt and in-between situation. So, their liminal situation is not always over once they reach the West, it is rather dictated by the regularization of their status and reorganization of social networks in the destination country.11

As this paper focuses primarily on the situation of Iranian transit migrants in Turkey, it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions on all those
who went to the West transiting Turkey or to draw conclusions on their
levels of adaptation, the means of continuity and discontinuity, the
changes in the roles of men, women and children imposed by the demands
of host societies, the perception and reception of Iranians by the indige-
nous population, and the re-organization of their social networks in desti-
nation countries. There is also a necessity to understand the complex
combination of continuity and change in religious and ethnic identities,
and whether religion and ethnicity continues to be an important identity
marker in the countries of resettlement. As suggested by the literature,
social networks are described as the main mechanism that makes migra-
tion a self-perpetuating phenomenon (see e.g. Massey et al., 1993; Arango,
2004: 28). In the case of Iranian transit migrants in Turkey social networks
do act as a “catalyst for emigration” from Iran. However, due to several
factors described in this study, these networks are not always effective in
promoting completion of the transit migrants’ journey and thus fall short
of perpetuating migration further to the west.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and Dr. Elzbieta Gozd-
ziak for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

NOTES

1. This has also something to do with the restrictions of re-entering Turkey in
case of visa violations. If Iranians overstay for one to three months, they
cannot enter Turkey for three months. If they do not pay the fine arising
from overstaying, then they cannot enter for 18 months. If they fail to
return within twelve months, then they are not allowed to enter for another
twelve months into Turkey.
2. Fictitious names were used in the paper in order to preserve the anonymity
of the respondents.
3. Turkey and Iran reached agreement on visa-free travel in 1964 and this
practice is still in place (Kirisci, 2005: 351).
4. See Chavez (1992) for a similar discussion among Latino immigrants in the US.
5. It is documented however that Chechen and Kosovar refugees were hosted by
some Turkish mosques (See report by E. Frantz on the situation of refugees in
6. Although Kurds are Sunnis, the respondents in this study were not practic-
ing Muslims and ethnicity as well as nationality becomes the identity mark-
ers in Turkey.
7. The word “Turkish” is used here to refer only to the people and language of Turkey, whereas “Turkic” denotes the broader cultural and linguistic group of Altaic languages spanning from Balkans to China.

8. It seems that these differences go far beyond linguistics, as Van Bruinessen indicates that the Sorani-speakers find the Kurmanj “primitive and fanatical in religious affairs”, and the Kurmanji-speakers often see the Soran as “unmanly, unreliable and culturally arrogant” (1986: 16).

9. It should be noted that Kurds are a heterogeneous group and members of different political parties. For some other Iranian Kurdish outside the respondent group, “diaspora” politics might be more important in the transit country as well. See Watts (2004), and Eva Kristine Ostergaard-Nielsen (2001) for political participation of Kurdish groups in Europe and their transnational networks.

10. Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) was established in 1945 in Mahabad, Iran as a pan-Kurdish party. It initiated guerrilla operations in Iran as of 1968. After the Islamic Revolution, the headquarters was moved across the Iraqi border (see van Bruinessen, 1986 for further details).

11. The word “liminal” is derived from “liminality”, a term coined by van Gennep (1908) in analyzing the *rite de passage* and later elaborated by Turner (1974). The “liminal” state refers to a phase between separation and reincorporation. Here, it is rather used to display the psychological situation of a transit migrant, between the origin and destination countries.

12. Krissman also argues that migration is not self-perpetuating and affected by other (f)actors (2005: 34).

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